Secretary

by JaneDavitt

Summary

A repressed lawyer hires an emotionally unstable young woman and an unlikely romance grows as they explore their mutual kinks.

Notes

We -- Bit, Darling Effect, Allegraslade and I -- wrote Secretary over eight months, starting in June 2004. It was intended to be a few thousand words of comment-fic, retelling the movie Secretary with Faith and Wesley in the lead roles. Over 600,000 words later we came to the end of an epic that left the movie plot behind after the first few chapters, pulled in every Buffy and Angel character we could think of, and left us and the readers following it in the LJ comm we set up, a wrung-out emotional mess at times.

We love this fic and the flawed, fucked-up characters who took over our lives for those eight months. It will be archived here in sixteen parts because of the length. We're going through and editing before we post each part, but not updating it. It's set in 2004 and if Faith's pleasure in her pink iPod seems strange now, it was a big deal back then.
Chapter One

It’s pouring rain the day of her interview. It’s the kind of storm you only get in the south. The skies just open up and ‘torrential’ doesn’t even begin to cover it. After a mere two minutes of the Great Flood Mach II the storm drains have already filled up and driving halfway across town is nearly an exercise in futility. Their beat-up Oldsmobile station wagon clearly wasn’t built to ford a freakin’ river.

But she gets there eventually. Even more amazingly, she’s on time. Her mom beams at her hopefully from the car and waves her on with an encouraging “Good luck, honey!” as Faith walks toward the front door. Faith rolls her eyes and keeps walking. She’s picking her way slowly to the door because she can’t see a fucking thing in this stupid bright red rain poncho her mom made her wear. The water is sluicing off the brim and running into her eyes. Her sensible skirt ($9.99, TJ Maxx’s finest) is utterly soaked.

There’s a pretentious sign out front that reads “Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, Esq.” in fussy script. That gets another eye-roll from Faith. She desperately hopes that Mr. Wyndam-Pryce, Esquire isn’t watching her from the window.

_Goddamnit, the things I do for the prospect of yet another crappy low-paying wage-slave job,_ Faith thinks ruefully, before ringing the doorbell.

Nothing.

She lifts up the gleaming brass knocker on the door and gives it the old college try. After standing there for several moments, water trickling down her neck, she tentatively tries the door handle and gives a little start when it opens with a soft click.

Her soggy shoes make squelching sounds on the gleaming parquet flooring as she shuffles into the lobby and casts a questioning look down a narrow hallway. The whole place smells of beeswax and old books. It kinda creeps her out.

“Yo!” She mentally kicks herself. Hotshot secretaries don't say “yo.” She tries again. “Hello? Is there anyone there? I have an interview.”

She doesn't know how long he's been standing there but she looks up from her quiet contemplation of the little stream of water that's run off her rain hat onto the floor, to see a shadowy figure standing at the end of the hallway.

“I've come from the secretarial school about the job,” she says.

Silence. She squints into the dim light to see if he's like some kind of deaf mute or something but all she can make out is the silhouette of a tall thin man.

Then he pushes open the door behind him so a shaft of weak, watery sunlight hits him and she gets an impression of a pair of cold blue eyes, before he speaks.

“I suppose you'd better come in then.” His voice is clipped, curt and so not what she's used to hearing in this neck of the woods.

“You're English?” she asks as she trips down the hallway, aware of the impatient way he's standing
there.

“It would appear so, wouldn't it, Miss, ah…”

“Oh, Faith. I'm Faith.”

He stands back as she brushes past him, so she can't contaminate his expensive charcoal-gray suit with her cheap wet clothes.

He follows her into the room. “No, don't sit down,” he barks as she reached for the ornately carved wooden back of the chair in front of his imposing desk.

He walks around, sits down in a bigass leather chair and just looks at her. She's painfully aware of the way her new skirt is clinging damply to her hips, wrinkling up, and she tugs at it.

“I take it you have your résumé?”

He's one cold motherfucker. Every time she tries to look at him, her gaze hits those icy eyes and skitters away. She rummages in her bag for her carefully typed résumé. Even the inside of her satchel is soaked and when she retrieves the piece of paper from its plastic folder, it's been another victim of the storm. The ink has run slightly and as he holds out his hand, she feels the need to explain. “It's gotten wet. Maybe I could e-mail it to you.”

“I see. Please, Faith, your résumé.”

He takes it gingerly between thumb and forefinger like it's a rabid dog that might bite him.

“So you have no office experience.”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“And you seem to have a very spotted career history. Dairy Queen, Walmart, the Easy Diner. Six jobs in six months; that seems a little excessive, don't you think?”

“See, it looks like that but…”

“Office hours are eight-thirty to five, with an hour for lunch. I expect you to be punctual. I will not tolerate lateness. I also expect you to wear suitable office attire.”

They look at her ruined beyond repair interview outfit.

“You giving me the job then?”

“Yes, and I can only hope that you haven't had time to learn any bad habits. I'll see you tomorrow, Faith.”

It's kind of an anticlimax. She was ready to do typing tests and pledge allegiance to paralegal training but he's already bent his head to look at the top sheet of a pile of papers on his desk. She's been dismissed.

“Okay. Well, thanks. I'll be in tomorrow and thanks again for the opportunity, man. I…”

His eyes are burning into her, his lips a thin tight line. “Are you still here?”
Chapter Two

The next morning she sleeps right through her alarm and has to scramble to get out the door in time. In her haste she spills scalding hot coffee down her crisp new white shirt. Scrubbing at it just makes it worse and grinds the stain in more. She can’t hold back a frustrated “Fuck!” or two.

“Honey, language,” her mother scolds halfheartedly from her vantage point at the kitchen table. Faith can smell the sharp medicinal tang of whiskey wafting from her coffee. At seven thirty in the goddamn morning. But she can’t worry about that just now. If she’s late, well, that would be it. The bastard clearly has it in for her already.

“Sweetie, why don’t you wear that pretty twin-set I got you for your birthday?”

Despite the fact that she wouldn’t be caught dead in hell wearing that, she has no choice but to run upstairs and change. At least there’s an upside: something this hideously prim is bound to meet with Mr. Uptight and Pasty’s approval.

She finally gets to work, rumpled and out of breath, just a few minutes on the wrong side of eight-thirty. The heavy clatter of the brass door knocker is met with a resounding silence. She tries again. Nothing.

“What, is he too good to answer his own door?” she grumbles under her breath before testing the door handle. For the second day in a row it’s open.

As she steps over the threshold she realizes that she didn’t get a really good look at the place before. It’s dark in the waiting area, but as her eyes adjust to the dim light she sees three overstuffed chairs and two low side tables piled high with well-thumbed stacks of Architectural Digests, New Yorkers, with a stray US Weekly or Hello! thrown in for good measure. To the right there’s the forlorn desk. The surface is empty save for three red Sharpies, lined up perpendicular to the edge, one four-pack of SavMor Correction Fluid, a neat stack of linen bond, and last but certainly not least a vintage IBM Selectric that she’ll get to call her very own.

She notices that the phone is a heavy black rotary model.

Talk about kicking it old school.

As she passes the desk and proceeds down the shadowy hallway she pauses to inspect the framed Japanese prints hanging on the walls. The paper is faintly yellowed and she guesses that they’re the real thing.

Still no sign of her new employer.

She decides to go into the galley kitchen and make him some coffee. Oh wait, he’s British. Aren’t they allergic to coffee or something? So, tea. She’s never made a cup of tea in her life. She’s fumbling around in the kitchen looking for the tea bags and mugs when she hears a sharp “Ahem” behind her.

“Faith.” His voice is toneless, neutral. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Oh yeah, I hope you don’t mind that I just let myself in. Thought I’d make you some tea but I can’t seem to find—”

“No, thank you. There’s coffee if you like. Sugar in the cupboard, creamer in the refrigerator. After you’re finished with that, please step into my office.”
And with that he disappears soundlessly into the adjoining room.

She's riding the horns of a dilemma. Ain't used to riding one of them. Bikers, maybe. Pickup trucks, sure. But right now she's more worried about whether she's meant to take her coffee in with her or let it go cold while Mr. Stick Up His Ass gives out her orders for the day.

In the end, she gulps down her cup as quickly as she can and brushing her hand over her mouth to get rid of the Folger's mustache, she knocks on his door.

“Enter.”

There hadn't been a chance to have a good look around yesterday, but now her eyes take in polished wood and books. Man, there's a lot of books. On shelves and piled up on every available surface. Every now and again a pile of papers tied with ribbon breaks up the monotony.

Her inventory is interrupted by a quiet cough from the corner of the room where his desk is. She swivels round.

“You got a lot of books,” she says, more to break the silence which is starting to feel awkward and spiky.

“I believe I mentioned the subject of appropriate office wear yesterday,” he says coolly, like she hasn't even spoken.

Faith looks down at her stupid pale blue, fake cashmere twin set, which is already making her skin itch.

“You skirt's too short,” he replies in answer to the “what the fuck” expression on her face. “I expect it to rest on the knee.”

Obviously the sight of two inches of thigh is giving him all kinds of bad thoughts. Talk about repressed.

“Bare legs are not acceptable,” he continues and she's aware of the pale gleam of her skin. She hates wearing hose. “The sweater set will do, though I'd prefer it if you wore a blouse, but the hair....”

Her hand creeps up to touch the ends of her hair. “What's wrong with my hair?” she asks, unable to keep the sullen tone from creeping into her voice.

“It's unkempt,” he informs her, leaning back in his chair and staring at her with that frigid blue gaze. “Here, tie it up.” An elastic band whizzes through the air and she refuses to scramble to catch it.

“I do hope we're not going to have a problem here.” There's something kind of scary and unrelenting about the way he speaks. Like he's used to getting his way. She sighs and bends, picking up the rubber band, then straightening up so she can gather her hair into a pony tail and secure it.

“Will that do?” Any more of this and he can take his fucking job and shove it up his ass along with the stick that's already there.

“Well, it will have to.”

He's twirling a pen in his long fingers as his eyes start at the toes of her shoes, a pair of pointy kitten heels she bought at a yard sale, traveling up the offensively bare legs and farther. She fidgets uncomfortably and resists the temptation to yank her skirt down.
“So...” Come on Faith, think of something to say. “I guess I should get my e-mail account set up. You got an ISP?

He looks at her as if she's just taken a dump on the rug. “E-mail?” he echoes incredulously. “I don't have e-mail. I believe in doing things the old-fashioned way.”

That explains why her office equipment looks like it came from the Smithsonian. “You don't have a computer?”

He shudders almost imperceptibly and she wonders why such a neat freak doesn't seem to have used a razor this morning. He's got some serious stubble going on and this puffy look around his eyes, which she's all too painfully familiar with, being the only daughter of two alcoholics.

“Fascinating though this is, it really would be beneficial if you could do some work,” he says. “Go and get your pad and a pencil, 2B please. I need you to take some dictation.”

Right. Dictation she can do, she's even kind of good at it. The secretarial college still held a course in shorthand, taught by a shrunken, antiquated woman who liked to whap people with a ruler when they screwed up.

She turns on her heel and returns to the reception area, grabs a pad and pencil. She's heading back to the inner office when the silence is shattered by the bleating ring of the ancient phone.

Shit. No doubt there was some sort of weird way Mr. Prissy-Fussy, Esq. wanted her to answer the phone, and they haven't discussed that yet.

It rings again.

“Tort... No, I'm not here,” he calls sharply from the inner office.

Shit shit shit. And take a message as well.

Another ring.

“Faith! I don't pay you to let the phone go after two rings! Answer it now!”

She stumbles over her feet a bit in her rush to reach the phone before the fourth ring.

“Um, yeah?” Yeah, real professional, there, Faith. She takes a deep breath and starts over. “The offices of Wesley Wyndam-Pryce. How may I help you?” She struggles to keep the fake perkiness in her voice from taking on an almost manic lilt at the end of the question.

The caller, with a voice that vacillates between screeching and rumbling, rambles through some crap she can hardly follow. Torts and counter claims. Whatever. “Yes. I see. Yes. Well, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce isn't in right now, and if you leave me your number I'll have him...”

The caller hangs up on her. Well. That was different. “Fuck you too,” she says into the dial tone and slams down the phone.

He's behind her. Clearing his throat. “Faith.” God, that disapproving tone is really starting to grate on her nerves.

She is totally not getting paid enough for putting up with this crap. But she follows him into the inner office.

He's pulling a stack of books off an ancient (and huge) burgundy leather club chair. “Sit.” Right,
sure. She's a secretary, not a dog.

The problem is, there's no easy or ladylike or comfortable way to sit in the damn chair and take dictation. Again, she's reminded of the shortness of the skirt and the bareness of her legs. She tries perching on the edge of the seat, legs crossed at the ankle, but sinks into the giant cushion. She tries leaning all the way back, but gets swallowed by the chair's dark recesses. She finally compromises by tucking her legs awkwardly onto the seat and sitting on them and balancing the notepad on her knees.

And she can't help but notice he's watching her with a detached amusement that's kind of weird and slightly inappropriate.

“Take a letter.”

At first, she thinks it's going to be okay. She has to get him to spell out a couple of words on the address, but then he's biting out words in this dense legalese and it's all judiciaries and plaintiffs and words she doesn't even recognize, let alone know how to spell.

She figures that she'll muddle through as best she can. There's bound to be some Boring Legal Words dictionary kicking around here somewhere.

The sound of her pencil scratching across the paper is comforting. She shifts on the seat and her gaze drifts to a cabinet over against the far wall with glass doors.

“Therefore to your inquiry dated...”

There’s all kinds of weird funky shit in there; wooden boxes, with fuck knows what inside, and about three different clocks, ticking away silently behind the glass. She couldn't get a job at some trendy Web design company downtown. No, she has to be stuck here with the repressed English patient and his antique doodads.

“Yours sincerely etc. etc.”

Mr. Wyndam-Pryce finally shuts the hell up and Faith puts down her pencil.

“Type those up and bring them in here for my signature.”

Would it kill him to say please? She's seen those foofy costume dramas on BBC America and she thought that the English were falling over themselves with their pleases and thank yous and anyone for tennis.

“Faith!” He's barking at her again and she scrambles off the chair, almost catching her heel on the edge of the rug.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm going,” she snaps, flinching before she remembers that this isn't home and that tone of voice will only earn her a reprimand, not a blistering invective about what a worthless piece of shit she is.

It doesn't take her long to type up the letters. She digs out a dictionary from the bottom drawer of the desk and manages to decipher the words she doesn't know. It's like fun, only boring. But it's her ticket out of this dump, then she can hop on the first Greyhound to New York and never look back.

When she knocks on his office door, there's no reply. She pauses for a second, then takes a deep breath and turns the handle. He's not there and she places the papers on his desk and practically runs out of the room.
It's only ten o'clock and she already wants to grab her bag and coat and go home. She leans back on her office chair, does a couple of 360 degree revolutions on it, then decides that it's time for her mid-morning cigarette. Yeah, he had plenty to say about appropriate skirt length but she doesn't remember him saying jackshit about not smoking.

There's a door past the kitchen that leads out into the back yard. She sits on the stoop with a cigarette between her thumb and forefinger and burns dead leaves with her lighter. She likes watching things burn, letting the leaves catch light, then throwing them onto the still damp lawn just as they threaten to singe her fingers. She's contemplating having a second cigarette, when she hears the back door open and knows he's standing there. Probably with some pissy kind of look on his face.

She swivels round, her eyebrows raised, to find him in the office doorway brandishing a sheaf of papers. The type is almost obliterated with red lines.

“*It would seem that we have a problem. I want you in my office,*” he says as coldly as a winter's day, then turns and slams the door behind him.

With the door shut it’s as though there’s been a blackout. The only natural light in the room behind her is from the thin sliver of weak sunlight streaming in from under the office door.

She shivers, and it’s not from a chill.

He’s waiting for her on the other side.

She’s this close to storming out the front door when she stops herself mid-stride.

“C’mon, Faith, it’s just a job. You’ve had worse. Don’t let Mr. Stiff Upper Lip get to you.” The pep talk must be working because she finds herself advancing toward the heavy, ornately carved door.

Once inside she finds him glaring angrily at her, sheaf of papers still clutched in his hand. He gestures toward a small, cheap-looking desk adjacent to his larger, more imposing one. That’s new.

So is the gleaming black Selectric. He must have wheeled them in from the supply room.

“Please sit.”

So she gets a “please” this time. That’s when she knows she’s doomed. That’s absolutely the last time she listens to her fucking conscience.

She sidles past him, taking care not to make eye contact with the Glare of Doom for fear it might turn her to stone, and sits down in the high-backed chair. Clearly ergonomics, in addition to most modern technology, are an utterly foreign concept in this office.

She’s got her hands poised over the keys in preparation to re-type the whole batch of letters, when suddenly he’s right behind her, just inches away. How does he do that? She didn’t even hear him stride across the room. He’s so close she can feel his breath on the back of her neck. He leans in over her shoulder and reaches around to hold the stack of papers in front of her nose.

“Firstly, how many times am I going to have to tell you that there’s no ‘h’ in Wyndam-Pryce? Frankly, I’m stunned that we’re having this conversation *again.* Not to mention the fact that ‘whether’ has nothing to do with meteorological phenomena. Shall I send you home with *Strunk and White?* Or a pink slip?”

“Strunk and who?” The ocean of circled red words is giving her a headache.

Now his voice is low and he’s almost whispering in her ear. “I took a chance on you, Faith. Don’t let
me down.” His tone is more intimate than she’d like. She shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

Finally, thankfully, he moves away from her, his arm brushing hers, which sets her nerves jangling, to lean against the side of his desk and watches as she sandwiches a sheet of carbon between two pieces of paper and feeds them into the Selectric.

Her fingers feel as fat and ungainly as sausages as she looks down at the original letter which he's defaced with the red Sharpie. If he doesn't stop fucking staring at her, she's gonna plunge her 2B shittin' pencil into his eye.

No wonder he had a vacancy for a secretary; the last one probably ended up in the State Psychiatric Hospital.

She refuses to look at him as she re-types the letters. But she can feel his eyes on her as he sits behind his desk and begins flicking through his Rolodex.

Fucking English freak, she thinks to herself, as she savagely pounds down on the keys and he dials a number on the old-fashioned rotary phone.

“Wyndam-Pryce here. Kindly put me through.”

Stupid fucking legal terms. Stupid fucking lawyers.

“I'm afraid these terms are completely unacceptable.”

Stupid fucking one-horse town. Stupid fucking carbon paper which is wrinkling up.

“I'll give you twenty-four hours to re-submit your settlement agreement.”

Stupid fucking everything. She slams the carriage return back on the typewriter and pulls out the papers.

“Faith!”

She looks up and surprise, surprise, he's looming over her again, his hand outstretched for the letter. This is getting really old, really fast.

He stands there, reading what she's written and when his lips begin to tighten and his nostrils flare, she rolls her eyes and mentally counts to ten.

“Faith, I thought we were entirely clear on this. There is no 'h' in Wyndam.” His words are flung at her like bullets.

“Well, there fucking should be,” she mutters quietly under her breath and tries to school her sullen features into something approaching contrition.

“What did you just say?”

She gulps noisily and wonders why she can feel a prickling at the back of her eyelids like she's gonna start crying or something.

“I said...” She clears her throat. “I said that there should be. Doesn't make any sense, y'know? It sounds like there's an 'h' there.”

His frosty glare snatches off her top layer of skin and she sits there staring down at her bitten nails because she's fucked if she's going to apologize for shit.
He places both hands on the desk and leans over so she has no choice but to scrape the chair back a few inches. He smells of something lemony and laundry starch. The snowy whiteness of his shirt is blinding her.

“I don't think I've ever had such a recalcitrant employee,” he tells her conversationally, pleasantly even.

He places the new letter on the desk, the lone red circle a source of frustration and relief for both of them. With that, he straightens. “But I haven’t really given you time to acclimate. And you’ve made a small amount of progress. Shall we break for lunch?”

First time she’s seen the bastard smile and it looks freakishly unnatural.

“Yeah, lunch. Good,” she says in a monotone. At this point she’s so fucking wrung-out she doesn’t even want to eat, she just wants to inhale a pack of cigarettes.

There’s a brown bag in the tiny fridge that’s got her name on it—another source of frustration as she’d dearly hoped she’d be beyond the mom-packing-her-a-fucking-bag-lunch portion of her life—but she needs a walk so she goes down the street to the diner. She orders a coffee and a grilled cheese and tomato, which she just picks at. They’re a cover so she can sit there and chain-smoke. To try and calm down.

She’s known him for a sum total of a day and a half and she can’t fucking figure him out at all. Just when she thinks she’s got him pegged he goes and does a 180˚ on her. He was almost apologetic back there.

And suddenly she’s wondering how the hell he ended up in Middle of Fucking Nowheresville. Why here? Hell, she’d go live in Europe in a second if she could. What made him leave?

The diner’s bell jangles, and speak of the devil, in he walks. She quickly places her menu over the embarrassingly overflowing ashtray and smiles weakly at him.

He nods tersely in her direction. “Faith.” The cashier hands him his sandwich in a bag and he hands her a crisp new ten-dollar bill. Then he saunters out.

Christ. She shakily lights another cigarette.

Chapter Three

They settle into some kind of routine after that.

A week goes by and she’s at his door every morning by eight-thirty in a crisply ironed blouse and skirt. She still can't muster up the necessary humiliation to put on pantyhose every morning but he doesn’t say anything.

She gets in, goes to the kitchen, and makes coffee for her and tea for him. He has it strong and black with a slice of lemon resting on the saucer. Not swimming in the tea. But on the saucer. Just so.

Then she stands by the sink, gulping down her coffee, before picking up his cup and taking it into his office so he can casually sip it while he dictates that day's letters at her. Dust motes swirl around the room and dance with the words that he shoots at her. Once her pad's pages are decorated with her squiggly shorthand, she gets up from the bucket chair and goes back to the reception to type them up.
Once she's put them on his desk, she goes outside for a cigarette and comes back to find the letters waiting for her. On a good day, they're signed in his slashing, black scrawl. On a bad day, they're a mess of red lines and circles. But he doesn't get all English about it, just asks her to redo them. She hasn't even had to sit at the other desk, which has been taken out of his office and put back in the basement.

They go to the diner for lunch. But she sits at the counter and tries to chain smoke her way into an early grave and he simply comes in for his sandwich (chicken and lettuce and tomato on rye, no mayo) and the briefest nod to indicate that she actually exists.

In the afternoon he goes out and she sits there. He always tells her to stay in the reception area and answer the phone but it never rings. So she files her nails and slips out the back to smoke some more and burn pieces of paper that she tears out of her shorthand pad.

He's back at precisely 4.35 every day to dictate the last letters of the day, which she drops in the mailbox as she walks home.

And she's never been so fucking bored in all her life. It's got to the stage where she wishes he'd do something to break the routine. Like, wear a blue shirt, instead of a white one. Really go to town. Or order something else for his lunch. Ask them to smother his fucking sandwich in mustard. But he never does.

It's the third day of her second week. He's out on appointments and she's burned a whole shorthand pad in the yard and smooshed the ashes into the weeds and gravel with her heels. As she lets herself back in, it's four-thirty already, and she hears the phone ringing.

Someone's calling! Halleluincellinglujah!

She tears down the hallway and snatches up the receiver. “Wesley Wyndam-Pryce's office. How may I help you?” She sounds pretty fucking spiffy.

“Faithy, babes, is that you?”

“Mom?”

“That you, honey?” She's drunk, which is why she's ODing on the endearments.

“I told you not to call me here.” The phone slips in her sweaty hand.

“Faithy, don't be mad at me. I need you to do something for me.”

“Look, I'm working, which I know is like totally out of your area of expertise, but I'm not allowed personal calls.”

She might just as well have not spoken. “I need you to go to the discount liquor store and get me some vodka. Can you do that for me, babes?”

“I'm not old enough.” It doesn't matter that she's never once been carded in the last two years. There's something weathered in her eyes, she thinks, that she can buy enough alcohol to sink either one of her parents into their usual twice weekly stupor.

“Babes, I wouldn't ask if I wasn't desperate. Please, Faithy. Your father came over today.”

“That bastard! Why did you even let him in? What the fuck did he want?”
“So will you...”

She looks up and of course he's standing there because he's sly and stealthy like this cat they once had. Fuck knows how long he's been standing there. He looks pointedly at the phone in her hand, one eyebrow arching in query.

“Faithy, you still there, sweetheart?”

“Mom? I have to go now. I'll pick it up on the way home.” She carefully places the phone back in its cradle and straightens. “That was my Mom. She needs me to run some errands for her on the way home.”

He looks at her curiously, like he's seeing her for the first time. “It never occurred to me to ask, but how old are you? You didn't put your age on your résumé, as I recall.”

She never does because she figures that the minute they do the math, then the only paycheck she's gonna be picking up is from the Everything For 99 cents mart.

“I'm nearly twenty.” It's her stock response and he smiles faintly.

“Was that a personal call?”

“It was my mom.” Hadn’t she just told him that? “I told her not to call here but she gets lonely.”

“Hmm, how fascinating.” He turns to go because he's one stone-cold bastard. Then he thinks better of it. “We really haven't had the time to get better acquainted, have we? I do like to know the salient facts about my employees.”

An icy finger of dread tickles it way down her spine but she just shrugs. “Nothing much to tell. Do you want me to take a letter?”

“No. You should probably run along home. Get those errands. I'll see you tomorrow.”

She’s getting sick and tired of this bullshit and the stuff at home that seeps into the other parts of her life like a virus. After picking up the vodka for her mother, which is sure to be a downer for the evening, she calls her best friend, Xander. He always knows how to make things brighter and he doesn’t reek half as much as her mother (he gets sick after three shots so he doesn’t drink.)

Excuses, excuses, Faith... a voice chastens in her head. She doesn’t give a damn, though. She doesn’t want to spend another evening in a slump.

Her mother’s sure to try to convince Faith to stay in and listen to all the crap that her father put her through. He’s the reason she’s still drinking. Vice-versa, Mommy dearest. Right now all she wants is someone who doesn’t want to screw her over both metaphorically and not. In other words; no bosses, no exes who still want in her pants, no parents.

She manages to slip out the house, muttering explanations of overtime work, though Mr. Wyndam—without an ‘h’—Pryce isn’t gonna invite tonight’s conversation, she assures herself silently. Her mother sits, her eyes cast downwards and her hands intertwined. Her plaintive voice sets a pang of guilt deep inside Faith.

“Ma, really... I’d stay if I could, you know I would.”

Faith tries not to think of her boss’ interest in getting to know her as she makes her way out the door.
The only one who knows her, she’s going to see, and she trusts him. There’s something about the boss that makes her edgy. Maybe it’s the lack of ‘h’ in the name or the accent. Maybe it’s his issues about her skirt length. Whatever it is, it unnerves her.

Xander’s sitting at their usual table in the coffee shop. She’s pretty sure that java isn’t gonna calm those nerves.

Damn.

She slides into the booth and bumps up against him by way of greeting.

“Been here long?”

“Nah. Only had one slice of pie.”

“Xander!”

“What? I saved some for you.” He laughs and pushes the slice of strawberry rhubarb over to her.

She takes a forkful and slumps down into the red leatherette. “Christ, Xander. I don’t know how I’m gonna make it through this week.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Just that my freaking boss is a freaking freak. I did mention that he’s British, right? I mean, that says it all right there.”

“Um, says what, exactly?”

“They’re all repressed and control-freaky and man, he is so not an exception.”

Xander shrugs. “If you want to quit, then quit.”

“The weird thing is, I don’t. We’ve got this routine, and it’s kind of, I don’t know, comfortable. But there are these moments where he’s just so closed-off and I’m dying to know what he’s really thinking. He’s…”

“A velvet glove wrapped in an enigma?”


They collapse together into a fit of laughter. They don’t notice Wes sitting at the corner table, watching.

It's the last time she laughs that night.

When she gets home her mother is drunk and passed out on the sofa, a column of ash from the cigarette between her fingers still smoldering. Faith stubs it out, then begins the long, thankless chore of hauling her to bed. She comes to halfway through; long enough to throw up all over Faith's prettiest dress, then lapses into a long rant about how unhappy her life is and what a bastard Faith's dad is and how she wishes that she'd had an abortion and never got landed with an ungrateful kid and a sorry excuse for a husband. Faith has heard it a hundred times before. The words skim off her like water on oilskin. But her mother's nails digging into her arms hard enough to draw blood are a good enough reason to stay.
Chapter Four

She doesn't get to bed much before three and comes to with a start, cracking her head on the headboard as the alarm clock bursts into its cacophonous ringing. She hits snooze. She hits snooze again. By the time she gets up and drags a comb through her ratty hair and tries to find clean clothes from the pile on the floor, it's already eight-fifteen.

There's no way her mom is in any fit state to drive, so she pulls on her battered sneakers and clutching her kitten heels in her hand, she runs the eleven blocks to Mr. W. Wyndam-Pryce Esq.'s office.

Faith pokes her head round the door, to see if the coast is clear. Maybe she can bluff him into believing she's been here for half an hour. She tiptoes across the reception area and sits down to toe off her sneakers and worry at the loose piece of skin on her big toe when she hears a cough.

It's him. Of course it's him. Who the fuck else would it be?

She's never been so aware of herself and not in a good way. Her hair falling round her face in tangled curls, the stain on her rumpled skirt where she spilt syrup on it a couple of days before, and the scratches on her forearms from her heart-to-heart talk with Mom add up to one lousy appearance. He sure as shit ain't going to be sending her a muffin basket for National Secretaries Day.

“So you've finally decided to honor me with your presence,” he says when the silence is ready to apply for citizenship.

Faith kicks her Chuck Taylors under the desk and slips on her shoes. “I'm sorry.”

“Late night, was it?” She won't look at him—can't look at him—but that stupid Limey accent of his has never sounded so clipped, like he has to force the words out.

“I had trouble sleeping.” Which isn't really what she meant to say and now she's said it, it seems weirdly inappropriate.

“I see.” He moves away from the door and she thinks fuck! Mom wasn't the only one who had a rough night. His stubble has practically upgraded to a beard and the puffiness around his red-rimmed eyes tells its own tale of dirty glasses and stained beer mats. “Get yourself a cup of coffee and bring it into my office with your notebook.”

She has no choice but to comply. She’s come to dread the Official Summons Into the Inner Sanctum, because, Christ, it never bodes well. And given his appearance this morning, she imagines he’s hungover and even more short-fused than usual. Which is just fucking great. She skips the coffee. Her nerves are on edge enough as it is.

He gestures for her to sit. She does so, trying simultaneously to smooth the rumples out of her skirt and cover the maple syrup stain and cross her legs in appropriately lady-like fashion.

“Frankly, Faith, your appearance is atrocious. If you're going to breeze in here a half an hour late looking like that you might as well not come in at all.”

“I can explain.” She hates herself for the tiny but noticeable quaver in her voice.

“I really don’t care to hear what you have to say for yourself.” He pauses. “So, is he your boyfriend?”

“What? What are you talking about?”
“I saw you last night. At the coffee shop.”

“Who, Xander?” She laughs, somewhat relieved. “God, no. Xander’s gay.”

“Where did those marks on your arms come from, then? What have you been doing, Faith?”

This whole line of questioning seems beyond inappropriate, and she’s calling an end to it right now. “You know what? It’s none of your fucking business. And really, if we’re going to critique appearance, we should talk about you. Because, quite frankly, you look like sh—”

Before she can finish, he snatches her notebook from her hands and slams it down onto the desk with such force that she jumps.

“We came here to talk about your performance, Faith. Get up.”

She stands, feeling painfully self-conscious and more apprehensive than she’d like.

“Place your hands on the desk.”

She does. She finds herself staring at her crumpled, water-stained résumé.

“Lean in close to the letter, now. Can you find what’s wrong with it?”

“What? I don’t know what you—”

“You’re a liar, Faith. And a sloppy one at that.”

“This is about my age, right? I mean, I can explain that too. My dad’s never around and my mom, she—” She’s talking really fast, trying desperately to explain before he cuts her off again.

She’s answered by a resounding, firm smack on her backside—a hard thwap! that sends a shockwave through her.

She exhales sharply, and slowly looks over her shoulder. He looms above her, the dark of the Inner Sanctum the only thing visible behind him. The quaver in her voice has transformed into eyes ever-so-slightly brimming with tears. She blinks them back; she sure as hell isn’t going to crumble now. Something that wasn’t there before.

She opens her mouth to speak, but he cuts her off. “There’s a rather glaring omission on your résumé, isn’t there, Faith?”

Of course. The time she spent in juvie for lifting. But that’s off her record now. She’s clean. Mostly.

“Look, I can explain...”

“I’m not interested in excuses, Faith.” And he runs his hand through her hair, tenderly at first, then grabs a fistful and pulls her off the desk. His lips are against her ear, his breath warm on her neck. Shocked at her reaction, she doesn’t struggle. In fact, she tries to keep from shivering as electric tendrils of desire curl down to the tips of her toes. “I thought I told you to keep your hair up.”

“Yes.” She not so much whispers as exhales the word.

“I’m sorry?”

Is it that kind of game? Of course it is. Her head is swimming. “Yes, sir,” she says, a little more
firmly.

“And your clothing, it's disgusting.” He lets go, and she crumples to the desk. Before she can get up, before she can get her bearings, he's spanked her again, another resounding smack across her left ass cheek.

“And you'll arrive on time, every day.”

And another smack.

“And you'll answer the phone with an appropriate tone and manner.”

And another. And another. Until she can't really make out what he's saying, and has just given herself over to the twin discomforts of spanking followed the edge of the desk shoving into her gut, making it nearly impossible to catch her breath. The tension of her bullshit life and her fucking bullshit drunk mother and this bullshit job and everything other fucking thing she's ever done wrong start to float away, and she's actually feeling kind of relaxed, really fucking turned on too. She closes her eyes and sees an explosion of color every time he strikes her.

It all stops. For a split second she's unsure what to do, but then he's collapsed against her back, breathing heavily, amazingly in sync with her gasps. And his hand is millimetres away from hers on the desk. They say nothing.

She slides her pinkie around his index finger. She tries to force everything she's feeling into the tip of her little finger. And she realizes when he doesn't pull his hand away that maybe she's finally succeeded at doing something right in this office, for once.

He has beautiful hands she thinks; long, tapered fingers and this is the first time they've ever touched her.

His index finger slides out of her grip, slowly, almost regretfully, then he's straightening up. She feels a tug on her skirt but he's only smoothing it down where it's wrinkled and she's boneless, she couldn't move if she wanted to. She just might have to stay bent over his desk forever.

“Faith? Are you all right?” His voice has softened and trickles over her like warm honey.

“Yeah,” she says on a sigh.

“Good, well, kindly sit down please.” Not so much warm honey now, more like permafrost.

But as she winces slightly and wriggles as her tender cheeks hit the chair, she sees the shadow of a smile ghost across his face. Then he pushes her résumé toward her.

“How old are you? The truth this time.”

“Eighteen. I'm eighteen.”

“I see. And what were you in juvenile hall for?”

“I got caught shoplifting from Walgreens with some friends.”

“Let me guess. It wasn't your idea, you were just the look out, then they ran away and left you to take the rap after stuffing half a dozen lipsticks into your purse?” If he were a superhero his special power would be killing people with his snark.

Faith shrugs in a noncommittal fashion but his eyebrow arches up as he studies her over his linked
“Well, it was something like that.”

“And the scratches on your arms?”

They look at the angry red weals marring the soft flesh of her forearms before she tucks her hands behind her back.

No power on earth is going to get a confession out of me, counselor. “Cat,” she improvises, not caring how unconvincing she sounds. “Angry cat. Anything else you're dying to know?”

He does smile then and it transforms the harsh lines of his face into one of those matinee idols from the black and white movies on TCM. “That's everything for now. I think we'll save the mystery of how you've got through six shorthand pads in a week for another day, don't you?”

Just when she thinks she's got him sorted, he throws another curveball at her. “So, you're not firing me?”

“And have to go through the burden of putting another ad in the paper? I think not. But I'll be watching you very closely, Faith. Making sure you behave yourself.”

For one second their gazes meet. Collide. And it's like he's asking her a question and she thinks the answer might be yes but she doesn't know for sure so to be on the safe side, she looks down at the stain on her skirt.

She thinks she hears him chuckle but then he clears his throat. “Please pick up your pen so I can give you dictation.”

And it's another flurry of legalese, yours sincerelys, and words she asks him to spell out. And he's even nice about it, for once. He doesn't even trot out his favorite admonishment: “What in heaven's name do they teach you in the schools here?” Her hand is flying across the shorthand pad on autopilot.

The rest of her brain is trying to parse out what just happened, and it mostly boils down to the fact her repressed and control-freaky boss just gave her the spanking of a lifetime that might have been the hottest five minutes she'd ever spent with a man, then acted like nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. And interrogated her. Which, okay, might seem weird under other circumstances, but it isn't really. After all, there's the little nagging issue that they're two royally fucked up people.

“That will be all, Faith.” His voice is clipped again. The honeyed tone has all but vanished.

She looks up at him and realizes he's been done dictating for a good minute and a half, and she's still sitting there lost in thought, looking like a dreamy-eyed idiot.

“Right, right. Sorry. I'll, uh, just get these typed up and drop them in the mail at lunch.”

She stands a little too quickly, and her still-tender ass twinges. And so do some other bits. She whimpers slightly and nearly falls over on the spot, but amazingly manages to keep it all together and shoot him a sly little smile as she brushes past him to the door.

Chapter Five
Back at her desk, the gentle thrumming of the Selectric's motor echoes the incessant throbbing of her tanned ass. She types faster than ever, her fingers flying across the keys. She can't even think anymore, just lets the words glide across her fingertips. After the last letter's done, she realizes she'd better have a ciggarette before she spontaneously combusts.

Which is the precise moment a leggy brunette she's never seen before enters the foyer.

She's perfectly coiffed and perfectly dressed in a tailored suit cut to accentuate the angularities of her frame. Her very expensive shoes match her even pricier-looking handbag.

"Wesley!" she screams.

"Um, excuse me, can I help you?" Faith steps out from behind the desk, her bare feet hitting the cold floor. And suddenly she remembers exactly what she looks like. For one thing, she's still barefoot. And there's the fact that her birds-nesty hair has a distinctly freshly fucked look to it. It's kind of overkill to think about how her stained skirt and wrinkled blouse look at this point.

Not even deigning to give Faith a once-over, the woman looks right through her. "I highly doubt that, whatever your name is."

"Faith. Just Faith." God, this woman amply fills the definition of bitch and some other choice words as well.

"Miss Faith. What an odd name. Well, he certainly has scraped the bottom of the barrel this time. I had no idea it was so impossible to find a presentable secretary these days." She makes for the hallway.

Faith beats her to it, blocking her way. "Look, I don't know who you are, but I know you don't have an appointment, and you can't just barge in here like this."

The woman snorts derisively. "Fine." She ratchets up the fake charm to eleven. "Would you let Mr. Wyndam-Pryce know that Lilah Morgan is here, honey? Thanks." She turns on her heel and slips into one of the battered leather club chairs and starts mindlessly flipping through one of the ancient magazines.

Faith takes a breath she really needs to be laden with nicotine and smoke, and gets a lungful of nothing but dusty, musty book-smell all but wiped out with whatever perfume this woman’s wearing. It smells thick, aggressive, rich, and she wants to hold her breath and run until she’s out of range of it, but she figures she’s done enough to make herself look like a fool without that. She gives the woman one last look to make sure she’s going to behave, and backs away, only turning when she’s out of sight.

Going back down the hallway, with her skirt shifting against her ass with every step like a ghostly hand, she lets out the breath she’s been holding and begins to hurry.

Wesley. Bitch called him that, she must know him. Family? No, or she’d have said...and she sure as hell wasn’t a friend. That left ex, and yeah, she’d fit that bill. She looks as wound tight as he is.

She taps gently on the door, waits for long enough to be sure he isn't going to answer, then opens it.

"Uh, are you there?" she says, feeling stupid talking to thin air. His chair’s empty, like the room, and she goes in and pushes the door closed behind her in case the woman decides sending a peasant to do a flunkey’s job was a mistake and comes charging down the hall. She doesn’t want her in this room, she realizes, doesn’t want her touching anything, sitting where she sits.
The desk draws her gaze and she stares at it, even as she calls out, “Sir?” in a voice she tries to keep low, because she’s fucking sure she can see marks on the polish where her hands were, and it’s making her shiver remembering the way the wood pressed up against her palms.

“I’m not here."

It’s like a stupid kid’s game or something, and for a moment she grins. Hide and seek, hot and fucking cold. But since she really doesn’t think he’s under the desk, it only leaves one place. She walks over to the other door in the room, and hesitates, not quite daring to open it.

“You sure? Because there’s this Morgan woman out in reception and she wants to see you. Sounds pissed.”

His voice is edged now, each word slicing at her, hissed out in a whisper, and he must be practically fucking leaning against that door, because it sounds loud in her ear, as if he shouted it, but she’s not sure he can raise his voice. Doesn’t need to. Scarier when it’s quiet and he knows it. She puts her hand against the paneled door and spreads her fingers wide. She stares at that for a while, and just the feel of it makes her ass burn brighter, even though the door’s all messed up with weird carvings, not smooth like the desk. Was he watching her hands when he did it, seeing them clutch and scrabble that first time his hand landed, then stay still, stuck in place after that? Probably just watching her ass, she decides.

“Are you not listening to me, Faith? I am not here. I do not wish to see her. Please do what you’re paid to do and get rid of her.”

He does sarcasm the way other people do drugs, but she can hear something dragging at his voice; little bit of panic maybe, little bit of need.

He really doesn’t want to see the snooty bitch, does he? And he’s asking her for help. Well, as close as he gets to asking.

“You’re the boss.”

And she puts a bit of a swagger in her walk as she goes back into the reception, because man, it’s going to be fun passing on a tidied-up version of ‘Fuck off, bitch, he’s not interested’ and watching the mask crack.

When Faith gets back to reception, Lilah is feigning enough interest in last October’s *Architectural Digest* that Faith has to clear her throat to gain her attention.

When Lilah finally looks up from the magazine, her expression of surprise is about as genuine as her knockoff Gucci bag.

“Oh. I didn’t see you there. So sorry.” She puts the well-thumbed AD back on the pile and stands, smoothing her skirt and squaring her shoulders. She gives Faith a frosty little smile. "Where is he? I know he’s here.”

“Actually, Miss Morgan,” Faith stands up straight and does her best to approximate Lilah’s body language into some semblance of Don’t Fuck With me if You Know What’s Good For You, "he’s not. He’s out of the office at present. Shall I take a message?”

“A message. Huh.” She tilts her head and considers this for a moment. “All right. Tell Wesley that if he doesn’t sign the settlement by close of business tomorrow I will personally put his balls in the most airtight legal vise grip known to man. I’m not waiting any longer.”
Faith’s improvised composure falters just a little bit at that.

Lilah gives her a condescending little smirk. “I’ll let myself out, honey.”

The door slams behind her with teeth-rattling decisiveness.

Faith sinks down onto the leather chair, shaken. “Christ, no wonder he was driven to drink.”

Unpleasant encounters aside, she’s still on the clock for another four hours. And so she reluctantly drags herself up out of the chair. On the way back to her desk she hears a tiny creak from inside Wes’ office. She opens the door and peers inside. He’s back behind his desk, looking as composed and steely as ever.

“She’s gone, yes?”

“Didn’t you hear the—” She hears the note of exasperation in her voice, and she stops mid-sentence. “Yeah, she’s gone.”

“And?”

“Would you like quotes or paraphrases?”

“Faith.” So that’s why Lilah’s head tilt of condescension looked so damn familiar.

“Quotes. Right. If you don’t have the settlement signed and on her desk by tomorrow, she’s going to be forced to … take legal action.”

“I’m reasonably sure Ms. Morgan used more colorful epithets than that, but fine. That will be all. I left some briefs for you to type up. They’re on your desk, sorted in colored folders. They’re to be finished and filed by end of business today.”

Faith turns to go.

“Faith?”

She stops and half-turns to look at him.

“Thank you.” He sounds almost relieved.

She smiles. “No problem.” She closes the door quietly behind her.

Chapter Six

The next few days seem to pass by in this seamless blur, punctuated by the sounds of office routine. Her fingers clacking over the keys of the Selectric. The scratch of her pencil on the paper. The static hiss her stockings make as she crosses her legs.

Yeah, she’s made some minor adjustments. Xander and she went thrift store shopping on the weekend with the contents of her first pay packet, minus the fifty dollars Faith gave her Mom for housekeeping, which resulted in an immediate phone call to the only liquor store in town that delivers.

Whatever.
Now Faith is kitted out in a parody of a fifties secretary. Tight pencil skirts, fitted little blouses (one even has a pussy cat bow, which even Xander thinks is overkill) and a pair of killer heels. Her long, loose-limbed stride is constrained to more of a hobble with her tits thrust out but it's worth it just to see the look on Mr. Wyndam Pryce Esquire's face when she teeters into his office on Monday morning with her shorthand pad. It only lasts a split second before he schools his features back into severity but the way his eyebrows shoot up to his hairline and his mouth hangs open is worth even little red weals that her stockings left when she takes them off.

But it's not enough.

And it's not like she's some weird little freak who gets off on guys hitting her and shit. Except she did. And he did. So why the fuck hasn't it happened again?

Instead he's acting like some playground bully who got sent to the principal and given a week's detention. It's like there's a twelve-inch exclusion zone all around her. When he comes into the kitchen for his stupid Earl Gray tea and she's leaning up against the counter waiting for the kettle to boil, he presses himself back and sidles round her like she's gone down with a bad case of cooties.

Faith would also swear on the freakin' Bible that the chair in front of his desk has been moved back at least two feet so she can't contaminate him with her...whatever that stuff is that oxygen turns into once you breathe it out.

But instead of feeling angry and hurt, she's feeling all kinds of other things. Mainly restless, the same way she gets the week before Xander and she take a trip to the City and she's anticipating the good times and the beat of loud music and the bodies brushing up against her as she dances. She feels heavy like her limbs have been weighted down and it's all she can do to walk the corridors in her four-inch, fuck-me shoes.

Something has to give and it sure as hell ain't gonna be her.

Two more days of him acting like he has a leper on the payroll and after another morning's scintillating dictation when she keeps looking up to find his eyes fixed rigidly on a point somewhere above his shoulder, she knows what to do.

Faith marches back to her desk, inserts a page of the fancy linen blend paper into the typewriter and begins to type. Two minutes later she finishes off:

Your sincerely

W. Windham-Price EsQuire.

With a beatific smile, she snatches the sheet out of the machine and begins the short walk to his office.

She's two steps away from him when she starts to wonder if she's made a mistake. Thinks about snatching back her hand, extended toward him with the paper quivering like a moth's wing, wadding the thick paper into a ball, all edges and spikes, and shoving it down the front of her blouse. But then she imagines his fingers, cool against her skin as he goes in after it—and she knows he would—unbuttoning her blouse with the same careful precision he uses to line stuff up on his desk, or fold his handkerchief, and she lets go. It flutters and snaps as he brings it closer and starts to read and she swallows.

She always watches him when he does this. He reads fast; eyes skimming and flickering, and he doesn't miss a fucking thing. This letter's perfect, not a comma out of place; a work of fucking art if
you go in for that sort of crap. The ink’s black, and the paper’s cream, and it’s elegant and understated, just like him. She thinks about his bare back, two shades darker than the paper, no more, because he’s so not the soaking up the rays kinda guy, and goes off into this daydream where she’s writing on him, maybe with one of those fucking Sharpie pens, hearts and loops and—

“‘I see.’

Two words. Four fucking letters, that’s all, and he packs the Complete Works of Shakespeare in there, it’s that loaded. And she’s missed the look on his face when he saw the ending that made it the best fucking letter ever.

“‘What?’

“I see that you’re determined to stay at your current level of ineptitude and ignorance.”

Oh, she’s ignorant, is she? Not fucking blind though. He’s glitter-eyed and tight-lipped and he’s looking at her. First time since it happened and she’s got his attention on her and it’s gone so fucking quiet in here she wishes she’d brought a pin to drop.

He stands up and it isn’t that he’s taller, because when she’s in these heels there’s not that much in it, but she wants to tip her head back somehow when she looks at him.

“You’re wasting my time, not to mention dirtying expensive paper.” He’s walking around the desk now and her heart’s thumping with each soft footstep. “Do you like doing that, Faith? Like spoiling things? Like destroying and burning and turning something useful to nothing but ash and smoke?”

He knew. He’d seen. Christ, how did he watch her without her knowing? She always knew if she was being stared at, alien eyes on her tits or ass when she danced or walked down the street, throwing in a wiggle just for the sake of it.

“I made a mistake. It happens.” Christ, she sounds like she’s three days into a cold. Clears her throat and tries again. “Sorry.”

He widens his eyes just a fraction. “Well, yes, I imagine you are, but that’s scarcely the point, is it? What did you think, Faith? That you could get dressed up in your new clothes and suddenly you’d be good enough? Is that it?”

And she’s shaking her head, little bit hurt, because he’s got scorn dripping off every word as he looks at her and she’s remembering the Morgan bitch and feeling like a carbon-copy, a knock-off, second-hand and cheap.

“Turn around.”

It’s a whisper and it’s still got more authority than a scream but she doesn’t want to lose the sight of his face so she stays where she is until his lips thin and tighten.

“I won’t repeat myself, Faith.”

And she’s spinning on her heel and the fucking shoes are too high for that, and she starts to stumble but he catches her, hand wrapping around her arm and pulling her up. For a second she thinks she feels his breath against her bare neck, but then he’s stepping away and she’s left staring at the wall, waiting.

“Lift up your skirt, Faith.”
It’s not what she expected and it unsettles her, though fuck knows she’s not exactly relaxed right now, but he waits and when she shakes her head she’s not really saying, ‘no’, she’s asking, ‘why?’

“Please stop wasting my time, Faith.”

No one says her name like that, lingering on it, as if it’s more than just a convenient label, and she reaches down and pulls up the tight skirt, bunching it in her hands and easing it over her hips. She’s so fucking exposed right then and it sends a trickle of heat through her, so that when he reaches out and hooks his fingers in her panties she moans, biting her lip to keep the sound inside and not quite making it. His hand goes still, knuckles brushing her ass.

“You will remain silent, Faith.”

And she would have, she’d have tried to anyway, but then he slips the letter inside her panties and she cries out with surprise as the stiff edges scrape against her skin. He spins her around and slams her against the desk in one swift movement.

“I don’t tolerate waste and disobedience, Faith. I think you need to be reminded of that, don’t you?”

And she watches her hands slip into position, fingers spread, and hears the air part for his hand behind her.

It seems to last an age but then again it doesn't seem like any time at all.

She hears it first; the crack of his hand against the curve of her left buttock, then she feels it. God, how she feels it! This hot kiss on her skin that makes her fingers clench.

The next smack almost jolts her off her feet and she lurches against the side of the desk, catching the tender pooch of her belly against the edge of the wood and making the paper crackle, She can't stifle the surprised cry that bursts out of her mouth.

He stops. He takes a step back, then she hears a tutting sound. Christ, now what?

His hands are gentle as they arrange her to his liking, molding her into Faith-shaped clay. He stands behind her, palms smoothing down her arms so he can press her hands flat on the polished wood. He nudges her impossibly high instep with the toe of one polished brogue and she swivels her head to look at him like he's a crossword clue she just can't figure out.

The glint in his eye makes something twist in her stomach. There's a hectic flush of color dotted over his cheekbones.

“I want... Spread your legs, Faith.”

She turns round so he won't see the triumphant smile on her face and obligingly shuffles her feet apart.

“More.”

She waits, contemplates giving her hips a gentle shimmy but thinks better of it.

“Arch your back, Faith.”

What the fuck is she? A pretzel? But she does as he asks and feels the cold air ghost against the exaggerated thrust of her ass.

“That’s better,” he says in this oh-so-satisfied way, like she's just handed him a perfectly typed,
perfectly spelled letter instead of the mess that got her into this wet dream.

She barely has time to blink before the flat of his hand is striking her again. Slow, measured strokes against the thin cotton of her panties.

“You see, Faith, there are correct ways to do things. Procedures that have to be followed.”

His breathing is ragged, a perfect match for hers as she gulps in air and hangs her head. His hand speeds up, starting fires wherever it touches. Her right cheek, her left cheek, the tops of her thighs, and she starts to wish, more than she's wished for anything in her life, that he'd pull down her low-rider briefs so she can feel his skin against hers.

“Without order, you have nothing but chaos. Do you like chaos, Faith?”

She almost misses her cue but comes in just before the prompt. “No, sir!”

“How many pads have you burned?”

She can't remember. Fuck! She can't remember.

“Eight? Nine?”

“Eleven pads. How many?”

“Eleven, sir.”

“You need to be punished for your willful destruction of office property.” He's pacing some distance behind her. “Or maybe I should just deduct the amount from your wages.”

Faith wants to protest that this way is just fine but he's already making that “tsk tsk” sound that she's starting to feel rather fond of.

“But would that be effective? I think not. I think you need tangible evidence of your crimes. Start counting.”

This time the smacks are concentrated in that soft space where her thighs meet her buttocks and as she counts out his beats, it takes every last ounce of energy that's left not to scream and moan but call out the numbers in a steady voice.

“Ten.”

There's a pause, then his hand crashes down with great force between her legs and stays there, crushing the sodden cotton and paper that it's found.

“Eleven.”

His fingers twitch almost imperceptibly and he takes a step closer so she can feel the soft wool of his trousers against her smarting legs.

She stifles a gasp. She sways unsteadily, momentarily thankful that the desk is holding her up. She struggles to remain composed, fingers and legs splayed apart just so, arms locked rigid, back arched, head upright, when all the tension in her body has converged at the juncture where his hand rests. She wants nothing more than to sink down onto the desk. Wants his fingers twisting up inside her. Wants his hands on her breasts and his lips brushing against her skin. Wants him to fuck her. Wants, wants, wants. But she knows that he would see that as simplistic and clumsy and inelegant. *Primitive*, even. For a moment she feels betrayed by the very obviousness of her desire—the proof of
her wanting him—when there he is, still buttoned up and in control. But that’s the magical equation, isn’t it? That’s what got her wet in the first place.

And God, he’s not moving. She can hear his quickened breathing and the mere fact of his body pressed against her—she can feel the heaviness of his erection through the soft yielding fabric—is almost too much. She wants to ask him but she can’t. But this peculiar stasis is killing her.

She waits for him to say anything. Do anything. She’s starting to feel faintly ridiculous just standing there. If only she could see the conflict she’s sure is written across his sharp features. Shame and doubt and self-hatred all reflected in the tightness of his posture, the downturn of his mouth and bitter set of his jaw, his eyes shut tight. Maybe a slight sheen of sweat across his forehead. But she can’t see any of it, only guess. She dutifully stares at a fixed point on the ridiculous flowered wallpaper, and tries to keep her exhausted arms from collapsing. She can’t help but replay all the short, graceless fucks she’s had in her life. And yeah, so she wouldn’t have to put up with this bullshit from the captain of the football team or head of debate or even some geek from chess club. But once you got them into bed they were all the same. Unimaginative. Usually stoned. One, two, three, uh! and she’d be left, unsatisfied, smoking her post-prandial cigarette while he stuffed himself back into his pants and climbed out her window.

She’s brought abruptly back to reality when Wes draws a breath and shifts slightly against her. When he speaks his voice is terse, his accent clipped. “I’m not going to fuck you, Faith.” He spits out the word fuck as though it’s an unclean, unfit thing, utterly beneath him. She’s thankful that he can’t see the disappointment written across her features. She’s about ready to collapse.

That’s when his fingers slide just a little deeper inside her, and she hears the metallic rasp of a zipper. Instantaneously, instinctually she clamps down on his fingers. Instead of digging them in, like so many other finger fucks she’s had, his movements are slight, gentle, deliberate. It’s heavenly, and if there’s something better than that, it’s when his warm and ever-so-slightly hangnailled thumb shoves the wadded paper away and brushes her clit. She lets her breath out in a slight hiss, straining to push a burgeoning orgasm back down. Not yet, not yet. She’s digging her short, ragged nails into the desk, praying for anything but a quick release.

Then she hears it, that tell-tale sound of skin slapping on skin. His ragged breathing picks up the pace. She fights the urge to turn around, even though she knows full well what he’s doing back there. Immediately, as if reading her mind, he rasps: “Keep your eyes to the wall, Faith.”

Well, she’s certainly in no position to disobey that order, as prone and open as she is, his fingers working deep inside her in places she’s pretty sure have never been touched before. Then, like she’s some kind of complicated combination lock, he hits two of the right points at the same instant, thumb working over the tender, concentrated flesh outside and his fingers inside hooking on to the deepest core of her desire.

She doesn’t recognize the sound that comes out of her. Not a scream, not a moan, but some weird, desperate combination of both. This time, when she slams into the edge of the desk, it’s her own doing. His hand is still working her, and the warm tingle of release ebbs and transforms into a near-uncomfortable slow burn. Impossibly, or perhaps not, she comes again, the sounds coming from her throat even more animalistic and needy. Again, she’s grateful that the desk keeps her from collapsing, nearly boneless, to the floor. She’d give anything in the world for him to flip her over and fuck her senseless on the spot.
No sooner has that thought crossed her mind than he breathes her name, his hot come hitting the small of her back, sliding down the slope of her ass, dribbling past where his hand is still locked inside her.

Again, there's silence. Almost too much. He removes his hand and seconds later, he's wiping her down with his starched handkerchief with surprising gentleness, the slight roughness of the fabric sending a little aftershock of shivers across her flesh.

She can hear him fussing around behind her, but she doesn't dare turn around. There's the reverse rasp of the zipper, and she feels an emptiness in the space he'd filled.

He slips into the ancient leather desk chair, and she can see that some of the tense lines around his mouth and eyes have slipped away. She tries to catch his eyes, but he's looking past her, through her.

“That will be all for today, Faith,” he says flatly, pulling a file from under her arm.

Chapter Seven

She thought the world would end after those twenty minutes in his office or, like, be different or something but the planet is still spinning on its axis and she's still typing and burning pads in the backyard and hoping, beyond hope, that he'll notice and take it out on her ass again.

Only two things change. The supply desk is back in his office with the little blue typewriter on it, though he's yet to ask her to use it and the other thing? She's still trying to work out whether she should be offended or turned on. Or some weird combination of both.

See, she comes in to work three days later after The Spanking With Benefits and on her desk are two boxes from the fanciest dress shop in town; the one frequented by the Lilah Morgans of this world. She approaches the largest pink box with the cursive black script on it cautiously, mentally rehearsing the flirtatious reprimand she's going to give their cute UPS boy, when she sees an envelope with her name on it tucked into the lid of the larger box.

Her stomach flutters delicately. She knows that writing. Her fingers tremble slightly as she tears open the envelope and plucks out the piece of paper.

Faith

It would appear that you're still not familiar with the appropriate dress code for a lawyer's office. I've taken the liberty of rectifying this matter.

W. Wyndam-Price, Esq.

The delicate flutter has upgraded to a full-on churning as she opens the lid of the first box. There's black as far as the eye can see. She picks up a fold of material and a smile lights up her face.

The dress, identical to the other two still folded between sheets of tissue paper, is unrelenting black and made of fine light wool. High neckline, long sleeves, and when she holds it against her, it just skims the knee. The fact that the slit in the skirt has been painstakingly stitched up is not lost on her.

When she opens the smaller box, she has to clutch on to the sides of the desk to steady herself. Which is way too much deja vu for her liking. There are black suede, pointy-toed stilettos, far higher than anything she's ever teetered on. Five pairs of black silk stockings and then there are...the other things. The things that no boss should ever buy his secretary, appropriate office attire be damned. She scoops up one of everything and rushes into the bathroom.
But he does nothing. He's in boring lawyer automaton mode. His eyes don't seem to appreciate the way the dresses cling to every inch of her, showcasing the high thrust of her breasts and the impossible curve of her waist or the jut of her ass in the corset that he picked out for her.

Faith likes the feeling of being restricted, of being restrained in her clothes. Like she can't be the person she was, instead she's forced to be this other Faith who walks slowly in her vertiginous heels, the tight binding of her skirt making her hips swing gently as she navigates her new world of desk, corridor, office.

She's so convinced by this new Faith that when she looks up and sees him there it takes a second before she gives a start of recognitions. What the fuck?

“Well, well, look at you, Faithy. All grewed up.”

“D-dad?”

She scrapes her chair back to get away from the almost asphyxiating fumes of alcohol seeping out of his pores and his mouth as he directs a stream of invective right at her.

“Your bitch cunt of a mother has had the fucking locks changed. I know you put her up to it, you treacherous little whore. Got yourself a fancy new job but you're still a worthless piece of lying shit, aren't you?”

She doesn't answer. Faith knows how to play this game and it involves hanging her head and staring at her hands until he's done. And that way she doesn't have to see the stains on his shirt, the bloodshot eyes and the spittle clinging to his chapped lips.

“Serve you both right if I fucking torch the place. Like anyone else would miss your useless ass.”

Her gaze skitter to the corridor in dread. How can he not have heard? Why hasn't he appeared? Fuck! Please God, don't let him suddenly appear like a lawyerly version of the bad fairy.

“Giving her housekeeping aren't you? Even though I'm busting my balls to make her fucking alimony payments.”

She's frozen in terror now, her palms damp. Wes is going to get up out of his leather chair, softly stride down the corridor and see her reduced to this. A scared little girl all dressed up and nowhere left to go.

“Give me some fucking money, you cunt!” Her father slams one meaty paw down on the desk with a thump and she jumps.

“I... I...”

“You gonna get that sentence out sometime before the end of next fucking week, Faithy?” He's leaning into her now and she flinches away, one hand reaching out for her bag. He saves her the bother, snatching it out of her nerveless grasp and upending it so a motley collection of makeup and pens and chewing gum and receipts scatters over the table.

He doesn't give a fuck about that. He's already seized her pocketbook and is rifling through it.

“Fuck! Is that all you got?”

“I don't get paid until the end of the week,” she says, her eyes downcast and she doesn't know why she feels like apologizing as he pockets a tiny wad of bills and a handful of loose change.
“Yeah, well, should have known I couldn’t rely on you for fuck all.” Now that he’s got what he came for, he’s already starting toward the door but she daren’t breathe out until the door slams back against the frame and she hears him muttering angrily as he staggers down the steps.

Her fingers fumble for the lighter on her desk and the new shorthand pad that she took from the supply cupboard an hour ago. She’s surprised to find it damp and splotchy but then she realizes that she’s crying. Her tears trace a track through her carefully applied mascara and powder so gray blotches spot the pristine white paper.

She gets up and it feels all wrong to be in this tight skirt and these stupid heels. She doesn’t want to be hemmed in, she wants to run out of here and find some empty place where she can shout and smash things up. Guess she’ll have to make do with willful destruction of office property and fuck! why are her hands still shaking?

Faith steps out from behind the desk, her lighter and pad clutched in her hot, sweaty hands, then nearly screams when she sees him standing there. He doesn’t even blink an eye at her disheveled appearance, the mess of her life spread out over the desktop. He looks so calm, so collected, so in control. His back’s rigid, his eyes frosty like Cool Whip, even though he must have heard World War Three break out in his reception.

She wipes the back of her hand across her eyes to get rid of the tears and it comes away with a black smudge on it as she ruins the rest of her makeup. She can’t stand feeling like this.

“I... I’m sorry... He... Messy divorce thing...”

He cuts right across her tear-soaked babble with the one thing she suddenly realizes she needed him to say. “I want you to take a letter, Faith. Come into my office.”

Chapter Eight

He doesn’t wait for her to reply, just turns and stalks off. She snatches up a pencil, and she’s halfway down the corridor when she realizes she’s still holding the lighter, tucked under the pad. She’d go back and drop it on her desk, but that would mean losing sight of him, and she doesn’t want to do that.

The panic and the rush leave her when she’s inside that dim room, the door closing behind her with a creak and slam that echo in her head as she walks over to him. He’s not at his desk this time; he’s sitting, relaxed and looking thoughtful, on the low couch off to the side. She stands in front of him, the smooth metal of the lighter warm in her hand, hidden for now, not wondering, or thinking, not doing anything but waiting for an order.

And she’s starting to see that if she’s wearing these clothes and waiting, always waiting, this thing, this fucking game they’re playing, isn’t stopping. This round didn’t begin when he told her to follow him, and it won’t end when she leaves, after he’s, well, what will he do? God, she doesn’t fucking care, as long as he takes this feeling away from her; the certainty that all she is and all she’ll ever be is exactly what her dad tells her she is. And he says, “Sit, Faith,” like she’s a fucking dog or something. And that really isn’t a good thing to have pop into her head when she’s carefully bending her knees to sit perched beside him, and tucking her feet neatly to the side.

She clears her throat, pencil poised, the pad awkward in her hand because it’s balanced on slippery metal. The first page needs tearing off; she’s not writing on it when it’s all messed up like that. Fumbling, with fingers still shaking from reaction, she rips it away. The one underneath is stained too and she glances up at him, expecting him to look impatient, but he’s staring at her hands and waiting. Two, three pages get crumpled in her hand and she shoves them down beside her and sets the pencil
against the page.

“Sorry. I’m ready now.”

He starts to dictate to her and she misses the first words because yeah, she didn’t think he really wanted to answer Mr. Lowell’s letter of the fourth and, oh fuck, she’s lost track.

“Sorry. Can you just say that again? Please?” She stares down at squiggles and hooks and tries to make sense of them.

A hand comes to rest on the pad and he curls a fingernail under the page and lifts it up, taking it between finger and thumb and pulling at it. It tears free of the gum at the top with agonizing slowness, then it’s fluttering, held, in his hand.

“Let me see.” He glances at it and tears it in half. “No. It’s not worth keeping. You’d better make a fresh start.”

Well, someone ate Chinese and memorized his fortune cookie last night, she thinks bitterly and she can’t help glaring at him. “It’s not that fucking easy,” she says, the words too loud for this place.

“For most people, no, I’d imagine it’s not.” He studies her and smiles, and God, he’s pretty when he does that, but it’s gone so fast she’s left missing it before she’s had chance to fix it in her head. “But for you it is, isn’t it?” He hold out his hand, palm up. “Give it to me.”

And she knows what he means, but she can’t, and her fingers clutch and curl and her eyes are flickering around the room until she’s giddy, with a kaleidoscope of images slamming against her mind.

“Faith.”

Her gaze goes to his face, and all she can see is him, and that makes it simple.

He tosses the lighter in his hand and flicks it open, watching the flame. “Does it really help?” he asks, as calm as if he’s asked her the time.

“I don’t know. It’s just something I do. Not a big deal.”

She smells the sweetness of the smoke in her head, and touches a perfect curve of black crisp paper, feels it melt to a smear, and swallows.

“No, of course not.” He snaps the lighter shut and slips it into his pocket.

“No! Look, that’s mine.” Give it back to me, you fucking bastard.

“You don’t need it.” He stares at her. “It serves no useful purpose for you to do that, and I believe I’ve expressed my views on it before. You didn’t listen, Faith. Inattention brings with it certain consequences, but you don’t seem to care.” He brings out another of those impossibly clean white handkerchiefs—Christ, would it kill him to blow his nose on Kleenex like the rest of the fucking world? —and reaches behind him for a small jug of water, dipping in a corner of the handkerchief and wetting it.

Without warning she begins to cry, hot tears spilling down her cheeks, and he pauses, hand hovering in front of her face. “Stop that.”

She sniffs, feeling gross, and blinks at him. The tears are stinging her eyes and if she’s got any
mascara left on, it’ll be a fucking miracle. He takes hold of her chin and tilts her face, this way and that, before cleaning it, dipping and dabbing, an intent look in his eyes. He’s making her look the way he wants her to, restoring her, and though it’s not just what she wanted, she takes it anyway.

The water softens the fabric, but it’s still rough against her face and when he’s done he touches his fingers to her skin, reddened and a little sore.

“That’s better,” he says softly. “I don’t care for tears. They will do you no good here, Faith. Remember that.”

It’s a warning and she can’t focus enough to work out what he means because that feeling of being trapped is starting to squeeze her again. She’s tensing her muscles to jump up and run when he twitches the pencil from her hand and tosses it across the room. It lands in the middle of the carpet, rolls and comes to rest.

She meets his eyes, feeling a puzzled excitement chase away the suffocation.

“Fetch it,” he says, eyes doing that burning holes in you thing again. She stands, teetering on her heels, and walks over to it, feeling his eyes on her the whole time. Thanking Christ that she’s fit and limber from never having bus money to do anything but walk, she bends from the waist, feet apart just enough to steady her, and holds the position just long enough to give him something to look at, before straightening and turning back to him, the pencil in her hand. Four steps and she sits down again, picking up her pad and looking at him expectantly.

He leans in, not touching her with anything but his breath, exhaled minty-cool and whisper-soft against her throat and takes the pencil off her, throwing it again, a smile curving his lips. This smile doesn’t make him look pretty but she likes it better.

“Fetch it, Faith.”

And she gets it then and the carpet’s rough against her knees.

It takes her four times to get it exactly right, with him greeting each attempt with a pained sigh and a repetition of the order, until finally she slides to her knees, crawls past the pencil and turns, meets his eyes, then lowers her head, using tongue and teeth to pick it up. A pause, and she crawls back, never looking away from his face, and kneels in front of him, her fingers an inch from one polished shoe.

“You’re remarkably slow on the uptake today, Faith,” he says as he holds out his hand and the spit-wet pencil drops into it, to be discarded with a fastidious shudder.

“Now that you’ve mastered that little task”—his voice is cool and calm and he gives an almost jaunty little lilt to the word “task”—”We can move on to something a bit more difficult.”

She’s still kneeling, looking up at him expectantly, anxiety and excitement flooding through her.

“Stand up.”

She does so.

“Turn around.”

Again, she complies. Her stomach does a little flutter as she imagines him looking her up and down. She had hoped to feel transformed under his gaze, like an Amazon or one of those heroines from a fifties film noir, all poise and snark and power-suiting. Instead she feels like a little girl caught playing dress-up, awkward and a little ridiculous. The nearness of him, the extreme tightness of the
skirt and the nosebleed high heels are conspiring to make her unsteady on her feet; her eyes are still red from crying and her calves ache from the newness of the heels. She takes a deep breath to try and calm herself when she feels the flat of his hand pressing at the small of her back. She leans instinctively into his touch, but he pushes her away with a minute flick of his wrist.

“You are not to slouch, Faith, not ever again. You must stand tall at all times, do you hear me?”

All her concentration is focused on standing stock-still. She’s practically forgotten to breathe.

“Answer me.”

“Yes!”

“Good. Now.” She hears the hushed hiss of a drawer being opened and a rustle of fabric. The air pressure shifts and once again he’s standing right behind her, so close she can feel his hand brushing against her back.

“Close your eyes.”

Eyes closed, she feels like she’s floating in some portion of undetermined space. She tries to make sense of the tiny noises around her. The air conditioner clicks on. The water cooler in the kitchen’s got a drip again.

He's moving around. Pacing, she thinks, and the whisper of fabric continues to cut through the air. She wants to make some sassy remark about how the hesitation is killing the buzz but honestly, it's not. She can't stand it. She wants something to happen, preferably five minutes ago. What the hell is he doing? She swallows nervously, her ankles starting to wobble from standing still for so long. She shifts a foot just a tiny bit to the left.

“Stand still.” Sharp and cutting.

“I'm...I'm sorry.” It comes out as a dry whisper, much more helpless than she intended.

And he's behind her again, warm fingertips brushing a stray tendril of hair from her neck.

“I'm sure you're sorry for a lot of things, Faith.” His mouth is by her ear, she shivers. “Many of which, I imagine, are not your fault.”

It's like a punch in the gut, those words, and the waterworks threaten to break in again. No crying. No. No. No. Deep breath, arms rigid by her sides, hands in tight fists. Another deep breath. But her goddamn chin won't stop quivering.

“No tears, Faith. Remember that,” he says again, running a finger lightly down her cheek, stopping at her betraying chin, holding it still. “Now, open your eyes.”

He's in front of her now, eyes piercing with icy control. She tries to read them, but he's closed off too tightly. He knows she's trying to puzzle him out, and his lips curl into a sneering little smile. He moves a hand to her tight French knot and pulls out the hairpins keeping it in place. Her unruly hair tumbles out around her cheeks.

There's a flicker of pleasure in his eyes at what he's done, and a slight smile curls about her lips.

He frowns. “On your knees.”

She fights an urge to roll her eyes. Up, down, up, down. Shit. But right. It's the game. Right. Keep
your head in the game, Faithy. But she's still hesitating, still not...

“Did you not understand me, you ignorant girl? On your knees. Now.”

She can't exactly argue with that tone. She slips to the floor again. And finds herself staring at his crotch. At his hard-on.

“Hands behind your back.”

Oh God.

“Hands behind your back, Faith. And keep them there.”

She knows. Exactly…

“Undo my trousers.”

Where this…

“Without them.”

Is going.

She's sweating a little. The wool dress is suddenly a lot warmer than it had been. She pressers her sweaty palms together behind her back and takes a deep breath. Here goes nothing.

And actually, it's not exactly as hard as she thinks. Or, well. Undoing the belt anyway. But what to do with this hook and eye closure thing on the waistband? She could pull it really hard with her teeth, but he'd probably not take well to her damaging his obviously custom-made trousers.

She goes for it anyway, tugging lightly at first. She grunts a little with the effort and finally wrenches it open without tearing anything. She thinks.

Zipper next. Easy. Easy. Except that she can't keep it in her teeth because his goddamn erection is in the way. She sighs heavily, then purses her lips around the tiny zipper pull. This works better, and his cock springs out at her, unhindered.

He's going commando? Well, at least she doesn't have to use that stupid plan she was mulling over to casually get his underpants down with her teeth.

From here she's pretty sure she can handle things. The rest of the way is nothing she hasn't done countless times. And she's hungry for it. She takes in as much of his full length as she can at first, and relaxes the back of her throat to take more.

He's running his hands through her hair again. Pulls her off him. What the fuck?

“You're a greedy little harlot, aren't you, Faith?”

She glares up at him. What is with him? Just a little busy down here, sir..

“You could do with a little more grace. I'm not some drunken fool you've picked up at a club in the city. Start again.”

Wait a minute...

“How the hell do you know about...”
“Silence, Faith.”

“What the fuck? Have you been fucking spying on me?” Her voice borders on shrill. She’s taken just about enough shit for one day.

He looks down at her, stony-eyed, but silent.

“No. No. I won’t play that way. I won’t. You cannot spy on me. You can’t, you pretentious fucker!”

Now she doesn’t give a fuck about pleasing him, about composure and the game and keeping it all down. She’s hitting him, thrashing out. Pushes him down onto his precious antique desk and lays one knee right into him.

“You fucking piece of shit! How fucking dare you! I’m not gonna fucking shut it this time, not gonna keep quiet and just let you play out your sick little mindfuck.” She’s got him by his shirt collar, staring him down with murderous anger. He’s not looking away from her but he’s not saying a word in his defense either.

“Is that why Lilah Morgan is suing your pansy ass? You overstep more than a few boundaries with her too, you sick fuck?”

He’s still calm and collected, the bastard. “Your vocabulary has really grown to encompass a startling array of colloquialisms since you’ve started here, Faith.”

Is that a smile? She’s going to take his fucking head clean off.

He’s sprawled roughly on the desk, she’s straddling one knee, a fistful of his formerly impeccable Brooks Bros. chambray shirt gathered tightly in white-hot knuckles.

“Any explanation you can give me that isn’t going to make me walk out of here and never come back?”

She can still feel his hard-on pressed between her thighs and she’s doing her best to ignore that.

“No. No, there isn’t.” No smirk this time. There’s a sharp edge of guilt in the way he’s not meeting her gaze anymore and he looks almost shaken. There’s a first for everything.

“So, you just couldn’t help yourself? What? Say something, goddammit!”

But she doesn’t need to hear it from him. She can see it. How he’d have one more shot of whiskey to talk himself into it, how he’d hate himself for sitting there in the dark, watching her. She can’t help but see the dead-leaf echo of—she doesn’t even want to continue that train of thought. It doesn’t go anywhere good.

She lets go of him, and he slumps down onto the desk.

“This isn’t going to happen again.” Her voice is flat, the merest hint of a quaver creeping in. And she hates herself just a little bit for that.

Suddenly his hand is on her thigh and he’s pushing aside the fabric of her dress, his fingers sliding under the thin lace of her thong. “No, it’s not.”

“I’m leaving.” And yet—

“I’d like you on the desk. Please.” His fingers twist a bit deeper inside her and she finds herself complying. Her better judgment hasn’t gotten fucked in a long while.
She slides onto the desk, legs as apart as they can go in the constricting dress. He kneels down, hiking the dress up over her hips and sliding the lace aside so he can dip his tongue into her pussy. He does so shallowly at first, circling her clit and testing how wet she is before he settles in to really tongue-fuck her. Grips her ass and angles her toward him so the pressure’s just right on her clit. She’s already making these short, clipped moans—"Ah, ah, ah"—but he’s just getting started.

Funny that he can be so cold but his mouth and hands are hot on her as she arches her back, bangs her head on the brass pen tidy, and all the while he’s there, on his knees in front of her, tongue drilling into her.

It’s too much. It’s not enough. She doesn’t know how to do this. No-one’s ever gone down on their knees in front of her. No-one’s ever gone down on her. Like she’s a queen. Like she should be worshipped. Her legs twitch and she’s panicking, trying to fight the fast, frantic waves that are threatening to push her under as he starts sucking hard on her clit.

“Oh God, I can’t...” Her voice is hoarse, frightened as she tries to scoot back, get away from him and his voracious mouth that wants to swallow her whole, taste all her secrets.

His hands slide off her ass, then she feels the span of each of his fingers as he grips the soft skin of her inner thighs, pushing her legs farther apart so she's laid completely bare.

“Please...” It was meant to be some incoherent plea to get him to stop but then he's using his tongue and his teeth and his chin, even his fucking nose and she's never been so wet, so open. When she comes, it's torn out of her with a harsh cry but it's not stopping. Mainly because he doesn't need to worry about keeping her legs open anymore and shoves three fingers into her cunt and twists them roughly.

Everything slips away. All of it. Family. Fears. Foes. And all she is is the relentless tugging and sucking between her legs, which makes her dig the spike heels into the polished wood of the desk and grind her hips into his face as stars explode beneath her screwed shut eyes and she thinks she's just seen God.

When he pulls away at last because her cries are getting fainter and fainter as breathing becomes this really hard thing to do, she presses her hand against her wildly beating heart and tries to send this message to her brain to shut her thighs.

Her brain doesn't want to know and she sprawls on his desk, legs akimbo, dress still hitched up to the heavens, panting. His wrist is warm against her knee as he grips the desk to haul himself up and stand in front of her. She waits for the clipped command to get up, straighten up, take a letter, fetch a pencil but it never comes.

“Beautiful,” he says and he sounds like he's in church. Then he takes his handkerchief out of his pocket and begins to gently clean up the terrible mess he's made of her.

All that she can do is fling her arm across her face so she doesn't have to look at him. Because she can't bear to see any of his looks from icy, to amused, to concerned.

“Faith. Look at me.” He's mopping up her cunt with soft strokes of his once impeccable handkerchief but somehow it seems more intimate to open her eyes and see his face.

“I can't,” she mumbles, trying to sit up and having to give in, to accept the hand that he places under her elbow so he can pull her upright. He's hard. Of course, he's still hard. She wonders whether he wants...if she should offer...but when she tentatively reaches out her hand, his fingers curl around her wrist and he shakes his head.
She tugs down the skirt of her dress and realizes that she's naked under it. The thong got lost somewhere between the whole eating her out thing and the clean-up operation. “Where's my...” He's had his tongue in her cunt but she can't bring herself to bring up the subject of her missing underwear.

He gives her one of his pretty smiles. “Your thong? I removed it. It's not appropriate attire, as you know perfectly well.”

Faith remembers the underwear he bought her that she left in the box. Black satin French knickers that she thought were too old-fashioned, too impractical.

She swallows hard and slides off the desk, almost stumbling as her feet hit the ground. “You're a sick fuck,” she whispers fiercely and gets another tender quirk of his lips.

“That's no way to talk to your employer,” he says mildly, folding the soiled square of linen and putting it into his pocket. “I can see that I still have a long way to go with your training.”

And she finally looks at him and it's something to do with the way he's standing there, rigid but awkward, eyes clear but wary and she's jumping back into the game, finding her place.

“There were some things that weren't on the syllabus at the secretarial college,” she says tartly, smoothing the wool across her hips. “I guess I need to learn on the job.”

“You're not leaving.” And the weird thing is that he probably means it as an order but it sounds to her like a question. She doesn't answer just walks over to the couch and picks up her pad.

“No you still want me to take a letter?”

“I think we're done.” He's moving stiffly around the desk so he can sink into the leather chair like he's exhausted. “For now. You should go and get some lunch.”

Faith walks toward the door, her legs doing these weird little spastic spasms so she imagines he can see the muscles pulsing under her skin. Just before she turns the door handle, she looks over her shoulder at him. She catches him mid-stare, in quiet contemplation of her ass and he flushes.

“Don't ever call me a harlot or, like, anything that means whore ever again.” she says quietly before she leaves.

Chapter Nine

He doesn’t come to the diner, though she doesn’t know if she’s glad about that or not, and he’s in his office when she gets back, a sandwich stuck painfully halfway down her throat, because she didn’t have enough cash for a drink after her fucking dad cleaned her out of all but pocket change, and her mouth was too dry with tension to swallow. She knows he’s in there because she hears his voice faintly, talking on the phone, but he doesn’t come out and he doesn’t call her in.

So she sits, black satin undies smooth and slippery against flesh still tender, and she works without a break until it’s time to go home, then leaves, shutting the door with a loud slam.

And when he comes out, half an hour later, she’s waiting by his car.

“Good night, Faith,” he says evenly. She doesn’t move from her position blocking the car door and he frowns. “I don’t have time for—” He breaks off, and she sees his eyes get cold and wary. “What do you want?”
Oh, so many things, but somehow when he’s this close, they all stop mattering. Attention. She wants to matter, and she wants, oh God, does she want his cock in her, just once before this ends. And she knows it will. Good things always do.

She holds out her hand. “My lighter. I won’t—I won’t do that, all right? But I haven’t had a cigarette all afternoon.”

It’s lame. Not like she can’t get a light off someone, and there are matches in the office kitchen, if it comes to that, tucked up high in a cupboard next to some candles. It’s lame, but it works.

“I think it will do you no harm to wait, Faith. To go without.”

And they’re not talking smokes anymore. But then, they never were. His eyes travel down and stop at her feet, with heels changed to flats.

“You changed your shoes.”

He sounds disapproving and she glares at him. “Got a thirty-minute walk on cracked sidewalks ahead of me. Want me to arrive tomorrow in a fucking cast because I’ve broken an ankle?”

“You don’t have cab fare? Bus money?” He sounds incredulous. Maybe in his world there’s always money for shit like that, for just about everything you want. Somehow she doesn’t want to tell him her father left her penniless but she doesn’t need to. He sighs, as if he’s come to a decision and yeah, go ahead and amputate, doctor, leans in a little, and slides the hand with the key past her hip, grazing it with his fingers and sending heat over her in a scalding ripple. “Get in. I’ll take you where you want to go.”

The car seats are leather, from cows that died grateful for the chance to cushion her ass in comfort. She sinks back and moans with pleasure. “This car’s so fucking cool,” she says, not caring if it makes him smile, reaching out to twiddle with the air conditioner. He lets her, and there’s even a twitch that might be an indulgent smile, but when she tries to flip on the music, his hand slaps her fingers away without him bothering to look away from the road.

“Fine. No music. Talk to me then,” she says, feeling that it’s different now they’re outside work and she might actually get to find out something about what they’re doing here.

He reaches out and ejects the CD that would’ve started to play automatically, then switches on the radio. It’s set to some classical station, which means it’s all noise to her, but she lies back, closes her eyes and drifts, plinking pianos and scraping violins merging to make her think of oceans and surf and crying gulls. She’s always been good at making up shit like that.

She’s jolted out of the haze when the street noises drop away and she sees they’re climbing up out of the city.

“Hey! This isn’t the way home!”

“Oh, but it is. For me.”

And as he pulls into a garage, with the door sliding out of the way obediently and silently, she remembers the words he’d used and starts to shiver.

Where she wanted to go. In his house, just the two of them. Are they the same thing? She doesn’t know, but as he walks around and opens the door for her, doing it without a flicker of doubt, as if he thinks that was why she stayed sitting, not that her legs were trembling too much to support her, she gets out. Her fingers rest in his for a long moment, and she thanks him as if men do this for her all the
He nods, a gesture of gallantry that's almost kind of dorky, but says nothing.

The anticipation, fear, whatever, is prickling on her skin. Thoughts are forming, but they sort of float away, half complete. Is this a date? Does he have some hidden room behind a swinging library door that's a torture chamber of pleasure? That last thought sticks with her, and makes her wet all over again.

“This way, Faith.” Right, daydreaming again in front of him. Right on, Faith. Good one.

He's standing by a door and punching a hell of a security code into a panel, faintly lit up all blue. The garage door closes swiftly and quietly, unlike the precarious, creaking thing at her mother's house. It's dark for a second, and after a series of clicks that sound like some serious deadbolts, the door swings open.

“Come along,” he says, just slightly impatiently.

She gently closes the car door and follows him into the house.

There are very few hills in this part of the world, but his home—his magnificent fucking estate, she corrects herself—is on one of them. It's one of those super modern affairs, all glass and metal and angles that looks inhospitable but is really open and airy and lovely on the inside.

The hallway ends abruptly in an architectural collision with a glassed-in great room with at least a twenty-foot ceiling. And even though they're not all that high up on this incongruous hill, below them the nasty suburban sprawl is glittering in the twilight.

She's taking in the view, kind of stunned. The car was one thing, but this. Shit. It's amazing.

He's working his way silently around the room, turning on lamps. He even pauses to tweak a pillow just so on a weird looking black-and-chrome sofa. He slides up next to her, hand at the small of her back. “You're slouching,” he whispers.

Nodding, she nervously licks her lips and straightens.

“That's better,” His voice is kind of thick and drawly, in that English way. His hand is still at her back, almost as if he's keeping her from falling backward from her outrageously erect posture. She's still looking at the view, practically fucking swoony from the nearness of him. But out of the corner of her eye, she can see he's taking her in with his patented disconcerted look—yeah, she's noticed it before—just the slightest hint of a furrow on his brow. It's as if he can't believe she's really there.

Being out of the office has shifted things, perceptibly. He's still got her on a short leash, so to speak, but between the change of venue and the fact that she nearly beat him up this afternoon, things are off balance. Of course, she can't make the first move. Hell, she can't make any move at all, really. And of course, he really does seem to take a gently sadistic pleasure in making her wait. God, would he take her to the hidden room off the goddamn library already?

She turns, and catches him still summing her up. The briefest smile flits across his features, and just like that—she can hardly believe she sees it happen—he's Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, Esq., cold, thorny bastard. How the hell does he do that?

It's like the air is charged with his renewed position of power, and she breathes in sharply. His hand has slid over her ass, gently. It feels amazing, his touch through the layers of wool and satin.
“I think it’s time we dispense with the pleasantries.”

He grabs her arm and starts her down the long hallway and suddenly she’s feeling anxious and just a bit perturbed. Like, aren’t we beyond this bullshit by now? He must sense her resistance because he stops walking and turns to look at her, clucking his tongue in annoyance.

“I’m not Bluebeard, Faith. Come on. There’s something that I want you to see.”

This time she walks ahead of him and he does not touch her.

“The door at the end of the hallway.”

She halts in front of it. It is red lacquer, heavy and imposing.

“What—”

“Open it.”

It’s recalcitrant, creaky, and belongs to a different time entirely. But she gets it open and steps into the darkened room. There are no windows and her hand scrabbles along the wall searching in vain for the light switch.

“Allow me.” Wes flicks it on and the room is illuminated by a soft, quiet glow. Nothing harsh allowed in this room. There are more of the Japanese prints hanging on the walls, only these make her blush. And there are books everywhere. She’s surrounded by them; bookshelves from floor to ceiling. There’s a slight smell of damp and age, worn leather and cracked bindings and the soft woodsy scent of old paper. It’s a strangely intoxicating perfume.

She must be a little openmouthed, because she hears Wes say, “Pick one.”

She slides a tiny little volume off the shelf. Les Délassements d’Eros. She doesn’t need to know French to figure this one out.

She takes an idle flip through and sees page after page of bird-boned, delicate girls sprawling lazily on pillows and sliding down between one another’s legs and fucking in giddy illustrated delight. She closes the book and replaces it on the shelf.

“Um, this is nice and all. Really. But can’t you just subscribe to some porn mags like everyone else?”

Wes ignores her. He’s busy walking his fingers along the top of the third shelf from the bottom. He’s looking for something and when he finds it he lets out a little “Ah!” of satisfaction before cradling it off the shelf.

“You’re not a reader, are you?” He’s not judging her, just asking her a question that he already knows the answer to.

“Not really.”

He gestures toward the two overstuffed chairs in the corner, facing one another as if in genial conversation. “Sit.”

There’s the merest hint of a wicked smile curling on his lips when he begins to read to her. He’s standing, and she’s sprawling a bit in the chair, because, hey, she’s not in the office anymore and she can damn well sprawl if she fucking feels like it.

When he reads aloud his voice is smooth and assured. Each word is a surprise, a delight, and she
hears—maybe for the first time—she hears him take joy in something. She’s not even hearing the words, just hanging in rapt attention on the sound of his voice and the lilt of each syllable as it passes from his lips.

The story chills her, a little bit. That is, what she can follow of it. There’s a child bride, and a cruel husband, and a creaky, dark manor house with hundreds of locked rooms.

“He twined my hair into a rope and lifted it off my shoulders so that he could the better kiss the downy furrows below my ears; that made me shudder. And he kissed those blazing rubies, too. He kissed them before he kissed my mouth. Rapt, he intoned: ‘Of her apparel, she retains/Only her sonorous jewelry.’

“A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewing gulls swung on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside.”

It’s beautiful and dark and kind of magical and she’s surprised to find herself lost in the words when he shuts the book with a snap and puts it back on the shelf.

“Now. Take off your clothes.”

She leans forward in the chair, her elbows sliding off her knees and her jaw plummeting to the floor.

It wasn’t what she was expecting even if it was what she came here for. But still, she's shaken. Because, like, she's eighteen and his emotionally vulnerable employee and this is so very wrong.

She stands and reaches behind her for the button at the back of the collar. He stretches over to the table next to her chair and switches on the light before walking over to the door and hitting a switch so the rest of the room is plunged into velvet darkness.

“Go on,” he says as he walks past her and sits down in the other chair, crossing one leg elegantly over the other and jiggling his ankle. “Slowly.” He draws out the word, luxuriates in it.

As she drags down the zipper, the noise sounds deafening in the stillness of the room. He's sitting in shadow but she'd love to see his face as she slides her arms out of the sleeves and prepares to push the black wool down her body.

“No, wait.” He barks out the words and Faith freezes. All the tiny hairs on her arms are standing to attention and she can feel the wetness between her legs soaking into the black satin as she restlessly shifts her weight to her other foot. “The shoes. Are the shoes in your bag?”

She'd stuffed them in there, as an afterthought. Figured that maybe she could practice walking in them at home. “Yeah. Yes.” Since when did her voice get so breathy, like she'd been inhaling helium?

He makes an impatient sound at the back of his throat and reaches forward with an awkward jerky movement that clues her right in to the quite startling revelation that without her he's got nothing. He picks up her Emily Strange backpack and it looks so stupid, so utterly incongruous, in his long fingers that Faith has to bite her lip to stop the giggle that she can feel rising in the back of her throat.

But as he opens the bag, she can hear the unmistakable sound of her Itchy and Scratchy ring tone as someone calls her cell and she has to stifle another giggle. He ignores it and she tries to wipe the smirk off her face as he pulls out the asskicker heels. But then it starts ringing again.

“Should I turn it off?”
He scrabbles around for the fucking annoying-gonna-ruin-everything cell, which has stopped again but starts ringing the minute he touches it.

He squints at the lit-up display and gives her a tight smile. “How touching. It's your mother wanting to know where her errant daughter is.”

Way to kill the mood, Mommy. “I'll turn it off,” she says quickly. Too quickly and he tosses her on the phone with a shit-eating grin quite unlike anything else she's seen on his face.

“Get rid of her,” he orders.

Faith punches the green 'talk' button with great ferocity. He's picked up her shoes and looks at them with utter fascination. He should try walking in the fuckers.

“Mom! What do you want?”

Her mother is drunk. Again. “Faithy! I thought you'd be home by now.”

She shuffles around, her arms wedged to her side to stop the dress slipping down. “Well, I'm not,” she whispers, knowing damn well he's listening to every word. “What do you want?”

“Where are you?”

She does giggle then. "I'm stripping naked for my boss. This twisted English guy who's old enough to be my father and is into some kinky shit. Instead she modifies it. “I'm with a friend from work.”

She must have imagined the snort of laughter she hears behind her but she doesn't imagine what happens next, even though it can't be real. Because he crouches down in front of her, shoe in his hand, and tugs at her ankle. “Lift your foot,” he says, making no effort to lower his voice.

Faith rolls her eyes and tries to listen to her mother's whining rant about the usual crap. “...then he came round... I had to tell him something... he's a lousy bastard...” His hand feels cool around her ankle as he slips off her flat Mary Jane and slides on the stiletto, then reaches for her other foot.

“How much did you give him? Always were Daddy's little girl. Love him more than me.”

Faith barely listens as she wobbles precariously on one sky-high heel as he puts on the other one. “Yeah, yeah. Was there something you wanted because I'm kinda in the middle of something here?”

She expects him to go back to the chair but he stays there, his fingers curled loosely around her ankle. “What time are you going to be home?”

“I don't know. Later. Maybe a couple of hours.”

He lifts his head and gives her a look that strips off the top layer of her skin. “Tell her you won't be home tonight.”

Faith shakes her head. She can't not go home. She can't stay here. What the fuck is he planning to do to her that's going to take all night? And anyway she doesn't know anything about him and he might have had a dozen barely legal secretaries up here and done fuck knows what to them and maybe nobody ever saw them again and...

“I... Mom...”

“I won't have you tramping around at all hours, Faithy.”
“Would you like me to speak to her, Faith? I’m sure I can put her mind at rest.”

For one second she’s almost tempted but then she comes to her senses. “No! Mom, I’m gonna stay over at my friend’s. My girlfriend’s.”

“You come home right now, you little whore.”

“Mom.”

His hand starts moving. Upwards, ever upwards. His fingers smoothing down the tense muscles of her calves as she quivers in her shoes, brushes his knuckles against the backs of her knees.

“Are you on the pill? Gonna get yourself knocked up.”

He’s slowly walking her fingers up her thighs and she's so wet now that very soon he's going to feel it, be able to smell it.

“Mom.”

“C’mon, Faithy, you come home to Mommy, baby. I need you...”

He's reached the top of her stockings now and insinuates a finger between the elastic and her skin. “Maybe you should go home, Faith,” he says softly.

Maybe she shouldn't. “Look, Mom,” she says sharply even though everything inside her is melting liquid as his fingers are closer, getting closer, just skimming the wet satin that covers the heart of her. “I've gotta go. Get the fuck off my back. I'll see you tomorrow.” She hits the ‘off’ button and throws the phone over her shoulder so it lands with a clatter on the wooden floor.

He sits back on his heels and his eyes miss nothing as she slowly peels the dress down over the corset and panties he bought for her and kicks it across the room. And when she looks at him, at the way he's eating her up, a muscle banging away in his cheek, she has to wonder who has the power here?

Then he gets to his feet in one fluid movement and folds his arms. “Now where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?” he muses and she remembers. He's got the power.

He walks over to the chair and sits down. Faith puts her weight on one hip and rests her hands on her waist, waiting for his next instruction. She doesn't have long.

“Come here, Faith.”

She takes slow, deliberate steps toward him, still unused to the goddamn heels. But she’s found a rhythm now and even manages a little hip sway as she walks.

His look of anticipation is just a little feral. Hungry. That’s okay. She’s hungry too.

“Now. Sit in the chair.”

She stops, a little startled. That’s not what she expected.

“Did you not hear me? Sit.”

She does so. She sits awkwardly, self-consciously. The fabric is cool and a little rough against her skin.
He gives her another appraising stare that seems to cut right through her. She shivers a little.

“Sit back. Spread your legs apart.”

She hesitates for a moment—here in this isolated, strange little room she feels even more exposed and vulnerable than she did in the office—but she does it nonetheless.

“You’re wet. I can see that. So, what is it that you want, Faith? Tell me.”

“What? I mean, you’ve got to be—” This is just too fucking much. She knows there’s an edge of anger in her voice, but she can’t help it.

“Kidding? No.” His expression is curiously flat. “Pretend I’m not here at all. You’re in your own bed, alone. It’s dark…”

Christ. This is a new one. She’s not used to talking. Not like this. Not with him, or with anyone else for that matter. She’s a little bit terrified. Make that a lot terrified.

“Um, okay.” She takes a deep breath and starts, tenuously. “You’re in my bedroom. I must have snuck you in once she, once she was asleep, and we can’t make a sound because she might hear us. But that makes everything more…urgent. When the door is closed I start to undress and you just stand there, watching. I fall back onto the bed and you slide down between my thighs—”

“Aren’t you forgetting something, Faith?”

That snaps her out of it with a start. “What?” What now?

“You’re alone.”

She looks a little astonished. Tries to remind herself that this is the game, house rules, and she’s either committed or …not. She slides one finger inside herself, then two, and tries to resume where she’s left off.

“You’re gripping my hips, and your tongue’s deep inside me, so fucking relentless. And God, I’m so wet and so close but I don’t want to come before you’re even in me. I want you to kiss me first. We’ve never kissed and I’ve got butterflies in my stomach but you brush my hair up off my neck and kiss me there first. Mmm, when you kiss me then I can taste myself on your lips and that’s so weird, kinda, but I don’t care. Your hand is between my legs and I can feel your…you’re hard and there’s this delicious friction between us and all I know is how much I want to see you naked, never seen you—”

Her fingers are moving faster and God, her thoughts are getting off-track.

“But you’re beautiful standing there and I want you to fuck me so much, and you want it too. Want your cock inside me. I slide down on top of you and it feels so good, as good as I knew it would and God, just fuck me! Would you—just—fuck—me—”

She’s lost now, spasming out against her insistent fingers, and he hasn’t moved, just sits there in silent appreciation.

Until he says one word: “Yes.”

Yes? Yes he’ll fuck her?

His eyes narrow as if he can see the smile she doesn’t let reach her lips, and he says, “But all in good
time. I’d like you to stand in front of me, please.”

If she hesitates, just for a moment, before getting up and walking to him, it’s not through indecision. She wants to get closer, that’s all, and finds it between heartbeats, so that one moment she’s seriously certain she’s about to twist an ankle, and fall in an ungraceful sprawl at his feet, earning herself a sigh, and the next she’s taking the two paces it takes to reach him, and turning them into four tiny steps, placing her feet so that her hips sway, tits thrust out, head up high.

The sight of her smacks into him so hard she wants to look for the bruises it left. Oh, nothing obvious, but she’s been watching him for too many hours not to miss the blue darkening and deepening in his eyes, that tremor of arousal that sets one finger tapping against his leg in a beat she could dance to if she wants, spinning and grinding, lost in a space of her creating.

She pauses within reach, not touching him, and she sips air in tiny short gasps because fuck, her legs want to spread, not close, want to open to his eyes, for his fingers, for his cock. She’s as ready to fuck and be fucked as she’s ever been in her life, and coming as he watched hasn’t done a thing to calm her down. Quite the reverse, as he’d say.

He sits back in his chair and looks up at her.

“Are you frightened, Faith?”

And she is, just a little, just a trace of it there beneath the need, but it stopped mattering when his hand closed around her ankle and that’s so long ago now, it seems.

“Not enough to leave,” she tells him.

“So you think that’s an option you have? Interesting.”

She could call his bluff but it doesn’t feel like one.

“You saying you’d stop me?”

He brings his hand to her leg, runs a finger, soft pad against soft skin high up on her thigh, pauses and rakes it down, nail scoring a scarlet line on the skin. She whimpered on the down stroke and he raises an eyebrow.

“I think we both know I wouldn’t have to.”

She opens her mouth, and she knows if she does anything but agree, she’ll be lying, but he holds up his hand.

“I—sometimes—enjoy our conversations, Faith. At the moment, I’d rather have your silence.”

Just saying that’s enough to part her lips, angry words rising, and he smiles, shaking his head. “Oh, that’s going to be so hard for you, isn’t it?” he says, mocking her, but still with that indulgence to it. She relaxes for a moment, almost fooled into smiling back, sharing the joke, but it stops being funny when he leans over and opens a deep drawer in a side table by his chair.

She isn’t sure what’s in there, but when he pulls out a black silk scarf it’s almost a relief. No chains, no leather, no weird-ass stuff you need a degree in kink from Fetish U. to figure out which bit goes where. Just a length of heavy blackness, mist-soft, wide and long.

“What’s that for?”
Fuck. He taps his finger against his mouth and gives her a pointed look, using his silence to remind her that she’s not supposed to be asking questions. Okay, maybe she’s not too good at this shit. Without looking, he reaches over and pulls out another one. Wanting to ask him if he’s got a rabbit in there is getting so irresistible she has to bite her lip, and he smiles.

“The second one is because you spoke,” he says, answering her question without telling her much. “Eyes, mouth, hands, Faith. You’re going to lose the use of two of them for a short while. And no, you don’t get to choose which. That’s for me to do.”

He’s telling her there’s no choice, but he’s giving her time to absorb it, and if she wanted that from him, she might thank him for his idea of kindness.

He stands with the scarves bunched loosely in his hand, and for an instant they’re close enough that he could kiss her if he wanted to without doing more than pursing his lips, but he doesn’t, just steps behind her, leaving the space where he was for her to pout at, an instant too late.

And she just fucking knows his eyes dipped to her ass because she felt them on it a second before his hand cupped it. “Hands and eyes, I think,” he murmurs, “and you can use your mouth for something other than talking.”

She can feel the memory of his cock against her tongue when he says that and she sneers, knowing he can’t see her. Boss didn’t like the way she’d done it before, did he? She’s going make him come in under a fucking minute and—

“Hands first. Come on, Faith, stop dawdling.”

Dawdling? Where does he get these fucking words from? But her hands are behind her back before she’s finished thinking she’s going buy herself an English dictionary and he’s knotting the scarf around them fast enough to make a Scout leader swoon with delight.

And she wouldn’t mind betting he could.

She’s tugging at the scarf, testing it without realizing she’s doing it, and he says, “Stop that,” as if he’s seriously pissed she’s even trying. The second scarf blinds her while she’s swallowing more words she’s not allowed to say, and does a better job of gagging her than, well, than a gag would have done. In the time it takes to knot it, and smooth her hair with a touch soft enough to stroke soap bubbles, she loses her balance, lost in emptiness. If he hadn’t kept a hand on her hair, she’d have fallen down, she’s sure of it.

He walks in front of her, his fingers going from hair, to shoulder, to arm, to fingers, never more than a brush against her, but enough to keep her safe.

Then he sits down and the fingers aren’t there, it’s just his voice and it’s as soft as they are.

“Kneel down, Faith. Slowly.”

Her legs scream as she obeys him, muscles trembling from arousal, those fucking heels, and the slow, slow bend. She drops so that her ass is against her heels, then goes forward to her knees.

“Very good,” he says and she could fucking kill him for praising her when she can’t see his face as he does it. “Now shall we finish what we began this morning, with perhaps a little less...enthusiasm on your part, commendable a virtue as that usually is?”

And it sinks in that he’s not going to let her do this her way and that she’s not going to get to come until he has and he plans to take his time.
And if she whimpers and squeezes her thighs together just a little, she can’t fucking help it, can she? And it’s so fucking unfair of him to make his first instruction, “Spread your knees, Faith. No, wider than that,” but she doesn’t notice because his zipper’s going down—guess she did that well enough not to have to sit a retest on. Before she can lean forward and score an A, he traces her lips with his finger. “You’ll be just using your tongue at first,” he says. “Show me what you plan to do.”

If anyone had told her that curling her tongue around a finger, lapping at it, slicking it up with spit, tilting her head to the side and making her tongue paint it wet would get her humming with arousal, she’d have laughed. If they’d told her she’d hover on the edge of coming when she hears his breath quicken and she teases a moan from him by going lower and chasing his heart line across his palm, she’d have walked away, shaking her head.

All that, all of it, with her body wound up tight, tight, tighter, so that when his finger moves away slowly and she follows it, she has to pause a second when it comes to rest on the head of his cock. He tastes ready, God, he’s so wet, and she wants to do what he did to her, get fucking messy, suck hard, slide down and choke on him, just go to town, but he’s not telling her to do that and so she drags her tongue through a slick of precome, tasting it properly for the first time ever. She has to stop and think about it, touching her tongue to her lips and mouth, making him wait while she tastes again.

“I have an Australian Shiraz you can try later,” he says, and there’s a hint of strain in his voice that’s all the revenge she needs or wants, “but I think perhaps a little less evaluation and a little more—”

She doesn’t let him finish. Her tongue’s busy and he’s silent now, until he groans and his hips lift an inch. She feels a flash of triumph, and she’s waiting for him to tell her to go ahead, make his day, when his hand’s in her hair, hard and demanding and his finger’s back at her lips and he’s pushing them open and it’s sliding in, and he can’t be fucking serious...

“Show me what you’ll do to my cock, Faith.”

She bites down, hard enough to feel the bone grate, frustration making her eyes sting, and he laughs. “I knew a preview was a good idea. Do that again and do it properly.”

And she does, delicate little nips and bites and nibbles until the finger hooks behind her top teeth and pulls her down gently into a darkness that’s full of nothing but him and he waits until she’s done everything she showed him, then his hands cup her face, holding her still, and he fucks her mouth, sliding forward on the chair, fast, sharp strokes that should feel like an invasion, an intrusion but don’t, not with his hands warm on her skin, and it’s not until she’s swallowed, choking just a little, that she realizes his thumbs are brushing away the tears the blindfold didn’t catch.

Chapter Ten

Faith shudders a little and squirms away backward into empty space behind her, unsteady. Sure, she wants to surrender to his orders, when she’s not fighting the urge to sass back and she wants to offer herself up as a willing participant in this little game, but it makes her stomach turn to think of him knowing just how vulnerable she was at that moment.

His warm hands steady her shoulders, His voice is safe and comfortable: “Faith, are you all right?”

She nods, clears her throat. “Uh, yeah. Yeah. I’m fine.” It’s not entirely true, but she pushes the tears back. He doesn’t push the issue, but lets go. She notices absentmindedly, that the tatami mat on the floor is embossing her knees and if she stays on it much longer it’s gonna cut through her stockings and her skin after that, and she’s not sure she’s ready for this to get bloody anytime soon. Still, she surreptitiously leans into the pain, concentrating on the tender bits of skin on the tips of her kneecaps.
that feel like they're on fire.

He's shifting around, settling back into his clothing, from the sounds of it—unfortunately. It's not like she thought she would suck him off, then he'd immediately ravish her on the spot—he would need time to recover—but it is her turn now. There's a persistent ache throbbing deep inside that's only gonna be relieved when his cock is slamming in her.

He slides down to the floor next to her. Stroking her hair, her cheek. She's not scrabbling away now, but leaning into each caress. He leans in close to her, breath warm on her neck: “You're a quick study, Faith. That was...” He stops, breathes deeply and doesn't finish the thought. “I'm going to untie your hands now. Put your arms around my neck.”

He reaches behind her and undoes the knots efficiently and pulls the scarf away. The silk sliding past her wrists is delicious, cool and warm at the same time, and she drapes her freed arms around him. He slides his arm behind her knees, and in an instant he's swung her up into his arms, as if she weighed nothing. Just as quickly, and nearly impossibly, he's risen from the floor—again with hardly a trace of effort—and is carrying her out of the room.

She rests her head against his chest, and can hear his heart beating quickly. She's not a betting girl, but she'd wager five bucks he's got a king-size bed with satin sheets in this joint somewhere.

She's naked, still blindfolded, as he carries her through the house, drafts from the doors that he nudges open with his foot kissing her skin. When she shivers, his arms tighten around her and it makes her feel safe, protected like no one can get at her. She hasn't felt like that since she doesn't know when. But as he sighs in expectation, then hoists her a little higher so he can start the climb up a long flight of stairs, Faith wonders who's going to protect her from him?

She presses her face against the warm cotton of his shirt and opens her mouth, tries to touch his skin between the buttons with the tip of her tongue but he shifts her away from his goal.

“You really are dreadfully impatient,” he observes. “So many bad habits.”

But right now she's not in the mood for verbal cut and thrust. It's like her brain has split in two. One half of her wants to stay in his arms and let him lull her to sleep by stroking her hair and reading her fairy stories. The other half wants him to pin her against something, over anything, and fuck her conflicted brains out.

When he sets her down on her feet and she realizes that she's still shod in those fucking heels, she gives a tired groan. “Can I please take these off?”

It's disorientating not being able to see where she is or where he is as she hears him move around the room. She stretches her arms out to see if they'll touch the sides.

“Keep your arms down,” he says but he sounds farther and farther away. “You can take off the shoes but I don't want you to move.”

Kicking off the shoes is almost as good as white chocolate cheesecake from the diner in town. There's soft carpet under her feet that they sink into and she wriggles her toes luxuriously as she listens to the sound of running water and catches the scent of something exotic and spicy wafting in.

When he comes back in, it takes every ounce of strength that he hasn't already drained out of her not to turn around. She doesn't have to though because he's running both hands down her neck, tracing the knobs of her collarbone and the curve of her breasts before cupping their weight in his palms.

Her nipples are so hard that they hurt and when he presses his thumbs against them, she can't help
“I can see that there are certain areas in which I’ve been remiss,” he remarks and it would be so fucking funny if her lethargy hadn't been swept away by his hands and replaced with these sharp waves of want that threaten to make her knees buckle.

“You said before...that you were going to...that you'd...” Why can't she just come out and ask him, no, beg him, to fuck her? But it's not how they play this game and right now he's stroking her nipples with the pads of his thumbs and English doesn't feel like her mother tongue.

“Really, Faith, that's inarticulate even for you. We'll have to work on that too. I can see it's going to be rather a long night and you're already looking fatigued.”

“I'm not!” Her protest sounds petulant and gets cut short when he suddenly pinches her nipples between finger and thumb and kisses the top of her head.

She cries out and presses into his hands but he's already pushing her away. “Patience, Faith. You need to learn it so very badly,” he hisses against her ear and even the feel of his breath on her oversensitized skin makes her gasp.

“Yes.”

His cool hand clutches her hot one and she twines her fingers through his. He returns the pressure and just holding hands with him, like he's her fucking High School sweetheart threatens to make her come undone all over again. For, like, the fifteenth time that day.

“Come with me.”

He pulls her across the floor until her feet are on slightly damp tiles and she's inhaling the bergamot-scented steam and trusting him not let her slip as she bumps against something hard.

“We're in your bathroom?”

“I can see that your powers of deduction haven't completely abandoned you.” Oh yeah, she's so fucking amusing.

He places her hand on the roll top edge of the tub and lets go. “Get in.”

She gingerly places one foot in the hot water and gropes for the bottom before bringing up her other leg.

“Sit down. Slowly. We don't want any accidents, do we?”

“Nah, I might have to sue you and, y'know, those employee lawsuits can get kind of nasty,” she manages to get out with one tenth of her usual bravado before carefully sliding into the water's soft silky caress. It feels like heaven lapping against her as she leans her head back and gives a small, contented sigh.

He sits down on the edge of the bath and runs his fingers through her hair so he can untie the scarf. The edges stroke her face, then she's blinking, adjusting to the dim glow from the candles that he's lit.

He's staring at the glimpses of her body that he can see beneath the milky water and making no attempt to disguise it. Her breasts bob up and down, her nipples a dark pink against the white of her wet skin. His lips tighten out into this thin line that she itches to smooth away with her tongue. And maybe she's been lulled to somewhere a little too safe by the warm embrace of the water because she
has to tell him: “When you look at me like that, it sorta freaks me out sometimes.”

He smiles faintly as if she isn't really there. “I know.”

“You think I'm, I don't know, like this little victim, don't you?”

He brushes his knuckles against her cheek. “You really don't know anything about me or what I think, I assure you.”

"I know what gets you off.”

“Do you? Do you really?”

And no, she doesn't, because baiting him is like throwing sticks at a bear and any minute now he might start giving her teeth and claws, instead of the soothing motion of his fingers against her face.

“Well, maybe not,” she concedes with a shrug. “So what do you want me to do next?”

He stands up and smiles down at her lazily, like having a naked girl in his bath is something that happens to him most nights. Maybe it is. “I don't want you to do anything for a while. Just lean forward slightly.”

As orders go, this one is pretty vague. Frowning, she does as he asks, then shuts her eyes and wiggles her shoulders as he scoops a bowl along the surface of the bath and pours the warm water over her hair.

It gets better and better. There's shampoo that smells of sandalwood and his fingers massaging her scalp so she can feel the tension seeping away along with the suds. Then he rolls up his sleeves, which are already sodden, takes a sponge and the soap from somewhere behind her and begins to wash her.

He was right. He really doesn't want her to do anything. He tugs her forward, pushes her back, lifts up her arms, even delves into the water so he can pick up her feet and clean in between her toes. She feels like a goddess. He's not so frightening like this, his hair damp and his lips pursed in concentration, all focused on her.

Somewhere along the way, she becomes this pliant, pliable mass of girl flesh, nudging herself into the long, sweeping strokes and giggling when he rubs the sponge against her stomach with great vigor.

“Hey! That tickles!”

His eyelashes swoop down and he peers at the tiny bulge of her belly intently. “There's a smudge just there.” He presses the sponge into her and scrubs harder like he's trying to clean a smeared window.

“No, there isn't.” She giggles again and looks down at his hand as he drops the sponge in the water and splays his fingers across her stomach and starts sliding them down, weaving through the sparse hair and down and down...

“There's something very erotic about a woman with a bare sex. I'd like to shave you,” he says like he's asking her opinion on office stationery. Her mouth is suddenly dry. “It would be arousing nowing you were smooth and waiting for the touch of a finger or a tongue and feeling the satin I bought for you caressing you instead. It wouldn't be enough, would it, Faith?”
She’s frozen in the warm water, his voice, the things he’s saying, all around her as his fingers slide farther down and slip between her thighs.

“I asked you a question.”

“N-n-no. I'd want you to touch me there instead. I'd want it all day,” she admits throatily and it feels like a huge weight that was pressing her down and making it hard to breathe has finally been lifted off her.

“Where would you want me to touch you?” His fingers are tracing the crease of her lips and she keeps her thighs pressed tightly together because he hasn't told her not to and she likes the way he has to flex and stretch against her.

“My cunt,” she whispers with a tiny, triumphant smile because he's turned his head so he can burn her with his deep blue stare. “I'd let you shave me and do whatever you wanted to me as long as you promised to use your fingers and your tongue and you gave me your cock every day.”

For one second it seems like all the light in the room is centered on him. He's suffused with joy, with relief, with all these emotions that flit across his face so quickly that she can't begin to catalog them, then he's shutting it all down, blanking it out.

“Spread your legs.” His voice sounds like ice cubes crackling in a glass of water.

And she lets her head loll back, shuts her eyes and rests her legs on the rolled edges of the bath so the water drips down on the tiles like a tiny patter of rain drops.

She knows she's pretty as a picture, but maybe being posed like this while he takes a razor to her girl flesh might not be the best idea. She opens her eyes and starts to plead for a change of venue, but he's already turned away, fussing with something on an impossibly large marble countertop.

Her legs are quivering with the effort of holding her body half in and half out of the water. She shifts a little, pulling against the weight of the water and rests on her elbows, hoisting her hips even higher.

He turns and gives her the kind of disapproving glance that cuts right through. And she doesn't even try to explain herself because in the next moment he's pulling a leather strop out taut from the counter and is sharpening a straight razor on it. A bolt of horror and fascination shoots through her solar plexus. Guess she didn't really expect him to have those bikini area Lady Bics just lying around.

The rasp of the blade against the worn leather is almost unbearable, and of course, he's bent intensely over his task, methodically sweeping his arm back and forth in a way that's all too reminiscent of the way he'd spanked her. He pauses after every ten strokes or so to roll the ball of his thumb over the blade, turning to meet her gaze every time. It seems like every goddamn hair on her body is on end, ready to be felled by his hand.

After what seems an eternity of stroking and checking, he clucks softly to himself and whispers to no one, “Yes, yes. I think that will do quite nicely.” He snaps the blade into the ivory handle and returns to the tub, armed also with a tiny pair of scissors, a small white porcelain dish, a matching ivory-handled shaving brush. No wonder he's always slightly scruffy if he insists on doing things the old-fashioned way.

He sweeps his glance over her new position and nods curtly. “This will do as well,” he announces and sets all his tools down on one of the tub's wider ledges and sluices the warm water over her pussy.

“I don't think I need to tell you that it's of the utmost importance to hold completely still.”
She nods mutely, fascinated by the slight tension that's collected on his face.

“Very well, then.” He smoothes all the excess water off her snatch and starts with the scissors, trimming the entire area with amazing efficiency, the sharp points nudging her soft flesh but never dangerously. He sluices water over her again, surveys his work and nods. “Perfect.” She shivers and tries to catch his eye, but he's too rapt in his task to pause.

He sets the scissors down and chooses the brush next. His long fingers swirl it around in the dish, full of shaving soap that smells deliciously of spicy bay rum, pulling up a cascade of lather that overflows and spills into the water.

The first long, prickling, tickling stroke of the brush against her pussy lips is almost too much to bear, and she nearly loses balance entirely. She bites her lip and struggles not to laugh or wiggle out of his reach.

“Faith. Please. Hold still.”

She nods again, words impossible.

He returns to lathering her up, using the brush like he's some kind of artist, covering every furred inch. The sweet spicy scent of the soap mixed with her juices is hot and pungent. She feels as though she's burning up, smoldering, like there's a small fire between her legs, and he's stoking it with every sweep of the brush.

“Yes,” he says on a breath, examining his handiwork. Looking up at her, he asks, “Are you ready?” Her lower lip is still caught between her teeth, her eyes wide. It's all she can do to nod slightly, trying not to betray the delicious fear and anticipation that's bubbling up inside.

He snaps the razor open and automatically rolls his thumb over the blade; an involuntary habit, she's sure.

Leaning in closer, he places the blade lightly on the flesh at the top of her mound. “You absolutely cannot move,” and he's not so much addressing her as her cunt, it seems.

The first stroke is sure and even, the cool blade slicing through the unbearable heat that's rising from her core. He cocks his head, examining her now-bare flesh, stroking it with his little finger as he pulls the blade away to rinse it clean in the bathwater. It takes every bit of effort she has not to scream with delight, and instead she lets out a whimpering little moan.

“Lovely, isn't it?” he whispers, finally looking her in the eye. He's nearly at a point of ecstasy himself, eyes glowing and cheeks flushed. He sets back to his task, meticulously and carefully revealing the all-too-tender flesh, centimeters at a time. He pulls her lips this way and that to reach the wayward, stubborn little hairs.

She's panting, gasping from the effort to keep still. He's relentless and exacting. She can feel his even, heavy breaths directly on her flesh after each stroke of the blade leaves her increasingly open and naked. And finally, it seems that he's satisfied, snapping the blade closed and running the taps to catch a handful of fresh warm water to rinse away the last of the foam clinging to her flesh.

For the longest time, he doesn't do anything but look at her, bared to him, utterly exposed, and so aroused she thinks one more touch from him and she’ll come, explode and shatter, no matter where his fingers go. “Why do you wait so much?” she asks. “Why don’t you just—” she raises her hand, sprinkling her breasts with scented splashes and waves it about vaguely, “take stuff?” Like me. Right now. Just climb in here and fuck me.
He looks amused, calmer now, as if she’s broken a spell by talking. “There’s no need to grab, when you know, without a shadow of doubt, that something’s yours for the taking,” he says. “And why rush something pleasurable?”

“You rushed plenty getting me out of my corset,” she points out, the steam diluting the acid in her voice until it sounds more like a comment than an accusation. His fingers had undone hooks, one at a time, without fumbling once, but it had been peeled off her faster than she would’ve believed possible.

“Ah. I think you’re confusing hurrying with controlled haste,” he said and she gives him a look, because he’s teasing her now and damn if it isn’t the closest he’s come to cute. “But if you feel that I was too impetuous, I do apologize.” Yeah. Like that’s ever going to happen. “Some time,” and look, there’s her heart going skippety-skip at the thought of a next time. “Some time, I’ll undress you and take an hour doing it. At least.”

His hand dips into the water slowly enough that it barely makes a ripple, but the water that had lapped under her nipples rises and licks at them before receding and she shivers at the proxy touch.

“An hour? To take off, like five things? That’s crazy.” She thinks about what she’d be like by the time he was done, and rolls her head from side to side. “No way.”

“It wouldn’t be difficult at all,” he assures her. The shirt he’s wearing is clinging to his arms in places and she wonders if he’ll strip it off soon. Got to feel uncomfortable. And yeah, she wants to see him. She’s naked and he’s fully dressed. Something wrong with that picture.

“Tell me what you’d do,” she says, demanding it as if she can do that, as if she can command him as he does her. And she can’t, but he begins to speak anyway, punishing her by settling his hand between her thighs, cupping her flesh. It’s stinging in a thousand places, which she kind of likes, and she can’t wait to run her fingers over it, explore it now the hair’s gone. Would he let her, if she asked? Watch her like he did before?

“Don’t move,” he says. He never bothers to tell her what’ll happen if she does disobey him, she notices; it never seems to occur to him that she might.

“Talk fast then,” she says, through gritted teeth, wanting to press up against him, grind the heel of his hand against her clit, and feel those long, sure fingers slide and shove into her.

He dips his free hand into the water, brings it up full, and lets the water splatter and patter over her breasts. “No.” It’s said without heat and he begins to talk, after a pause to make sure she’s listening. She keeps her eyes open because he’s looking at her as he speaks and his eyes and voice do more to make her ache than his hands.

“I’d stand you in front of me,” he says, “dressed for the office, and I’d take your clothing away.”

It’s a weird way of putting it and she frowns. “How?”

His hand flexes and brushes her just slightly. “With my hands, scissors, possibly a knife, though, no, that probably wouldn’t be necessary.”

And just what the fuck? Her legs start to close as she draws herself together instinctively and he stops her dead with a raised eyebrow. “Don’t move,” he reminds her, his voice mild. “You can’t imagine I’d hurt you, so stop being so—” He seems lost for a word, then he chooses ‘foolish’ and carries on, his voice dreamy now. “Scissors first, and I’d start at your wrists—”

And she sees it as he speaks, feels the cold metal blade slide between her skin and the material, hears
the thick crunch as it shears through, splitting threads, unraveling the stitches.

He’d take away the sleeves first, he tells her; bare her arms to the shoulders. Then kneel and cut away at the hem, a spiral cut, as if he’s peeling an apple, light, cold touches from the blades, sometimes his hands, warm on her as he grips the material and tears it in short, sharp rips. She’s trembling now, picturing it, the destruction, precise and careful, the unmaking of whatever she’s wearing that’s hiding her from him. It’s weird, it’s wrong, and she’s shaking her head as he describes the swatches falling to the floor at her feet, until she’s standing among black leaves, like a tree in winter.

“You’re aroused by that, but you’re frowning,” he observes, rubbing his thumb slowly across the indentation leading to her clit, pressing down lightly. “Why?”

“It’s a waste,” she says. “Destroying something just to get to me, when you could tell me to strip and you know I would.”

Honesty gets her a finger, darting inside her, swirling around and removed the instant she cries out softly.

“But isn’t it romantic?” he asks. “Having your clothes torn off you? Isn’t it what all the best pirates, brigands, and noble lords do to their helpless captives?”

He’s keeping his voice serious, but she can tell he’s laughing at her.

“Not when they’re all you’ve got, and you can’t afford new ones, no,” she says, bluntly.

“They’d be replaced,” he says.

“Still a waste.” She holds his gaze. “And you wouldn’t be ripping them off me in a fit of passion because you just couldn’t help yourself; you’d be doing it on purpose. That’s different.”

He purses his lips. “Oh, I think I’d be feeling very passionate when I was doing that.”

He stands suddenly, his hand leaving her body and looks down at her. “The water’s getting cool now. I think it’s time you got out.”

She lets him help her out, water beading on her skin and trickling down her back and her legs. The towel he wraps around her is thick and soft and as white as the shirts he wears. He dries her, kneeling to do her calves and feet with a complete lack of self-consciousness. If she was doing this for him, she knows she’d feel like some fucking slave-girl. She doesn’t think she could kneel and not have it mean something, but he can do it and it doesn’t change a thing. His hand under the towel, slides between her legs, rubbing her dry, getting her wet, and she can’t help the sound she makes.

“We need to dry your hair,” he says and she gives up, she just surrenders, because he’s going to keep this up all night, tormenting her, teasing her, driving her fucking crazy.

“Fine. Then how about a facial, or a manicure after that?” Her voice is rising with frustration and she takes a breath and ducks her head down in a silent apology before meeting his eyes, looking for anything that says he’s as turned on as she is.

“Will you ever learn to wait?” he says, twitching the towel away from her and stepping back, his eyes cold. She can’t feel any anger though, and she thinks maybe he’s been waiting for this, for her to step over a line he drew when her eyes were closed.

He points at a wide stool positioned at the counter in front of a mirror, large enough to hold the room
within it, captured in silver and glass. She walks to it and sits, expecting him to give her a brush, or maybe do it himself. She likes the thought of his fingers teasing the tangles from her hair and she knows he wouldn’t yank and pull and make her eyes water the way her mother used to do when she was little and getting ready for school. No, he’d do it so slowly her hair would be dry by the time he finished. She starts to get fond of slow just thinking about it, but his voice cracks out, sharp and cold and her gaze goes to the mirror to see him walk toward her, face hard.

“You’re slouching, Faith. Very well; if you can’t maintain a proper posture, perhaps we should find a new position for you.”

He makes her stand, pulls back the stool and turns it so that the narrow end is facing the mirror. Heat floods her as she’s told to sit astride it and bent over so that her forearms are resting on the marble, her back a straight, horizontal line, her feet against the floor.

“Watch yourself, Faith,” he whispers, bending down and pushing her damp hair behind her ears. “Don’t close your eyes, don’t look away. Watch your face when I punish you.”

And she does, because he’s told her to, but as he brings that thin leather strap down on her ass, she sees him too and her back arches, thrusting up to meet the stroke gratefully because he’s looking as if this is killing him too and she knows she won’t be waiting much longer.

She braces herself for the blow, every nerve ending in her body singing out in restless anticipation and it’s all she can do to keep still and wait for it to connect. Then it’s searing through her, the sharp crack of the leather immediately followed by a delirious, slow heat spreading through her lower body. She’s thankful to have something to lean against, something to absorb the shock because she’s too far gone to resist it. She hates herself for blushing furiously and resents him for seeing it. Of course that only serves to make her blush more.

“So deliciously red already.” It’s almost a whisper, like he’s just musing aloud to himself in an empty room, remembering. He pauses for a moment, tilting his head in order to see her reflected image trying to evade his gaze. Then he raises his arm in preparation for another blow.

That’s when time becomes curiously compressed; each second spent waiting for the inevitable is a small eternity and she has nothing to do but hope that her exhausted body doesn’t betray her impatience. She can feel the air shift against her newly exposed cunt and she’s can’t help but open her thighs slightly to invite it. But the cool air does little to counteract the heat that’s suffusing her.

Now she’s arching into each blow, which have a metronomic rhythm, and she figures that her cat-in-heat pose is giving him something to look at besides the swift reddening of her ass.

Another blow and she almost buckles this time. What began as a sharp sting has escalated into a kind of delicious agony. A tiny “Oh” of mingled pleasure and frustration escapes her lips and he reacts to that with a quirk of a smile. And of course redoubles his efforts. She can’t even think anymore—she’s slowly liquefying under this hail of blows, becoming entirely heat and want. She’s gripping the edge of the counter like it’s a lifeline. This is what her world has been reduced to: the purity of unrelieved desire.

Touching herself is out of the question; she knows that would only invite his scorn. That’s only allowed when he’s commanded her to do so. There’s a kernel of anger swelling inside her, and for the first time since this began she’s sick of playing by his fucking rules. And that’s when she realizes that there’s something she needs from him. But she doesn’t want to ask him, can’t ask him. Hell, she can barely form complete sentences.

“Stop.” It’s quiet, no more than a whisper. She tries again, louder this time: “I want you to stop.”
“Did I ask you to speak, Faith?” Flash of anger and frustration in his voice, the tone of which would register zero Kelvin on the mercury. But his arm stays at his side.

Suddenly everything she touches is crackling with surface tension. She can practically feel the full force of his disapproval boring into her. It’s strangely freeing.

“No. And I don’t really care.”

He’s swinging the leather strap against his thigh rhythmically. “Well, what do you have to say that's of such vital importance?” She's familiar with the sneer that twists the lines of his face but this one would barely get a C+.

She stretches out on the stool, using the tips of her toes to find purchase on the floor so she can tilt her ass out and is rewarded by his ragged intake of breath.

She can see the words in her head. Scrolling past her in big type and she has to pull them down as they flicker past her, make them come out of her mouth. “I need you to fuck me now.” They spill out in a frantic rush and she can't hang on to them. “F*ck me. Please. Will you just stop playing games? Will you take off your clothes and just f*ck me now? I want you to f*ck me. Please. Now. F*ck me.”

Faith lifts her head so she can see him standing statue still in the mirror. The words grind to a halt and all that's left is: “Please?” which leaks out of her as a tiny, gravelly moan.

He places his cool palms on the heated red flesh of her buttocks, split apart from her awkward, splayed posture.

“Is that what you want?” he asks her reflection in the mirror and there's doubt in his voice, which makes her bite her lip even as she nods hesitantly. “You want to get taken from behind in a bathroom?”

When he puts it like that, he makes it sound like just every other f*ck she's ever had. Fumbling around in toilet cubicles and the backseats of cars and wondering why it's never any good. Why she's never any good.

“I didn't mean it like that,” she tries to explain but the smooth, blunt edges of his fingernails are scraping against her skin and she's falling over her words again.

“Don't you think you deserve better than that?” Talk about loaded questions but it's hard to shrug when she's in this position. His hands reach around her waist and tug her up so she's leaning against his chest and she can see herself, knows that he can see it too. The poster girl for ‘f*ck me now.’ And he hasn't said that she could, but then again, he hasn’t said that she can't and her fingers creep toward her bare mound, delicately stroking the strange new feel of the flesh that he's shaved.

“Pretty,” she breathes in wonder, as her fingers part her lips. She's pink and red and so wet that she glistens with it.

“Yes, you are, aren't you?” he agrees and leans down to kiss her shoulder, his gaze still latched onto the girl in the mirror whose fingers are now pressing down on her clit.

Faith's head lolls back against him as he explores behind her ear with the tip of his tongue, his hands finally back on her breasts and tugging on the hard points of her nipples. Her flesh is slippery beneath her fingers as she starts up a fast, rubbing motion knowing that she has to get there soon or she'll die.
“How many boys have you let fuck you?” he hisses in her ear before he bites down hard on the tender plumpness of the lobe.

It's a strange way to put it. Because they just fucked her, there was no let about it. “Not as many as you'd think,” she gasps, jabbing at her clit with clumsy fingers. “Three, no, four.”

His fingers pluck at her nipples and she aches to feel the hot pull of his mouth on them. “Do you take them in your mouth instead because that way you don't have to let them in?”

She's pushed forward as he leans over and scrabbles at the counter, his hand closing around the slender but bulbous handle of the razor he used to shave her and she rests her hand momentarily on her thigh as he brings it closer to her.

“I asked you if you suck the boys off instead of fucking them?” he reminds her and his voice is so thick that she has to strain to hear him. She can't even look him. All she can do is stare at her open cunt and the ivory cylinder that's just ghosting between her lips.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “I can't let them in.”

And it's such beautiful choreography, the way that they work together because as she says the last word, he's pushing the razor handle into her cunt and her fingers are back on her clit.

He seems to realize that she's done with slow and that anything other than the blurrily fast motion that he uses to thrust the handle inside her will kill her.

“I was going to make you wait longer, but you're so impatient, so hungry.” She moans as they watch her cunt swallow up what he's giving it. “Such a slave to your desires, aren't you, Faith? You don't care that you open yourself up time and time again and get nothing back.”

She could really do without the pop psychology and she reaches around with the hand that isn't occupied with her jumping, jittering clit and digs her fingers into his ribs.

“Shut the fuck up!” she growls but he just takes that as his cue to start fucking her godholy with the handle of the razor and she grinds her fingers into her clit and screams as it hits. She's dimly aware of his arm wrapping round her waist and holding her steady as she jerks and almost slips off the stool, her hand still pressed into the sticky wet heat feeling the smooth, rounded head rubbing inside her.

It takes a while to come down and when she opens her eyes he pulls the handle out of her cunt and lets it drop on the tiles with a discordant clatter. He hasn't let her go, his arm still clamped around her, and she slides shaking fingers along the corded muscle, slipping under his cuff so she can stroke the smooth, warm skin of his wrist, feel the pulse shuddering.

When she looks into his eyes, she sees a storm brewing there. Can see clouds and thunder rolling across the clear blue and she won't have it. She's so fucking tired of giving and giving and giving.

She swivels round so fast that it catches him by surprise, arms falling away from her as he takes a step back. But she's too quick, jumping down from the stool, her feet just brushing the tiles as she throws herself at him.

Maybe for the first time, he acts purely on impulse, his arms instinctively reaching out to stop her from falling, but how could she fall, when he's there to catch her? With her arms round his neck, it's easy to haul herself up, wrap her legs around his hips and start peppering his face with kisses, while he twists his neck and tries to evade her lips.

He staggers back and bumps into the door frame. “Faith!”
“That's my name, Wesley,” she says, sounding out his for the first time, rolling it round on her tongue. “Wes.” She tries it again. And he tenses under her. “Wes. Wes. Wes. Wes.” It's become a mantra that she has to chant even as she's pushing against him, rubbing herself up and down, trying to get the hard, insistent nudge of his clothed cock between her legs. “Wes. Wes. Wes. Wes.”

He doesn't like it. Well, she has a feeling he likes the naked, writhing girl part of it if his hard-on is anything to go by, but not the whole Wes thing, which is probably why he swings them round so she's the one wedged between the cold tiles and his warm body, and kisses her.

His kiss is like no other she's ever had. He doesn't immediately thrust his tongue in her mouth, jousting for her tonsils as so many other boys had. She quickly rolls hers back in retreat, stunned. The disorientation doesn't last long, the red-hotness of her need rising up to her lips, making them soft and pliant to match his. Her head is spinning and it's enough to make her stop writhing around and just fall into the kiss. All she can think of are those old black and white movies where the kisses aren't messy, sloppy, tongue wrestling affairs, but an actual connection.

Because underneath it all, they're just two fucked up people who need desperately to connect. Through a quirk of fate or whatever it was, they've ended up here together, in his bathroom, for crying out loud, her ass still throbbing from his last blows, her cunt hot and swollen and tender with need for his urgent hard-on that now seems to be on her side, straining to reach her through his trousers.

She's so lost in it all, in just concentrating on how every bit of their mutual need and desire is writ large on their lips that when he finally breaks away, snagging a bit of her lower lip between his teeth as a finale, a little sound of protest crawls out from inside and hangs in the air between them.

All the times he's stared her down, made those pretty blue eyes flinty with disapproval and something bordering on real anger—all that's nothing compared to the fact that now he won't look at her.

“Wes.” She whispers it this time. She really had no idea that using his name would break his resolve this way.

“No, Faith,” he says. “I...”

She doesn't let him finish. She uses a free arm to swivel his head round to face her again and kisses him her way—not necessarily all tongue and nonsense—but with a force she's sure will show him what he needs to feel from her. He doesn't fight it, and she can feel the initial reluctance slide away as she darts her tongue across his lips as they pull part, breathless.

Well, at least he's not hiding from her this time. Boldly, swallowing down a quaver that's creeping into her voice she says, “Take me to your bed, Wes. Take me to your bed and make love to me.”

He's floundering, trying to pull up the walls. “I can't, Faith. I can't do it this way.”

Oh this is really too much. She fights the urge to churlishly roll her eyes. “What, you can't make love to me?” she demands, spitting out the last two words. “Is it that you can't or you won't?”

Her demand leaves his face darkening, eyes gone cold again. And it pushes something else out, so much so that he grabs a handful of her hair, yanking her closer. “Don't go prying in places where the monsters live, little girl. It's not pretty.”

She snorts. “What, you think I don't know that? Oh, please! Isn't that how we ended up here? And you're a bad liar, Wesley.” She draws out the syllables in his name this time, each one dripping with venom. “Your cock is still hard for me.” She flinches a bit, waiting for him to lash out at her, slap
her, or pull her hair out by the roots.

He doesn’t answer, just kisses her again, all the tenderness gone, all tongue and thrust and they’re both writhing, hands greedily grabbing whatever they can manage to reach.

She detaches from his angry, hungry lips. “I mean it, Wes. Take me to your bed. Now.”

And it feels like the most important thing she’s asked of anyone, ever. Her whole fucking bullshit life she’s kept it all down, never made demands, just acquiesced and simmered with resentment and anger all the while. And yeah, she’d steal shit down at the Five and Ten back when it was still open, or sneak into the boarded-up wrecks down by the train tracks and burn everything she could lay her hands on, just to externalize it. Anything to stop her father’s slurred disapproval running endlessly through her mind as he tells her, “You’re just a good for nothing cunt, you’re just like your goddamn mother.” There’s never a moment when it doesn’t hurt more than anything.

She wonders what it is that he hears.

When she looks back at him he’s different, slightly diminished. This is a new Wes before her, someone who’s been fighting to hold on to this veneer of control for so long he doesn’t even know what he’s like underneath it. She can see him wrestling with his contradictory urges. It’s there, a long shadow casting a pall over his usually crisp, efficient demeanor. She feels a surge of power that she’s the one doing the exposing this time, even if she’s still naked and he’s still frustratingly clothed.

He’s not taking any initiative, as though it’s not his place anymore, and she wonders what it is that would make this right somehow. But they’re sure as fuck not going to be talking this one out. At least not right now.

Her hand hovers at the topmost button of his shirt but she doesn’t touch it, almost doesn’t dare to. When she finally speaks her voice sounds strange, even to her, quiet but filled with a new sense of authority. “I’d like to undress you now.” She pauses, knowing full well he wants more from her than that. She’s not used to this sort of improvisation. She starts again. “I’m going to undress you now and I’m going do it slowly, button by button, and each piece of clothing that I remove will mean I’m that much closer to seeing you for the first time. And I’m going to keep you so close to coming, you’re going to fucking beg for it.”

She looks at him for some sign of recognition or approval or, well, anything really.

He’s the one who’s all surface tension now. He’s holding himself away from her and he’s restless, flushed. She can see how much this is exciting him, but his confusion is as plain. She touches his arm and he flinches out of her grasp. He can’t meet her gaze when he tells her, “Not here.”

“Show me.”

He lets her touch him this time, allows her arm to link tentatively with his. They’re holding one another up and touching awkwardly, as though they’re not sure if this is allowable under house rules.

His voice is terse again. “Door on the left.”

She’s silently thankful that they don’t have far to go, because the thought of wandering halfway across this expansive glass fishbowl on shaky legs is less than appetizing, and she doesn’t want to lose her burst of bravado.

The door is slightly ajar.

She pushes the door open and crosses the threshold. “Follow me.” She keeps her voice free of tonal
inflection, reminding herself that it’s part of the game. At the same time she feels like an intruder, and she fights the urge to call this off. But it can’t be undone at this point, there’s too much at stake. She fights back the doubt and gets on with it.

The room is dark and it takes a moment for her eyes to adjust. She can’t see much but the room’s centerpiece, a heavy antique cast iron bed, lovingly restored, with a curved headboard and a kind of graceful solidity. It’s perfectly made, of course: sheets folded back just so, corners tucked with hospital precision. She’s realizes that she’s going to take no small satisfaction in messing it up.

“Sit down on the bed.”

He does so, moving soundlessly. He sits where she’d indicated, stock-still, legs together, as though awaiting her instruction.

She decides against turning the bedside table lamp on. They’re still in the near-darkness, and that seems somehow appropriate.

She straddles him, reveling in the delicious insinuation of his still-clothed hard-on between her legs. “I bet that’s getting a little uncomfortable by now, isn’t it?” She looks up at him, resisting the urge to smirk. He’s already looking a little—how do the Brits say it?—peak-ed? Piqued? Whatever.

She reaches out an arm and pushes him roughly back down onto the bed. “Just lie back and think of England, Wesley.” It’s the first time she gets the Bitch Goddess vocalizing just right.

She shifts restlessly against him, riding him just a little—part of her is enjoying seeing him twitch. As she leans forward all she can think about is how much she wants to kiss him again but she knows that nothing would unravel her improvised façade of authority faster—she wouldn’t be able to keep tenderness from creeping in. Instead she takes her sweet time unbuttoning the top button of his shirt, and the next. Three buttons down and she slides her fingers underneath the gap in the fabric. She pinches his nipple roughly—how his cock responds to that—and he arches slightly up off the bed.

“I think it’s time I took this shirt off, don’t you?”

He closes his eyes, retreating, hiding, and she lets the spark of anger that sends through her give her the strength she needs to do this. She never got to hide.

“No. You don’t close those pretty blue eyes, Wesley. You keep them open and you keep them on me. I want to watch you when you show me how good you are at begging. You can’t pretend this isn’t happening then.”

His eyes snap open and fix on hers. And Christ, is that how she looks to him? That hungry, that needy? She nods slowly, swallowing down the lust that’s making her body forget it came five minutes ago. It didn’t count. Nothing’s going to count but his cock and she’s going to have that when he begs her to take it and not before. “That’s better.”

One more button, then she needs to tug the shirt out of his waistband to get to the rest, because, you just know he’s buttoned every one of them. She does it slowly and yeah, she gets why he’s been so keen on not rushing now. Tearing his clothes off him, like a kid unwrapping presents on Christmas morning, is missing half the fun.

So she tugs it free bit by bit, letting the cotton drag and pull against his stomach, feeling him suck in a sharp breath, so that it slips free faster than she’d wanted, as his stomach flattens. Not going to let that pass, and she leans forward, spreading his shirt wide and bites down on the same nipple she pinched; one swift, warning snap of her teeth, then she pulls back before she can weaken and lick or kiss the
reddened flesh. He makes a desperate, whimpering sound, familiar because she’s felt it claw its way out of her throat before now, and when she feels his cock twitch she wonders if he’s turned on by making it or remembering it.

When the shirt’s free at the front, she stares down at him. He’s elegant, she decides. Smooth like the bed he’s lying on, lean but strong. Unmarked.

She likes the look of his chest, framed by the shirt, rumpled and creased as she’s never seen it before, still damp so that it’s clinging to his arms, but she’s not going to let him keep it. In fact...

“Sit up,” she orders, gripping the collar and pulling him up off the bed a little. He puts a hand to the side for balance and sits up obediently. It brings him closer than she’d like, but she doesn’t move away or give into the need to kiss him; just strips the shirt off his back, peeling it free and setting it beside her. One finger to his chest and she sends him back to where he was, on his back, looking up at her.

He’s looking—well, she’s not sure. Expectant maybe, as if he’s getting a bit of a kick out of not knowing where it’s going, after all the times when it’s been him calling the shots. She can almost see him adjusting to the idea that she’s in the game enough to do anything it takes to keep it from ending. It’s starting to sink in for her that he didn’t believe her, not really, when she told him she’d stay no matter what he did.

And she doesn’t know if forcing him to accept it like this will work, if he’ll get what she’s telling him when she takes over from him. Never had to count on a man’s brains to get fucked before.

She picks up his shirt and slides into it, straightening the collar with finicky precision, just like he would, smiling down at him as she sees a flicker of indignation. The cotton brushes against her, cool and fine, and she buttons one center button.

And she’s clothed, and he’s half-naked, just like that.

It's easier now that she's not exposed. For a while, it had felt strange and awkward, then it had become subversive and finally it had become something she was and something he wasn't.

“I'm going to take your shoes and socks off now, Wes,” she says as she slides off the bed and onto her knees. “And I don't want you to move an inch.” The way his hands are knotted in the bedclothes, his knuckles white, are answer enough, even though he's not moving and she has to squint extra hard to catch the rise and fall of his chest just to make sure that he hasn't expired on the spot due to extreme freaked outness.

And even this is better because before when she was on her knees, fetching and carrying and sucking, even though she wanted to do it, it still made her feel like she was less than him. But now she needs to be down here so she can free him, get him out of his stiff clothes and show him that there's nothing to be ashamed of about being naked and desperate. Of needing…stuff.

She unlaces his black brogues and tugs them off, then yanks at his black wool socks before she remembers that this is meant to be unhurried and erotic. But it's feet and she's kinda squicked out about that even though she takes a deep breath and slowly slides one sock off. Then the other one and she's holding the soles of his feet in her hands. He has really nice feet. Long and slender, his toenails neatly clipped and though she doesn't want to do anything gross like start sucking on his toes, she can't resist scoring one nail along his high instep.

This short, sharp laugh is wrenched out of him as he twitches his toes, then he's not moving. She tries the same trick on his other foot, keeping the edge of her nail scraping along his arch until he jerks his
ankle and pulls out of her grasp even while he's making these snuffling noises.

He's *ticklish*? What the fuck? Her fingers creep up his trouser leg but he's on to her.

“Faith.” The way he says it, all reproach and wounded pride makes her snatch her hand away and rock back on her heels. How is she going to do this? She wants him begging. She wants his stupid barriers broken down. Seems like doing it through the medium of tickling is sort of undignified for both of them.

She climbs back on the bed and just wishes that it would be okay to lie down, wrap her arms around him and explore his mouth for a couple of hours. Like normal people. But they're not normal people so she leans over him and peers at his face. His eyes are staring unblinking at the ceiling and she seizes his chin and forces his head in her direction.

“Look at me!” she demands, the pitch of her voice creeping up. “It's me doing this. Faith! And this is happening because I want it to.”

She can't see his eyes in the dim light but he nods and it's like he's giving her permission to do what she has to do. Problem is, she's not quite sure what this is. Everything she wants to do involves kisses and featherlight touches on his skin so she settles for leaning over him and tracing her tongue along the side of his neck.

She gives in to the urge to bite down on flesh that tastes of salt and he tenses, shifts his hips and she inches closer so she's pressed up against him, can feel the hard ache of him against her belly. It must be killing him.

“Do you want me to touch your cock?” she asks but her hand is already there and she doesn't wait for him to answer before she's pulling at the cloth of his trousers, tracing the length of him and marveling at the way he arches his neck and grits his teeth.

Her hand closes around it while she's trying to negotiate his belt buckle. The leather's well-worn as she slides it through the buckle and tries to pull it out of the way.

He's not doing a thing to help her but she can feel him quick and pulsing beneath her fingers and she abandons the belt and goes to the button of his waistband. His skin is smooth and hot but there's a downy trail that she scratches at with her nails as she fumbles for his zipper. Her hands are damp with sweat and she impatiently tosses back the hair that's falling into her eyes.

Thing is, it's all right when she's touching him through wool and there's something between them, keeping them apart, but then what?

She bites her lip as she begins to inch down the zipper, the noise almost deafening in the quiet of the room, apart from the hitch in his breathing. It's almost halfway down and all she has to do is slide her hand into the gap and touch him. He'll be wet. His cock leaking with want and need and she could jack him off or take him in her mouth and not let him come until he's moaning her name like a prayer.

Yeah, all she has to do is slip her hand inside and he's hers. She can do this. So why does it feel like she's doing something terrible? Like she's making another mess? Like she's tearing him down piece by piece even though she's not sure how to put him back together.

Very slowly, she moves her hand so maybe he won't notice how close she got. She's retreating back, her left leg moving off the bed, trying to find the floor when his hand suddenly curls round her wrist.

“It's all right, Faith,” he says, rolling onto his side so he can place one hand on the small of her back
and press her closer. Then he's tugging her back to where she was, helping her slide down the zipper and guiding her fingers around his cock.

He sighs into her open mouth as her lips part into an “oh” of wonder.

“I didn't... I thought... I'm no good at this,” she tries to explain. “I wanted to…”

“Sshh,” he soothes her and his hand is wrapped round hers, showing her what to do. They shift closer together on the bed so their legs entwine and his mouth is buried against her neck.

When they get back to the top she smoothes her thumb over the leaking head of his cock and brings it to her mouth so she can taste him. But he's already snatching her hand back so he can grind softly into her palm, taking deep breaths as she lets his fingers pick up pace and she's matching him, speeding up the movement of her hand.

“Do you like this, Wes? Am I doing it okay?”

She can feel his smile. “You're doing it wonderfully, Faith.” His voice is muffled against her. “A little too wonderfully. I may have to start begging soon.”

“Just give me the word. One word and I'll…”

He stops her from having to make promises she doesn't know how to keep by pushing his tongue into her mouth. It's a wet slither of a kiss. Their mouths cling and he shifts his legs again, pressing his thigh between her legs and she's spread open, aching wet against the wool because he's still got his trousers on. The friction is good. Really good and she clasps him tighter and now when she's on the downstroke, her fingers flex out and caress his balls. That makes him hiss and almost, almost writhe so she's getting more and more of that friction. Fuck, she's humping his leg now, trying to squeeze it between her thighs and he doesn't need to show her what to do because she's jacking him off, trying to remember to squeeze the base of his cock to stop him from coming too soon like she read in Cosmo, but the rhythmic push and pull against each other is making it impossible.

His cock is dripping over her fingers when he suddenly jerks against her and goes still.

“Do you want me to be inside you, Faith?” he asks, pulling back and closing his eyes tight as her fingers slide against him.

He doesn't call it fucking. But then he doesn't call it making love either. They're somewhere in between, which is good enough for her.

“Yes,” she says and bites down hard on his bottom lip. “Yes, I want you inside me.”

He pulls away and glides off the bed, standing to let the trousers pool at his ankles. He waits there, eyes locked on hers.

And for a moment, she can't break eye contact to move her gaze downward. She's been waiting so long, so very long for this moment. And yet, her cheeks are burning as she takes in the full sight of him finally blessedly naked in front of her. Of course, of course, he's impossibly long-limbed unclothed. The play of shadows and light across the arc of his hipbone leads her eyes to his straining hard-on. Her face and various other parts feel like they're made of flames and she's lightheaded, on the edge of fainting. Is this what it's like to swoon?

“Stand up, Faith.” He whispers it, and his tone isn't frosty or harsh; it's just a simple request.

She sits up on the bed, feet on the floor for a few seconds to make sure she'll be able to stand and not
have her knees fail her. She supposes he senses this because he offers a hand again, which she gratefully takes.

When she's standing, his hands brush across her breasts, meeting at the single button that keeps his shirt closed about her.

“Unfortunately, our needs have become a bit urgent. Otherwise I would take twenty minutes to unfasten this button.” He's actually smiling down at her and she can feel him fiddling around, twisting it between his fingers. And in the next instant—with a straight face—he's actually ripping the button off the shirt and flicking it deftly across the room. Her disbelief at this disorderly little action must have been written all over her face because a little grin betrays his seriousness as he parts the shirt like it's heavy draperies concealing a rare artifact, sliding his hands up to her shoulders and coaxing her arms out of the sleeves, letting it fall to the floor next to his trousers.

She shivers; the places where his fingers traced over her flesh are still tingling. After a few moments, his hands are on the move again, snaking up over her back, stroking her neck, fingers tangling in her hair. But he doesn't yank too hard when he pulls her closer and tilts her face to his for another urgent kiss, their bared flesh sliding together for the first time. She can feel the gooseflesh rise across his skin where it meets hers, all the fur on their bodies straining from the electricity coursing between them. Their hands meander, stroking and petting with all the gentleness that had been absent minutes before.

Before she can really register what's happening, she's falling back on the bed, and he's falling with her, pinning her arms at the wrists to the bed, and spreading her knees apart with his legs. He hovers there for a moment with a look like a kid in a candy store. His slips over her smooth pussy, bumping her clit, teasingly missing the mark. She rockets her hips upward, whimpering, trying to draw him inside.

He doesn't admonish her, doesn't say anything, just pulls back for another thrust that leaves the head of his cock hovering at her entrance, barely touching her. She's on the edge of begging, of demanding he fuck her now but pushes it down, savoring the wait for once. It's almost enough to make her giggle, but she swallows that down too.

And she's glad she does, because he takes that exact moment to pitch with some follow-through and he's finally inside her. She flings her legs around him, twisting and pulling him in even deeper.

And for a moment they're locked like that, every inch of flesh galvanized, neither moving for fear that they'll break the current and come too quickly.

She rocks her hips gently, just to see his mouth fall open on a gasp, and moves her legs away, spreading them wide, opening to him. Bending and angling her fingers, she can just brush against his hands, tight around her wrists, but after that touch, she relaxes them, so that her palms are curved, cupping shadows. Waiting. Expectant.

His hands tighten to the point of hurting her and she tells him it does, with a sound that makes him smile, because there’s not a shred of protest in it. He slackens his grip slowly and rubs his thumbs over the pulse in her wrists. It’s racing but her body’s perfectly still, the need to make this last fighting the need to have him move in her, on her.

He leans forward and kisses her wrists; left, then right, and it’s then, as his mouth is warm against her skin, that he pulls out of her, most of the way, and he times it perfectly, so that her lips part in surprise just as his mouth covers them.

“Can you stay still?” he murmurs, kissing her between words and showing her how it’s done.
She’s got an inch of him now, no more, and it’s killing her, after being filled so completely. “Do you want me to?” she counters, doing the unthinkable and pushing her ass down against the bed so that he almost slips out of her.

“I don’t believe I do,” he says, sounding as if he’s considering which tie to wear or something. His eyes gleam down at her and she sees the tenderness there, mixed in with the hunger. “Later, perhaps.”

And he’s back inside her on the last word, in a smooth, fast thrust that jolts a cry out of her and he does it again, and it’s even better, because she’s expecting it and she’s ready, hips tilting to bring him close, legs tangling with his. She wants her hands free; wants to score his back with her nails, feel the muscles in his ass clench as he drives into her; wants him to touch her. One strong tug against his grip, and he releases her, his hands sliding down her arms. His left hand goes behind her head, warm against the back of her neck; his right curves around her breast; finger and thumb squeezing her nipple hard enough to send a shock of pleasure through her to add to the rest. She feels lit up, glowing, and he’s not taking his eyes off her as he fucks her, letting her see what she’s doing to him with every stroke of her hand, every scrape of her fingernails down that long back of his. She hasn’t seen it yet, she realizes; hasn’t really looked at him. All that to come and she can’t wait, but she will.

From somewhere he’s found enough control to have slowed down, teasing her with short, slow stabs that leave her mewling, fingers scrabbling at his shoulders. “Wes, you bastard,” she whispers, and it still sounds like ‘please’.

He grins, lips peeled back from teeth he’s gritted. “Am I not doing this right?”

He slows down even more, barely moving, until her body’s screaming and yammering for more. Frustration sends her hand flying down to smack against his ass before she can stop it, and she freezes as his eyes widen in surprise. The echo of the slap in the silence takes forever to fade, and her palm’s still tingling when he pulls out of her and rolls to his back, tucking his hands behind his head and spreading his legs a bit.

She looks at him and has to swallow. Talk about a Kodak moment. His cock’s wet and the dark hair around it is stuck to his skin in places. She wants to lick him clean, taste her on him, nuzzle into him until every breath she takes tastes of him, but that, like so much else can wait.

He’s not angry with her; he’s daring her. She’s never said ‘no’ to a dare; it’s one reason she ended up stealing. This should feel just as scary, but all she’s getting is the exhilaration. She straddles him, bending forward so her breasts touch lightly against his chest and she freezes as his eyes widen in surprise. The echo of the slap in the silence takes forever to fade, and her palm’s still tingling when he pulls out of her and rolls to his back, tucking his hands behind his head and spreading his legs a bit.

She puts the tip of him in her and slides down on him slowly, peeling away a finger at a time and lowering her hand until it’s flat against his body. Holding his eyes, she brings her hand to her mouth and laps at the clinging stickiness, more to see his reaction than out of curiosity. She knows what she tastes like, after all.

His tongue runs over his lower lip just before his teeth dig into it and she doesn’t know if it’s what he wants or not, but she wants to feel that tongue of his on her again, and she lifts up and braces her hands beside him so that her nipples brush against lips and teeth and tongue and he moved his hands, cupping her breast and holding them in place. Feels so good having him do that; sucking them hard, tongue furiously busy, teeth giving her the edge of pain she needs, that she starts to move by way of a reward.
And God, he’s slowed everything down again, and each slow drag of the tip of his cock against her clit is just about enough to make her come. For all her impatience earlier she knows instinctively that she doesn’t want to rush this. It’s much too soon.

She stills herself against him, and he feels it. He pauses in his intent task. His eyes are still heavy-lidded with concentration when he whispers, “What is it?”

“I just want— Can we stop for a little while?”

“Stop?”

“I… I don’t want to come yet.” She feels slightly ridiculous saying it.

“So now you’re all about delayed gratification?” For a moment she’s worried that this will mark the return of Cold Bastard Wesley, then she’s never going to come. Instead he just gives her a bemused little smile, curls his arm around her neck and pulls her to him.

And this kiss is different still, a little bit feverish but strangely tender. There is something a bit old-fashioned about it: serious, almost reverent. She decides that’s all right. It suits him. And she’d much rather have that than a kiss that’s artless or clumsy or, worse yet, entitled. She’s had enough of those to last a lifetime.

She leans into him as she slips her tongue into his mouth. His tongue arches up in return, echoing the concurrent movement of his cock inside her. It’s exquisite, and she lets out the tiniest of ahs, closing her eyes and letting her body give in to it.

That marks some sort of turning point, like they’re both too restless at this point to care about the slow and the steady.

“Maybe I was a little, mm, hasty,” she whispers, her breathing noticeably ragged.

“You always are,” he counters, tipping his hips forward so that she’s thrown a bit off-balance and slams down onto him. He thrusts into her with renewed vigor, not slow this time but still controlled; short, sharp movements that seem to be liquefying her from the inside out.

“Oh God, like that, oh,” and they’re straining against one another, muscles corded and taut, finally lost in a single rhythm. She meets each thrust with a slow grind of her hips against his.

He takes her nipple between his teeth again, tonguing it with equal parts roughness and care, then sucking hungrily. She feels it, a new, deliciously insistent ache that shoots right to her clit, and between that and his cock slamming into her she’s so fucking close—

His features have settled into a kind-of beatific ecstasy that’s smoothed away all the usual anxiety and sharpness. Now it’s his turn to ah, and she takes some satisfaction in his being reduced to monosyllables. His face is clouded, briefly, before his head snaps to one side and he’s coming, eyes shut tight and mouth open in a perfectly soundless ‘o.’ His cock is still shuddering with the last throes of orgasm when she feels her own start to crest. It almost takes her by surprise, she’s been so curiously intent on watching him, but when it hits her she’s wrenched away from him, crushing out against him with single-minded intensity.

She collapses against him, breathing heavily and still somewhat disoriented. When she regains her composure, he’s turned away from her, his eyes still closed. She traces her fingertips down the side of his face, running them along the still-taut muscles in his neck, trying to soothe the tension out of him; she finds herself murmuring “beautiful,” almost as an afterthought.
That seems to be the last thing he wants to hear, because he practically flinches away from her. He won’t look at her and seems to be trying to curl in on himself, to disappear.

“No. Look at me, dammit!” There’s a hitch in her voice that she can’t tamp down, won’t tamp down. She kisses his shoulder; she holds onto him, and won’t let go.

He's so very far away, the only connection his spent cock still slightly twitching inside her. Other than that, he's very nearly perfectly still, his ecstatic panting slowed to shallow, measured gasps.

Undeterred, she kisses her way up his neck, tries a different tack and breathes in his ear: “Wes... Wes, look at me. Please.” Her hushed voice cracks on the last syllable and there's tears welling up in her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks on to his flesh.

She’s at a loss, the ache of her desire turned to sharp pangs of concern. Without thinking, she's pulled herself up, grabbing his wrists as he'd done to her, pinning him to the bed now.

He turns to look at her then, his eyes as clouded as hers and it's like someone's stabbed her in the heart. And she knows it, knows then that it wasn't just about getting him to shed his protective layers of bespoke suiting and take her to his bed. Their mutual heat has blown off the rest of his veneer and she’s faced with the real thing, the real Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, Esq. his face a frozen mask she knows only too well. The look of defeat that comes from years of insults flung a little too heavily, hitting the mark again and again with tenacious accuracy.

She knows then she's on the wrong page and removes her hands from his wrists slowly and curls around him, rolling on her side and pulling him close. They cling to each other again like two shipwrecked people ready for the swells to crash over their heads and shove them into a dark undertow.

After a few minutes, the words finally spill out of her, unchecked. “What the fuck did they do to you?”

And it's like he's breaking a vow of silence. The words come—haltingly at first—then in a jumble of pain that she knows all too well. The father, of course. Years of being told he's second rate, but not with the curses and fists and thrown dishes and flicked cigarette butts that she knew, but with verbal daggers that cut subtly and deep and ached and festered for days, months, decades. And no way to let the pain out. It just burned inside him, then pushed him as far from the mother country and the father as he could get—and into the arms of peevish women that tormented him mercilessly—and all the while he swallowed it all in silence, the simmering rage the only true feeling he'd known.

And she thinks this may be the strongest thing she's ever done, letting him shudder as the years of grief pour out of him, wiping the scant tears off his cheeks with the soft pad of her thumb, like she's flipping through a file full of endless depositions.

When he's done, she doesn't know what to say—doesn't think there's anything to say. She just pulls him even closer, still stroking his face until he finally falls asleep. She stays awake as the weak dawn light suffuses the room, watching the way his eyelashes curl over his cheekbones, flickering in his dreams.

Chapter Eleven

When she wakes up in the morning, she's on her own. There's not even an indentation on the pillow next to her to indicate that he slept with her. That he slept in her arms.

She staggers out of bed wincing as her muscles start shrieking in protest. Her body is this painful
throb, centered in her nipples, her thighs and her cunt. She doesn't know if it's because she had too much or she didn't have enough. She catches sight of the little pile on the bottom of the bed; her dress neatly folded with the stocking and corset placed carefully on top. The black satin panties are conspicuous by their absence but as the last time she saw them was when they were thrown into a damp, creased bundle in the corner of the library, it's not really that surprising.

Her reflection in the bathroom mirror is pure fright night. She went to bed with damp hair and now it's sticking up in all directions. There are smudges under her eyes and her lips are swollen and sore when she touches the tips of her fingers to them. Did he watch her while she slept and wonder what the hell he was thinking of? She catches sight of the little pile of her hairpins on the counter, that he must have brought up and feels a sudden wave of inexplicable anger. Why is he still playing the game? Or maybe that's all it was to him? Just a game and she's a girl-sized pawn that he's moving round the board.

She has a complete sense memory of his hand on her ass as he spanked her. Of the way it felt to be constricted by the corset, her breasts pushed up to the heavens. His touch at the small of her back, exhorting her not to slouch. The anger gets upgraded to full-blown rage. She wants it all. His tenderness and all the fucked-up shit he pulls on her. Wants them both in equal measure and what kind of masochistic little freak does that make her?

He must have showered because he's a clean freak but you'd never know it to see the serried ranks of towels all neatly hanging from the rail according to size. She takes great delight in using as many of them as possible and throwing them on the floor. She even spits on his toothbrush after she's used it, but once she's shrouded in tight black wool, her hair scraped back, she feels calmer.

That's what she tells herself as she tiptoes down the stairs, following the scent of coffee and toast and trying to pretend that her hand isn't trembling as it slides down the banister.

He doesn't look up when she walks into the kitchen. Just finishes his piece of toast with two decisive bites and folds up the paper he's been reading.

“Hey,” she says softly, then blushes as her stomach gives an almighty rumble. He wasn't too bothered about feeding her. Just fucking her.

He ignores both of the sounds. Just stands up and smoothes down the starched front of his white shirt. Seeing him there, so prim and buttoned down, face set in grim, unreadable lines, Faith wonders if she imagined last night. Then as she takes a hesitant step forward and feels the silk lining of her dress brush against her shaved mound, remembers what he said about wanting her always ready for his caresses, another wave of heat pinkens her cheeks.

“About last night…” Shit! Why is she talking like some lame chick from a tired rom com?

He's embarrassed enough for both of them, hooking up his jacket from the back of the chair and not looking at her as he slips it on. “You'll be late for work,” is all he says and he brushes past her, not looking to see if she's following and she has no choice but to scurry to keep up with him.

In the car, he's even more remote. Turns up this crashing, discordant classical music so loud that she can't even think, never mind talk to him. His knuckles are white where they grip the steering wheel and she's flashing back to how they matched the bed sheets. He's taking corners too fast, overtaking to an angry volley of beeping horns and cutting through red lights so all she can do is grip the door handle and press her foot down on an imaginary brake.

She has to shut her eyes when he sweeps onto the drive of the office parking lot because he's going way too fast and they're going to crash through the wall, but then he slams on the brakes and she's
jerked forward then pushed back as the car grinds to a halt. Her forehead is damp with sweat as she unclips her seat belt.

“What the fuck is your problem?” she screeches, then stops dead on the blistering rant that she's been working up to for the last half hour when he slides a five dollar bill across the dashboard.

“Go and get some breakfast,” he intones crisply, every fucking inch the crusty lawyer.

And she's stony broke, starving hungry and running out of choices as she snatches up the money, lips thinning as she realizes he hasn't fucking touched her.

She scrabbles at the door lock, feet on the ground when he says: “You're to have one cup of coffee, a toasted plain bagel with cream cheese and a piece of fruit.”

“Whatever, you fuck!” she snarls, jumping out of the car but he's yanking her back by the collar of her tatty denim jacket.

“Repeat!” he orders like she's mentally deficient.

His lips have flattened out, no trace there of the soft tissue she kissed but his eyes. Oh God! They're like twinkling blue stars, sweeping over her furious face like he doesn't want to miss an inch. Like he wants to memorize her and play it back to himself when she's not around.

Doesn't mean she has to lose the attitude as she sullenly repeats her breakfast menu back to him, but he lets go of her collar and she thinks that she must have imagined the brush of his fingers against her nape.

Faith takes her sweet time having breakfast. She's got a lot of cigarettes to make up for. She manages to spin it out for an hour but then she's teetering back across the road and pushing open the front door. It's exactly as it was when she left. Of course it is. But somehow she thought everything would be different.

She picks up her shorthand pad and a pencil and taking a deep breath, starts down the shadowy corridor and opens the door to his office. She's fucked if she's knocking first.

He barely looks up. “I don't need anything from you right now.”

Chapter Twelve

She burns fifteen shorthand pads during the next ten working days. She buys a cheap lighter with the money she found in an envelope on her desk, which is either payment for services well and fucking truly rendered or an advance on her wages. He doesn't tell her and she doesn't ask.

Because he's not saying much of anything. Just shoves a pile of handwritten notes at her first thing in the morning, then hands back her typed up sheets of linen bond, almost obliterated with red corrections two hours later. It seems like sloppy typing isn't an invitation for him to take it out on her ass anymore.

Neither is the transformation in her wardrobe. The three black dresses are stuffed in the back of her wardrobe, away from her mother's prying eyes. The corset and panties and shoes get wedged under her chest of drawers and she turns up in a variety of stuffy lawyer-incensing outfits. Man, she even wore jeans, sneakers and a What Would Joan Jett T-shirt Do? one day and he didn't so much as bat an eyelash. Like, she's totally acting out, as her social worker from juvie would say, and he hasn't called her on it once.
He's like every other fucking guy in the world. Gets what he wants, gets some touch, and then he won't call, won't write, won't fucking look at her. It doesn't make any sense. Or actually it makes way too much sense so why, every morning, when she's in the shower does she use her Gillette Daisy Plus razor to shave her pussy, keep it smooth while she waits in vain for the caress he promised her?

He even ignores the Post-It notes that she sticks to her freshly typed letters. Sometimes it's just four words scrawled in red Sharpie. “You're a fucking bastard.” Sometimes it's song lyrics: “We don't need reason and we don't need logic because we've got feeling and we're damn proud of it.” Every night before she goes home, she papers the corridor with her words and when she gets in the next morning, they've disappeared.

The funny thing is that she's stopped trying to actually talk to him. Just stands there, shoulders slumped, to hear the “I don't need anything from you right now” that she gets every morning, then flounces out, slamming the door behind her.

It's been two weeks to the day since… And at lunch, she picks up the local paper on her way to the diner and starts circling the Help Wanted ads. No way is she sticking round until he gets some stones and actually fires her.

She ignores most of the pile of paper that he shoved at her that morning and gets through the never-ending afternoon by sitting out in the back yard smoking and burning through the corrected letters from yesterday. They're getting kinda low on shorthand pads.

At four-thirty, she decides that anything is better than staying cooped up where the walls are trying to swallow her whole. Might as well start earning that pink slip. Just as she's shrugging on her jacket, her cell rings. It's Xander, wanting advice for his hook up with some skeevy bus boy that he's been crushing on like a high school girl for the last month.

“Just don't fuck him on your first date,” she's laughing into the phone. “It's too cheap, even for you.”

She looks up, as Xander howls in protest, to see him standing there, a piece of paper clutched in his hand, blazing fury etched into every inch of him.

“I'm on the fucking phone,” she hisses and turns round because she loses all her balls when his frosty blue eyes are turning her to ice.

His hand slams down on the desk, the piece of paper underneath it. “I need you to type this before you leave, then bring it into my office.” His voice is so low that she has to strain to hear it and all the hairs on her arms are standing up and waving. Trying to get her attention but she just shrugs.

“Gotta go, Xan. Some kind of fucking legal emergency,” she says jauntily, knowing that he can hear as he strides to his office but the door closes after him with a gentle click, and she wonders why she expected anything else.

She hangs up on Xander, after a lengthy conversation about appropriate date wear, then sits back down and picks up the five pages of densely written legal bullshit. What's so fucking important than it can't wait until tomorrow?

March 15, 2004

10 A.M.: Turned up one hour late, wearing sneakers and a skirt with a torn hem.

11 A.M.: Made eleven mistakes on three letters.
11.15 A.M.: Burned office property

11.45 A.M.: Hung up on client.

It goes on and on. A diary of her misdemeanors, and as she slips the really fancy linen bond into the Selectric and begins to type, something is unfurling in the pit of her stomach, spreading out in warm rays so her nipples are hard and she squirms on the seat as she feels herself getting wet.

They're a fucking piece of art by the time she's finished. Every comma exactly where it should be. Bolded, underlined, italicized, exactly as he's indicated. Because she's good at taking orders when he can actually be bothered to give them to her.

She stands outside his door, wishing that she's wearing something else rather than her denim skirt, green T-shirt, and Mary Janes. Something black and tight-fitting. Her palms are damp with sweat as she knocks on the door for the first time in two weeks.

“Enter.”

She's taking baby steps, creeping toward him, when he looks up and pins her to the carpet with his eyes. NASA should come to him next time they're doing research into killer laser beams.

“I got your…” she begins but he just holds out his hand, palm facing up, and she has to walk toward him, trying to resist the urge to start genuflecting, as she gingerly places the sheets of paper in his hand.

He takes his sweet fucking time reading them, even though he knows they're going to be worthy of a gold star. Then he stacks the papers back together, standing them up and shuffling them so they're all neat and tidy, before lifting his head and staring at her. She presses her thighs together against the cruel insistent pulsing of her clit and tries to give him the evil eye right back.

“Stand up straight,” he barks at her, and she jumps.

“Look, I can explain,” she stutters, trying desperately to fill the silence that's weighing down on her. “I know that I've been…”

“Quiet.”

Just one word and it's like he's connected a live wire to her cunt. She can feel the word inside her, rubbing against her wet, swollen walls.

And he's getting up, his movements calm, unhurried, pushing the chair back.

“Come here.”

Part of her is longing to back out of the room and get the fuck out of there but the other part of her, that's currently about to go up in a woosh of flames, manages to stagger over to the desk.

“Assume the position.”

Faith bends over the desk, her arms flat against the polished surface.

“Lift up that sorry excuse for a skirt.”

He's coming round now as her hands tug at the uncooperative denim. It doesn't even occur to her to argue. He's given her two weeks of the silent treatment. Two weeks of torture without even laying a finger on her. Two weeks of agonizing foreplay.
She keeps her head down as he moves behind her, then one finger is hooking into the waistband of her red, boy-cut panties. “Get rid of these.”

As she slides them off, wriggling to get them down her legs, she feels the change in the air as he bends down. She lifts her foot, then the other one, and he’s pulling them away from her, then straightening up.

“You're a very dirty little girl, Faith,” he says, like it's some surprise that there's a fucking great wet patch staring back at him from the red cotton.

And she knows that he's not going to give her some quick, hard fuck over the desk, even though she'd sell her soul for it. But even so when his hand slides between her legs and his fingers trace the smooth skin of her bare mound, become slick with moisture, she wonders if they can't just forward wind to the main event and maybe do the spanking afterward.

“Though I'm surprised that you've managed to obey at least one of my orders,” he drawls against her ear, fingers still sliding over her, slipping into the crease where her thighs begin. She knows he can feel her legs trembling, the muscles quivering as she strains to hold herself still.

“I…”

“I didn't tell you to speak,” he purrs, giving her a little pinch, then taking his hand away so she has to bite her lip to stop the moan of protest. “I don't know where to begin, quite frankly. You really have behaved appallingly. I think this may take some time.”

She closes her eyes and wishes that she didn't feel so happy. So fucking ecstatic. Already she's greedily calculating the hours, the minutes, the seconds that he's going to lavish on her.

The first blow takes her by surprise, even though she's been expecting it. His hand crashes down on her left cheek, lingers there, then withdraws.

He's tutting and she almost screams in frustration. She's forgotten about the waiting and how much she hates it.

Why's he stopping? Why the fuck is he walking back to his stupid leather chair and sitting down?

“I think…yes. This will be a much more effective punishment if you'd just come over here,” he says, as she looks up into his eyes and sees them dancing with amusement.

She slowly uncoils herself from her supine pose over the desk and shuffles toward him, skirt still hitched up and her arousal starting to paint a sheen over her inner thighs.

He doesn't say anything, just eats her up with his eyes but then he flexes his fingers and she can't help it. This needy whimper escapes her lips and he frowns. “Really, Faith. I expect you to take the consequences of your behavior with much better grace than that. Perhaps this would be easier if I just arrange you exactly to my specifications.”

Then his hands are on her. Properly on her. Pulling her down so she's lying across his lap, his cock digging into her belly and she curls her hands into the leather and waits.

He doesn’t make her wait long. She’s so aware of everything right then that she hears the rustle of his shirt as he pulls back his hand, hears the catch in his breath that tells her he’s as worked up as she is, then she hears nothing but the sound of his hand landing, and it’s such a clean, crisp, cool sound that it’s kind of funny it leaves her burning up.
She’s figured out why he waits between spanks. It’s because it doesn’t hurt, not at first. There’s this split second of sound and pressure, like the shockwave from an explosion, then a sting that spreads and grows. He knows just when it peaks and starts to fade; knows it and has the next one lined up, so that just as she’s sucking in a breath she couldn’t take when her mouth was open, trying to push the pain out of her, his hand’s against her again, driving everything out and leaving her lost.

It takes a while to scramble and find a way to match breathing to the steady rise and fall of his hand, but she manages it somewhere around number nine—and yes, she’s counting them, silently, in her head, fixing on the number because he won’t go past twenty—thirty—so it gives her something to focus on.

Then he starts to talk to her and she loses count, because his voice sends her spinning out of control.

“I don’t know what you thought I’d do, Faith. Ignore this? Overlook it? Excuse it?”

He spits that last one out, and his hand practically bounces up off her ass, he hits it so hard. She yelps then, because he’s hit the same spot he did with five, seven, and nine and it’s sore. Bad mistake. There’s a flurry of blows, still precise, all landing so his fingers fit into the marks they left, but fast enough that it feels like one smack five times harder.

It’s too much and she starts to struggle, panting, fuck, crying now, and she isn’t doing it with one pretty crystal tear rolling down a cheek; no, they’re splashing and running down her face and her fucking nose is running too. Oh, shit, this isn’t how it’s supposed to be.

“Please—”

She doesn’t think he hears her, because he doesn’t tell her off for talking, but maybe he did, because the next spank lands on her other cheek, and it’s almost as good as him stopping.

“I won’t do that, Faith,” he says, sounding remote and Wrath of God-like. “You can’t expect me to.”

And it comes to her that these are words he’s heard said to him, and he’s repeating them to her, and he’s fucked-up, yes, but he needs to be the one saying them and God knows why, but she needs to hear them from someone who cares, and she stops fighting.

The blows stop hurting, the sound and fury distant now, as she spreads her legs wider, feeling the soft scratch of his trousers against her thighs. Arches her back, pushes her ass up to meet the next blow, and feels his hand pause.

“You don’t have to stop,” she tells him, knowing he will, because Christ, she must be stop-light red by now, but needing to say it.

He pats her ass, gently enough for it to surprise a giggle out of her, then flips her over so she’s cradled against his arm. One of those hankies he must buy by the gross is in his hand and he looks at her with this astonished look, as if it’s beyond him how she managed to get so messy in ten minutes.

The handkerchief tidies her up as efficiently as ever, and he drops it out of sight and stares down at her.

“Well, that takes care of part of it,” he murmurs. “But I don’t feel inclined to let such an impressive catalog of misbehavior pass. I think, for the sake of our future working relationship, we need to make sure we both know where we stand, don’t you?”

She’s not sure if he wants an answer but she tries a nod and gets the frosty eyes full beam. “If it’s not too much trouble, Faith, perhaps you could do me the courtesy of responding with a little more—”
“Yes, yes, I do. Sir.”

“—little more respect and no interruptions.”

“I’m sorry. Sir.”

Christ, she just can’t make that ‘sir’ part of a sentence and every time she pauses he gets this funny look in his eyes.

“Say that again, Faith.”

“I’m sorry—sir.”

His hand goes to her clit and pinches it hard, and she forgets her name, the day of the week, and what letter comes after ‘a’ as she writhes against him, toes curling hard.

“Fuck, Wes! Please!”

His hand pulls back and slaps her between her legs, not as hard as he’d done on her ass, but hard enough to sting. “We’re in the office, Faith. You’ll address me properly.”

She bites her lip as she fights to keep her ass from lifting to rub her cunt against his fingers. “Fuck. Sir. Please,” she says, spitting it out and glaring up at him.

His fingers tap against her clit, then dip lower, stirring the wetness that’s pooling between her legs. “You’re not making much sense, Faith,” he says. “I expect my secretary to have a modicum of fluency. It is rather important.”

“You want fluent?” she demands. “Two weeks and you’ve barely spoken to me, and you want fluent?” He pushes a finger into her, then two, moving them in and out, with a deliberation that’s making her shiver, head to toe. Her nipples are aching now and she wants to kiss him. She’s missed kissing him more than she’d thought, gone to sleep kissing the fucking pillow, like a kid, pretending it was him. Two weeks of burning up, spraining her wrist rubbing herself until she came, and it didn’t help. And she couldn’t come unless she was thinking of him. Every fantasy she’d ever used was worthless now. Didn’t work. Just him, and she’d worn every memory of him down to bare bones.

“I want you to tell me when you did this last,” he says, making each thrust of his fingers slide inside her to the exact same depth every time, bringing his thumb across to brush her clit. “Where you were, and what you were thinking.”

She closes her eyes, and fuck, she’s blushing now. His fingers pause the instant she does that, frozen like his voice as he says, “Look at me when you speak to me, Faith.”

She hadn’t been fucking speaking, but she wasn’t going to point that out. She forces open her eyes and the hand around her shoulders tightens a little, almost like he’s encouraging her. He’s looking expectant, eager, and it makes it easier somehow.

“About an hour ago,” she says. “In the washroom—.” His eyes close like he’s picturing it, before snapping open again, watching her and his fingers start moving again. “You’d just walked past me without even looking at me, as if I was this empty patch of air, and I needed…”

“What?” he asks, sounding curious. “To come? Just that?”

“To come without you,” she says, throwing the words at him. “To prove I didn’t fucking need you
because I hadn’t got you anymore and fuck—”

Something sparks deep down in his eyes and she doesn’t realize it’s anger until he scoops her up and sits her on his desk, bruised ass smacking down against the wood and making her gasp. He scoots the chair up close, trapping her, his hands on her knees, pulling them apart. “And did you manage to prove it?” he says, gritting his teeth so the words come out in a growl. “Did your little experiment, during working hours”—Yeah, because that matters so awfully fucking much to him usually—”did it work?”

His fingers are squeezing her until the skin around them is white and the way he’s leaning forward, her cunt’s practically in his face, but his eyes are fixed on hers and he’s looking sort of wild now. She tries to close her knees and he shoves them wider. “Answer me.”

It’s that toneless voice now and she takes a deep, shaky breath. “No. No, it didn’t. I didn’t want it to. Stood there for ten minutes and didn’t think about you once, just rubbed and rubbed and I’d got two fingers up my cunt and one in my ass and I still couldn’t come. Not until I let myself think about you.”

His grip on her legs shifts and he bends down and tastes her, one gentle sweep of his tongue against her clit. She looks down at his dark hair and wants to touch it but she’s not sure he’d let her, so she keeps her hands where they are, flat against the desk, and carries on talking as he explores every fold with a delicacy that’s making her shiver.

“I watched you when you were asleep.”

It’s not what he expected, and he pauses, but she’s not going to let that happen, and she gives in and runs her fingers through his hair, rumpling it, like she does everything of his, holding him in place and tilting her hips in a hint he takes, and she feels his teeth graze against her clit and moans a little.

“Watched you dream. You make these little noises, you know. Soft little whimpers and they’re kinda sweet in a way, but they’re not all that happy.”

He slips his hand along her thigh and his fingers are in her again, and they’re good, but they’re not enough.

“You’re not still, not ever. Got to see your back when you rolled over—” And she knows every freckle, every tiny mark and pulling the sheet up over it when he got cold nearly killed her. “Got to see all of you. You’re fucking pretty, you know that?”

“I am not in the least pretty, Faith.”

Only he can snap that out and make it sound even vaguely scary when he has his mouth an inch away from her cunt and Christ she was so wet his finger was skating and skidding down and teasing her ass now and if he—

“Say it.” He sits up, taking his fingers and mouth away, and gives her a stern, outraged stare.

She all but sticks her tongue out at him, but reconsidered. “You want me to lie?”

Really pissed-off now. “Never.”

“Then, gotta say, you’re fucking pretty, sir.”

She takes advantage of him being stunned into silence to slide off the desk and into his lap, winding her arms around his neck and getting his trousers messy as hell as she squirms against his cock, hard
enough to poke through the wool by the feel of it.

“You’re pretty, Wes,” she says and flicks her eyes at the clock. It’s not working hours now, and she kisses him, tasting herself on his lips, ready to beg, if it’ll get her kissed back.

And this is new territory still. She’s walking on water, heart thudding in her chest, a little bit terrified; she’s carried along by pure momentum because if she stopped to think about it she’d call the whole thing off. Because even he wouldn’t be stone fucking cold enough to say no to that.

But she doesn’t speak; words would only betray her indecision. Instead she quietly relishes the slight indrawn breath he takes as she pulls him toward her, her hands resting against his neck. She can feel his pulse hammering away under her fingers, and she has to stifle a laugh because they’re finally in accordance. He’s as scared as she is, if not more so. That’s just what she needs to continue.

And God, he’s always so hard for her, the one part of him that’s not crippled by ambivalence and guilt. And for now that’s enough, it’s more than she could hope for—just to be able to kiss him and know how much he wants her. At last, something simple between them, not some elaborate fucking game where they’re trying to score points off one another.

She knows it won’t last, but she’s going to make it fucking count. She can’t take two more weeks of this agony, and she suspects he can’t either.

He answers her with a kiss, and again, there’s something strangely sweet and sincere about it that seems at once so uncharacteristic and yet… It’s him too, all of it; the coldness and the mercenary calculation and the heart on his goddamn impeccably ironed sleeve. Bastard. But right now all she really cares about is that Wes and his passel of charmingly frustrating contradictions fuck her into insensibility.

He seems to be thinking the same thing, too, because before she knows it he’s pulling her green T-shirt up over her head and she’s clumsily unzipping him. They’re still kissing, his head tipped up to meet her hungry mouth, hands restless against her body. She finally succeeds in freeing his cock from its prison of summer-weight wool and he lets out a little ‘ah’ of pleasure at the cool air before she hitches herself onto him. He pushes her roughly back against the desk, then his hands glide down her torso to rest against the small of her back. They serve the practical purpose of protecting her from the sharp edge of the desk as he slams into her. Her head falls back and her mouth is open but thanks to the exquisite torment of the pre-show she’s already incapable of making coherent sounds, and just emits these little wordless moans: “Fuck yes, oh God I’m ohh…” The ferocity of it scares her a little bit. Such an edge to this; it's almost feral.

All it takes is his ragged whisper: “Such lovely little sounds you make. Don't stop.”

And she doesn’t, she just holds onto him and rides it out.

Amazingly, he doesn't stop either. Just slows it right down to watch her as she comes, not even shutting his eyes when she's clenching round him and locking her ankles into his back to stop him from moving as she frantically grinds into him. She can't even force sounds out of her mouth anymore; just this strangled yelping noise that would be fucking embarrassing at any other time.

Then he starts again. Fucking into her at a furious pace and she realizes that she hasn't stopped, can't stop, that she's getting dragged under again and again. His hand is braced against the edge of the desk for ballast as he pistons into her with these jerky lunges that makes the solid weight of the desk shift beneath them.
His mouth worries at her neck and she's laughing and crying and scrabbling at his shoulders because nothing has ever felt this good. The effort of keeping her legs tight around him proves too much and she relaxes her grip round him, only to have him pause mid-thrust so he bumps against that white-hot place inside her cunt that she didn't know existed until she met him.

“No!” she practically screams at him, her throat hoarse and scratchy, and he tries to console her with a twist of his hips that makes more tears leak out.

“I want to come inside you,” he whispers into her ear like it's some kind of terrible perversion and it takes a while for the meaning of his words to penetrate the mush that used to be her brain.

“Yes, yes. It's all right. I want it too,” she frantically assures him, pushing at his shoulders, trying to get him to move again. “I'm on the pill. Please, Wes. Fuck me.”

But he's pulling out of her, sliding against her clit and she tries to sit up and ask him what the fuck he's playing at but he's scooping her up and placing her on shaky feet.

His cock is red and primed and she reaches out to touch it, touch him but his hands are already turning her around, bending her over the desk.

“You once told me that you could stay still while I fuck you,” he reminds her, rubbing his cock against her buttocks while she bucks her hips and tries to entice him back inside her. “I think it's time to see if you can keep your promises.”

There is no way on God's earth that she can keep herself motionless but already she's trying to lock her muscles into rigidity as she feels the wet head of his cock trace the crease of her cheeks.

“Are you going to… there?” she manages to gasp out in a tone that sounds far too tempted by the suggestion. Not like he ever had her pegged for being a nice girl.

In reply, he nudges against her with a little more conviction. “Am I going to fuck you in the arse?” And there's no way that those rasped words should seem like such an exciting proposition but they do. “Do you want me to?”

One of his fingers has got in on the act now, worming its way between her cheeks and she bites down on her lip so hard to stop herself from pushing back that there's a salt tang on her tongue and she knows she's drawn blood.

“Do you want me to fuck you here?” His finger pushes in a little farther, wet with her juices. “Do you want to get fucked in the arse, Faith?”

“I've never…” And those two words are pretty calculated considering she's not thinking too straight. His cock jerks against her thigh and she knows the thought of taking something of hers that no-one else had is going to keep him here just a little bit longer. “But I'd let you, Wes. I'd let you fuck me there, if you wanted to.”

His teeth sink into her shoulder as he slams his cock into her cunt. The pain's just more sensation, as he drills her spasming hole, his hands sliding down and around so he can pinch her clit and one of her nipples in this punishing rhythm, which makes her savage her lower lip again.

“Oh…oh…oh…” She can't move. She's not allowed to move because then he might stop again and she'd die so all she can do is moan in tandem with his thrusts and his fingers.

“Such a good girl, Faith,” he says, biting her earlobe now and rubbing her clit in this fast circular motion, which makes her want to swivel her hips to match. “Keep still. I'll take care of you.”
That's what does it this time. Not his fingers or his mouth or his cock. But the five words that unlock this rusty box buried deep inside her so something bursts open and spills out so that when he grabs her hips in this vise-like hold and shoves inside her with this choked cry, she can't help it.

“I love you!” As soon as the words have forced themselves out, even as she feels him spurting inside her, she wants to take them back. Cram them down her throat. Pretend they never happened.

He collapses against her, pressing her into the desk so the edge digs into her stomach, then he's pulling out, her cunt trying to cling onto him, the over-sensitized tissues dragging against his length.

Without him holding her up, Faith feels her legs give out and she's sinking to the floor.

He laughs then, this indulgent little chuckle, and she can't look at him but he's obviously looking at her. About to say something cutting about her outburst. Or worse, pretend that she never said it at all.

“You're bleeding.”

Her fingers prod her smarting lip and she pulls them away to stare dispassionately at the red stain.

“No, your shoulder.” He's already tucked his cock back into his trousers and crouches down to look at the thin trickle of blood that's inching down her arm from where he bit her.

Faith scooches back, hits the leg of the desk and changes course so she can actually crawl under it, snagging her T-shirt on the way and dragging it on, tugging at her skirt so it covers her oozing pussy.

“I'm fine,” she insists, the sullen tone that used to get her grounded, creeping into her voice. But she's pretty much regressed now anyway, which is why she's cowering under his desk, eyes squinched shut and her hands over her ears so she won't have to hear him say something that she doesn't want to hear.

“Faith,” he says with a sigh, all long-suffering but restrained because he's never going to just come out with it and call her an idiot, even if she's acting like one. “You can't be comfortable down there.”

He bumps his head on the edge of the desk and swears under his breath. It's probably the most normal thing he's done in the whole time she's known him.

“I didn't mean it,” she whispers eventually, when he shows no signs of moving and she can't bear to look at the highly polished toes of his shoes anymore. “It's just something that people say when, y'know…” She tails off, uncertain of how to finish the sentence.

“You can't possibly believe no one else in the world has ever misspoken during the throes of passion?” He's not outwardly laughing at her, of course, but even this gentle prodding rubs her the wrong way, raises hackles she didn't even know were there.

“Shut up,” she hisses at him, weakly though, and squishes herself farther under the desk, fingers absentmindedly smearing the blood running down her arm. “Just shut up, would you?” She wants to be left alone to wallow petulantly in self-pity for a bit. Can=n't he see that?

“Faith, come on, now. Stop this nonsense.” He doesn't apologize, just offers that goddamn gallant hand again and a dishful of patronizing concern as well. “Come out from under there, please. Let's at the very least get you cleaned up before you start dripping blood on my carpet.”

The look she gives him rivals any stony glare he's ever laid on her, and he chuckles indulgently again, as if he's actually enjoying this underneath that facade of concern. The self-pity is rapidly turning into a flame of a rage, and she realizes that he's going to win this round, no matter what. And
she sure as hell can't be bothered to have him clean her up again with one of his infinite supply of pristine handkerchiefs. Not this time.

Without looking away, she rakes her now-bloodied hand across the pristine cream-colored carpet, leaving a long rusty smudge. “Too late for that, sir,” she says flatly, shoving past him and pulling herself up shakily without his help. She wraps the T-shirt around her chest, and tugs the skirt down as far as it will go, ignoring the fact that his spent seed is running down her inner thigh.

And just like that, she walks out of his office and straight to the tiny bathroom, locking the door. She doesn't even look back to see if he's angry or hurt or indifferent. She's not sure she really wants to know anyway. And when he doesn't come after her, she turns on the sink full blast so he won't hear her crying.

She cleans up as well as she can, dabbing at the mascara smudges under her eyes, swabbing down his teeth marks on her flesh with a dab of Neosporin from the first aid kid under the sink and wishing to God she hadn't stormed out of there without her underwear in hand. She can't quite bring herself to leave the office either, and it's not for want of her favorite panties.

Of course she doesn't love him, she's not in love with him—but she loves needing him. She loves aching for his approval. And, heaven help her, she loves playing this game with him.

She cracks the bathroom door open, peers out cautiously. She can see him there in the inner office, on his hands and knees with shirtsleeves rolled up past his elbows, his back to her, scrubbing away at the carpet.

Oh, that's just too fucking much. “Want me to get the cleaners in?” she says coldly, as she stalks back in. “Decontaminate the place? Because that's going to leave your pants, sorry, trousers looking like you slept in them, as well as fucked in them.”

He turns, and yes, he was using one of his handkerchiefs, and bottled water at a dollar a swallow, to clean up her blood. Men.

“You're remarkably mercurial, Faith,” he says. She lets her face tell him that she doesn't know if she's being insulted, and he smiles, standing up and brushing at his trousers, which, typically, fall back into shape, with the only crease being the straight line down the middle. “Your moods change so quickly, I despair of keeping up with you.”

It's so unfair of him to lay that on her, when it's what he does to her all the fucking time that she's left with her mouth hanging open. “Me? I'm changeable? Look in the mirror lately? I'm not the one who—who—”

And she's stammering, stuck, because when his face goes polite like that, she can't reach him. She slouches over to where he dropped her panties and pulls them on, not caring that she flashes him as she wriggles them up and into place.

His face twists. “Faith, if we can move on now, I trust tomorrow you'll be properly dressed again?”

He sounds as if it's important to him and she knows she wants to wear it all again, fit her body into clothes he's chosen, so that every moment she's wearing them, it's like his hands are on her, approving little strokes and pats as the material shifts against her skin. And she's wearing holes in her bedroom carpet practicing walking in the shoes.

“If it matters, I will,” she says and maybe he's right and she is whatever that fucking word was, because she's feeling soft and warm now, just watching his face when she says that. She's left out
two words; ‘to you’, saying them in her head, but it’s like he heard them, the way his face lightens.

“Your attire, your behavior, your attitude—they always matter,” he says, “and if you bear that in mind, I think we’ll get along better.”

But will it still get her sessions like this? She hasn’t quite worked that out yet. Maybe there isn’t an answer. Maybe he just does this when he wants to, when he can’t not do it, and she’s got nothing to do with it. She doesn’t like that idea somehow. If it doesn’t matter, then she doesn’t matter, and she’s had enough of that all her life.

He stares at her, and there’s just enough tenderness in his voice when he snaps that she’s slouching, to be reassuring, even when she watches him drive off, taking the corner as sedately as a little old lady, as if it hadn’t been him who’d been living the Grand Prix fantasy last time she was in there with him.

Chapter Thirteen

She’s ready for bed that night. Her mother’s still convinced she’s got a boyfriend after her night out two weeks before, and goes between sly, girlish giggles to peevish predictions of teen pregnancy. She’d know all about that, knocked up at seventeen. When the rambling, vodka-soaked questions probe and pry past endurance, she slams into her room, locking the door and stripping off the robe she’d left on after she’d finished showering. Naked, she slips into bed and stares up at the ceiling, drifting into a dream of a Wes who fucked her every day, twice a day, whenever she wanted him. Shit. They’d never get any work done.

The phone ringing doesn’t register at first, but then she’s scrambling for it, yanking it out of her purse and stabbing at buttons in the dark. Xander, she thought. In trouble, wanting a shoulder to cry on.

“Faith.”

And she sinks back against the pillows and squeezes the phone in her hand as the heat flares up between her legs. One word and she’s wet a second later. God, he should bottle that voice.

“Yeah, it’s me, Wes.”

She can tell he doesn’t like that and she waits for him to say something, but it’s gone eleven; no way is this on the clock, and she can call him any fucking name she wants to.

“Tell me where you are.”

She wants to lie, flick on some music, say she’s at a club, a party, on a date, but he’d never believe that. Fuck, he might be in that car of his right now, staring at her window, knowing just where she is. That sends shivers over her, thinking of him that close to this part of her life.

“Where are you?” she counters.

There’s another pause, then he says, “In the library. Looking across at the chair you sat in.”

That’s kinda sweet, though remembering that room, dim and filled with words spoken and written, his low voice telling her what someone else wrote, her husky voice telling him her dreams, doesn’t make her feel romantic exactly.

“Are you wishing I was there, sitting in it?” she asks.

“I’m wishing you would answer my question,” he says, lemon-ice sour.
“In bed. I’m in my bed.”

“Do you own an alarm clock? You’re late so often, I realize that might be a foolish question—’’

What? No, ‘what are you wearing?’ Her fingers are already trembling waiting to be told to touch herself and he’s asking about—oh, fuck it.

“Yeah, I do. And it works, I’m just not a morning person, you know?’

“Oh, believe me, I do.” The ice melts a bit there. “What time do you set it for?”

This is the most fucked-up phone seduction ever. “Seven, but I don’t, you know, get out of bed until about twenty past.”

“Set it for six.”

“No way! God, Wes, that’s the middle of the fucking night!’

“Faith.” Patience wearing thin, but she can hear the control vibrate in every word. “You will do as I say without commentary or profanity and you will tell me when you’ve done it and address me properly as you do so.”

Touch yourself, yeah, baby, harder, moan for me... No, he wouldn’t last long on a phone-sex line. Or maybe he’d be the one everyone wanted. She shakes herself out of thinking about it and puts the phone down and switches on the bedside light while she fiddles with the clock. Six. Christ, it’s pitch-black dark then.

“I’ve set the alarm for six,” she reports back, avoiding using a name and wondering if he’ll let her get away with it. The chilly silence tells her she’s out of luck on that one and she sighs loudly and repeats it, adding a ‘sir’ that slips out sounding more sincere than she’d planned.

“Good. Get up and shower and I want you perfectly smooth. And take more care over that. I noticed today that you’d cut yourself. That’s unacceptably careless.” Stung like a bitch too, thanks for caring. “Are you naked?”

“What?”

“Faith, I wasn’t aware that you had trouble hearing or comprehending simple—’’

“Yes, yes, I am. I’m in bed.”

“Do you recall what I said about interrupting me?” He doesn't wait for an answer, just carries on as if he hadn’t just thrown that at her and left her tingling, fingers drumming against her thigh. God, she could do it. He wouldn’t know. “You’re to brush your teeth for two minutes, starting in the top right —your right that is.”

Not a smidge of a smile in his voice and she’s rolling her eyes in disbelief until she thinks of how it’ll feel to do that and do it perfectly, then she moans, getting her hand to her mouth just in time to stifle it.

“Where are your hands, Faith?’

Or maybe not.

“One’s holding the phone, one’s just—by my side,” she says, making it true in a hurry.
“I see.” She sticks her tongue out because he sounds so amused at that.

“Want me to move my hand?”

It’s lifting, ready to go to her breast, dive down to where she’s already aching with emptiness when he says curtly, “If I did, you’d be moving it, wouldn’t you? Replace it at once.”

Sulkily, she puts it down on the cover and waits.

“At precisely 6.40, dressed in your work clothes, you’ll be waiting outside.”

“Waiting?”

“I’m taking you out for breakfast, Faith. Now go to sleep. And Faith? Sleep with your hands outside the covers, please.”

“If I don’t come, I won’t be able to sleep,” she spits out, wriggling her ass against the mattress as she rubs her thighs together without it doing anything to help.

She can hear his eyebrows going high on his forehead, she swears she can. “I didn’t say you couldn’t come,” he points out. “I have every faith in your ingenuity.”

And there’s a click in her ear and he’s gone.

Chapter Fourteen

The alarm goes off at six and it takes all the will power she can muster not to fling it across the room and burrow back under the covers. Her first vaguely coherent thought being, of course, fuck him, he’ll just have to fucking wait. Then, as her brain slowly starts to regain consciousness, she realizes with a dismaying inevitability that she’s going to be out there on the curb on time because she can’t not. She manages to stumble to the bathroom in the dark, grope for the light switch and blink against the harsh glare of the cheap hi-watt bulb.

She hadn’t been able to sleep, just tossed and turned. Not so goddamn ingenious after all, are you, you stupid bitch, she thinks ruefully as she glares back at her reflection in the mirror.

She’d kept her hands dutifully outside the covers as he’d requested; her sleepless eyes fixed on a water stain on her ceiling that mutated, at various points over the course of the night, into the Trix rabbit, that scary demon bunny from that weird-ass film Xander dragged her to, and the Mayor of Springfield.

She does her best to not think of Wes at all, but God, there isn’t an inch of her that hasn’t been marked by him in some way. Christ, she can’t even touch herself without it seeming like a pale imitation—like nothing—compared to the galvanizing force of his gaze, his fingers, his tongue, his cock, upon her ruined flesh. Ruined, because suddenly everything is so fucking complicated. Need is so fucking complicated.

She splashes water on her face and blearily steps into the shower. She showers quickly, only slowing down in order to shave her legs and carefully denude her pussy (although, inevitably, her bright pink generic razor doesn’t do nearly as good a job as his old-school kit). She uses the apple-scented shampoo and the Morning Mist body wash, then realizes (too fucking late, of course) that he might disapprove of such artificial scents. She steps out of the shower, towels off quickly, and tries to do something with her rebellious hair. Goddamn humidity. Finally she just runs some detangler through
it and leaves it down.

She looks at the clock and she’s almost out of time. Fuck, clothes—dammit, did he say what he wanted her to wear? No. Shit. She wonders what’s clean and finds one of the vintage blouses (this one with slightly prim tiny black and white polka dots all over it) and the black pencil skirt. No underwear, she decides. They’d only get lost anyway.

She finishes with the black Mary Janes with the high arch. She looks in the mirror, satisfied, grabs her purse and over-the-shoulder bag and tiptoes down the stairs. She’s sure her mother is dead to the world anyway, but she can’t be too careful.

When she steps out of the house, thirty-five seconds late by her count, he’s already there waiting, car lights turned off.

She’s glad of her shoe choice when she breaks into a bit of a trot across the yard and down the driveway. She swings the door open and plops down on the cushy leather seat with the heartiest “Good morning!” she can muster before a giant cup of coffee and a ciggarette.

She’d thought he was the morning person, but he's thin-lipped and stern, looking a little tired and pinched himself. The mellifluous voice of the early-morning BBC news announcer (so thoughtfully carried on the local NPR affiliate, of course) floats in the air between them.

Oh. Shit.

The clothes.

Fuck, he'd said work clothes, she remembers now.

They're speaking over each other:

“I can run in and change.”

“I thought I specifically informed you yesterday...”

She stops, shame and not a little excitement creeping up her cheeks, making her scalp tingle, sending a shiver down her spine.

“If I didn't know better, Faith, I'd say you make these errors to intentionally provoke me.”

She's looking at her feet now—mouth dry, she swallows uncomfortably and shakes her head, whispers: “No sir, I just forgot. I'm sorry. I didn't...”

“You didn't what?”

“I didn't exactly sleep well last night, okay?” She's finally meeting his eyes now, peeved. Well, it had been his fault she didn't get enough sleep. Mostly.

That makes him smile a bit, makes his eyes glitter in that wicked way. He places his hand on her knee, a parody of every inappropriate boss секретary image she's ever had, and slides up her thigh, under the skirt, going right for the ripe, wet prize that waits underneath.

His eyes widen with mock-surprise when he discovers she's underpantsless. “You seem confident today, Faith.” He cocks an eyebrow when he finds her sopping wet. “Perhaps a bit too confident, even.”

And with that he leans in and slides his finger between her moist pussy lips and swirls the tip around
her clit, pulling his hand away in a split second. “I'm sorry you didn't sleep well,” he whispers huskily in her ear. The needy scent of her wet snatch is filling the circulating air of the car now, canceling out the sticky, clingy scent of the morning mist shower gel—probably for the best.

He pulls out a handkerchief, wipes his finger clean, and tucks the square of white fabric back in his pocket, all in one smooth movement. He flashes her a goofy grin. “Hungry?”

What did he say yesterday? Mercurial? Yeah. Too stunned to speak, she just nods.

He knocks the car into reverse, peeling out of the driveway. “Good. Me too.”

He's stroking the bridge of her nose. What the hell?

Oh right, she'd dozed off there.

“Wake up, we're here.”

The clock on the dashboard says 7.20. They're in an underground parking garage, it would seem, one that's full of cars just as lovely, if not lovelier than his.

She knocks some sleep out of the corners of her eyes and tidies her hair. “Where are we?”

He shakes his head slightly. “Just follow me, Faith. And behave.” She sticks her tongue out at his back, but follows him all the same.

There's a plush elevator waiting, all mirrors and brass and red velvet. Classy. And an elevator attendant. Classier.

“43rd floor,” Wes says to the attendant.

“Right away, sir.”

She tries not to fuss with all the mirrors around, but can't help smudging a pinkie under her lipline to even out a stray feathering of lipstick and straightening the bow on her blouse.

And, he's not looking at her exactly in a disapproving way, but…Her hands fall to her sides, and she's suddenly conscious of the fact that she's probably slouching as well. She pulls herself up, smiling self-consciously. He tips her a little indulgent nod that makes her blush.

The elevator dings and the doors glide open to a wide hallway full of really old, heavy furniture and vases that looked like they were worth more than she'd make in three lifetimes of working double shifts.

There's a tinkling and clattering of crystal and murmured conversations. And suddenly, it's rather painfully obvious where they are.

They're in the city, of course. At the nicest possible restaurant—one of those top-of-the-world joints with spectacular views. And just co-incidentally the one where Xander works the breakfast shift.

She wants to run away, freak out, anything. But her feet keep moving forward, no matter what command she sends to them. Great. Right, uh. Maybe he's not working today. Yes, it's possible. She racks her brain, trying to remember his schedule—right at the moment he comes around a corner carrying a tray laden with about the most decadent breakfast she's ever seen. And nearly drops it on some gray-haired lady's head.

He gives her that look that says “What the FUCK are you doing here?”
She gestures to Wes. His back's to them, conferring with the maitre'd.

Xander's look still says "What the FUCK are you doing here?"

She shakes her head and mouths, "I'll tell you later." as Wes turns around. She snaps her mouth shut, assumes the correct posture, and smiles demurely.

"Sorry for making you wait." He takes her elbow and steers her after the penguin-suited maitre'd.

"We're meeting a client for breakfast. It should be illuminating."

And that would be the moment her stomach goes from slightly flip-flopping to churning. She tries to smile, but it sours on her lips. He's positively giddy and she's freaking. Wonderful. A client, though. She hopes it's not another bitchy cow.

It's not, of course. It's just another tweedy English guy whose name she doesn't catch sitting in a plush and massive round booth. They slide in on one side of the empty half circle, and when she tries to slide a little farther in, Wes grabs the tender flesh of her inner thigh under the table, pulling her closer. It's all she can do not to whimper as he walks his fingers closer to her snatch, all while discussing some vagaries of the law she can't follow.

The service is impeccable, and she orders everything just as his discreet whispers in her ear direct—shirred eggs, coffee, fruit.

Things seem to be going well—well for Wes that is. Whenever he has a free hand, he's stroking her under the table, and she's desperately trying to keep a straight face, make small talk with the client, eat. And she's only just succeeding in not getting up, knocking everything off the table and shoving her pussy in his face and begging him to eat that. But no, she smiles sweetly, she takes tiny bites of her food, she's perfect. Well, as perfect as can be with his hand up her skirt, thumb resting slightly on her clit.

And then things aren't going so well.

"As much as I have faith in your abilities, Wesley, I'm afraid for the more complicated issues in this case, I've had to seek further counsel."

"You can't be serious! There's no one who knows more about this than me." An edge of petulance is sneaking into his voice.

"Yes, yes, Wesley, I know that. Believe me, I do. But in a case like this, as I've said, I need bigger firepower. And as competent as you are—and you'll forgive me for saying this—but bigger firepower just isn't your forte."

"And just who did you propose to bring in to wield your big guns?" he says through gritted teeth.

Mr. Tweedy smiles slickly. "Lilah Morgan, of course."

As soon as that bitch's name is brought up he goes cold as ice, Faith can physically feel the sea change. His hand’s off her now and he's running through everything robotically. He pays the bill, steers her out of the restaurant, still by the elbow—though she does manage to throw a tiny wave Xander's way as she's hustled out to the elevator.

They ride back to the office in silence. That clashing, cacophonous classical music is back on the stereo. She sits there, nearly invisible, watching him unconsciously grinding his teeth in anger the whole way back.
Chapter Fifteen

Of course, it’s too much to hope that she'd remain invisible. She just wanted to slink back behind her desk, type a few things, sneak out back for a cigarette. Or twenty. But no sooner are they back in the office then he slams some files on her desk and snaps, “Come in to my office in five minutes. I need you to take a letter.” Eyes wide, she nods silently.

He leans in, close to her face, “You'll answer when I speak to you, Faith.”

“Yes. Yes, sir. I'll be there in five minutes.” She tries to keep her face as still as possible, trying not to betray her real fear at his mood.

Five minutes, well eight minutes, is enough time to go to the washroom and clean herself up. Which means scrubbing at her still wet pussy with a damp hand towel, then sneaking off to the back yard to smoke half a cigarette.

She's still got that flippy feeling in her tummy when she knocks on his office door but it's not the one that makes her nipples go hard. More like the other one. The one where she thinks she might throw up. Because she's seen him pissed off. Fuck, that's like a half hourly occurrence but the trip back from the city was with a man who looked like he was cresting the wave of a homicidal meltdown. And it's not even nine-thirty yet.

“Enter.”

Nope, not even nine-thirty yet and as she walks into the room, trying to keep her shoulders straight and her face expressionless, he has an open bottle of whiskey on the desk and is halfway down a glass of it.

His eyes are shut and he's clutching the glass like it's a life raft, or the next best thing, because the life raft sailed off without him. Then his eyes snap open and he smiles at her. It's completely devoid of humor; the smile a predator gives before they try to rip out your jugular. She's seen it a hundred times before and she's backing away.

"Y'know, I have a ton of stuff to do,” she says nervously. “All that paperwork from yesterday and the court orders you wanted me to file and you look…I can come back later.”

“Ah, Faith. I was wondering when you were going to honor me with your presence,” he says all silky smooth, then drains the rest of the glass in one gulp.

“Coffee. I'm going to make some coffee.” If she keeps on talking it means the silence doesn't start getting too much to handle and if she moves over here, then there's a table between them and she's got a clear path to the door. “You want some coffee?”

“What I want is rather immaterial,” he says, running his eyes up and down her body. “Come here.”

“I really think you should have some coffee.” Not because he's drunk, because he hasn't had long enough for that, but it takes time to boil up the kettle and pour the water into the cup and he might have a chance to get the fuck over himself.

“Come here.” It's sharp as a whiplash and he's conditioned her so well that she even takes a step in his direction. But someone else got to her long before he did and so she digs her heels in to the carpet and folds her arms.

“I'm going to go back to my desk now,” she says, keeping her voice calm, even though everything inside her is shrieking. “And I get that you're angry about the tweedy guy and what he said to
you…” Why can't she just shut the fuck up? Why does she have to keep talking and make his nostrils flare and his eyes blaze and, shit, pour himself another drink?

He shuts his eyes very slowly, pinches the bridge of his nose like he's in great torment, then opens his eyes so he can give her a ferocious glare. “I really wouldn't try my patience too much today, Faith. It's in very short supply. Now come over here.” Each word is enunciated so crisply and distinctly that they're like bullets wedging themselves straight into her heart.

“No.” She's shaking her head and shuffling back as he gets up from his chair and comes toward her. Her hand is on the door handle but he's already there, yanking her arm back with cruel fingers and swinging her around to face his wrath. She can smell the whiskey on his breath, feel the bite of his fingers, and it's like home away from fucking home.

“Which part of 'come here', didn't you understand, you stupid girl?” His face is twisted up and ugly and she's wriggling in his hold like a little fishy on a hook.

She's not entirely sure what he's going to do but she isn't going to wait to find out as she shoves him back and tries to keep him away with flailing fists as he uses his strength to slam her against the door.

“Get off me!” Her voice is shrill. “Don't you touch me!”

He has her shoulders pinned back now as he looms over her, blocking out the light and she waits for the sharp slap or the painful tug of her hair being pulled. It doesn't happen. All she gets is his thigh pressing between hers.

“But Faith, you're forgetting that you like it when I touch you,” he drawls, vowel sounds impossibly languid even as he rips the front of her blouse open.

It's a terrible sound, renting the air, swiftly followed by the seam splitting in her skirt as she tries to kick him but gets sidetracked by her tight skirt and the way he's pushed up against her.

“Not like this, you fuck!” Her hands are angry birds fluttering in the air. Hitting him, scratching at him and he's not trying to hold her back now but hold her off. She catches his cheek with her nails and he's bleeding but she doesn’t care. He deserves it. “This is not what it's about! You're not meant to hurt me like this! Like everyone else does!” It feels good to force the words out. They were buried so deep inside her that she thought they'd stay there forever.

It's all shit. Was going to have such a good day. He was going to take her out to breakfast and maybe he'd fuck her afterward and kiss her. Now he's turning away, one hand clutching his bleeding face and he's on a collision course back to the desk, back to the bottle, and she's had enough of that to last her several lifetimes.

There's no one there to stop her as she reaches for the door handle again. And she's sighing with relief as she steps into the corridor and runs.

Lighter, cigarette, purse, jacket. It takes a millisecond to scoop them up and just as she's almost home and clear, she turns back and screams into the dense silence, “You've fucking ruined everything, you bastard!”

It's raining. Of course it's raining, as she trudges to the bus stop in shoes that pinch and a torn skirt and shirt. She looks like a superannuated teen whore who's just had an argument with her pimp. Which isn't a million miles away from the truth.

She's so fucking stupid. Thought it was just a game and that all the naughty spanking and the crisp
orders in that fancy British voice were just directions on the map that took them where they needed to go. But not so much. Turns out he just wanted to give her some pain and that all the other stuff, the stuff that keeps her up at night, twisting in her bedclothes, hands between her legs, was just what he used to do it.

What is it about her that makes them all think she can take the hurt and keep coming back for more? She should just have the word 'victim' tattooed on her forehead.

The rain's sheeting down now and she's soaked through. Her skin underneath her sodden clothes feels wet and clammy and as she squints into the distance to see if she's anywhere near the stop, the bus whizzes past her, throwing up a spray of dirty water and soaking her just that little bit more for extra wetness.

“Fucking son of a bitch!” she yells, stamping her foot and wincing as the thin sole of her shoe simply soaks into the wet sidewalk. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! You're so fucking dumb!”

It doesn't matter now. She's about as wet as she's gonna get, she thinks as her whole body protests the thought of walking home.

The one good thing about the rain is that it washes the tears off her face as soon as they've leaked out. And there's plenty more where they came from. It feels kinda liberating to walk along, crying. Proper crying with these big hiccuppy sobs dragged out of her and snot coming out of her nose, which she wipes on her sleeve every now and again. She's disgusting. No one could ever want her.

It takes a while for the steady beep of the car horn to penetrate the pity party that's going on in her head. She slowly turns her head and sees the car rolling slowly along beside her. His car. All sleek and dark, just like him.

She pulls her aching shoulders back, wipes off her face and carries on walking. He can just go fuck himself because she sure as shit ain't gonna do it for him anymore.

He must be leaning on the horn now, because there's this constant, persistent, piercing whine emitting from the car and she pauses briefly to glare at him before she realizes that her best and filthiest look isn't effective when visibility's like, zero.

Then the door open's and he's sitting there all toasty and dry and with the most long-suffering expression on his face since records began.

“Faith!” he shouts. “Get in!”

And she isn't going to do it. Not after what he did; but two things make her pause and stare at him, as she pushes back the hair that the rain's decided to stick across her face so that's she's eating it. It tastes of sour windfalls, wasp-bitten and moldy now, so she spits it out and pushes it back.

Two things, and the first takes her a step toward him, and the second puts her ass on the seat.

Because he came after her. No one’s ever done that before. She must’ve run away from home a dozen times when she was little—always to Xander’s house, where his mother sniffed and made it say a hell of a lot for one sniff, and fed her milk and cookies and let her sleep head to toe in Xander’s room in a pair of his Spiderman jammies, because Xander always wanted to be the hero. And her parents never called, never came looking. She and Xander would sit up late and watch the local news, waiting for her face to be on it, with her parents crying because their baby had gone. She found out years later that Xander’s mom called hers as soon as she saw her coming down the street, dragging a case that held all her clothes and dollies, but it didn’t wipe away the sting. And it didn’t
stop her remembering that when she slunk back home the next day, there was nothing waiting for her
but an indifferent stare.

And here is Wes, chasing after her like he cared. Not enough, wasn’t half enough, but it’s something,
and once she’s taken that first step, she thinks of the mess his car will be in when she’s finished
dripping filthy water all over the leather and she scrambles in.

His hand’s shaking a little on the wheel as he pulls out into the traffic again and she hopes it’s not
because he threw back another drink or four before leaving the office. Even from here she can still
smell the whiskey on him and she has to bite back a wave of sickness. Doesn’t want to make that
much of a mess.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks, making it that, not, ‘Where are we going?’, because she wants
it on record that this is the way it is.

“Home,” he says, his voice as flat and discouraged as she felt.

“No! No way. I go home like this and Mom’ll—”

“My home.”

Oh. And she doesn’t let herself hope he can fix this but she lets herself admit that she wants him to.

The house is as tidy as ever, even if he must’ve been up even earlier than she was. No dishes in the
sink and she bets there’s no leftovers in that giant, steel-fronted fridge either. He waves at the coffee
maker and says, “Please start some coffee. I need to—” He lifts his hand to his cheek, where her
nails have gouged three shallow scrapes in his skin, and lets it fall.

She’s walking to him before she can stop herself, needing to do something before he gets all gunked
up with antiseptic. He stands still, looking a little wary, but he lets her get close to him and trace the
scratches with the fingers that made them.

“I’m not sorry,” she says abruptly. “And if I didn’t have this fucking skirt on, you’d be walking
funny for a week, you bastard.”

“Is this your version of TLC?” he says, with a glimmer of a smile in his eyes.

“No. I’d kiss it better, help you clean it up, if I wanted to do that.” She doesn’t slap him, though she’s
toyed with the idea and her hand’s itching to leave a mark; doesn’t touch him at all, just steps back.
“Brush your teeth,” she says. “You stink of whiskey.”

Something flinches in his eyes but she doesn’t back down and he leaves her in the kitchen, starting to
shiver now as her wet clothes drag at her.

When he comes back, the coffee’s done, and she’s pulling open cupboard doors searching for
something to put it in.

“Two door over, to the left,” he says quietly.

She turns and sees him in casual clothes, showered, hair wet, the red lines on his face the only sign of
what happened. He’s in jeans—God, she’d have put money on him not owning any—and a soft dark
green shirt. It throws her completely. Suits. He wears suits.

Then she sees that he’s got an armful of clothes. “You’ll want to shower and change,” he says.
“These should fit.” She must’ve looked freaked, because he adds, ‘They’re new.” And the freakiness
just keeps on coming.

“Why have you got them?”

He does that sigh, the one he uses when she’s fucking up something so simple a kid of three could get it right. “Just go through and get changed, Faith. There’s a shower at the end of the corridor.” His eyes track across the white-tiled floor. “And a small lake in here, by the look of it.”

She walks past him and snatches the clothes as she goes. Fine. She’ll get dry, and she’ll have a coffee, but then she’s going to tell him to take her home.

Except when she comes back, walking silently on bare feet, in a gray dress that clings softly and feels like wearing a warm cloud, he’s poured her a cup, the coffeemaker’s already been emptied and cleaned, and he’s jingling his car keys impatiently.

“Hurry up, Faith,” he orders, voice back to normal; cool and impatient. “We’ve got a lot of—”

“No.” She plants her feet, and folds her arms across her chest, and this time there’s nothing between them and the filthy look she gives him. “We’re not going anywhere, Wes. Not until we’ve had a talk.” She holds up her hands and makes a ‘T’. Might not get that, being English, but even so.

“Timeout, Wes. Time fucking out.”

He nods at her coffee. “Bring it,” and turns on his heel.

She follows him into the room with the tall ceilings and the view. The clouds have swept in so low now that it’s dark in there, with the rain smacking against the glass wall as if it’s angry about something. He turns on a couple of lamps, makes a corner of the gray darkness warm and bright, and she sits down in a chair, curls her bare feet under her and sips at the best coffee she’s ever tasted as if it’s medicine.

The silence that follows isn’t uncomfortable. He watches her without hiding it, and she finds herself shifting in her chair, not aroused, not exactly, but aware of him to such an extent that when he clears his throat and leans forward, she jerks, spilling coffee on her hand.

He’s about to pass her his handkerchief, she just knows it, and she brings her hand to her mouth and licks it clean quickly. Only a drop, after all.

“Faith—” She knows what he’s going to say and she’s all set to tell him where he can shove his apology, when he finishes, “that’s most unladylike.”

“Screw that.”

“I’m sorry?”

Right words, wrong way of saying them. She gives him a sneer he’d be proud of and sets her cup down on a glass table, knowing it’s going to leave a mark. “You heard me, Wesley. Cut the crap and tell me why that bitch can get you so worked up you do that. To me. To me.”

He glances away, then back at her. “She’s—she was, my partner.”

“More than that,” she says flatly, knowing she’s right. “You fucked her, didn’t you?” She shudders thinking of Lilah in that bath, with Wesley’s hands on her, Lilah’s perfect hair spread out on the pillows of the bed.

“One normally does get intimate with one’s wife,” he says. “But the marriage lasted for a shorter
period than you’d think.” He looks thoughtful. “I might have been willing to have our business arrangement continue, but Lilah’s always been an all or nothing woman.” He shrugged. “Flawed, though, and her so-called power lies mainly in her contacts.” The smile that curved his lips was cold enough to make her coffee ice over. “As lawyers go, she’s a good whore.”

“Jealous, Wes?” It slips out. God knows she doesn’t like the bitch, but that was low.

Anyone else would have got angry, but he considers it and waves a dismissive hand. “No. Once, perhaps. Not now.” He smiles at Faith. “Today’s setback is down to you, you know.”

“Me?” He can’t be trying to blame her for—

“You met Lilah. She formed certain conclusions about you.” He smiles again. “I’m not jealous, but I do believe she is. Congratulations, Faith. Even looking as disreputable as you did that day, she saw you as competition.”

They’ve gone so far from where they started that she’s dizzy. “Forget her. Just fucking forget her. Wes, you tried to—you—” And the tears well up and over. “And you haven’t even said you’re fucking sorry,” she hisses at him, struggling up to her feet.

He looks down at his hands, folded in his lap. “Would you believe words?” he asks.

“They’d help! They’d be something! I was scared in there, Wesley.” Now she’s on her feet, the words come easier. “You were drunk, like him.”

“No. I wasn’t. Angry, yes, but not—”

“Fuck that! You were going to—”

“Rape you?” He looks up at her and it’s that toneless voice. “Force my unwelcome attentions on you? Hit you to hurt you, not just to—?”

And she thinks back and she wonders. Maybe not those things, but it doesn’t matter. “You crossed a line, Wesley.”

He stands up and comes over to her, hands loose at his sides. “And I can’t promise I won’t do so again. I told you, Faith, I warned you—this is what I am. Fucked-up, to use your words. I’m not safe.”

His phone rings, just as she’s trying to find words and he steps back, taking a quick, ragged breath.

“Leave it,” she says, but it’s too late, he’s walking over to a low desk in the darkness and she doesn’t need to hear him say her name to know it’s Lilah, because he’s rigid and stiff with dislike as he listens to her gloat and when he tries to answer a flood of spite screamed so loudly down the phone that Faith can hear most of it, he stammers, just a little, and it’s all she needs to make up her mind.

Three steps and she’s by his side, and as he grips the receiver white-knuckle tight, she leans in and kisses the scratches she left, tasting nothing but clean skin. He pauses mid-word and she takes the phone from his hand and drops it back in its holder.

“You were talking to me,” she reminds him. “And I’m still waiting for an apology.”

“I can’t just—”

“Yes, you can. I’ll know if you mean it, trust me.”
He frowns, as if she’s confusing him by making it that simple, and he’s right, it isn’t, but he came after her, and when he tells her he’s sorry, she knows he means it at least, and she sighs and lets some of the tension leave her.

“You want to go back to the office and work now, don’t you? Dig up something you can use to get that client dumping her and back with you?”

“Presently, yes,” he says and he’s getting the confidence back, she can tell. “But I’d left the morning free—” And just like that she’s getting tingles spreading out, because she wants to know; if it hadn’t gone wrong, what did he have planned for her?

“So what were you going to do? After breakfast I mean?”

He smiles, sending shivers chasing over her. “I was going to make you come at the table. Was I close?”

And if he wasn’t then, he is now.

But she doesn’t want to give in that easily. She ignores the arousal flaring up; doesn’t welcome or need it.

“You don’t even have to ask, do you?” she asks shakily, sounding as exhausted as she feels. She sits heavily back in the chair. “This is getting tiresome, y’know? I’m starting to see the pattern. Christ, everything in my life seems to form the same crappy pattern eventually. It’s like the fucking linoleum in my mom’s kitchen—the color of mud.” She’s not going to fucking cry again, so she takes another sip of her cooling coffee and tries in vain to keep the edge out of her voice.

Then he surprises her by sitting down next to her. He doesn’t look at her directly, just takes her hand in his and brushes his thumb across her wrist, slowly, gently, like a little mantra. He doesn’t say anything, except: “I know.”

“I won’t be a convenience to you. Not anymore.”

“I know.” She can see in his dark, clouded features that he does. He knows better than anyone. How fucked-up is that? God, they’re like the masochist Astaire and Rogers, a fucking matched set. “Believe me, this isn’t what I wanted. I never—”

She cuts him off. “What, you never lost control of the game before? I’m willing to bet Lilah never even gave you that chance.” She matches his flickering, increasingly evasive gaze with a look of burgeoning self-possession. “I’m sure as hell not giving you another one.”

He seems to take this as some sort of definitive declarative statement. “I’ll drive you home if you like.” His voice is flat, expressionless.

She turns the word over in her mind and realizes that it’s ceased to mean anything to her. She almost laughs. “Fuck, anywhere but there. Can I just stay here for a little while? God, I’m just really fucking tired.”

“I’m sorry. That was rude of me. You stay. I’ll go back to the office and do some work.”

“You look pretty exhausted yourself. Would you like to—”

He cuts her off with a curt “No,” then says, "Help yourself to anything you like. I believe you know where the bedroom is?"
“I remember.” She’s hoping against hope that she’s not blushing as she says it.

“Good. I’ll be back after lunch.”

She doesn’t take another breath until she hears his car pulling away.
Part Two

Chapter Summary

Faith and Wesley move past the events of the storm.

Part Two

Chapter Sixteen

With the storm raging outside the house is dark and extra-creepy. She has this urge to go snooping through his things, to peek into the library and unearth the naughtiest book she can find, or better yet, correspondence—but she resists it. In his twisted way he’s been completely honest with her and she decides to give him that same courtesy.

And really, she just wants to sleep. A dreamless, deep sleep. It’s so elusive as to be practically mythical to her at this point.

As she climbs the stairs, her fingers brush over the curved bannister, remembering how he’d carried her. A little shiver runs through her. Did it even happen? She’s seen so many different versions of him that she’s not even sure anymore. That night seems unreal now, like a fever dream.

She drags her exhausted body into his bedroom. She reflexively flips on the light this time, pleasantly surprised to find the room suffused with a lovely warm glow. It’s so homey. She didn’t expect that. And of course the bed is perfectly made again. There are plump throw pillows everywhere and she wants nothing more than to sink down upon them, pull the down quilt over her head, and sleep.

That’s when her gaze settles on the chair in the corner. The shirt that she’d worn that night is carefully draped over it, torn-off button still conspicuously missing.

In her wayward imagination she’d imagined that he’d burned it—burned all evidence of her, in fact. Of course he’s done no such thing. It’s almost worse that he hasn’t, because that reopens the whole uncertain question of attachment and entanglement and reciprocation.

She can’t help herself: she has to put it on. And she does, stepping out of the soft gray shift and wrapping the shirt around her, settling into it. It still smells of him, just a little bit, as if he's worn it recently. She folds the dress carefully and drapes it in place of the shirt. Then she climbs into bed.

She doesn’t know how long she sleeps. It’s hard to tell with the storm raging outside. She hears a tree branch crash nearby and wakes with a start. Then the world is quiet again and she drifts off.

When she wakes it’s pitch black in the room. It must be late evening. She sits up with a start only to realize that he’s sitting there in the dark.

“Oh. You’re back.”

“I am.”

“I should, I should go.” She throws the covers back, starts to get up.
“You don’t have to.”

“No, but I should. My mom’s probably—” She stops, not wanting to say “drunk herself into a stupor by now.”

“You were never a convenience to me, Faith. Please believe that.”

She wants to believe it, more than anything. But she can’t trust herself to speak, so she just lets silence build between them.

The dark stillness of the room becomes too much and she fumbles for the lamp on the bedside table.

He's still in the shadows once she's switched it on and she's on the spotlight, the warm glow of the lamp illuminating her as she sits with her knees hunched up, her arms wrapped round her legs.

“How old are you?” She's always wanted to know; can pretty much guess to within the nearest five years or so, but she's gonna go somewhere with this and it's important to hear him say it.

“Thirty-seven,” he answers eventually. Another tiny nugget of information that she's had to mine.

“You've got nineteen more years than me of knowing how things work, of who you are, of how people fuck you over. Me? I've got a lousy eighteen years.”

He's leaning forward now so she can see his face, how drawn and fucking exhausted he looks. And she can't help but feel that she's responsible for the dark smudges under his eyes, the tightness around his mouth.

“Do you think I've taken advantage of you, and preyed on your youth and inexperience?” It's not a question that's designed to titillate though if he'd said it another way, it might have been.

“Well, mostly you don't take advantage of me because I let you, that's kinda the point, isn't it?” She's concertinaing the edge of the quilt between her fingers. “Have you done this with other girls? Did you do it with her?” She can't even say Lilah's name anymore. Like, she's subsumed his rage and hurt and injustice by proxy, which is so stupid it's not even funny.

He steeples his fingers together and twirls his thumbs around each other before he answers.

“There've been variations on a theme,” he murmurs eventually and she knows he's groping for the right words, the right explanation. “But generally, no. There were certain contrived scenarios but nothing like this, like you.”

She doesn't know whether to be flattered or offended. Does this mean she's special? Or just the one that he managed to separate from the rest of the herd, because he could read her desire like a cheap airport novel?

There's this thing that she wants to ask him but it gets lost between her head and her mouth and she's still trying to spit it out when he gets up and sits on the edge of the bed, reaching for her hand and stilling her nervous, quilt crushing activity by closing his fingers around hers.

“It's very important to me, Faith, that you know that I would never hurt you or hit you in anger. It was never my intention to make you feel that you couldn't trust me to respect your boundaries.”

But then her boundaries are pretty undefined. Six weeks ago, the thought of letting someone tip her over the desk, spank her, shave her, then spend an hour not letting her come would have rated fairly low on her list of ways to spend a day. And there are things that they haven't done that would normally fill her bruised little heart with dread but she knows that with him, she'd do them, like them,
It's hard to tell him that though. Especially when he's bringing her hand to his mouth and kissing the tips of her fingers. She doesn't know how to react to that little curveball, so she sits there with her head bent and keeps herself rigid so she doesn't do something completely lame like curling herself around him and asking him to hold her.

“My dad… he doesn't beat the shit out of me but he drinks and gets really mad and he used to end up lashing out at me.” It spills out of her mouth and this is why he shouldn't sit there, stroking her hand, his head tilted so he's the picture of concern. “He's way bigger than me and he'd pick these fights about nothing and I'd end up getting caught between his fist and the wall. So this morning, when you were angry and you'd been drinking, it was like that. Like, it wasn't part of what we do but you wanting to take it out on me because I was there.”

His fingers tense and tighten around hers before he starts that steady, soothing motion again. “Do you think you can feel safe with me?” His voice goes up at the end of the sentence, almost shrill, almost panicked.

She throws him a break. “I feel pretty safe right now. But you got those nineteen extra years, Wes. I'm still figuring stuff out.” Because it's too much effort not to, she bats her head against his shoulder like she's house-trained, and almost purrs when his hand moves up so he can curl strands of her hair between his fingers.

When he kisses her, it's chaste and solemn. A simple pressing of his lips against hers. Like a first kiss that you give to a girl who's almost out of your reach and you're wary of frightening her off, making her run back to her friends.

And for once, her body isn't going into this hormonal overdrive, getting wet and heavy and ready for him. Instead, she feels light and insubstantial next to him, like he could be the person who'd do the strong stuff for a while and give her a rest.

It's all very soppy with the hair stroking and the leaning against him, until her stomach remembers that it hasn't had any food since breakfast and lets out an almighty rumble. The hand in her hair stills just in time for the next gurgle, then, fuck him, he's actually laughing. At her.

“Oh God, that's totally killed the mood,” she moans, her face flushed red with mortification. “I should get going. Could you drive me or, like, call for…”

“And have you expire from hunger on the way home?” He's still chuckling like she's the funniest thing since Bill Murray and he's not looking like a tragedy mask anymore but amused, indulgent, ready to be charmed by all the things she's not. “I think I should feed you, don't you?”

He cooks just like she imagined she would, if her fantasies have ever veered toward the domestic rather than the erotic. He chops onions, mushrooms, and tomatoes with military precision, pausing every now and again to wash his hands and peer critically at the saucepan that's simmering on the stove.

Her culinary expertise began and ended when her mother showed her how to nuke some ready-made mac and cheese in the microwave so when she picks up the garlic crusher, stares at it in confusion, and asks if there's anything she can do, he steers her toward a chair and tells her to sit down.

It's actually pretty cool to watch him make dinner. He moves round the kitchen, opening cupboards and drawers, rifling through that huge fridge with this relaxed ease that she's never seen before. All that frightening intensity is focused on the sauce and the fresh egg pasta, not on her, and it's been
such a bitch of a day, that's it's sort of a relief.

Faith curls her legs up under her, wraps the buttonless shirt a little tighter around her body because flashing him when he's doing food stuff would be completely inappropriate, and allows herself to watch him.

Every now and again, he looks up from grating cheese or chopping parsley with this wicked looking machete thing and flashes her a vague smile like he's forgotten she was there.

Soon there's this amazing smell of garlic and tomatoes wafting round and her stomach absolutely won't shut the fuck up.

“Wes? Can I have, like, a tomato to eat or something while I'm waiting?”

He picks up the firmest, ripest one from the counter and tosses it thoughtfully in the air. “No. You'll spoil your dinner,” he says reprovingly, just the merest hint of a smile ghosting around his lips. “And you won't have any room for dessert.”

And just like that, with a downward sweep of his eyelashes and the drawl back in his voice, she wants dessert and every fucking thing else that he wants to give her.

It's another stomach torturing five minutes before he pours a glass of wine, then picks up a serving spoon and carefully portions out a mound of pasta into a bowl and ladles out the aromatic, rich red sauce on top. He places it on the counter and she's sitting up expectantly, mouth watering.

“Aren't you having any?” she asks, her eyes fixed unwaveringly on the heaped bowl as he walks toward her.

“Of course I am! I'm positively ravenous,” he announces with relish.

“Well, hey, what the fuck about me?” God, she sounds like some whiny kid who's just had their TV privileges snatched away from them.

He's fussing about now. The bowl's firmly out of reach and as she grabs for the fork, he taps her hand smartly. “Really, Faith, there's no need to be quite so greedy,” he says, moving his chair way too close for some lying son of a bitch who's now withholding food as the next stage of his evil master plan. “I said I'd feed you, didn't I?”

“Well, yeah but…”

“Then stop pouting and open your mouth like a good little girl.”

It's the best meal she's ever had. This delicate combination of flavors and spices that pops on her tongue so she has to close her eyes and savor the taste. Then she looks at him expectantly and he picks up the fork, carefully selecting the most tender morsels of chicken, the plumpest pieces of tomato, and brings it to her mouth.

It's his turn. Then she's already leaning forward, lips apart, as he chooses pasta this time, soaking it up in the sauce and offering it to her. In between, he lets her have sips of wine from the glass they're sharing.

By the time there's one lonely little piece of chicken nestling on the plate, her shirt is gaping open, her legs slightly spread because this is the sexiest…no, fuck sexy, make it the most sensual experience of her life. He's cooked for her and he's fed her and if the way he keeps brushing the back of his hand, slowly and deliberately, against her hard, aching nipples as he lifts fork and glass to her
mouth is anything to go by, he's going to fuck her too.

“It's your turn,” she reminds him, as he spears the chicken and chases up the last dregs of the sauce with it.

“I know,” he says and holds the fork up to her mouth.

She's still running her tongue over her teeth, trying to savor the last remnants of the mouthwatering meal when he pours another glass of wine.

“Are you even old enough to drink alcohol?” he asks, arching his eyebrow like a pantomime villain and holding the glass just out of the reach of her questing mouth.

He's close enough that she can run her toes up his calf, along his thigh and if she scooches back enough in the chair, yeah, right there, his cock, which has been hard, ever since he sat down.

“You're the fucking lawyer, you tell me,” she growls at him, trying to catch the rim of the glass between her teeth. “You know, if you'd tried any of this six months ago, I'd have been jailbait.”

His cock twitches underneath the caress of her toes. “Yes, thank you, Faith. I'm painfully aware of that,” he says wryly, a rueful smile twisting his lips.

“Would you still have fucked me…” She doesn't get to the end of the sentence, though it's pretty much out there because he scrapes his chair forward and tips the edge of the glass so she can take greedy gulps of the wine, that tastes of grapefruit and peaches and sunshine.

She traces the hard length of him with the sole of her foot until he grabs hold of her ankle and gives it a tug so he can see her glistening and open. Her cunt clenches around nothing at the look in his eyes as he feasts all over again; eating her with eyes, his tongue teasing at the corner of his mouth. He looks so fucking hot.

“Wes? Can I have my dessert now?” she asks plaintively, making her eyes go big and jutting out her bottom lip. It never worked on either of her parents but Xander was always a sucker for it. “I've been a very good girl.”

His thumb brushes against the swollen tip of her breast. “I rather think you've been a very wicked girl.” His voice is grave. “But I suppose you have behaved yourself, more or less.”

He pushes his thumb into her mouth, slowly like it's his cock, and she slicks it up with the pink swipe of her tongue so that he can glide it over her nipple and admire how pretty and shiny it looks.

“What do I get for dessert then?” she asks between gritted teeth, parting her thighs wider and daring him to just sweep everything off the table, like they do in the movies, and fuck her on the surface.

He looks up, and takes his own sweet time before he gives her a reply. She even gets a little lip nibbling as he gives her question proper consideration. “Let me see. We're going to go upstairs, and I think we'll take the wine with us. You're going to lie down exactly in the center of the bed.” He probably can't help that clipped preciseness that creeps back but as his fingers know, it only makes her wetter. “I'm still deciding whether or not to tie you up but I'm utterly adamant that I'm going to see how many times I can make you come. Does that sound agreeable or would you like some fruit instead?”

She's laughing as she says, “Strawberries, please,” just to make him frown, but her heart’s doing this thudding thing that makes her notice it’s there, which she doesn’t normally. Tied up? How many times? God, she’s thinking double figures, but her mind’s stuck on ‘tied’ and she touches her fingers
to her wrist as if there’s already something there, holding her open, keeping her still while he does anything he wants to.

His fingers rest against hers then move to circle her wrist. “If I say I don’t have any, will you ask me for raspberries or cherries, which I do have, or will you walk up the stairs to the bed?”

She twists her hand slowly, not trying to break free, just seeing what it feels like, and his grip stays exactly the same but his eyes are watchful now as if he’s waiting for her to panic or tell him ‘no’.

And she might have if he’d tightened his grip.

She smiles at him instead as his hand drops casually away. “So, just out of interest, Wes, what number are you aiming for?”

He snags wine bottle and glass in one hand and holds out his other hand to help her stand, not letting go of her when she does, so that they walk toward the stairs holding hands.

“If I knew the answer, I wouldn’t want to solve the problem,” he says.

“Oh, I’m a problem am I?” she says, teasing him as they reach the bedroom door.

He pushes it open and lets her walk in before him. “In many ways, yes, you are, Faith.” He sets down what he’s holding on the bedside table and she looks at the deep, wide drawers in it and wishes she’d spent a little bit of time snooping after all. “And I find that doesn’t matter very much now.”

She wants to know what that means, but he nods at the bed and there’s no time for anything but remembering how to breathe when he’s taken the air out of the room with just that gesture. “Take off that borrowed shirt and lie down, Faith. In the center of the bed, on your back, for now.”

She almost hates to lose the feeling of his shirt against her skin, which is crazy when she’s going to have his hands on her soon, but even so, she slides it off regretfully, holding it bunched in one hand as she walks to the bed, like it’s a fucking security blanket or something. He takes it from her as she passes him and puts it back on the chair.

She crawls onto the bed, still rumpled from her nap, and positions herself as she’s been told to do and waits. He’s still dressed and still standing, looking down at her, spread out naked on his bed.

“Hands by your side, palms up. Move your legs apart, no, a little farther, please, Faith.”

He’s lost in this now, voice cool, but there’s this link still there between them and he says her name like he’s kissing it as it slips past his lips. That English voice of his makes everything sound so proper and correct.

“Pinch your right nipple, Faith, as hard as you can bear it.”

Well, okay, maybe not everything.

She lifts her left hand and it’s like moving underwater. She can feel her cheeks getting hot and his eyes never leave her face until she’s rolling her nipple between her fingers.

“Harder,” he says in a voice that’s almost casual.

She brings her fingers and thumb together and it’s like invisible fingers are teasing her clit, and doing it so well that the sensation there’s stronger than the one the flesh between her fingers is feeling. She
gasps and her hips lift up a little and her legs split open.

“You broke position,” he says and she tries to relax, but the only way she can do that is by easing off on what her hand’s doing and he notices that even faster. “It’s very simple, Faith,” he says, chiding her. “You stay still, apart from the movements I tell you to make. Try again.”

She’s got just enough willpower left, as her fingers clamp down on a nipple that’s already starting to feel tender, to say, “I thought you were going to make me come, Wes.”

He pours a glass of wine, brings over a straight backed chair and sits down at the foot of the bed. He takes a long, slow sip of the wine and says, “What makes you think I’m not? Keep doing that and run the fingers of your other hand across your stomach. Oh, lighter than that, Faith. Try again.”

By the time he lets her spread her legs, one knee bent up, she’s so wet her finger slips over her clit as if it’s encased in ice and it almost hurts to touch it, it’s so swollen. She’s making soft little sounds and he’s talking to her all the time now, arms folded tightly across his chest, eyes glittering as he watches her fingers curl inside her, thumb rubbing against her clit, middle finger deep in the slippery heat of her cunt, ring finger teasing at her asshole until he tells her to push it inside her and she’s so wet down there that it slides in farther than she’s gone before and he tells her to come, but she already is, and her hands won’t stop working her body until he comes and puts cool fingers against them to still them and peel them away from burning skin and kisses her into calmness.

She’s chilled and feverish at once, and the cool touch of his fingers does little to change that. And she’s still coming down—muscles still out of her control, breathing still ragged, eyes still shut tight. There are tiny goose bumps standing up on her arms and as he brushes her skin with his fingertips she shivers involuntarily. He pauses for a moment, concerned: “Are you cold?”

It takes a moment for her to find words. Any words. “No, just…” Another tremor passes through her. “Ah. I’m fine.” She fights the urge to curl up on her side and slip into sleep. Her eyelids flutter open and she smiles. “So, that’s number one. Is there a scoreboard somewhere or will you be approximating?”

The look he gives her is one of mock effrontery. “I never approximate.”

“That’s what I thought.” This feels good, this easy banter. It was hard-won enough.

“We seem to be drifting off-topic, don’t you think?”

Before she can speak, his hand strays between her legs. As his fingers slide deep into her for the first time since that disastrous breakfast, all she can think of is how different and lovely, almost uncomplicated, this is, and that she’d let him do it all night if he wanted to. He sits there, utterly still, watching the play of arousal across her features with rapt fascination.

She’s amazed at how quickly he can always seem find that one spot, that one elusive bit of her inside that shoves her right up to the edge of coming again immediately.

“Wait...wait,” she murmurs, shivering again as another wave of pleasure runs over her super-attenuated flesh.

“Wait?” he asks, amused, still working his long warm fingers inside, reeling her in. “You want me to wait?”

“You... Wicked...” But she can’t finish for the sound that’s being pushed out, from somewhere deeper than her voice, her heels involuntarily digging into the bed, straining to slow herself down somehow, as if that would help at this point.
“Wicked what?” he teases, dipping his head to catch a nipple in his teeth, sucking on it languidly, while gently gliding his thumb over her white-hot, overstimulated clt, leading her to unleash a new round of moans.

She can't say anything, just shakes her head. It's like she's being turned inside out, slowly, then thrown back into her skin, over and over—in a good way. In a very good way.

Now she can't help it, as shudders rack her body, snuggling up close to him, moans subsiding to little mewling sounds. “Two,” she whispers as he brushes her hair away from her face with moist and spicy-scented fingers that had just recently been inside her.

He chuckles, raking his fingers across her flesh, raising a shiver when just the lightest touch is run up the inside of her arm or over her belly; he traces along the edge of her ear, down her neck, dipping in the hollow of her collarbone. She's lost in the feeling—that familiar surge of safe and comfortable—leaning into his chest.

“Perhaps I should give you some time to recover before we move on.” His voice washes over her, and it’s all she can do to nod lazily. The wine and pleasure have given everything an even softer glow and what she's sure is a completely idiotic grin is plastered to her face.

She shuts her eyes for only a moment, surprised that she's so exhausted so soon, after she'd slept so long—but there was the food and the wine before this...

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“Faith. Faith, wake up.” He's stroking her inner thigh.

Her eyes flutter open. He's still in the same position, but there's something different. She squints up at him, questioningly.

Her legs are spread wide open, cool air hitting her pussy. It's still moist and throbbing lightly.

“I hope you don't mind.” He's got that honey-dripping tone again. “I took the liberty of preparing for the next round while you were resting.”

And now she understands his particular affinity for this bed. It’s heavy, substantial, with two slats on either side of the headboard perfect for, well, many things. As she slowly regains consciousness, she finds herself held in place, held open. She tries in vain to shift position only to find her efforts are met with an equal, firm pressure keeping her there. She doesn’t need to turn her head and look to know that she’s bound hand and foot to the bed-frame. Reassuringly, the bonds are loose enough to be comfortable, but she’s still pretty immobilized.

She gives him a slow, wry smile. “So, I guess you decided to tie me up after all.”

He doesn’t answer, just leans forward to blow cool air on her nipple and watch it contract into hardness. She shivers, and tries in vain to stay still. Doesn’t want to thrash. He places the flat of his palm against her belly, drawing it slowly along the slight curve, down toward the vertex where everything converges. He traces the periphery of her still-swollen clt with one long finger, and she can’t help but emit a tiny “ah.”

“Still so wet. Lovely,” he murmurs, as though he’s talking to himself. Then he looks up, directly at her. “Have you ever been tied up before, Faith?”

She shakes her head.
“Good. That’s good.” There’s another pause while he rolls her nipple idly between thumb and forefinger. "I don’t want you to come too soon this time. What do you suggest?"

She’s not sure how to answer, especially with his nimble fingers still darting between her parted thighs.

“Really, Faith. I’d have hoped you’d have progressed a bit further than this by now. I’m asking you a question.”

She tries to think through the inchoate pleasure tearing through her in small, powerful waves.

Suddenly, she knows. She looks lovingly at him, so intent and serious about his task, and smiles. Her voice is calm and clear.

“Read to me.”

She hasn’t surprised him often enough to have become used to the way his eyes light up with such genuine, unforced pleasure when she does. His face warms, a small, delighted smile that’s less a curve of his lips than a subtle change in the way he holds himself.

“You’d like that?”

It’s said with a trace of doubt that makes him vulnerable and that’s always when she feels the connection between them is at its strongest. It’s what’s brought them here, to this place, to this space where she’s posed and positioned at his whim. She knows no matter how many kisses her thirsty skin soaks up, she’ll always need more from him, and that he’s not just going to give her kisses. She wonders if she’d have still asked him to read to her if she’d been lying on her front when she woke up, and what it would be like to have his hand on her because she’d asked him to hurt her, just a little, just enough.

But that can wait. “Yes. Yes, I would. Anything. You choose.”

She expects him to leave her and fetch something from the library, but he only walks as far as a small bookcase in the corner. There are books all over the house, as if he can’t bear to have them too far away from him. He crouches down and she cranes her neck, watching his hand stray over the spines of the books, touching them with a familiarity and assurance that calls to mind how he touches her and makes her shiver.

He walks back to the bed, a book in his hand. The bed’s wide enough that even with her lying in the center, he can still sit beside her comfortably, and he does, crossing his legs, and holding the book in one hand, while the other rests against her hip. It’s the most relaxed she’s seen him, and it’s easy to forget that she’s tied, her wrists softly chafed by black silk again, as they were once before, thick, wide bands of it, doing exactly what he wants them to do; arousing her without alarming her; holding her without hurting her.

He starts to read, and it’s not until he’s two lines in, that she realizes he’s reading it in French.

“I can’t understand that!” she protests.

He pauses. “It sounds better this way,” he says firmly, tapping his finger against her clit in a rebuke that makes her want to protest again. “Listen, and I’ll translate it afterward, if you insist.”

“You can do that?”

He arches an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t read it to you if I didn’t know what it meant,” he says, sounding
a little sniffling about it. “I could be reading you something completely inappropriate.”

She can’t help laughing, as she tries to think what would be inappropriate at a time like this, and his eyes darken, though she doesn’t think for a moment he’s really angry. Still holding the book, he moves to kneel between her legs, resting the open book low down on her belly. It’s so old that the spine’s cracked and it stays as wide open and exposed as she, the dark print trailing over the dim page. “I think you’re losing sight of the objective,” he murmurs. “The book is not to move, you understand?” He shifts down the bed a little and props himself up on his elbows. Leaning forward he runs his tongue in one teasing flickering tickle through all the wetness and the heat, until he gets to her clit and he pauses and recites the first line again, not even bothering to look at the book because, as she should have known, he knows it off by heart.

Each line is punctuated by a kiss, a lick, a nudging pressure of teeth behind lips and she’s gasping, the muscles in her legs taut and stiff as she fights not to move. The book’s light and the cover’s smooth with age and ready to slide off the gentle curve of her belly if she so much as takes a deep breath, and she wants to do more than that. She wants to writhe and twist, arch upwards and rub herself against his mouth and she wants to do it now. His voice is doing just as much as his tongue. He forms words with his mouth so close to her slicked, swollen lips that each letter that forces his lips to push forward earns her a fleeting touch and his breath itself is enough to be a torment, warm and stirring the air that clings to her wetness like the silk is clinging to her damp wrists and ankles.

The final word is spoken and his tongue darts inside her, eager and fast, lapping up the juices she’s spilling and she’s so close to coming she screams when he pulls back, tugging against the scarves as if she can break free, and looking at him with disbelief.

“Why did you stop?”

He reaches out and catches the book as it slides off her body and kisses her thigh hard, sucking the skin into redness before answering. “You wanted me to read to you in English, Faith. I wanted your next climax to wait. It’s nice when we’re both aiming at the same mark, isn’t it?”

Speechless, she’s about to tell him what he can do with his book, when he starts to read, this time in English, and each word matches and mirrors what she heard before, what she felt as he was reading, so that without touching her he’s still making her body feel what he did to it.

“As each thing moves me, I know not
If one seduces more than all the rest
She dazzles like the blazing Dawn
Consoles me like the restful Night;
The harmony is too sublime,
That governs all her body fair,
For powerless analysis
To note each of its sweet accords.
O mystic metamorphosis
Of all my senses melted into one!
Her very breath is made of song,
Just as her voice becomes perfume!”

He finishes reading and leans over, placing the book carefully on the bedside table.

“You may come now, Faith,” he says.

She’s just got enough strength left in the quivering tremble of need that he’s turned her body into, to look calmly triumphant. “Already did, Wes.” She closes her eyes. “You had me at, ‘Si quelque chose me séduit.’”
That gets her a soft chuckle. “Your accent needs work, but your memory’s excellent.”

“Yeah. Thanks. So, that’s three for the home team, but what about you?”

She can just lift up her head enough to see the bemused expression on his face.

“What about me?” he echoes softly.

She wishes that the silken ties would momentarily unfurl themselves so she could give him a good hard prod in the ribs. Not that it would make much difference on the pain scale because he’s been hard ever since the whole erotic feeding time deal and that was hours ago. He must be in agony.

“Don't you want to come?” she asks curiously.

He's propped up on his elbows again and it makes him seem boyish almost, if he didn't have a bird's eye view of her snatch.

“This is about you,” he reminds her gently. “About giving you what you want.”

It sounds all kinds of reasonable until she remembers that she doesn't even know what she wants until he forms the thoughts in her head.

He scores a line up the inside of her thigh with his thumbnail, staring transfixed as her skin visibly quivers underneath his touch.

“I want you to come,” she says, her voice quiet and resolute. “It's not fair if you don't get to come too.” And anyway if he doesn't get inside her soon, she's going to dissolve into a sticky little puddle, which would be a bitch for him to get out of his 300 thread count sheets.

He places a lingering kiss on her syrupy cunt, his tongue delving deliciously for a few blissful seconds before he drags himself reluctantly away and pulls himself up. His lips glisten with her.

“Very well,” he agrees and she can't quite work out the challenge that she's picking up in the mild tone of his voice. “Why don't you return the favor?”

If he's not going to fuck her, then he can bet that she's going to give him the mother of all blowjobs. Suck his soul right out of the end of his cock. Especially when he looks so pretty as he rocks back on his haunches and unbuttons his shirt.

“So, did you have anything particular in mind? I'm sure I have a copy here. I have a very extensive library.”

What the fuck?

“I thought you wanted me to suck you off,” she says indignantly, once again pulling at her bonds, until he raps his knuckles lightly against her knee.

“Delightful as that sounds, I don't know how you're going to manage that if you're reciting poetry,” he points out.

The one poem that she could recite from memory begins with the line, There was a girl from Nantucket, which would be a bit of a buzzkill. Shit, the only books in their house are her mother's Harlequin romances and a car manual that her father left behind.
She can't do this. She's not like him and she's struggling properly now against the ties that bind her. She's ruined it all again, simply by being Faith, by wanting to surprise him and earn one of those blinding, carefree smiles that he so rarely gifts her with. Like her blowjobs are that good anyway.

He pauses before pulling his shirt off his shoulders. His skin looks tanned and taut in the muted glow of the room and in any other circumstances, she's be eating him up with her eyes, cataloguing the sense memory so she could pull it out on a darker day. But now, she's turned her head away from him, angry tears spilling down her face.

“Faith,” he begins carefully. “It was just a suggestion. There are a thousand and one other things we can do that involve me.”

She remembers it. Of course, she does. She had to spend three hours after Ms. Gernstein's English class memorizing it after she got a detention for lobbing spitballs at Buffy Summers' shiny blonde head. And after about one hour in, when she'd already committed the words to memory, she suddenly got what Ms. Gernstein had spent two years trying to drum into her and sat there in a daze, awed by the simple beauty of the words.

“There’s a poem I know,” she interrupts in a small voice and he doesn't call her on it for once. “But you have to promise me that you won't read anything more into it, other than it's a really cool poem.”

He looks ever so slightly pissed off. “I wouldn't dream of it.” But his hands have stopped moving because she can kill a mood as quickly as she can type his letters.

“Wes?”

“Faith.”

“Will you do two things for me first?”

He treats her to just the merest hint of a sigh. “You're being terribly demanding tonight. Very well. What would you like me to do?”

“Can you take the rest of your clothes off and, well, will you…you should kiss me.”

The bastard just gives her a curt nod, then he's shifting off the bed and stepping into the shadows so she can only hear the chink of his belt buckle, the rasp of a zipper; rustling sounds as he strips off.

“I still don't get how you're going to come,” she remarks, twitching slightly as he comes into view and presses his hands down on the bed by her feet, so she gets the faintest hint of a lean chest, and the indentation of his hipbone.

He places his knee on the bed and begins a long, slow crawl over her body, his cock leaving a slick trail against her skin. “It's really not your problem,” he assures her, pausing to place a hot, openmouthed kiss on her nipple. “You just have to lie perfectly still and recite your poem.”

His weight is heavy against her pelvis, as he straddles her. Too high for her to really feel the benefit of his cock where she needs it most and he's so hard that it's almost flat to his belly as he leans over and tickles the closed seam of her lips with his tongue.

She puts everything she is, everything she wants to be for him, into the kiss, wishing her hands were free to hold her to him, wind her fingers through his hair and mess him up just a little bit. His tongue is sinuous in her mouth, stroking hers and she tugs his bottom lip between her teeth when she feels him begin to pull away, desperate to have him just a little bit longer.
He reaches behind him and she cries out as he swipes the flat of his hand against her still sensitive, still soaked cunt.

His hand is slathered with her juices and she frowns as he anoints the inner curve of her breasts with the sticky glaze. Then his hand is gathering up more and more and more so she tries to arch her hips and grind against his palm but he's focused on his task, tutting at her, and soon her breasts are gleaming in the lamplight.

When he moves up her body, cupping her tits in his hands and squeezing them together, all she has to do is lower her head and she's perfectly placed to lick the head of his cock lasciviously. Been so long since she tasted him and the salt tang on the tip of her tongue makes her moan slightly as he closes his eyes tight and moves his shaft away from her hungry mouth.

“He reaches behind him and she cries out as he swipes the flat of his hand against her still sensitive, still soaked cunt.

“Please,” she whines plaintively.

He doesn't answer, just clutches her breasts tighter and pushes his cock into the damp channel between them while her mouth falls open in disbelief.

This shouldn't be sexy. The one time she did this before was in the backseat of the football captain's best friend's car after she absolutely refused to give him head. But now with Wes' thumbs brushing against her tightly budded nipples on the downstroke and the hot-soft-wet feel of him pushing and pulling between her breasts, she totally gets it. Feels herself getting wetter and wetter, as the head of his cock slowly comes toward her, leaving a silvery trail on her chest.

“Oh God,” she breathes. “That's so fucking hot.”

She gets a choked laugh as he flings his head back. He's gone without far too long and if he'd just let her take him in her mouth, she could…

“I'm waiting, Faith.” Only he could sound so in command, so in control as he fucks himself between her breasts.

She has to close her eyes because all she can see is him in front of her. All that burnished flesh rearing up, then retreating is kinda distracting.

“I don't love you as if you were the salt-rose, topaz
Or arrow of carnations that propagate fire;
I love you as certain dark things are loved.

She doesn't have his gift of making words sound like kisses but the words mean something to her. More so now than when she clutched them to her and they were a secret that no one else knew about. Her voice is nothing more than a rasped whisper as he makes a small noise of surprise and thrusts unsteadily before finding his rhythm again.

Secretly, between the shadow and the soul.
I love you as the plant that doesn't bloom and carries
Hidden within itself the light of those flowers.

His head lowers and he's nuzzling her neck, sucking the tender patch of skin behind her ear. “Oh,” he sighs. Then “oh” again.

And thanks to your love, darkly in my body
Lives the dense fragrance that rises from the earth.
I love you without knowing how, or when, or where.
I love you straightforwardly without complexities or pride.
She can feel him shaking, trembling, the muscles in his arms rippling as his hands tighten painfully on the soft flesh spilling between his fingers. He draws back, still straddling her, and begins to jack himself off. Long elegant fingers moving hurriedly along his length, twisting over the damp head and all the time his eyes are burning into hers. Like he can't tear his gaze away.

All she can give him right now is these words, tumbling out of her.

*I love you because I know no other way,*
*But this, in which there is no I or you*

He shouts her name as he comes, his seed spurting out, adorning her chest and neck and he's still hard, as he collapses next to her on the bed and rests his head on her shoulder.

*So close that your hand on my chest, is my hand.*
*So close that when you close your eyes, I fall asleep."

Her words hang heavy in the air, still wanting to make their presence felt as she tries to kiss the top of his head.

“*I think you should untie me now,“* she says finally, when his breathing has evened out and he's sprawled on his back, one burning hot hand splayed out on the pooch of her belly.

“I think that's a very good idea,” he replies gravely. He leans over, trapping her with one arm so he can give her one of those devastatingly sweet kisses. “Thank you. That was beautiful.”

“I told you it was a cool poem,” she says with a certain degree of smugness which gets her a rolling of his eyes and a sly tug on her nipple.

“Yes, you did. And I recall that I was conducting an experiment before I was so rudely interrupted,” he kisses the curve of her shoulder, the damp skin of her neck, stroking her hair out of the path of his questing mouth. “Three orgasms seem like rather a paltry sum.”

She can feel the insistent nudge of his still-hard cock against her hip, as he stretches over her and unties one wrist. “Yeah, it is kinda lame. I was expecting double figures at the very least.”

He smiles at this. “I'm sure we can squeeze a few more in before we're both too exhausted to care.”

“Oh, I think even more than a just a few,” she counters, reaching out with her newly freed hand to stroke his cock, but he evades her touch, sliding back on top of her to untie her other wrist, sandwiching his erection between them. It twitches hotly against her, so close and yet so far away.

“Now, Faith. I thought that if you'd learnt anything by now, it would be to wait.”

She gamely rolls her eyes at this. “No, Wes. You haven't broken that out of me yet.” He frowns and she regrets she let that slip out and bites her lip, trying to snatch the words back.

He narrows his eyes, studying her face. “No, and I don't suppose I shall. But that won't stop me from trying.”

And she doesn't doubt for a second that he means every word. He smiles at her consternation, and slides backward off her, dragging his cock over her smooth twat, languidly, and she can't help but buck her hips upward in a lame attempt to catch him.

He tsks quietly at her, kneeling between her spread legs and running his hand up the length of her inner thigh, stopping just short of that tender bit of skin where thigh meets torso.
“Now, to leave your legs restrained? Or not?” he muses with what she knows is feigned indecision. “I'm not sure.”

The cool silk bonds that had felt not long ago as though they would keep her from floating off the bed in ecstasy now dig into her ankles as she pulls against them. “Wes, please.”

“Still,” he continues, cutting her off and barely containing a wicked grin. “I was hoping to admire your posterior this evening as well.” He's moved his hand up and over her hip now, lightly pressing her down into the bed.

She shivers at the thought of his hands on her ass, of his cock in her ass, and without a word he's carefully freeing her ankles, pulling the clinging silk away with shaking fingers. They're on a fucking runaway train now and she gets the feeling they're both hanging on for dear life.

“Turn over,” he says, thickly, his hand ready to help her up.

She wraps her hand around his forearm and his hand clenches around hers. He pulls her up close, kissing her fiercely, truly fiercely for the first time that evening. She meets that intensity full-bore, running her free hand through his hair, nails digging in his shoulders. He responds in kind, curling his hand through her hair, smoothing it roughly away from her face.

Pulling away, his hand still wrapped in her hair, her arm still draped around his neck, he whispers, “On all fours, please.”

She nods, eyes wide and unblinking. But he reads the question there, strokes her cheek down to the cleft in her chin. “Only if you want me that way, Faith.”

She's initially unable to latch on to any coherent thoughts. The memory of the last time they found themselves in this position—and what happened after—hangs between them heavily. And as much as she aches to have him fill every part of her, she finally takes a deep breath, shakes her head slightly, leaning away from him, saying simply, “Not yet.” And she's pretty sure he'll catch what she's leaving unsaid.

She slides onto her knees and turns away, planting her hands firmly on to the bed, pulling herself into the requested position.

“Perfect,” he breathes behind her, running one hand over the smooth surface of her ass, initiating a whole ‘nother round of gooseflesh that crawls up her back and slams into her neck, diffusing over her scalp. She's so accustomed to waiting for a swat in this position, that when he runs his lips lightly over where she knows there's still a bruise or two from the last spanking, her sigh of pleasure turns into a low, purring moan.

He rasps that oh-so-rugged stubble like sandpaper across each cheek, then it's his tongue, lapping his way to the cleft, gently slipping within, teasing around the edge of her asshole. Gasping, she begs, “Fuck me now, please, please.”

But he doesn't stop and moves a hand up to gently rub her clit while still tonguing that tender, puckered flesh. She's nearly screaming now with ecstatic incoherence, and the moment he plunges his tongue inside, she comes again, moaning fervently, arms buckling and straining to hold her up, fingers digging into the bedclothes.

Before she can recover, he's tilted her hips down slightly and is ramming his cock into her, shallow at first, then deeper and deeper as her undulating muscles reel him in. They're moving together now, each thrust synchronized, and he snakes a hand under and over her belly to pinch a nipple. And she's
uncertain how many times she's really come now, she's lost count—just fallen into that place where nothing matters but the waves of pleasure cresting over her body.

And he’s coming now too, the last thrust of his hips driving her sharply into the pillows where her drawn-out moan gets lost. He collapses against her, his breathing ragged in her ear, and it’s all she can do to hold them up. But she can’t hold it—she’s too exhausted—and together they fall into a rather inelegant, sweat-slick heap upon the bed. His body is satisfyingly heavy against hers, his spent cock still inside her. He shifts wrapping his arms around her, and she doesn’t move, just luxuriates in the feeling for a moment.

If she were a cat, she’d purr, but instead she just sighs happily.

He kisses the top of her shoulder. “I think…”

“Mmm?”

“I think we should take ourselves to the shower.”

“You have a shower?”

“Of course. You think I take hour-long bergamot-scented baths every morning?”

“Good point. It’s just, I’m not so sure I can move just right now.”

He laughs. “No.”

He shifts again, and she knows that he’s going to slide out of her, and she almost cries out but she bites it back.

He rolls onto his side and she does the same, so that they’re concave against one another. She’s starting to drift toward sleep again, and she’s fighting it.

“We should get up.”

“We should. You’re right.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Then they’re drifting together.

Chapter Seventeen

When they wake it’s impossible to tell how much time has passed. It’s dark, probably the middle of the night. They’re still in the same position, wrapped around each other, and it’s so lovely that Faith almost forgets—

“Fuck. My mother is gonna—” She’s still mostly asleep; it comes out as a whisper.

He just pulls her closer and kisses her neck and she can feel his half-hard cock pressing against her. She wriggles closer to him.

“Shh. It’s late. It’ll only be worse if you go home now.”

She can’t disagree with that. She lies there, willing herself to consciousness. Her body resists. Even with the bed there to support her, she feels deeply unsteady.
“I want to move, really I do.”

He swats her ass playfully. “We are getting up.”

She rolls toward him, propping herself up on one elbow. “Oh yeah?”

He sits up and in one swift motion pulls the covers off them.

“That’s right. Now come on.” He’s standing by the bed now.

She tries to move her recalcitrant limbs. He extends an arm to help her up. She stands with all the conviction of a new foal.

Wes slides his arm around her and leads her toward the bathroom. She’s almost amazed to find it’s not a figment of her imagination after all. But it’s solid, all gleaming tile and porcelain and that lovely, elegant claw-foot tub. She almost blushes scarlet when she sees the shaving implements lying out on the pristine marble countertop.

He doesn’t notice. He’s got his back toward her, kneeling as he turns on the taps and tests the water, trying to get it just so before they get in.

“Perfect,” he murmurs before he turns on the shower. He gets in and holds the shower curtain back for her while she steps in.

And it is, and she just stands there for a moment, letting the water wash over her face and shoulders. He’s already tipped some of the sandalwood shampoo into his hands in order to lather up her hair. She leans into him as he massages it evenly into her scalp. It’s delicious; she’s not used to being pampered like this and she never wants it to stop. She can picture the look of rapturous intent on his face as he’s doing it.

“Would you let me do something?” she asks shyly.

“What?” He’s not really focused on her voice, she realizes; he’s concentrating on making sure none of the bubbles are sliding down into her eyes, fingertips circling and digging in and doing it firmly enough that it both relaxes and invigorates her.

“God, your hands...oh, that feels good.”

Free to move now, she shimmies against him, reaching behind her to touch him, running her hands over his hips as he tilts her head so the fragrant foam rinses out to swirl around her feet.

“Let you do what?”

“Mmm? Oh, yeah.” Deciding that it’s easier to just do it, than ask, she turns around and reaches for the bar of soap, rotating it between her palms until they’re thickly coated, then dropping it back into the holder. “This...”

She wants to get to know this body. He’s seen her—God, has he seen her!—and she still hasn’t looked at him properly. It’s all been heat of the moment and desperate, and he’s been dressed most of the fucking time, or behind her. Indignation rises, as she considers what she’s been deprived of, and she fixes him with a challenging glare as her slick hands slap against his collarbones, instead of the sultry, seductive smile she’d had planned. Probably just as well. She hadn’t practiced that one in front of a mirror and it might have made her look totally dumb.
“Stay still,” she hisses and makes it scary enough that he does, though she can see a flicker of amusement lurking deep in his eyes. Which reminds her... She leans forward, nose-tip to nose-tip and has a good, long look at his eyes as her hands start to rub against his skin. “Pretty blue eyes,” she says appreciatively.

“Faith,” he whispers, as she starts to work her way down one arm, sending one exploratory hand up into the hollow of his armpit and trying not to tickle him. “I think I warned you once before about applying that adjective to any part of me. Don’t make me do it again.”

As threats go, it’s backed up nicely by the memory of what he can do when he’s *that* kind of pissed-off with her, and she pouts at him. “Can’t help it if I think they’re—” His eyebrows pull together in a frown and she backtracks. “Stop talking, Wesley. I’m trying to concentrate.”

“On what?”

“You.”

She’s at his hand now and she pauses to get more soap on hers before taking it and threading her fingers through his, feeling them clench and hold her tightly. Strong hands with long, elegant fingers and she shivers thinking of them inside her, on her, holding her.

He’s keeping her hand captive, and she tugs. “Give it back, Wes. Water’s going to go cold before I’m done.”

“No, it won’t,” he says, with the assurance of someone who doesn’t have to worry about bills or boilers older than God, “but I still haven’t quite grasped your agenda here.”

“There are bits of your body I haven’t seen, let alone touched,” she says fiercely. “Do you think that’s fair?”

His grip loosens. “I—it never really occurred to me that—” He blinks away the water that’s gathering on his eyelashes and gives her this puzzled look.

Fuck, not the stammering, lost for words, Wes. She can’t resist leaning forward to kiss him, with the water washing the taste of him away, so she has to send her tongue deep into his mouth to get at it and when she does, she doesn’t want to stop kissing him, ever.

He’s got his arms around her, which is just as well, as this isn’t the safest place for a kiss that’s making her knees weak, and he’s smoothing his hand over her back, pulling her close—

“Ow!” The sting from the slap on her backside is less than normal because she’s so wet, but it’s enough to break the kiss. “What was that for?”

“You won’t wait with any degree of patience and now I find you get distracted too easily,” he says primly. “I believe you were washing me and taking the opportunity to acquaint yourself with my body. Kissing me falls under neither of those headings.”

She smiles at him, glittering and bright. “Turn around, Wes.”

When he does, with an ironic, indulgent lift of his eyebrow that’s so going to cost him, she goes to town on his back, tracing each muscle, running a thumb down his spine. She lets the water rinse away the heart she’s drawn in soap on his back, ignoring his sucked-in breath as he figures out what shape the edge of the bar’s inscribing on his skin.

She crouches down to study his legs, stroking the skin behind his knees and watching it jump,
stroking a finger over a thin scar high on his outer thigh and waiting for him to tell her where he got it. He glances down at her hand and says nothing, so she leaves it and leans in to bite his ass instead, getting a surprised yelp that makes her grin. From this angle, with his legs spread a little, it’s an interesting view but she gets an attack of shyness that makes her bite her lip. Shit. She wants to do this, but...

“Shall I turn around?” he asks and there’s nothing in his voice but a question, but it sounds like a dare, and she pushes back her wet hair and kneels up, the slippery hardness of the porcelain warning her this isn’t going to be comfortable for long.

“Not yet,” she says.

She brings up her hands to rest against his ass, rubbing her thumbs in tiny circles, then shifting her hands so her thumbs are at the top of the cleft dividing his ass. Soapy as they are, it’s easy to bring them down firmly, parting his cheeks and running her thumbs inside and across his asshole, not pausing, bringing them down as far as she can reach without moving her hands, and doing it again, bolder this time. He’s letting her do it, spreading his legs a little wider, relaxing muscles that could have kept out this tentative invasion if he’d chosen.

She does it once more and her courage leaves her but it’s left her aroused, more by him letting her do this than anything. She slides her hand between his legs and cups his balls, feeling their weight against her palm, squeezing them gently, then stands up because she can’t stand the pain in her knees any more. One last application of soap to her hands and she wraps her hands around his waist, kissing his shoulder blade, and lets her hands drop down to his cock.

He’s not just hard, he’s rigid, and at her touch he shudders.

“I think you’re already quite familiar with that territory.” He’s not pushing her away, exactly—after all, she’d just had her thumb up his ass a minute ago, and he does have a hard-on. But she realizes she’s hit a nerve with her voluntary ministrations and attentiveness to him.

She pauses with her sudsy hands around his cock, boldness fading fast again. Rather suddenly, like a punch to the gut, she further realizes that her appreciation, her goddamn devotion to him—in spite of things he's done that would turn her heart sour if they'd been done by anyone else—she can only show those feelings to him by shoving his beauty and his fucking desirability directly in his face, making him look at it without flinching, without turning away or putting up his emotional walls, or any of that tired crap. Like when she was seven, she thinks rather unromantically, and her father rubbed her new puppy's head in its own piss when it made a mess on the furniture. Something like that—but less gross. Every battle with him on this front is going to be unpleasant—she can’t forget that that nagging detail—but she's gotta take a chance. Like when she held him, let him cry on her.

She tilts her head up, kissing him lightly—just grazing her lips across his. “That doesn't mean that it deserves any less attention than the rest of your...” She pauses, pulling up the courage, realizing she's holding the trump card, as it were. But whispering now, “Pretty body.”

And before he can protest, she snatches his mouth into a deeper kiss, wrestling her tongue against his and squeezes his cock tightly, running her slick hands up and down the length of him, pausing only to swirl her thumb around the head, milking his precome over her fingers. He moans and she can feel his conflict in her hands. Part of him is trying desperately to pull away, and the other part wants her to do this, is leaning into her grip, pulling her closer, hand pressing against the small of her back.

She breaks away from his lips, smiling. Before he can stammer out whatever it is he looks like he's about to stammer out—because, yeah, she's still got him in the stammering place, not the yelling one —she decides to lay it all out for him. Her eyes are locked on his and her chin is tilted with what she
can only hope is telegraphed as overt defiance. All the while she hasn't let up the pressure with her hand, still stroking him even though the last of her foamy lubricant has been washed away.

“Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, Esquire.” She rolls the last bit around in her mouth, drawing it out gently. “You. Are. Pretty.” His eyes are heavy with what she can't decide is pleasure, anger, or a little bit of both. She picks up the pace of her strokes, in time with her voice: “Your eyes are fucking pretty. Your ass, it's pretty. Your hands—those long, perfect fingers—so very pretty. And your voice. Oh God, Wes. Your voice may be the prettiest thing of all.”

At that last bit, he just whimpers and pulls her close, slumping against her, his hot and slick come hitting her belly before it's washed away by the soft cascade of the shower. His head is resting on her shoulder now, and she slides her lips up his neck to his ear, whispering, “Don't forget this.”

He nods, nearly imperceptibly and whispers back, “Thank you, Faith.”

They stand there, clinging to each other under the jets of water, letting it run over them for what seems like an eternity. Finally, he lifts his head and sighs, “Well, I think we may actually use up all the hot water after all at this rate.” But he's smiling, and she steps out of the shower first, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around her before she carefully and tenderly rubs down every inch of him. She totally stops short of carrying him to bed—just leads the way and yanks the come-soaked sheet off, tossing it to the floor, along with her towel.

“We should actually, you know, get some sleep, maybe,” she says, pulling him on to the bed with her. She's forgotten what day it is, and even if they have to go into the office, but that doesn't matter. She's exhausted and she can tell he is too. He doesn't reply, just leans over, switches off the lamp by the bed and spirits up a huge, soft cashmere blanket from the foot of the bed that he wraps around the two of them, like a luxurious cocoon.

Chapter Eighteen

She wakes to find herself alone, with a faint light seeping through the curtains to tell her that it's daylight. She's as rested as it's possible to be, clear-headed and, though not inclined to throw back the covers and bound out of bed singing, she’s feeling, yeah, energetic.

But she’s alone and if this is going to be a rinse Faith out of your hair and pretend nothing happened repeat of the last time, she’s not sure she can take it. Her feet are on the floor at the thought of it, and she’s looking around for something to wear a second later, when she realizes that what woke her wasn’t him leaving, but the sound of him coming back.

She scrambles back under the blanket feeling absurdly guilty.

“Good morning, Faith.”

And yeah, if she’s getting a smile from Wes, she guesses it is.

“Hi.”

He’s carrying a tray and she can smell coffee, rich and bitter and strong. She’s starving one sniff later and the only thing stopping her from sliding out of bed and going over to the small table where he’s set the tray down is the fact that he’s dressed for the office and she’s naked.

“Umm, I just need to—” She slants her eyes over to the bathroom and he nods and waits. She can’t wrap the blanket around her and she can’t walk past him naked, and yes, it makes no sense at all.

“Wait a moment,” he says and disappears into the bathroom, coming out with a robe tossed over his
It’s the pure white of spilled salt but it’s not new, it’s his, and he stands by the bed and holds it open for her to slip her arms into, then folds it across her and fastens it without taking his eyes off her. She wants a kiss, but he turns away and goes to the curtains instead, pulling them back so that the clear gray light washes in like the tide. They’re so high up here. The window’s wide and they’re at the back of the house, so instead of the city she can see his garden. It’s not as neat as she’d expected, but it doesn’t look neglected. It’s too early for there to be many flowers but there are drifts of white in the grass that she thinks must be snowdrops and the trees that border it have lost the starkness of winter, with a fuzz of leaf buds softening each branch.

“It’s beautiful,” she says.

“It’s 7.25,” he replies. “And I can assure you I won’t believe any excuses for lateness today.”

She’s close to sticking out her tongue, but she settles for a dignified exit. It’s tempting to make him wait by taking her time in the bathroom, where a new toothbrush is waiting for her, but her stomach’s reminding her it’s empty so she hurries instead, coming out to find him halfway through his breakfast.

There’s something unreal about this, even if it’s daylight when illusions shatter and dreams fade. She’s sipping juice and coffee, trying to stop herself moaning at the taste of fresh raspberries and buttery, flaky croissants. Makes her usual choice of Pop-Tarts or stale cereal seem a million miles away.

Wesley’s not one for breakfast conversation even when he’s not freaking. He’s wound tight again, eyes staring out of the window, little frown gathering. She starts to feel full and slows down, pushing her plate away.

“Guess I should get dressed then,” she ventures to say.

That gets her his attention. “Yes. Quickly, please, Faith. If we can make an early start—”

“I—I need to go home first,” she says. Mom...fuck knows what state she was in. “My mother...I’d better check on her.” He looks as if he’s going to argue and she’s not going to let him do that. “She’ll be worried. I didn’t come home.” Passed out and pissed off that there was no one there to get her more, but, yeah, there might have been some worry mixed in.

“Call her,” he says.

“No.” She sees him look impatient and it’s too much. “She’ll be asleep this early. I just—maybe if I get in, she won’t know I wasn’t there all night. I can pretend—”

“Do you lie to her a lot?”

“I do what I have to do.” Suddenly she’s had it with pretending, with tiptoeing around what he already knows. “Look, she drinks, okay? She’s an alcoholic, and for all I know she’s spent the night on the fucking kitchen floor unconscious. I can’t just go to work without checking.”

“Then I suggest you dress and do something with your hair. If we really must take a detour, we need to leave in ten minutes.”

“The world won’t end if you’re not at your desk at 8.30, you know.”

He stands up and leans over, as close as he’s got since they woke up, and his lips brush her ear as he says softly, “Perhaps not. But, Faith? Tardiness brings with it penalties. And if we’re both late, and it’s your fault, I’m afraid you’ll have to pay them.”
She stares ahead and clenches her hands in her lap. “This isn’t part of the game, Wesley.”

He sighs without regret, as if he pitied her ignorance. “That won’t save you. Dress.”

Dressed in the cloudy gray dress because her other clothes were so torn and damp that Wes refused to give them back to her, Faith tries to relax as they drive through town.

But as the streets become a little less leafy and the houses a little less dream homey, she can feel this thud thud thud as her heart starts pounding. Her stomach is doing these weird little fandangos that threaten to make the croissants put in a repeat performance.

In other circumstances, she'd enjoy being driven by him. The way his hand rests lightly on the gear shift, his movements calm and precise, the way they are when he undresses her, or caresses her into a frenzy.

He hasn't said anything since they left. In fact, he seems far away and remote. A distant twin of the man whose arms she'd slept in the night before. She hates the morning after; it always ends up getting complicated.

“You can drop me here!” she yelps as he swings the car into her street.

“But be ridiculous,” he says in a tone that brooks no denial. “Really, Faith, there isn't time for these high school histrionics.”

She gives him a look from under her lashes. Most people couldn't stand to be on the other end of it but he's not most people. Besides, he's looking out of the window and when he sees her house, he pulls the car over to the edge of the curb.

They look at the place she never calls home. The rusted car sitting on blocks on the drive. The broken shutter. The smashed pane of glass in the landing window. The peeling paint.

“Five minutes, Faith,” he barks at her. “I want you to put on your work clothes, all your work clothes.”

She can't help it. She smirks at his utter refusal to say the word 'underpants' or, like, 'knickers' or whatever. He wasn't so worried about social niceties when he was fucking her into the mattress and at that thought, everything turns liquid and she's suspended in the moment, hanging there and…

“Faith!” He gives her shoulder a warning push and she's sighing and unclipping her seat belt. “Five minutes or there will be consequences.”

Before she slides out of the car, she throws him a beseeching look over her shoulder. “You're gonna stay here, right? You're not gonna come in?”

It would have been perfect if he'd kissed her then and told her not to worry but he doesn't. She gets an opaque glance but he brushes her cheek with his fingers like he can't not touch her before he gives her shoulder another prod. “Five minutes.”

She knows he's watching as she tears across the weed-strewn, pot-holed drive, trying not to stumble in her heels. Inside, the house is dark and maybe it's because she hasn't been home all night, and maybe because she's suddenly, painfully aware of exactly where she comes from, but it's like she's here for the first time. Like, she's seeing the grease stains on the wallpaper and smelling the cloying, stench of fried food as a stranger would.

Her mother isn't passed out in any of the five places that she likes to pass out in. The bedroom door is
shut and when she presses her ear to it, she can just make out the faint, whuffling sound of her breathing so she knows she's still alive.

She toes off her shoes and creeps down the hall to her room, opens the door, then shuts it quietly so she can lean back against it and just take a second to get her bearings. She loves her room, but she wishes it wasn't in this house. Loves the posters, with Kathleen Hanna, Belle and Sebastian, Scarlett Johansson in Lost In Translation staring back at her. The smell of Johnson's Baby Lotion and the Marc Jacobs perfume that Xander bought her for her birthday with his tip money. The patchwork quilt on her bed that her Grandma made for her before she died. She's trying to see the room through his eyes. Would he think it stupid and teenage or would he want to sneak in, under cover of darkness, and fuck her on the bed where she studied for her SATs with her mother passed out drunk next door?

But he's not here. He's out in the car, his fingers probably drumming impatiently on the steering wheel. Faith shrugs off the gray dress and her bra and rummages in her drawer for the black satin panties. The corset takes a little longer, her fingers fumbling over the hooks and eyes and finally it's on and she's reaching for one of the dresses, hanging right at the back of the wardrobe on one of the padded hangers that are a legacy from her days as a shoplifting JD.

It sounds kinda weird but as she zips up the back of the dress, smoothing it over her hips, she feels different. Not her, but this other girl who doesn't have to drift through life, without ever touching the sides. A girl who deserves expensive things, who gets to have the most cake. A girl who's actually getting used to walking in four inch, fuck-me heels.

And her five minutes were up long ago, but she takes her time slicking on her fire engine red lipstick and applying a couple of coats of mascara, before snatching up her cutest vintage jacket, the moss green suede one that she found at a yard sale for two bucks. She looks about as fucking hot as it's possible for her to look.

She's almost made it to the front door, when she hears a tread on the stairs.

"Where the hell were you last night and what the fuck have you got on?"

She turns round. Her mother is staggering down the stairs in her nightgown; birds nest hair and yesterday's makeup making her look like something from a revival of Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?

"I was late," she says quickly. "You were already in bed. Gotta go!"

"You hold it right there, you little tramp." Her mother has a hectoring edge to her voice that all the wasted years and vodka have perfected.

"Mom! I'm gonna be late for work!" She's fumbling with the lock but her mother is already hurrying toward her.

"God! Just look at you! You know what you look like? You look like street trash. Those shoes! And that dress wasn't cheap. Are you stealing again?" Her words are accompanied by a blast of sour breath as she grabs Faith by her upper arm and squeezes so hard that she squeaks.

"No! I bought it with my wages because at least somebody in this house has got a fucking job!" Every time she promises herself that she's gonna keep her cool and within ten seconds, she's come undone. Every fucking time.

Her mother is right in her face now. Close enough that Faith can see the dull skin and the bloodshot
eyes. Feel her bloated body pressing her into the door. Back in the day, when Mom was head fucking cheerleader, she was this tiny blonde thing with a bright future ahead of her on the makeup counter at Nordstrom's. Faith's heard the story a million times, has to stare at the pictures of her mother waving her pom poms every time she goes into the lounge. The end of the story isn't quite so wholesome, seeing as how it involves her getting knocked up after a drunken post-prom party.

“I know you've been out whoring around with God knows who! I won't have you treating this house like a fucking hotel!”

“If this was a fucking hotel, I wouldn't have to come back to find you passed out drunk on the kitchen floor.” God, she could have this row in her sleep. As it is, she's on auto-pilot, not really hearing the barbed comments, the invective anymore, just hoping that this isn't going to take very long because she's on the clock here.

“You're an ungrateful little bitch.”

Yeah and you're a lousy…”

They jump when they hear the doorbell ring. No one ever rings the doorbell, unless it's one of the debt collectors who aren't on their Christmas card list. And then Faith remembers why she was in such a hurry to get out of here.

“I have to go, Mom. Look, I'll get you something on the way home,” she says placatingly, forcing herself to briefly wrap her arms round the drink-swollen body and not notice the way her mother flinches.

The doorbell rings again and she guesses that this is how the prisoners on Death Row feel when they're walking to the chair.

“You gonna get that, Faithy? Tell whoever it is that we don't have any fucking money until your bastard of a father actually makes an alimony payment.”

She's never going to shut up, Faith thinks, as she pulls open the door and he's standing there, cheeks pink with cold and a look of dull fury on his face.

“Faith,” he says and it sounds like pebbles dropping into icy water. “You've been twenty minutes, I can't imagine what's taking so long.”

Her smile is shaky. It accessorizes perfectly with her legs.

“Who's this?” Her mother is standing behind her, shivering slightly in the draft from the open door.

“It's my…”

“I'm Faith's employer,” he says, smooth as you like, his eyes flickering over the blousy body in the stained nightgown. “You must be Mrs…”

It's like someone's flicked a switch and the bitch is running her hands through her hair, licking her lips and all but pushing Faith out of the way in her haste to clasp the hand that Wes, her Wes, is holding out in greeting. “Call me Darla, honey.”

“Faith. It's almost nine o'clock. You've made us both late.” It's only the fact that he's glaring at her, his eyes are on her and nowhere near her mother's, that she doesn't get hot and cold about the tightly reined in top note of rage in his voice.
But her mother isn't done yet. She's looking at Faith, then looking at Wes in a two and two make a fuck of a lot more than four way. “You always give Faith a ride in?” she asks in a querulous voice.

He looks down his arrogant nose at her. “Generally, no.”

His utter disdain finally penetrates even her mother's dulled synapses and she shuffles back, her expression wary. “Well, you should be going. She's never on time for anything. I'm surprised that she's managed to hold a job for this long.”

Faith isn't even bothering to try and stop the car crash, just leaning against the wall and waiting for the ambulance to come blaring round the corner.

“Don't slouch, Faith,” he barks at her, then turns to Darla, a humorless smile firmly plastered on his face. “Your daughter is a positive delight to have around. I can assure you that I'm lucky to have found a girl with such an impressive array of talents.”

And while Faith is wondering what the fuck that means, he wedges his hand under her armpit and tugs her firmly out of the door.

She knows her mother is watching them and she resists the urge to wrench herself out of his grasp. It's not until they're back in the car that she rounds on him.

“What the fuck was that about? I told you to stay here!” she hisses at him.

“Put your seat belt on, Faith.” His knuckles are white against the steering wheel. “You've made us unforgivably late.”

“I don't give a fuck!” The hiss has upgraded to a full-blown hissy fit. “Why didn't you do what I told you? Are you, like, deficient or something?”

“I really won't tolerate being spoken to like that,” he says in a quiet voice, his whole body turned away from her and she can feel the rage leaving her so she's suddenly airless like a deflated balloon.

“I'm sorry,” she says in a tiny voice. “Wes, it's just… work and you… then there's the other stuff and…”

But he's turning the key in the ignition, his face tight which just makes his cheekbones stand out in stark relief. She can't help it. She has to touch him. Her fingers are wrapping round his as he clasps the knob of the gear shift.

“Don't be mad at me, please,” she begs. Because this isn't part of the game. It's her and her shitty little life fucking everything up when she's just realized how good it could be.

He doesn't pull his hand away, but he doesn't turn to look at her either.

“Look, I just didn't want you to see her. Didn't want you to see how we, I mean, I live, okay? What I have to look forward to when I leave you every day at five o'clock.” Her voice cracks on that last bit, but she swallows it down and finds that though she's flailing, she's amazingly free of that old defeated tearful feeling. “And, now, obviously, you know why.” She shudders a little, the memory of the disgusting show her mother had put on the second she clapped eyes on Wes running through her head in an endless, nauseating clip.

He's replies by twisting his hand from underneath hers, grabbing her wrist, and only turning to look at her, finally, when he places it—rather tenderly, all things considered—back on her lap. Though she's beginning to be rather fluent in reading his silences, she's feeling fairly illiterate right about
He lets her wrist drop, and drives out of her blighted neighborhood like there's a blowsy, drunken hellhound named Darla on his trail.

Chapter Nineteen

Thanks to the fact that he lead-foots it the whole way, they reach the office at 8:45, according to the trusty clock on the dash. Not too bad, she thinks. Until she sees that there's already a car parked out front. One of those excessively sporty foreign cars, seemingly constructed entirely of sharp angles and tinted windows. But she's not at all surprised to see that Lilah's standing next to it on the sidewalk, giant Starbucks cup in hand, talking animatedly on her cell phone.

Wes inhales sharply, as if gathering strength from the air. “When I stop the car, I want you to take my keys and open up. I'll delay bringing her in as long as I can. Just make sure things are presentable in my office, please?” He pulls into the driveway and stops the car, and when he hands her the keys, she can see the shifty fear hiding under his perfect facade. Well, it's mostly because his hand shakes a little when it touches hers, but still. She can see it.

She smiles thinly and nods. Whatever punishment she's in for will have to wait, she supposes. It's more important now to put up a united front until his ex-wife is off the premises.

He does as he'd promised, and holds Lilah up outside so Faith can dash in and make sure things look shipshape. It's been nearly twenty-four hours since she'd run out in the rain, but it seems an eternity. Her desk looks mostly presentable, just a few things askew. She strides as quickly as she can into the inner office, opening the shades and discovering the reason for his hurried request. The bottle of Jameson's is still on his desk, uncapped; a glass still half-full beside it. She puts the cap back on the bottle and shoves it into the closest desk drawer that looks big enough to hold it. She's carrying the glass back to the kitchenette when she hears them enter. She quickly dumps it in the sink and starts making a pot of coffee.

Wes ducks his head in as they pass. “Faith, would you hold my calls for the time being? And bring coffee in five minutes.” Things can't be going that badly; he's not in that defeated pose Lilah seems to beat him into.

“Of course, sir,” she replies, with a heavy emphasis on the last bit.

Lilah cackles sourly as they move on. “Good little submissive you've found, Wesley.”

It takes all Faith's strength not to go after them and plant a spiked heel in the bitch's skull.

Wes and Lilah are chatting amiably when she takes the coffee in, and he waves her out of the room without so much as a thank you.

Whatever.

The phone's not ringing—it never really does anyway—and she's got nothing to type, so she doesn't see the harm in stepping out for a cigarette or two—and she certainly deserves them. Despite the fact that it's midmorning, the air's sharp and cold and she wishes she had a scarf or gloves or something as sucks down the nicotine as fast as she can.

And, in the end, it's really rather fortuitous that she chose that moment to go back in, because Darla is standing in front of Faith's desk, running her finger over the brass plaque that reads 'reception.'
There's a box at her feet, overflowing with what Faith can see are her posters, her clothes, her records, her quilt.

“Mom!” Faith circles around Darla, herding her toward the door. She obviously hasn't taken the time to change or shower or fix her hair, because she's in the same disheveled state they'd left her in. “What the hell are you doing here? You need to leave. Now.”

“Faithy, if you've become that man's whore,” Darla says, a little too loudly, sidestepping Faith's attempt to hustle her out. “I don't want you in my house anymore. You hear me, missy?”

“Mom, look, we can talk about this tonight, when I get home. Okay? This really, really isn't a good time.” She's fighting to keep her voice level, the best imitation of calm she can muster.

“Oh, you're wrong about that—this is the best time in the world. Listen to me, you're not setting one of your feet back in my house ever again, you dirty slut. Take your crap!” Darla kicks the box toward the desk. “Go be his kept woman, but don't come crying back to me when things don't work out.” She laughs harshly. “Because believe me, they won't! And where is your hoity-toity employer, anyway?”

“Ah, Darla,” Wes says. He's slipped in from the back office without either of them noticing. “So lovely to see you again. It just so happens, however, that I'm taking a rather important meeting at the moment and can't speak with you regarding your daughter at this time.”

“There's nothing for us to talk about, honey,” Darla spits at him. “You want her, you can keep her.”

Before he can reply, Lilah's slinking into the front office, smirking. “Well, what a pretty picture this is.” She's got her briefcase in hand and is reaching for her coat. “I'd love to stay and watch your domestic drama unfold, Wesley, but I've got work to do. I'll send the courier by this afternoon for those documents. Which I expect to be signed—or I'll see you in court.”

And with that she strides into the foyer, shoving her way to the door past Darla, who gives what can only be described as a disdainful sniff and follows, slamming the door on her way out.

It's not until they're gone that Faith notices the tears streaming down her face, ruining her mascara for the thousandth time.

“I'm sorry about this,” she whispers, running the tip of her pointed shoe along the side of the cardboard box. It's sad, really, that all her possessions fit in it, as is the fact that she's got nowhere to put them. “I didn't realize that she'd...”

“Well, frankly, Faith, I did,” he says flatly and reaches out to tuck a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. “Now, really. This is no time for tears. You and I have some unfinished business to attend to. Please tidy up and be in my office in five minutes.”

He's gone before she can say anything and maybe that's just as well. Hello? Homeless here? Not exactly in the mood for whatever he has planned—and somehow she doubts he'll be holding out his arms so she can crawl into his lap for a cuddle and get his shoulder wet with the tears he’s forbidden her to shed. Not really.

But there's nowhere else to go but to him, and she's about to head to the washroom to see what cold water can do, when the phone rings.

“Mr. Wyndam-Pryce’s office,” she says, dull resignation flattening her voice to a whisper.

“Faith? Is that you? Where have you been?”
Xander. A tiny spark of warmth flickers.

“Hi, Xander. Look—not such a good time right now. I’ve got to—”

“I can guess.”

There’s a dryness to his voice that’s new and she frowns. “What? Xander, I’m not—Mom just came here and she’s—God, she’s thrown me out. Dumped everything I own on the office floor and just—fuck, Xander, it’s all such a mess, you know?”

“Not too drunk to miss the neon sign flashing over your head, huh? Faith, I don’t know what’s going on, but that guy is way out of your league. What the hell do you think you’re playing at?”

“He’s my boss, Xander. Yesterday was a business meeting. I’m his fucking secretary, you know.”

She’s trying to keep her voice down and she’s twisted around so she can keep an eye out for Wesley doing his cat impression combined with the jack-in-the-box impersonation but it’s not easy. Christ, isn’t anyone going to give her just a tiny bit of sympathy?

“Faith, I was watching your table. Half the fucking kitchen staff were trying to grab an eyeful until the show ended. He had his hand so far up your skirt he—” Xander takes a deep breath. “No. Not going there. So not going there. Fine. Darla’s kicked you out; she’ll get over it. Want to stay with me for a day or two until she calms down and realizes with you gone, she’s out an errand girl, cleaner, and shoulder to throw up on?”

Xander lives in an apartment he shares with two other men who think sleep is over-rated and party time ends around four in the morning. It makes the bus station seem peaceful, and though she’s crashed there now and then, the thought of it now, after Wesley’s house, makes her head start to ache.

“Thanks, but you really don’t have the space,” she says, slumping back in her chair and rubbing at the wetness on her face with fingers that are still shaking. “I’ve got enough to get a room somewhere. Yeah, you’re right; it’ll just be for a day or—”

The shadow falling across her desk is the perfect way for him to announce himself.

“Look, I’ll call you later, okay?”

“He just came in, didn’t he? Faith, it’s my day off; I can be there in ten. You don’t have to stay there. I can fix you up with something; they want bar staff for the evening shift—”

“No! I’m not leaving. Just back off, okay? Bye.”

She puts the phone back on its rest and looks up into the bluest, coldest eyes in the world.

“Is it too much to expect you to keep your personal life out of my office?”

“He called me.”

“I don’t care about your excuses, Faith.”

“No. You don’t care about anything much, do you, Wes?” She stands up—not going to look up at him anymore and in these fucking heels, they’re eye to eye near enough—and points at the pitiful box cluttering up the carpet. “That’s my life sitting there. Bet yours doesn’t fit in a box that once held twenty-four cartons of Kraft fucking Dinner. But you know what? It doesn’t matter. None of it. I’ve
had it, you know? Just fucking had enough.”

She’s in his face now, feeling as if she’s encased in the same ice she has to chip away from him to get anywhere close. She gives him a smile that must look terrifyingly manic what with the streaky face and tear-swollen eyes and says brightly, “Still think I need punishing, Wesley? Or isn’t this the kind of pain and humiliation you like to dish out? Are you turned on because your ex just sneered at me, my mother called me a whore, and my best friend thinks I’m a stupid slut?”

"Are you getting hard right now because you know I’m building up enough negative brownie points to earn me a fucking day bent over your desk or your knee? Are you panicking thinking I’m going to want something from you, like an advance on my wages, or God forbid, a roof over my head now I don’t have one?"

He holds up his hand and she’s left without a word to say in the face of his disapproval.

“Faith, for the second time of asking, please make yourself presentable, pick up paper and pencil, come into my office and take down a letter. It might have escaped your notice, but in addition to sneering, Ms. Morgan made some threats that weren’t entirely idle. This—all of this—it can wait.”

His eyes flicker toward the overflowing grocery carton. “And move that box before someone trips on it.” His car keys land on her desk in an expensive clatter. “The boot, please, not inside the car. I’d rather not look as if I were collecting for a jumble sale.”

Throwing her box of pathetic possessions into the trunk of his car, then slamming the top down so hard that the impact jars all the way along her arm, does nothing to dissipate the tsunami of rage that's currently ricocheting through her body.

The last thing she wants is to sit there, all meek and mild and “Please, sir, how can you ever forgive me for being such a bad, little girl” when she feels like this. She wants to tear things down, burn them up, rip through every single piece of paper in the place. But she can’t. So she gathers up her pad and paper with shaking hands and curses her tight skirt and skyscraper shoes for forcing her to walk sedately when she wants to cover distances with Amazonian strides.

It's like their mutual anger is the third person in the room as he dictates a letter to Lilah, which is an exercise in impeccably polite scorn. There are six other letters after that to various lawyerly big guns, the gist of them being that Wesley Wyndam-Pryce Esquire is going to fuck Ms. Lilah Morgan's shit up big time.

When she scribbles down the last 'yours sincerely', she looks up and he's sitting there with this dreamy smile on his face, fingers caressing his black fountain pen and all it took for him to get his groove back was his part in the imminent downfall of his ex-wife. It's not so easy for her, she thinks, grinding her teeth and clenching her fists so hard that she hears a snap and looks down in surprise to see that she's broken her pencil clean in half.

The noise startles him out of his reveries and he comes to, blinking.

“Do you have be so careless with office property?” he starts but she can tell his heart really isn't in it. He's looking longingly at his big, boring law books and she tastes the anger rising in her like bile at the back of her throat.

She wants to go to that place where she doesn't have to think, all she has to do is feel. And he's the only one who can take her there.

Faith gets up from the chair and walks over to his desk. Bends over, forearms flat against the polished wood, ass pushed out and stares him right in the eye.
“I want you to punish me, sir,” she spits out and she knows she's looking all kinds of crazy. She can feel the fire burning in her eyes, knows he can see it too because he inches his chair away from her, then leans back.

He doesn't say anything for a while. His face is blank but she knows now that that's a mask he wears as he weighs up his options. What she needs vs. what he's prepared to give her. And she has to wait, bent over his desk, while he mentally checks the rulebook to see what his next move should be.

It hurts much worse than the flat of his hand on her ass. “Don't embarrass yourself,” he says quietly, standing up. “I'm going to get some lunch. You should make a start on those letters.”

There are lots of things she should be worrying about as she types up the letters so beautifully that they deserve their own wall in the Secretary Hall Of Fame. Like, where she's going to sleep tonight because it looks like there's a No Vacancies sign hanging up in the Wesley Wyndam-Pryce Home For Waifs And Strays. And if Xander really does think that she's nothing more than a bigass slut. And, oh yeah, how quick everyone is to point out how he's too good for her without offering her any alternatives.

But the one thing that's actually eating her up is his cool dismissal. He's not playing because her bullshit little life has got in the way, just like it always does.

He stays closeted in his office all afternoon. She paces the corridor outside, hearing him talking on the phone and it sounds like there's a stranger behind the door who's witty and urbane and laughing way too much to be her Wes. Her Wes stammers and barks out orders and sometimes doesn't say anything at all.

At 5.30, she comes in from the backyard where she's been trying to smoke herself into an early grave to find him waiting in reception, her green suede jacket dangling from his fingers. For a minute, she thinks everything's going to be okay, then the two worst things in a whole day of worst things happen in quick succession.

“I have to go to New York for the rest of the week,” he says, and gestures at a couple of sheets of paper lying on her desk. She listens numbly while he issues instructions, orders, requests for things that have to be done while he's away.

“You'll have to use the overnight courier service,” he finishes. “I've left the details on the second sheet.”

“Fine,” she says tonelessly.

“And I'll phone you first thing in the morning so it's imperative that you're here on time.”

“Fine,” she repeats and wishes she had some gum to chew loudly and snap in his face to perfect the picture of sullen teen lassitude that she's currently projecting.

“You realize that you're being utterly impossible,” he says with a sigh, running his fingers through his hair and looking like he'd rather be anywhere but here, even on the redeye to New York. “I'm aware that your circumstances have dramatically altered during the course of the day but certain things have to take precedence.”

Which is just bastard English speak for “you were a great fuck but this is getting way too heavy for me.”

She turns and walks to the door. Looks like Xander's sofa is going to be her cuddle buddy for the next few days but his hand is on her shoulder, stilling her. She lets him brush her hair out of her
collar, then turn her round and do up her buttons like she's a motherless child.

“Can I stay at your place then?” she asks and there's this fatal note of pleading in her voice that makes her feel so weak, more naked than she's ever been in front of him.

He eases her out of the door and locks up as she stands there, shifting her weight from foot to foot. “You're slouching,” he reminds her, then his arm is around her shoulders and such unwarranted affection is never going to lead to anything good.

Instead it leads to the worst thing that's happened that day. “I'm going to book you into a hotel,” he says, as he guides her to the car like she's a dodderly old lady who might go under at any moment.

“Why can't I stay at your place?”

He gives her this smooth explanation, which makes no sense. “It wouldn't be appropriate, Faith,” he tells her. “Not with Lilah on the warpath and me out of town. It's better for you to be somewhere safe.”

“It was plenty appropriate when you took me there and fucked me!” she yells in his face, her hand curving back, then stopping in mid-air as he flinches back.

“This is getting very tiresome.” He sounds so fucking bored. Like, it was fun when her problems were something that collided with his kink, but now they're just problems that he doesn't want to deal with.

The tension in the car is thick like syrup as he drives her downtown and into the underground parking lot of the Holiday Inn. She's painfully aware of his sidelong glances but she stares resolutely out of the window and waits for him to retrieve her crappy box out of the trunk before she gets out of the car and slams the door so hard that he winces.

“I can take it from here,” she snaps at him and he has the fucking nerve to look embarrassed.

He jostles her box, getting a better grip on it, and tries to stare her down. She isn't budging.

“I need to check you in with my credit card,” he points out. Without waiting to see if she's going to follow he walks to the stairwell.

The whole check-in thing is like an abject lesson in humiliation. She can see the way the receptionist looks at her, despite her fancy clothes. Next to Wes she looks like something he found on the street but the guy's very polite, careful to give nothing away as he asks whether she'd like a wake-up call or a paper. It's all in his eyes though.

Wesley's fidgeting with his wallet, checking his watch, and making it abundantly clear that he just wants this to be over. They stand in the foyer, her box between them as he counts out ten twenty dollar bills and hands them to her. Not like she's in a position to refuse and, besides, he fucking owes her.

“Faith…” If his sigh at her mutinous glare gets any more long-suffering, it'll earn a place in the Guinness Book of Records.

“Have a nice flight,” she snarls and turns her back so she doesn't have to watch him walk away.

Chapter Twenty

She gets through the rest of the week on autopilot. In the morning she gets up, depilates the flesh he
shaved, puts on the clothes he bought, and goes to work in a place that echoes with his absence.

Then she goes back to the hotel, strips off the clothes he bought for her, and huddles down underneath the bedclothes, watching cartoons until she goes bug-eyed and ordering milkshake after milkshake from room service. They go really well with the vodka in the mini bar.

He does phone, at precisely 8.32 every morning and 5.17 every evening. After the obligatory inquiry as to her general well-being, he's banging on about depositions and witness statements. And she's too busy frantically trying to scribble instructions down with fingers that have suddenly seized up to even think of doing something really lame like asking him if he's missing her.

Xander comes to the hotel on the second night but it's awkward. They snuggle up under the quilt to watch an OC marathon but it's not the same, especially when he sees the bruises around her wrists from where he tied her up.

“I'm going to kill him,” he says with a long exhale. “Slowly and painfully.”

Faith shoves her hands under the covers. “They're not… Jesus, Xand! They're, like sex bruises or whatever.”

He makes exactly the same face that he used to make when he was trying to kid himself that he was in love with her in eighth grade and would take her into the boiler room for these passionless make-out sessions that ended abruptly when he started taking Andrew Wells down there instead. “Woah! And I'm filing that under TMI.”

“You don't know anything about him,” she starts angrily.

“And really don't want to either.” Xander shudders. “He's creepy.”

There's an argument after that. More ferocious than any of the other fallings-out they've had in the past and when he storms out, she has this horrible feeling that he won't come back. But it doesn't hurt half as much as the other man who's just walked out on her.

On Thursday night, it takes six miniature bottles of vodka before she's comfortably numb. She's just wondering whether she'd puke if she made some inroads into the tub of Rocky Road, when her cell rings.

It's buried somewhere underneath the quilt and she dives for it and clicks the green 'answer' button eagerly. It's going to be Xand phoning to apologize.

“Hey, you!”

“Faith. I can hear that your phone manner has drastically diminished while I've been absent,” he says and it's not just how he says it, all drawly and languid but he's talking about her. What she’s doing. Not the endless legal shit that he wants done yesterday.

“Oh, hey,” she murmurs, then realizes that she's sounding a little slurred. “How are you?” she tries again, attempting to make her voice a little more perky.

“I'm very well,” he purrs. “I've bought you a present.”

Those five words shouldn't sound like they've had a Parental Advisory sticker slapped all over them but they do. And her mind's racing through a whole porn shop of possibilities. “Yeah?”

“Oh yes. I'm coming home tomorrow evening so I can give it to you then.” He sounds relaxed and
it's easier on the phone, when she's not worrying about what every nuance of his ever-changing face means.

“I've missed you,” she confesses, the vodka making her braver than usual. “I can't stop thinking about you.”

She can hear his tiny intake of breath, then a throaty chuckle. “Really? Because you seemed to be rather less enamored of me when I left.”

She tucks the phone underneath her ear and slides her body down the bed, one hand worming into the waistband of her pajama bottoms and tracing the smooth folds of her sex. Doesn't matter what he says, just as long as he keeps talking to her.

“I'm sorry that I was such a bitch but I'm gonna make it up to you.”

There's another hitch in his breathing. “That sounds very intriguing. Where are your hands, Faith?”

“Where do you think they are?” Boy, that vodka's made her bold and flirty, and she can't help but grin innocently at him through the receiver. She slips her index finger inside, gingerly, and is not at all surprised to find she's already quite wet. She stifles a giggle and hopes the light puff of breath that hits the mouthpiece doesn't give that away.

“I don't ask questions to have them answered with more questions.” If she closes her eyes and doesn't concentrate too hard, it's like he's got her bent over his desk, his hard cock pressing into the back of her thigh, his mouth pressed close to her ear. Okay, he sounds a little sweeter and lighter than he would in that position, but it's still pretty damn hot. “I asked you a simple question, Faith. Where are your hands?” Scratch that, he was just getting warmed up. The second time around, the question's steely, cuts right through, and sets her finger to gently rubbing her clit.

“Well, one of them is sort of holding on to the phone, and I'm touching myself with the other.” She doesn't recognize her voice, the way it's coming out, all saucy like that. Not like some tacky sex line operator, oh no. She's already in that place where speaking becomes thick and husky and every minuscule breath, swallow, sniffle is magnified—he can hear them all perfectly. Because she can hear the same coming from his end.

“I see. We're getting ahead of ourselves here, aren't we? Stop that, now.”

“Okay.” She doesn't.

She can hear him breathing on the other end for a few moments, as if he's still waiting. “Faith. I thought I asked you to...”

“Okay, okay. What are you, psychic now too?” She slips her hand out of her pants with a heavy sigh.

“That's better. Are you undressed?”

“No. I'm in my pajamas.”

He sniffs, sounding a tiny bit amused. “That's going to make this awkward. Remove them.”

“I'll uh, need to put the phone down for a second, okay? To get the top off.”

“Of course, go ahead.”
She drops the cell phone on the bed, wriggles out of her tank top and pajama pants, leaving them in an unceremonious heap on the floor—then bounds across the room to switch off the main light and grab her spiked milkshake with one hand and a bottled water from the mini-bar with the other.

Setting everything on the nightstand, she switches on the bedside reading light and slides back under the sheet. It's cool and scratchy against her nakedness in that way that all hotel sheets are, even, she imagines at those five-star places. There's no way to wash something every day without...

“Faith.” His voice is tinny, calling from inside the phone, which she's neglected to pick back up. She scrabbles for it. “Sorry, sorry. I uh, had do get something to drink.”

“Mmm. Yes. And what have you been drinking this evening, Faith? Milkshakes and vodka again?”

“God, Wes, how is it that you can't help but spy on me even when you're in another city?” She tries to put on some insolence, but she's kind of touched that he's bothered to call the front desk and check on her room service bill.

“You should've ordered a proper dinner. I see I've been remiss in not giving you that particular instruction.”

“Wes, I hate to say it, but the room service is generally kind of gross here. And totally overpriced. Breakfast's pretty good though.”

“Yes, I imagine it must be for you to order a Continental and an American every morning.”

“Hey, hey!” She's mock miffed, grateful that the distance allows this kind of game. “I'm hungry in the morning, y'know?”

“Yes, I recall.”

“And like, the muffins in the Continental are great, but the rest kind of sucks—and they won't send any up on the side with eggs and bacon for some reason. So I've had to order both.” She giggles, suddenly embarrassed, and he makes a little breathy noise that she hopes is the sign of a smile. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I don't mean to go on and on like this.”

Dammit. She's forgotten about how she gets a little chatty and a little stupid when tipsy.

“It's quite endearing, actually.” He clears his throat a bit; shifts the mood deftly, carefully—his voice dropping a bit, sending shivers down her spine. “I've missed you too.”

It's turning into the sort of conversation she can imagine a couple having, and she's floundering a bit. “That's—God, Wes. I wish it was tomorrow night.”

He gives this soft laugh that curls around her the way his hands do. “I'll be rather tired,” he says, “and there’s going to be a considerable amount of work to get through, but I imagine that can wait until the morning.”

“It’s been going well, hasn’t it?” she asks, and she really wants to know.

“Oh, yes.” There’s a satisfied purr behind his voice and she’s grinning along with him.

“That’s so cool, Wes. And, hey, I forgot to tell you; that plant in the corner of your office? Lost two leaves, and no, I didn’t give it too much water. Guess it’s missing you too, huh?”

“Two leaves? Faith, you must not have been following the instructions I left—”
He sounds grim and she’s squirming under the covers now, holding back her giggles. “Relax, Wesley. I’m lying. It’s got this little flower bud coming, right in the middle. Never looked better.”

There’s this silence, then he says slowly, “Faith, you are not to drink anything more of an alcoholic nature unless I’m there. Are we clear on that?”

She’s feeling jumpy enough in her stomach even without the ice cream to make agreeing to that easy enough.

“And since you seem to be in such a delightfully playful mood...” God, she was too. Ever since he’d said he was coming back. “Perhaps I should play too.”

Thinking about the way Wesley plays is enough to make her hand start to move down her body again, and he can’t have heard the rustle of the sheets but he raps out. “Faith. Perfectly still please.”

“Wesley...”

“You do remember that I dislike repeating myself?”

“Yeah. I’m a statue.”

That gets a small chuckle. “I don’t think you’ll ever manage to be that, Faith.” She waits and he says gently, “If I were there with you, Faith, I think, yes, I’d be kissing you now.”

Her lips part as he says that, as if she can feel his mouth on hers in one of those long, sweet kisses that she’s come to crave, and she swallows. “You don’t do that enough,” she tells him.

“Kiss you? Perhaps I don’t. Would you like me to kiss you, Faith?”

“Yes,” she says and there’s nothing to add to that, because it’s true.

“Where?”

And that just opens up so many doors in her mind that she closes her eyes to shut out the dazzle.

She drinks in the sound of muffled silence and the slight crackle of static, hoping fervently that when she opens her eyes again he’ll be there, kissing away the worry knotting her up inside, pressing his lips reverently to her palm like she’s a household saint.

And there’s a dull ache in her chest, because she knows with depressing certainty that no matter how near he might sound she’ll still be alone in the room. How is it that he’s less remote to her now than when he’s with her? She finds herself brushing away the tears that are inevitably welling up.

God, she doesn’t want to cry, not fucking now, not when the brusque disapproval that colors his usual tone of voice has been softened by desire. She bites back the sob that’s trying to work its way out of her. When she barely succeeds, she makes a silent vow to never drink again. It’s brought everything right up to the surface—all the bullshit and emotional chaos of the last few days—and made all her fucking moods turn on a fucking dime.

“Are you there?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m just—” She blinks away the damp traces of tears. She tries to laugh but it comes out as more of a half-hearted sigh. “I’m here. You’re there.”

“But not for much longer.” There’s a brief pause. “There’s something I’d like for you to do for me.”
“What?” There’s a hitch in her throat when she says it, and between that and the fucking knot in her stomach she feels uncomfortably like some naïve, lovesick teenager. That’s nearer to the truth than she’d like.

“I want you waiting for me in that bed, exactly as you are now, when I arrive tomorrow. Leave work at five sharp, make sure you’re at the hotel and in bed by six. Will you do that?”

“Yeah. I mean, yes, of course.” She turns on her side, cradling the phone between ear and shoulder. He’s just a little bit closer that way.

“And Faith—no vodka. I’ll be severely displeased if I find out you’ve been drinking. I do mean that.”

Chastisement again. Like he’s her fucking father. The ridiculous thing being, her own father would never say that, wouldn’t even care enough to—She doesn’t finish the thought. Mostly she’s hurt that Wes expects her to misbehave. Hasn’t she been good? Vodka aside?

“I’m not like her, I’m not.” The words tumble out in a spontaneous rush before she can stop them. She knows she sounds almost petulant, and maybe a little hysterical, but she can’t help it.

There’s another pause. Is he surprised? Angry? She wants nothing more than to pluck the words out of the air and swallow them back up.

Instead, he just says, very quietly, “That was never my implication, Faith. Believe me. You will never be like her. You’re better than that.”

That stuns her to silence again. He’s hardly one to speak idly, and it means a great deal to her that he’s said it at all. She’s just recovering from that when he moves on.

“Now, Faith. You’ve somehow managed to neglect my earlier question.” His voice is smooth and insinuating again.

Oh, right. They were headed to this other place before she had her tiny little freeform freakout.

“I’d hate for you to feel as though I’d been remiss in certain areas. So, if I were there right now, what would you want me to do?”

“I just want you here. This is a big bed to have all to myself. I’m not so used to that.” She tries to keep it light-hearted, to veer things back to the way they were just a few minutes ago.

“I seem to be having the same problem.” He sounds bemused, and a little sleepy; when he pauses she idly wonders if he’s smoothing back the covers, wishing she were there with him? “You’d love the view from here. The park is so quiet at this time of night.”

“You know, I’ve never even been out of this fucking state. Well, except for that time my dad decided we were all going to have a nice vacation for once. He got pulled over for an expired license right across state lines, and that was the end of that. Some nice fucking vacation.” She laughs ruefully.

“It’s a dead-end town, Faith. I don’t think you belong.”

“I’ve never fit in here, ever.” She sighs heavily—doesn’t want this turning into a therapy session, that’s for sure. She tries a different tack. “So, what’s your view like? Tell me about that. No, wait—at your hotel—are the sheets scratchy?”

“Not exactly. No.” She can hear him shifting about. “They’re quite nice, now that you mention it.”
“Hey, well, mine aren't. They're wicked scratchy and they smell kind of weird too. Too clean.”

“Well, Faith, the next time you get kicked out of your house and I'm called away on business at the last possible moment, I'll be sure to book you something better than the nicest room at the Holiday Inn.”

“Wait, I thought you said I needed to get the hell out of Dodge. Shouldn't I go with you next time?” She falters. “Er, if there is a next time?”

“Mmm. Yes, I suppose that might be feasible. If you are good, of course, and don't try to burn the office down every day with your little steno pad conflagrations.”

“Oh, don't worry about that. I can be good. I can be very, very good.” She puts on her best breathy phone sex voice. “But you don't like it when I'm too good, do you, sir? No fun that way.”

“Now, Faith, you needn't stoop to that. Of course I'll bring you with me.”

She laughs and sits up, propped against the headboard, surrounded by pillows, the scratchy sheet wrapped around her. They're obviously not going to dip into phone sex at this rate; might as well get more comfortable. “Hey, so where are you staying anyway? I'm assuming that there aren't any Holiday Inns that overlook Central Park. Are you at the Plaza, Wesley, darling?” she purrs on a faux hoity-toity accent. He's actually laughing now, really laughing, not just a jovial little chuckle, and she's trying to imagine what that looks like. She's seen his goofy grin, but never a full-out laugh.

“No, not that garish thing. No, it's a little pensione affiliated with...” He hesitates for a split second. “With the law school I attended. Do you know the statue of Balto, in the park?”

“No, Wes, I don't.” She sighs, just a little exasperated. How would she?

“No matter—it's just that I can very nearly see it from my balcony. Incidentally, it's snowing here.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes—as you say—seriously.”

“Hey, give me a break, okay? I've never seen snow before. Well, on TV or in the movies or whatever, but not in person.”

“Well, it's perfectly lovely—I wish you were here to see it,” he says, hushed, in that sweet, honey-dripping tone.

She sighs, snuggling back down in the bed. She just can't help but get a little wobbly when he speaks like that. “Tell me more,” she whispers.

“Just a little bit more. Then I think it's best that we both go to sleep. I've got an early meeting before my flight, and the overnight courier will be arriving at the office at 8:45 with a number of packages I need you to take care of. But we can discuss that when I phone you in the morning.”

As if by the power of suggestion, she yawns hugely. “Yeah, okay, sleep—that actually sounds like a good idea. But tell me more about the snow first.”

And he does. He tells her about how earlier in the evening he'd stood up on the roof of the pensione, straining to see the stars over the city's glare, and how he tried to catch snowflakes on his tongue. (She laughs in disbelief at that one.) He tells her how beautiful all those lights are, though, twinkling above the trees, barren branches glazed with ice. And how the ground looks like it's been frosted by
giants, to make a huge cake. About how earlier, shivering on the balcony, he'd seen one lone soul trekking across the length of the park on cross country skis. How the pensione's doorman quietly disapproved of his shoes for this weather. And there's more, but she only half-hears it, her eyelids drooping, heavy with sleep.

“Faith,” he whispers. “I'm going to hang up now. Good night.”

“Mmm, okay. Thank you, Wes. Sweet dreams,” she says, between yawns, half-awake.

“You too. Don't forget about tomorrow night. Good night.”

“How could I forget?” she whispers to the dial tone.

Chapter Twenty-One

The next morning she's waiting at the office, bracing herself for a back to business Wesley and she gets that; brisk voice snapping out instructions, an impatient sigh when she asks him to repeat a telephone number, but at the end his voice drops, and all the passion he's been devoting to work gets sent her way.

“I gave you some instructions last night, Faith. I hope you weren’t too sleepy to remember them.”

And just like that, her fingers are curling around her pencil, and she’s closing her eyes against the rush of longing that’s going to make it hard to concentrate on anything but the fact that he’s coming back to her.

“No, I think I’m clear on what you want, sir,” she says, giving the last word a wicked twist.

He keeps his voice level but she can tell he’s in the sort of mood that’d end up with her moaning his name in less than five minutes if he were here. “Let’s hope so, shall we? I’ll see you at six, then. And Faith—I'm sure you’ve been skipping lunch. Not today. An apple, a glass of milk and, let me see, tuna on rye.”

She grins because she can just picture him frowning as he mentally studies the menu at the sandwich shop they eat at. “Yes, Wesley.”

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She’s late getting back to the hotel room. He’d told her to leave at five but she’d wanted to make sure everything was done, and it’s nearly twenty past when she locks up, and she’s only left with time for a quick shower, when she’d wanted a long bath, and a frantic tidying up, that consists of shoving everything into the cheap suitcase Xander lent her when he came over, when she’d wanted to pack it neatly. The cardboard box had been shredded—not burned, though Christ, she’d wanted to—and shoved into the inadequate wastepaper bin the very first night.

The bed’s made, of course, and she pops the chocolate they leave on the pillow into her mouth as she slides, naked and slightly damp, between the sheets at precisely 5.59, her heart speeding up when she hears footsteps in the corridor. They keep on going, and she sighs, snuggles down and waits. This is Wesley. He won’t be late.

By 6.15 she’s getting a little bored and it occurs to her that she’s not exactly how she was when he gave the order. Smiling, and yeah, getting a little low down tingle at what she’s doing, she gets herself into position, fluffing the pillows, spreading her legs a little, placing her hands on the outside of the sheets, palms flat. Picking up the phone isn’t really a good idea, so she misses that out.
She’s so turned on by the time she’s finished that the time just flies by until 6.30.

By seven, she’s ready to scream with frustration. She’s got herself in a place where she can’t move, won’t move, not until he arrives. The stubborn, sullen obedience that took her into work the first day after he left, sweetening as the days went by, because he needed her and she was making what he was doing easier, returns and gives her something to lean on.

Remembering that the T.V was on, sound muted, when she was talking to him, gives her a thrill for all of thirty seconds, until she realizes that the remote’s been tidied away by the fucking housekeeping staff and even if it was by the bed, the way she likes it, she still wouldn’t be able to reach it.

By eight, she’s thirsty; by nine she wants to pee as if she’s drunk a gallon of water, by ten the tears are squeezing their way out of tightly shut eyes because fuck, his plane’s delayed, isn’t it? Fucking picturesque snow dumping down shitloads of white fluff and grounding him. Or the plane’s crashed. Or he drove too fast after he landed and crashed the car. God, yes. Couldn’t wait to get to her, and drove like he always does when he’s in a rush and now he’s bleeding, crippled, dead.

By eleven, she’s thinking it’d serve him right and inventing tortures to inflict on him. She tells herself that if the phone rings, she’ll move to answer it, but she’s not sure she would, and that’s a little freaky, but she won’t let herself think about that.

When she realizes she’s reciting the poem she told him in a low murmured mumble, she tries to stop, but it’s endlessly circling in her head, and somehow it’s Wesley’s voice saying the words, and when he gets to So close that when you close your eyes, I fall asleep, she’s crying for real.

Somewhere between the tears, the anger, and the ache from muscles that want to move but she won’t let them, she falls asleep.

She wakes as he walks in, deftly flipping the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign to the outside of the door and locking it with a click that sounds decisive, promising and firm. And she discards every practiced sentence, every planned smile and sultry pout, sits up a little straighter, and hisses, “You fucking bastard, where have you been?”

He’s there. In the same room with her. A little taller, a little leaner and a little more scary than she remembers him, as he shrugs off his black wool coat and flings it over the back of a chair with a casual disregard. It’s like he’s sucking all the air out of the room as he slowly walks toward her.

She tries again, squinting at the clock on the bedside table. “It’s half past fucking one. What the hell took so long?”

He’s not walking. Scratch that. He’s prowling toward her as she scoots back on the bed and pushes her tangled hair out of her eyes.

“I thought you were dead in a ditch somewhere. You could have fucking called!” Her voice is scratchy, the threat of tears hovering again and he licks his lips and all of a sudden her nakedness, her sleep-crumpled body, feels like it’s about to go into meltdown. She’s crawling across the bed without even being aware of it.

“But if I’d called, you wouldn’t have been able to answer it anyway, would you, Faith?” he points out, eyes gleaming, a muscle banging away in his cheek. “Because I told you not to move.” He comes to a halt by the foot of the bed and stands there, eyes running over her and she can feel them like an army of ants swarming over her body.
“I didn't move,” she protests, not bothering to get bogged down on the small print of her race to the bathroom to pee halfway through her vigil. “I stayed here just like you told me and I was cold and I didn't even pull the covers up and you weren't here!”

But despite the whiny tone and her indignant expression, her hands are reaching toward him and he's here and she's touching him, running her hands up his shirt, feeling the muscle and bone underneath and pulling herself up so she's kneeling and if she lifts her head, just so…

“Uh-uh, Faith,” he tuts and he's taking a step back, stilling her wandering hands by wrapping his fingers around them. “Still terribly impatient, aren't you?”

“Well, yeah.” She knows she's pouting, but he's still holding her hands, smoothing the pad of his thumb over the tips of her fingers. “Where were you?”

“My plane got grounded at JFK while they waited for the snow to clear,” he explains, with the glimmer of a smile. “Then I had to go home and shower, have something to eat. The time quite ran away.”

“You're such a bastard,” she whispers, tipping her head back so she can see the gleam of amusement and something else, something darker that's making his eyes all pupil, as they sweep around the room, taking in his surroundings, then coming back to her.

“Very possibly,” he agrees equably and pushes her gently away from him. “It occurred to me while I was on the plane that there were certain matters left unattended between us.”

She frowns. It seems a lifetime ago since he left town. Then she remembers and smiles. “I made us late for work.”

He nods gravely. “And you were unforgivably rude to me too. There have also been incidents since I've been away, haven't there, Faith?”

Have there? “Like what?” she asks indignantly. “I haven't come the whole time you were away.”

That gets her a wolfish smile as he folds his arms, then schools his features into granite sternness. “Really? That must have been very frustrating for you. But actually I was thinking of the quite monumental bill for room service you managed to accumulate. All those breakfasts. All those vodka milkshakes.” He allows himself a tiny moue of distaste.

She thought that when he came back, he'd be so overcome with pent-up lust that he'd pin her to the bed and fuck her brains out until she didn't know the difference between night and day, black and white, good or bad. But this…this is so much better.

“I'm sorry, sir,” she says demurely, eyes downcast and tries to ignore the way her clit has started pulsing.

“I wish I could believe that, Faith. But I rather think that your apology is somewhat insincere. It lacks credibility.” He pauses for effect and every single molecule that she possesses is screaming now “I think you enjoy disobeying me.”

“I don't, sir.” She draws out the final word like her fingers are stroking his skin.

“You're wet though, aren't you?” he asks dispassionately, then he's moving, finally, leaning over and pressing his hands down on the bed. “Put your hand between your legs and show me.”

She's sprawled backward on the quilt and it's an easy matter to run her hand down her body, over the
curve of her belly, taking her sweet time about it, before she can trace the sticky lips of her slit with two fingers. While she's there, she can't resist rubbing down on her swollen clt, trying to alleviate the ache that started when he locked the door.

“Stop that!” he hisses. “Show me your hand, Faith.”

Her fingers are glistening as she pulls them free and offers them to him. His knee finds purchase on the bed so he can reach toward her. Then his mouth is closing round her fingers, his tongue swirling along their length before sucking hard, just a hint of teeth and it's so like the way he made her take his cock that she's swaying unsteadily and panting.

“Wes, please,” she says with a whimper. “You made me wait so long. I'm good to go here.” And she inches forward, only to have his hand bear down on her shoulder.

“Imagine how good to go you're going to feel in an hour.” His hand slides down to cup one heavy breast and worry her swollen nipple with his thumb.

An hour? He's not going to let her come for an hour? She's not going to make it. But even as she thinks it, she knows that she will, and when the hour's up, he'll make the wait worth her while. He is such a bastard.

“Why?” she has to ask, even though she already knows.

He brushes the hair back from her flushed face, traces the curve of her ear and gives her such a tender smile that it makes her heart sing. “Because the waiting, the anticipation, make the pleasure just that bit sweeter.”

She gives him a rueful smile and nudges her head against his hand. “I can't believe you're going to make us wait for an hour. Hey, you wanna watch some TV until then?”

That gets her a playful tap on her thigh, his fingers straying inwards. “I don't recall saying anything about me waiting, do you?”

Which is just so unfair and she opens her mouth to tell him. Almost manages it but he kisses her, his tongue delving into her mouth as his hands cup the back of her head. The taste of him is overwhelming and she'll wait however long he sees fit but doesn't mean that she can't grind herself against his hard thigh, knead at his shoulders with hungry hands.

It's like a thousand teen make-out sessions. She's pinned to the bed and he's on top of her, all over her, so that when she takes a breath, he lets it out. Her legs are wrapped round his waist and he doesn't seem to mind when she arches against the hard jut of his cock. But when she starts pushing against his erection, her breathing frantic and labored, the friction and the tickle of his trousers against her clt almost enough to make her go whooshing up in flames, he pulls himself away.

“You've got forty-seven minutes before you're allowed to come,” he says looking at the heavy, old-fashioned watch that he wears.

She wonders what he'd do if she just shoved her hand between her legs and brought herself off? But she discards that as a truly bad idea. He might leave. Again. And it's always so much better when he does it.

“Wes, please,” she begs because he's getting off the bed and he's already too far away. “Help me out.”

“Very well.” His voice is like treacle, so thick that she's going to drown in it. “Come here, to the
edge of the bed.”

She slides down so she's perched cross-legged and looks at him expectantly.

“Now what?”

“You're not to speak, Faith. I want you to follow my instructions to the letter.” That clipped tone does it for her every time. She's nodding like a little dog.

“I want your feet on the floor, your legs spread. Hands flat on the bed, please.”

She rushes to comply and her nerve-endings are over-sensitized enough that the carpet feels like needles against the soles of her feet. Her cunt is so wet that when she parts her legs, she's aware of her juices clinging to her thighs.

“Now unzip me and take out my cock.”

Never thought she'd hear him say that, so prim and proper even as she frees the rigid, angry length of him, drops of precum oozing from the head. She closes her eyes as she feels another wave of wetness pool out of her.

“I want you to lick around the tip very gently.”

He makes her suck him off forever. So all that she is is the taste of him in her mouth and his voice in her ears. He's given up all pretense of not being affected by the way she's using her mouth, sucking hard on the head and delicately digging the tip of her tongue into the little slit that's leaking out beads of spunk.

His head is flung back, which sucks (pun kinda intended) because she can't see the expression on his face, but his hands are clenched into white-knuckled fists and as she nibbles at the edge of his foreskin with blunt teeth, he whimpers.

“Take me as deep as you can,” he snarls between gritted teeth. “Use your hands if you have to.” And she knows that he needs to come and she wants him to come undone because of her, because of what she is and what she can do.

Faith relaxes her throat and takes as much of him as she can and that isn't enough. Not nearly enough when she wants to swallow him whole. One hand cups his heavy balls, squeezing them gently as she jacks off the base of his cock with firm strokes. His hand creeps up to hold her head still but he doesn't start fucking her face like all the others. He trusts her to do this because he knows that she won't let him down.

She pulls back slightly as he moans because he's coming and she wants to taste it in her mouth, not feel him spurting down her throat, going to waste. His knee bangs against her shoulder as he jerks against her and moans again.

“Faith. My Faith.”

She swallows him down for that; can't take her mouth away because he tastes so good and he said her name. Made her his. Jesus, could she get any more sentimental? She's still licking and sucking at him, when he takes his hands away from her head and gently disengages himself from her voracious mouth.

“Faith, please,” he says softly and she guesses that maybe it's too much to have her slurping down on him like a Wes flavored popsicle when he's just come.
“I can’t help it. You taste so good, Wes. You have to let me do that more.” She smirks at him and swipes the curve of her bottom lip with her tongue, just to catch the last drops.

“I really should go away more often if this is the reception I get,” he says, his back to her as he heads toward the bathroom.

“No, you shouldn’t,” she mutters to the empty room. “Not unless I get to come too.”

Which, yeah, would be a really good idea any time soon. The skin is tight and itchy underneath the juices that have dried on her thighs. Plenty more where that came from, and with one ear metaphorically cocked for the sound of running water, she presses her fingers into her sopping slit. If she came now, really quickly, it’d mean that he’d have to work hard for the next one. Have to spend longer…

“Faith, I can see that you seem to have immense trouble following simple instructions.” The words are like ice cubes tumbling down her back, as she looks up with her hand still jammed between her legs, to see him standing in the doorway of the bathroom, judge, jury and executioner.

He’s silhouetted in the doorway with the garish yellow light from the bathroom spilling out around him, throwing a long shadow across the bed. Just the sound of his voice is almost enough to make her—no, she’s so not going there. She snaps to attention, hurriedly pulling her greedy fingers away from her cunt and placing her hand flat on the quilt again.

“Really, Faith. I’m beginning to think that your promises to me mean less than nothing. I can’t seem to trust you to behave when left to your own devices. It’s most disheartening.” He walks toward her, very deliberately and slowly.

He’s still dressed of course, and looks so frustratingly impeccable that she wonders if she imagined everything that just transpired in some feverish wet-dream and he’s only just walked in through the door.

She’s there waiting, expectant, at the edge of the bed, at the edge of coming, so very ready to scream at him in abject frustration. When he walks right past the bed and sits down in the overstuffed chair by the window she almost cries out with frustration.

He sees the look of shock on her face and smiles that cool, tight-lipped smile of his. He pats his thigh.

“Come here, Faith.”

Part of her wants to tell him to shove it, to just fuck off because she’s so sick of this condescending bullshit, but Christ, she just can’t. Not when he’s sitting there looking stern. That look gets her every fucking time. She resents how predictable she’s become.

She hauls herself up off the bed, and manages to cross the room with a modicum of grace, all things considered.

When she’s about three steps away, he tells her to stop.

“I’m not sure you deserve to come, Faith. Not after your appalling behavior earlier.” He nods minutely in the direction of the bed.

He’s not going to make her beg, is he? Her mouth drops open and she knows she must look like the kid who’s come downstairs on Christmas morning to find nothing under the tree. In point of fact, she was that kid.
But he must have reconsidered—or else has some other diabolical thing in store for her—because he pats his knee again and she resumes walking toward him.

When she reaches him, she straddles him and lowers herself slowly to rest on his parted thighs, his incipient hard-on teasing her through the fabric of his trousers. It’s déjà-vu all over again.

He’s looking directly at her, but his hands are still resting on the arms of the chair, apparently disinterested. Why won’t he touch her? God, she just wants him to kiss her. That would make everything right with the world.

She’s unconsciously circling her hips slightly against him when he gives her another long-suffering sigh.

“This isn’t some cheap strip club downtown, Faith. I’m not asking for a lap-dance.”

She tries to hold herself still against the delicious insistence between her legs. It’s getting more difficult. If she doesn't come soon, she's going to spontaneously combust. Or curse his fucking name for all eternity, whichever comes first. Because it sure as hell isn’t going to be her the way things are going.

“Now.” He’s all business again. “What would you say would be a suitable punishment for your little transgression earlier?”

He gives her this devastatingly self-assured glance, and she flinches away from it. And here she’d hoped he’d be so carried away with lust that he’d forget all about that. Christ, not Wes.

“Ah yes,” he murmurs, almost idly, and when he places his hands at the small of her waist it sends a shiver through her. He maneuvers her, gently but firmly, so that she’s draped across his lap, ass bared to the cool air. To her considerable frustration, his fingers never once stray between her legs.

“I despair that this will cure you of your ills, Faith, but I can only hope.” His fingers skim a featherlight path down her back and come to rest at the curve of her ass.

“What do you have to say in your defense before I begin?”

“Nothing.” Pause. “Sir.”

“Very well.” The cool air shifts as he raises his hand, raising goose bumps along her as-yet unmarked skin. He places his other hand flat against her belly to steady her. It’s reassuring somehow. She closes her eyes, waiting with exquisite anticipation for the blow to connect.

Which it does, hard. He must have really appreciated the terse insincerity of her “sir.” She practically sees cartoon stars, and the force of the blow starts another fire between her legs. There’s a whole conflagration going on down there.

She almost cries out when he finally takes his hand away and breaks contact with her already tender flesh—she feels the shock of it as much as the blow itself.

He doesn’t hit her again right away, just lets her wait, lets her luxuriate in the heat spreading like wildfire through her limbs. He does so like to make her wait.

And then—thwap!—another one, just as forceful as the first and slightly to the left this time, and she’s thankful for his resolute hand because otherwise she would have slid bonelessly off his knee and onto the floor. She stifles a cry.
There’s another, and another, and another, until she’s lost count entirely; she’s nearly numb there and positively feverish everywhere else. “God, please, just…”

He doesn’t say a word, just rolls her gently over onto her back. She can’t help but hiss a little at the new pressure on her raw buttocks.

He gives her a devious little smile. “Seems the hour is almost up.”

He slides his arms under her knees and shoulders, cradling her close for a moment. She can’t help but shiver deliciously as his arm runs along the back of her neck.

“Five minutes, to be precise,” he says, stroking her hair. After a few moments, he glides smoothly out of the chair and carries her to the bed. It’s almost very sweet and tender, she thinks, face upturned and lips pouty and ready for the inevitable kiss.

Instead, he rather unceremoniously drops her on the bed, those damn scratchy sheets even more irritating now that her ass is as raw as can be. Her mouth is wide with protest, but before she can speak, he’s on his knees on the floor before her, pressing her thighs wide open.

Leaning in close to her wet snatch, he blows on it gently and strokes the edges of her inner thigh with his thumbs, sending her quivering and clenching at the ghost of a feeling.

She’s too stunned to protest, just closes her eyes and steels herself what’s sure to be the longest five—and perhaps now only four—minutes of her life.

He starts gently, a long lapping circuit that runs from no man's land up to the little divot above her clit, and slips along this course again and again with what can only be described as precise tenderness. The teasing strokes are enough to nearly drive her mad and she’s teetering on the brink of coming over and over. And it takes more than a few moments before she catches on that with each increase in the intensity of her throaty moans, he’s pulling back. It’s nearly too late though, as he’s only just flicking his tongue over her clit at that point, and it’s kind of like throwing a glass of water at a burning building.

“Wes, please,” she begs. “Don't stop. Please. Don't.” She’s lightheaded and her limbs are suffused with a numbing tingle that’s spreading rapidly.

He stops tonguing her completely. “No, Faith—I'm sorry, but you're just going to have to wait for another,” he pauses to squint a bit at the clock before, flashing that feral grin again and pressing her legs into the bed a little harder, “minute and a half before you can come. That doesn’t seem too bad, now does it?”

She can only grit her teeth and grab on to the bedclothes for dear life as he dips back down between her legs and resumes swirling the tip of his tongue gently over her clit, a hand slipping up and over her thigh and one finger added into the mix now, circling and teasing her slick opening.

She can’t help it, her left hand flies to her mouth, and she bites down on the heel of her palm, intent not to let any more traitorous moans escape.

He stops, pulls away again, and it's all she can do not to scream. “Now, Faith, that isn't very sporting. Put both arms flat on the bed, where they belong.”

She does so slowly—two can play this game, she thinks—but as soon as he sees that she’s obeying the command, he returns to his task and she can’t help but drop it quickly. His unoccupied hand snaps up from her thigh and around her wrist and pins it down as soon as it hits the bed. She tries to pull away, but he just tightens his grasp, twisting it a bit and digging his nails into the tender flesh.
This time she really does scream, and it melts from protest to pleasure in a half a second, the pent up fire from days of waiting finally, finally spreading hotly over her flesh.

And his tongue is still on her, still teasing out the last bits of heat, and she's nearly kicking him away when he finally pulls back, stroking her legs and watching, bright-eyed, as she shivers and moans, the aftershocks like waves pounding against the shore, over and over.

When she's finally still, she slides over to her nest of pillows, propping herself up to look him in the eye. He's still kneeling, looking at her with a kind of reverence like she's some kind of goddess, and that's nearly enough to send that heat curling over her skin again.

“Would you like your present now?” he asks breathily, leaning in closer.

She nods, pulling him close for a kiss, finally, running her tongue over his shiny, salty sweet lips.

“Though I might swap it for you being in a hurry for once,” she murmurs as the kiss ends.

He doesn’t seem to mind that; in fact he grins as if she’s just said something funny. “Would it help if I told you that I was planning to make you wait longer than an hour?”

She can’t help rolling her eyes and giving a plaintive moan at the thought, but with her body still humming and tingling from coming, she’s not going to panic. “What made you change your mind?” she asks as she starts to unbutton his shirt, needing to get her hands on his skin.

He reaches up and stops her busy hands. “You did.”

And while she’s still recovering from the simplicity of that, he moves over to his coat, draped neatly on a chair, and pulls out a long, slender jewel case, in a deep blue, from an inner pocket.

She’s been expecting—well, she wasn’t quite sure what she’d been expecting, but jewelry wasn’t it. Her fingers caress the leather box, stamped in gold with a name she doesn’t recognize, then she struggles with the stiff lid. Wesley’s watching her, eyes intent on her face, and she hopes she likes it, because he’s going to see if she doesn’t.

The lid snaps open and she’s staring down at a richly gleaming strip of silver.

“It’s a watch,” Wesley says softly. “I thought you might find it useful given your occasional difficulty with punctuality.”

It’s not a watch the way she knows them; cheap plastic ones that you threw away when the battery died. It’s something beyond that. Her fingers trace the elegant strap, hover over the square face, then she clears her throat and taps at one of two small stones set into the bracelet where it joins onto the watch itself. “Are they rubies, Wes?”

“Yes. They reminded me of you.”

They’re like tiny imprisoned flames, burning against the cool silver, held in check by it, and they blur as her eyes fill with tears.

“I was tempted by a rather lovely Art Deco one,” he says, producing a handkerchief and whisking it across her face in a practiced move, frowning at her until she takes a shaky breath and wills the tears to stop. “But I thought you’d prefer something new. Something only you’d owned.”

“Put it on me?” she asks, in a voice gone husky. “Please?”
She holds out her hand and he takes the watch out of the box and fastens it around her wrist. It clings to her and she shivers, not at the touch of the metal, but his fingers.

“Do you like it?” he asks and she realizes she hasn’t thanked him yet and flushes.

“God, Wesley, you just—like it? It’s beautiful. So fucking perfect, you know?” She stares at it, tilting her wrist this way and that to make it sparkle before launching herself at him and giving him an exuberant hug that rocks him back.

“Really, Faith,” he protests, with the merest trace of an indulgent smile. “You don’t need to—”

“Yes, I do,” she tells him, kissing him and making it gentle now, sliding her tongue past his lips and tasting herself on him still. “Yes, I do.”

They end up lying on the bed, kissing for the longest time, slow, languid kisses, with his hand stroking her hair, and it’s getting so late that she’s wondering if they’ll drift off to sleep in the middle of one of them when Wesley bites down on her lip and his fingers tighten just enough to tell her they’re not done yet.

“You were so quick to attack me when I came in, that I didn’t quite get to see how you were positioned,” he says, stroking his finger along her throat. “Show me.”

He moves off the bed and begins to undress, his movements deliberate and careful as always. She’d like to watch, though he’s not exactly stripping here, just getting undressed, but he glares at her when she doesn’t start to move and she scrambles into position, feeling her muscles protest as she recreates the pose.

“Like that.” And he’s whispering the words to himself as though he’s comparing it to a picture he’d created and held in his mind. The sheets are pushed down to her hips and he gathers them in one hand and pulls them off her. “You said they were scratchy,” he says. “You must have very sensitive skin, Faith. It marks so easily too.”

She imagines him watching her ass flush pink and blaze scarlet as he spanks it and wriggles, regretting it a moment later as the sheets scrape against her skin, making her wince.

He smiles. “You moved.”

“Yeah, and don’t I wish I hadn’t.”

“Do it again.”

She stares at him, startled, but his eyes are narrowed and his mouth’s gone to a tight line. He’s sitting sideways on the bed now, and she can see his cock’s hard again, but her eyes move to his hand, still gripping the sheets tightly. Slowly she wriggles her ass against the sheets and feels the echo of the sting his hand left on her skin.

“Again.”

His voice has gone to the bored drawl that means he’s so fucking worked up he can’t trust himself and she closes her eyes for an instant before obeying, grinding her ass against the sheet, and giving him the moan he wants because she can’t keep it inside. The heat’s spreading now, and yeah, it’s not like she’d ever thought once was going to be enough for either of them, not after this long apart.

His hand locks around her ankle. “Now stay still.”
Somehow, she thinks that’s going to be even more painful.

He slides up the bed, between her spread legs, dipping his head to kiss and bite here and there, igniting her skin in a dozen places she’d never thought were all that sensitive before. When his head’s level with hers, he pauses to rub his thumb over a nipple already hard, already aching.

She’s expecting something drawn out, something that’ll leave her begging and mewling with frustration, and instead she gets his cock, slid between the slicked folds of her cunt as his eyes meet hers and pushed home in one long, hard thrust.

“God!” She brings her legs up, wrapping them around his thighs as her fingers clutch at his shoulders. “God, Wes.”

“You moved,” he says in a silky, satisfied murmur, and she can’t work out if he’s glad because she couldn’t help herself, or because it means he gets to tease her because she broke his fucking rules.

“Let me try that again,” she says, giving him a look that promises him a painful death if he even thinks about—

He pulls out. Of course he does. “Well, I suppose I—” His hips are moving without even a flicker of warning showing in his eyes, and this time her legs are around his waist and she’s squirming against him. “I could, but it won’t make any difference, will it?” he finishes, easing out of her again. His fucking eyes are gleaming with amusement now.

“Wesley, you’ve been gone so long, what do you fucking expect?” she asks through gritted, grinding teeth, every nerve in her body jangling.

“I expect you to be obedient and controlled,” he says, as if it was obvious. “Always. I can see we have a lot of work to do before we reach that point however.”

He slides into her slowly this time, giving her some warning, going as deeply as he can with her legs flat on the bed. Three slow strokes later and she’s trembling so hard he pauses. “I think that counts as moving,” he says regretfully. “Dear me, Faith, I just can’t see how we can do this unless you try a little harder.”

“Or you let me move?” she suggests hopefully.

He pretends to consider that. “Why, yes,” he says eventually, shifting so that he can fasten his teeth around her nipple, sucking at it hard enough to make her catch her breath in an anguished moan. “That might work, I suppose. Would you like to move as I fuck you, Faith?”

“Yes, you fucking—”

He pulls out of her entirely. “I’d rephrase that attempt to answer my question if I were you, Faith.”

There’s no smile in his eyes now and she has a cold, crawly feeling in her stomach that tells her she’s just pissed him off. Her hand goes up to his face, and yes, that’s moving, but he lets her do it, and she whispers his name on a breath that’s a sigh. “Wes, I’d like to move, yes. I want you to fuck me, and I want to be able to move when you do. Please?”

She manages to keep it from sounding pleading, salvaging a scrap of dignity, and he smiles, brushing a kiss against her fingers as they touch his mouth. “It can be your second present,” he says. “But your last one will have to wait.”

“You got me another present?” she says. “You don’t need to get me anything, you know.”
“I bought it for myself and you can share it,” he says, as the tip of his cock nudges against her. “And it should be delivered tomorrow.”

“Delivered?”

He sighs and pushes into her hard. “I’ll permit movement, but I think you should be silent now, Faith.” Three thrusts later and she’s biting her lip so hard it hurts. “But I’ll allow you to moan,” he whispers.

Considering all the stuff that he’s done to her, it’s kinda weird that this is the most intense experience yet. Him on top of her, fucking her. There’s no other word that will do.

Her legs are draped over his shoulders, her heels drumming against his back as he drives into her again and again. Her breathless keening and the words that he’s rasping into her ear about how good she feels, how beautiful she is, how much he loves fucking her almost drown out the sound of the bed squeaking its protest. The cheap headboard is banging against the wall in time with his thrusts and she’s lost. Floating somewhere on the ceiling in a sea of sensation as he keeps hitting that spot deep inside her which has her back arched into a shape that it's probably not meant to go. The base of his cock is dragging against her clit because his hands are pinning hers above her head and it's almost game over.

It feels like she's been coming forever. Her insides have turned to liquid and it's pouring out of her but when he hisses, “Now, Faith, I want you to come now,” it seems like everything else was just a dress rehearsal because she can feel his cock spurting inside her and it sets off this chain reaction which starts in her cunt and spreads in violent waves along her body until even her fingers and toes are clenching and spasming. Her scream is the last thing she remembers.

When she comes back to earth, it's pretty much how she remembered it, except for the warm feel of him pressing against her back as he softly kisses her shoulders. In fact, maybe it's not earth. She must have ended up some heavenly dimension.

“Wow,” she murmurs dreamily. “Did you just make me pass out?”

There’s a rumbly sound as he muffles his laugh between her shoulder blades and she squirms against his mouth.

“The French call it le petit mort, the little death,” he purrs in her ear. “I suppose it's rather flattering, though I was slightly worried that I might have to call for a doctor.”

“Hmm, that would have taken some explaining—'I appear to have fucked my secretary to death.'” Her English accent sounds way too Dick Van Dyke, but he’s laughing again and she twists round because she wants to see it.

One of his arms wraps round her waist holding her still. “Stop wriggling,” he orders, but his voice is sun-warmed. “We have lots of work to do tomorrow.”

His other hand is smoothing her hair back and she can feel her eyelids drooping down. Keeping them open seems like the hardest thing in the world. “But it's Saturday tomorrow,” she protests sleepily. “You're gonna have to pay me time and a half.”

“I'm sure I'll find a way to recompense you, now go to sleep.”

And this is what got through her the long, awful days when he wasn't here. It was all about this moment with their legs entwined, his seed inside her and he's holding her in his arms like she's somebody precious.
“Wes?”

That earns her a gentle sigh. “Faith?”

“Will you keep holding me even when I fall asleep. Will you promise?” And in the cold light of the morning when he's back in his starched shirts and his starched lawyer attitude, she'll wince at the need in her voice but right now, she's not playing.

And he kisses the tip of her ear, the curve of her throat before he replies. “Of course I will. Now go to sleep.”

He keeps his promise and when she wakes up and opens her eyes to the weak, watery sunlight trickling in through a gap in the drapes, he's still clutching her to him.

She can feel the hard nudge of his cock against her buttocks and nestles back against him, ignoring the tender, bruised feel of her ass.

“You're awake at last?” he asks groggily and she allows herself a smug smile.

“Yeah, you been up long?” She wiggles her hips ever so slightly and he bites down on her shoulder.

“Really, Faith, that was a shockingly unsubtle *double entendre,*” he says sharply, but his hand is already creeping between her legs, circling her clit and testing how wet she is.

“Oh God,” she hisses as the pads of his fingers rub concentric circles round her still swollen nub and the head of his cock traces the crease of her buttocks. “Do you want to?”

“Be more specific. Do I want to what?” He teases the tip of his index finger against her dripping entrance and she can't remember if the same rules apply on the weekend because not bucking her hips seems like an impossibility.

“I mean, you can fuck me in the ass if you want to… I want you to,” she manages to gasp before all the air seems to leave her lungs. And she does. She wants to give him this because she doesn't have the money for fancy gifts and even if she did, she wouldn't have a clue what to get him. And when he’s still but his cock jerks against her, she knows that he wants it too.

The silence lasts only a few seconds but it seems longer. It's time enough for him to run his palm along the still smarting flesh of her behind and chuckle when she shudders against him. “Not now. You're still rather tender,” he purrs in her ear. “You must remind me to have a look at it tonight.”

“I'll make a note in your diary, sir.”

“What an exemplary secretary I have. Now lift your leg, that's it. Now reach round and put me inside you.”

After a long, lazy fuck, he leaves her sprawled out and dazed on the bed with an idiotic grin on her face as he takes a shower. By the time he's come out, she's kneeling by her open suitcase as she ponders her limited wardrobe choices.

He crouches down next to her, smelling of the complimentary shower gel and shampoo, which don't suit him as much as the sandalwood and citrus that she thinks of as his scent. “This,” he says, picking up her denim skirt. “And this.” Her green T-shirt makes the cut. “Oh and definitely these.” He dangles her red, boy-cut shorts between his fingers. “I have such happy memories of this particular outfit.”
She pushes her snarled hair out of her face so she can give him a narrow-eyed look. “It's not exactly appropriate office attire, is it, sir?”

He's straightening up so he can look down and give her a condescending smile. “Really, Faith, it is the weekend. I'm prepared to make some allowances. Now will you be wanting your usual global breakfast or shall we stop off in town and get something?”
Part Three

Chapter Summary

Real life intrudes...

Part Three

Chapter Twenty-Two

She's not used to this version of Wesley Wyndam-Pryce Esquire. Like, he looks like him and he pretty much talks like him, but it's past 9.30 and they've only just gotten to the office, stopping off en route so he could buy croissants and coffee that gives her a contact high just from one quick inhale, and he's not even freaking out.

Instead, he perches on the edge of her desk, one leg idly swinging and eats breakfast with her. He doesn't even notice when she drifts off into this fantasy of how he relocates to NYC and takes her with him and they do this every morning. Croissants and coffee and her flesh tender and swollen from what he did to it the night before.

But it can't last forever and all too soon he's barking orders about typing up his notes and holding all his calls. He doesn't even let her have her usual mid-morning cigarette but raps sharply on the glass as soon as she's sparked up and stands there glaring at her until she stubs it out and sulkily walks back inside.

It's strange being there on a Saturday, even though it's just the two of them like always. Faith realizes that everything's different. The usual motley collection of dog walkers and children coming home from school that she can set her watch by have been replaced by joggers and couples strolling hand in hand as they head downtown for an early lunch.

She can't really see that in her future. He's not the holding hands type. She doesn't even know if she's going back to the hotel tonight to sleep on scratchy sheets or whether she'll get curled up in cashmere blankets and have her hair stroked until she falls asleep.

But this isn't about what's going to happen tonight or tomorrow or that inevitable day sometime soon when he takes a good hard look at her, comes to his senses and wonders what the hell he's doing with some trashy, ignorant girl who's half his age. It's about here and now and right now she can hear his office door open and his slow, steady tread down the corridor.

She stares at the piece of paper in the Selectric and forces her fingers to move over the keys in the right order, even though she knows he's standing there, watching her.

It's like he has some invisible thread connecting her to him, because she can't not raise her head so she can see him, check that he's still there.

“These are nearly done,” she says, beginning the last line and turning back to the black words appearing on the white paper. “Do you want me to call the courier to come and pick them up?”

“No right now,” he says, shifting from the doorway and moving toward her desk. “I rather think it's time we got some lunch, don't you?”
Weekend Wes doesn't just get his usual chicken salad sandwich on rye with no mayo from the diner and take it back to the office. No, he waits until she's hauled herself up on her usual stool at the counter and sits down next to her.

Faith is already pulling out her cigarettes with frantic fingers. “Don't fucking say anything,” she warns him, ignoring his raised eyebrow and lip curl at the sight of her lighter. “It'd be frosty cool to not even talk to me until I've smoked at least half of this.”

He actually has the audacity to roll his eyes at her but he doesn't throw her some snarky, wordy English guy retort, just picks up the menu and studies it with the same concentration that he usually gives to his fusty old law book.

When she's smoked the cigarette halfway down, she nudges him ever-so-gently with her elbow. “Oh, I have permission to speak, do I?” he drawls and she nods gravely.

“Haven't had one of those for almost twenty-four hours, Wes. And it's not good to rush these little pleasures, y'know?”

He gives her a cool, assessing look and smiles thinly. “So I hear.” He brandishes the menu at her. “You'll have a cheese salad, I think.”

She pulls a face and this time she does give in to the urge to stick out her tongue at him. And, hey, he can make of that whatever he fucking likes. “Man! I'm a growing girl. Gotta have my carbs.”

“A cheese salad,” he repeats sternly, tapping her on the knee with the edge of the laminated menu. “And for dessert all the ice cream you can eat.”

She picks her way sullenly through the salad and he just sips his coffee and watches her, smug bemusement on his face.

She stops and flashes him a look. “What?”

He’s smirking at her. She’s never seen him smirk before. Weekend Wes is practically a revelation. “You”—he pauses for effect—“Are definitely acting your age.”

She folds her arms defensively over her chest and gives him her best (albeit more than slightly ironic) “fuck off, you’re not the boss of me” glare. “Oh yeah? So fucking what?” But she can’t hold the pretense, and starts to giggle.

She pushes the plate aside half-finished. “I’m ready for ice cream now.”

He laughs. “See what I mean?” For a second she almost expects him to take her over his knee, but that’s before she remembers that it’s Saturday, and they’re in public, and he’s in this freakishly good mood.

She decides against a sundae, and asks for the largest root beer float they’ve got. With two spoons and two straws. When the waitress sets it down on the polished counter, Wes stares at it, not bothering to hide his distaste. He looks like he’s biting down on tinfoil.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never had one.”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“That is so wrong on so many levels.” She slides it toward him. “C’mon, Wes. When in America
and all that.” By way of encouragement she spoons some root beer froth off the top and slurps it loudly. So she’s pushing the spoiled brat thing, but what the hell. It’s fun to watch him twitch.

“I’m waiting.” She’s rather proud to have mastered his moue of displeasure perfectly.

Now it’s his turn to glare. He takes a tentative sip of the offending concoction. She leans forward expectantly.

“So?”

“It’s…not bad.”

“That’s very diplomatic of you.” She takes it back from him and shrugs. “I tried. More for me.” Just to really annoy him, she takes another loud slurp. Several, in fact.

She’s almost forgotten that this is meant to be a lunch hour, and she’s taking her time, simply enjoying how relaxed, how weirdly normal, this is. She’s surprised she recognizes normal at all, considering how fucking skewed her life is.

It’s really unexpected and lovely. But she doesn’t want to grow accustomed.

His fingers brush against the back of her knee, and the accompanying flutter in her stomach tells her that it’s already too late for that.

She busily slurps away until there’s nothing but a miniscule pool of melted ice cream and root beer at the bottom of the fluted glass, and she spirals the straw around and around to suck out every last possible bit of the creamy goodness. He’s still stroking the back of her knee and giving her an indulgent look that on anyone else would make her lash out, but on him—on him it makes her feel kind of warm and cozy on the inside, despite being full of ice cream and root beer. Despite trying to live in the moment. Despite knowing all this can’t last.

He’s already paid the bill with a twenty slipped quietly to the cashier, and he hustles her off the stool as soon as she sighs contentedly at the empty glass.

“When we get back to the office, I want you to ring up the courier to pick up those documents,” he says, all business. “And, yes, er,” he falters, “see if they have that package I’m expecting.”

She slides past him—because he’s holding the door open for her, and how many guys have ever done that? Besides Xander, that is?—more slowly and deliberately than really required and flashes a toothy grin. “Is that the present? The other one?” Her mind can’t help but wonder if that’s the naughty one—something for the bedroom activities, perhaps—or maybe more lingerie?

He fakes a little grimace. “You’ll see soon enough.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

She’s got a little system—she doesn’t really advertise it—but, yeah, she’s got this little routine for getting the parcels ready for the courier. She kind of invented it when he was gone, for something to do, but it’s stuck with her now, and she starts stacking the files and envelopes and cover letters and enclosures in order along the floor in front of her desk before she remembers that she’s not alone.

He’s standing behind her, under the entrance to the hallway, arms crossed and examining her curiously. She’s on her knees, and she’s pretty sure she’s probably flashing him an eyeful of those red boy-cut panties every time she leans forward.
She glances up through her eyelashes at him, with a look that's probably coyly than she'd like.
“What?”

“No, no. Nothing. Carry on.” He doesn't move.

“Wes, you're hovering,” she says and sighs.

“Yes.”

“Don't you have something to do in your office right now, maybe?”

“No.”

“So you're just going to stand there and watch me?”

“I'm utterly fascinated, Faith, by the fact that you seem to have acquired some curious new organizational skills in my absence.”

She snorts, annoyed. “Look, it's just easier and faster to get them all together this way—the desk is too small.”

He nods, seriously, as if this is the most pressing, interesting issue ever. “I see, so you're just on the floor for convenience’s sake.”

“Yes.”

“I see. Well, as I said, don't let me interrupt you.”

“Right.” She tries to pretend like he's not there, tries to block him out, but she can feel his eyes eating her up from behind. It's more than distracting—more frustratingly, it's a cross between annoying and seriously hot. She keeps double checking all her stacks to make sure she doesn't make a mistake, but in the end, she manages to get all the correct papers in the correct envelopes just as the courier arrives.

“Hey, Faith! Heeeey, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce—how's it going?” Of all the people she'd gone to high school with, she'd never expected that eternally cheerful Holden Webster would end up as an overnight delivery courier—even if it was just his summer job before he ditched this town for something better.

“Hey, Holden,” she says, hoping he won't try and chat her up, as he does every day. Perhaps it's a good thing Wes was hanging about, for once.

“Hey, Mr. W-P,” Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Wes flinch at Holden's breezy manner. “I got a delivery for you too. It was sitting in the truck, and should have come through earlier today, so sorry about that.”

Wes strides forward, rather abruptly, snatching the package out of Holden's hands. “Hey, hey there, my good sir. You need to sign for it!”

“I'm sorry?” He squints a bit at Holden, confused.

She covers, quickly. Don't want Wes getting in a bad mood unnecessarily, not with the promise of a repeat of the previous night hanging heavily between them. “Uh, he doesn't sign for the packages, Holden. I usually take care of that.”

“Right, right—okay.” He hands her the clipboard, and she scratches her scrawly signature in the
allotted blank. “And here's the tracking numbers for your outgoings.”

“Thanks, Holden. Uh, see you Monday!” she says, trying to squeeze every ounce of her patented sweet yet effective “get the fuck out of here” tone.

“Right, right. Monday. Hey, I didn't even realize it was Saturday! Big case, huh? Noses to the grindstone?” His lopsided grin is about the most annoying thing she's ever seen.

Wes steps forward, with that steely lawyer look, but she waves him down. “Yeah, and uh, we really need to get back to work now, Holden, you understand.”

“Oh, sure. Right, right. Cool. I'll see you Monday then!”

They breathe a huge sigh of relief when Holden's finally gone.

“I'm finished for today, Faith. And I trust you are as well?”

She swallows, mouth suddenly very dry. “Uh-huh. Yeah. Just need to straighten a few things up.”

“Very well, then. Five minutes. Then we're going home.”

She tries to keep a straight face, but can't stop the giddiness that's crept into her voice. “Of course. I'll be ready in five.”

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Wes has cradled the package to his chest closely pretty much since it arrived, she notices. Except on the ride home, of course, when he tells her to hold it. It's totally driving her mad, trying to decide what it could possibly be. Bigger than a breadbox, but only just, she notes, playing Twenty Questions in her head. Rectangular. Hard. But that's just the outside box. She doesn't dare shake it, so she just runs her fingers over its surface, lost in thought.

When they reach the house, he doesn't open the door leading inside. Instead he keys in another impossibly long code that opens a door that leads to the garden she'd seen from his bedroom window. There's a little dribbling Zen fountain thing, and a black stone bench that looks like some kind of unpolished marble nested within a little glade of trees that she hadn't seen from the window.

He gestures for her to take a seat, and she's wide-eyed, taking in every corner of his little inner sanctum. It seems to her that this is probably his real refuge, maybe even more than his library.

And, as if on cue he whispers, “I've never let anyone back here.”

“It's really beautiful, Wes. I would love to see it in the spring.” Her tone is just as hushed and reverent, and for a split second, she sees that her reply touched something inside him.

He hands her the package. “Here, open it. I did actually get it for myself, like I said, but, well. The idea came from you. We can share it.”

She smiles, thrills a little at the touch of his skin as their hands meet, then starts ripping through the plain brown paper and acres of protective packaging to find a book. It's heavy and obviously valuable, but still...

“A book?”

“It's not just any book, Faith. It's a limited edition of the love sonnets of Pablo Neruda. Illustrated with hand-cut, hand-printed, tipped-in plates. There were only two hundred made, the year he died.”
His voice is kind of thick and quavery, words tumbling out without their usual decorum and restraint. “See, here's yours. Sonnet Seventeen.”

He turns the pages, each one a riot of sensual color and design, drawing out the imagery of the poems. “tan cerca que tu mano sobre mi pecho es mia, tan cerca que se cierran tus ojos con mi sueno,” Apparently, Spanish was no problem for him either; she wonders how many languages he knows.

“Coincidentally, it would seem, one of my rare book connections came across a copy a few weeks ago, just a few days after...” His voice trails off. “Well, anyway. As you can imagine, I couldn't just turn it down.”

“It's very beautiful,” she says, and really means it. She watches him examine his purchase, his gaze greedily taking in every detail of the illustrations, fingertips lightly stroking the cover, the pages, toying with the slightly frayed edges of the ribbon bookmark.

“Wes, sometimes I think you may care more about your books that you do about people,” It's not an angry or hurtful observation, she thinks—just an accurate one.

Surprisingly, he smiles. “You certainly aren't the first person who's ever put forward that particular theory.” He reaches out to stroke her cheek, her hair with the same tenderness. “I have no doubt it'll be different when it comes to you, though.”

She’s feeling adrift now, with his hand the only anchor she has. “Would be nice,” she says shyly, wishing she could use words the way he does, and make them say what she’s feeling.

He stands up and gestures at the packing. “Bring that. I think we should get you settled in, don’t you?”

She’s careful to pick up every scrap of paper, and she leaves the garden reluctantly with a backward glance. “Will you take me in there again?” she says as the door closes behind them.

“Perhaps,” he says, with his attention back on the book he’s holding. “I must put this in the library. Faith, why don’t you take your suitcase upstairs?” She’s trying to picture it standing, cheap and shabby, in the middle of his room, and failing, when he adds, “The room two doors down from mine. Unpack and wait for me there.”

She’s speechless as he takes them into the house, then disappears into his library. Her room? She’s not going to be with him? She’s trying to work out if that’s good or bad, as she lugs the case—which gets heavier at every step—up the stairs, and can’t decide.

The door’s the same dark wood as the rest of them but when she goes through it, she’s in a light, airy space, more like the downstairs rooms than what she’s beginning to think of as his rooms, like the library, his bedroom, his bath. It’s neutral enough to suit any visitor but there are fresh flowers on a table under the window, freesias, she thinks, delicate petals in pale yellow and deep purple, giving off a sweet peppery smell that fills the room. A small shower room leads off it and she smiles as she picks up a bar of the soap he uses and sniffs at it. Smells like Wes, she thinks as she starts to unpack, and as if that’s all it takes to summon him, he appears in the doorway of the bedroom, leaning against it.

“May I come in?”

“Huh? Wes, this is your house.”

“Yes. But this is your room while you’re staying here and I promise you I won’t enter without
asking.”

She gives him a puzzled smile. “Is this, like, some rule of etiquette or something? Because I’m not so up on that. Where I come from, a spare room’s the couch and kinda hard to knock on that.”

He shrugs and walks toward her. “It’s your room,” he repeats. “Make yourself at home.” His gaze travels to the roll of posters and he shudders. “Within reason. If you really must put those up, please use something that doesn’t mark the walls.”

“Why have I got a room?” she asks. “Don’t you, you know, want me in with you?”

He’s prowling around, tweaking a curtain, adjusting a cushion on a chair, but that makes him turn. “Oh, yes. But not always.”

“What, you mean—oh!” She’s nodding her head, now, flushing a little. “When I’m, when it’s that time of the month, you mean?”

He frowns. “You use language that would have had my grandmother washing your mouth out with soap, and yet that embarrasses you? You’re very contradictory sometimes, Faith. No, I didn’t mean that when you’re menstruating you’re expected to sleep alone.” He gives her an eye-roll she’s sure he’s picked up from her, then looks a little pensive. “It’s simply that this is rather unexpected. Events have forced it, rather than it being—”

“You don’t really want me here,” she interrupts flatly, moving over to her case and beginning to throw things back in. “Look, I can go. You pay me enough for me to rent a room, or I can stay on Xander’s—no, shit, I can’t. Not now. Fuck.”

He holds up his hand. “Slow down, please. It’s out of the question that you stay in some cheap room, and the hotel’s not suitable either.” He gives her a fleeting smile. “Not with the scratchy sheets. Remind me to read you a certain fairy tale one day. It’s simply that I’m not used to company. There will be times when I’d rather be alone and—” he comes close enough to tip up her chin and study her face, “why can’t you stay with Xander? Not that I’d allow it, but, just out of curiosity?”

She stares up at him, then it hits her. “You!” she accuses him. “You know he came to see me! You know we had a fight. God, did they tell you how many times I fucking sneezed as well?”

“Now, Faith,” he says with that tolerant half-smile that drives her crazy, just fucking crazy, “there’s no need to exaggerate.”

She steps closer to him and drives a stiff finger into his chest. “Did you know Xander came to the hotel?” she demands.

He nods, holding his ground, and pushes her finger down. “Yes. And I believe your voice was sufficiently loud when you told him to, er, get the fuck out, that several people complained to the front desk.” He hesitates. “Did he do something that I should take notice of?”

She laughs at that. “What? Going have him beaten up? Get him fired?”

“I daresay I could do both, but I was inclining more toward talking to him.”

He’s starting to sound a little frayed now and she takes a deep breath. “No. He’s pissed at me because of you. And he wanted to do more than talk to you when he saw you’d left bruises on me.”

She’s getting annoyed now. “Yeah, well, he’s been looking out for me for a long time now.”

“And did you manage to convince him that I’m not dangerous to your health and well-being?” he murmurs, leaning in and kissing her neck at the place that sends chills over that side of her body, then doing it on the other side too, so that every hair on her body lifts up.

“And how am I supposed to do that?” she whispers back, feeling her legs start to go weak, like she’s coming down with something. “Not supposed to tell lies, remember?”

“Only to me,” he says, letting his teeth scrape gently across the curve where her neck meets her shoulder. “And perhaps I’d better just confirm—Faith, have I ever done anything to you that you didn’t like?”

“Only once,” she tells him, feeling the office wall against her back and hearing the sound of her clothing tear.

“Ah. That was regrettable, yes.”

“You said you were sorry,” she reminds him. “I’m not holding it against you, you know? It’s just you asked.”

“I did, yes.” He looks around the room. “Finish unpacking,” he orders. “I’ll be in the kitchen.”

She stays there for a while, processing the conversation they’ve just had and getting a feel for the room. Her room. She is kinda messy and he would start to get pissy after having to weave through a trail of strewn clothes to get to the bathroom. Not that she has that much stuff but going back there to pick up the rest of her stuff, is so not what she wants to do right now.

Her gaze rests on the flowers in the delicate glass vase. Only Xander has bought her flowers before and that was a corsage for Senior Prom, which they only went to as gigantic fuck you to the rest of the graduating class. They’d dropped an E on the bus on the way there and she’d ended up tipping a glass of champagne down Buffy Summer's back. Ah, happy days.

She touches the petals and wonders when he had time to buy them. Probably on the way back from the airport; tired and hungry and thinking hard about exactly how long he was going to make her wait; but he still had time to buy her flowers. And the watch. And the book. And lunch today. He does all this stuff for her and she just sits back, not moving unless her tells her he can, and takes it. Something’s really wrong with this picture.

She straightens up and dives for her purse because she's just had the daddy of good ideas.

When she walks into the kitchen he's leaning against the worktop, sipping tea out of a china mug. He looks at her warily, trying to gauge what mood she's in and she tries to look innocent.

“What?” he asks suspiciously, his shoulders tensing, and she knows it hasn't worked.

She sidles closer to him. “Hey, Wes, do you like surprises?”

He looks like he's just been sentenced to life imprisonment with no parole. “Generally speaking, no. What are you hiding behind your back, Faith?”

She twists away from him, and throws in a little shimmy of her hips for good measure. “Pick a hand, Wesley,” she chants and she knows he's charmed and just a little bit scared.

“Very well, Faith, just to humor you,” he says with mock exasperation. “The right.”
She shakes her head at him and dances out of reach of the hand he's shot out. “Nuh-huh. Try again, Wesley.”

“Faith…” He's getting that pissy look on his face, which she itches to lick off him inch by inch. “I can see that you're going to be impossible to live with. The left. What have you got in your left hand?”

She does a little dance step using one of the kitchen chairs as her partners and just as he looks like he's about to grab her and put her over his knee, she takes her left hand from behind her back and dangles his car keys at him. “It's your lucky night, Wes. I'm taking you on an all-expenses paid date. You just have to drive us back into town.”

It takes her half an hour to persuade him to get in the car. She starts off with gentle kisses, pushes him down in one of the chairs and climbs on his lap. Fuck! She even offers him a blowjob but he just stares straight ahead, unblinking and keeps interrogating her about exactly what the date entailed.

“It wouldn't be a surprise, if I told you, would it?” she asks coquettishly, blowing into his ear when he wriggles away from her.

“Which is precisely why I need to know what fiendish little scheme you've cooked up.”

When those tactics don’t work, she resorts to threats, foot stamping and, finally, flouncing out of the kitchen, making sure to slam the door behind her. She knows before she hears the door bang against the frame that he'll come after her before she gets to the stairs.

All in all, it's a hell of a lot of work just to get him in the car and he isn't exactly Mr. Sunny Smiles like he'd been earlier.

“Faith! Don't touch the knobs,” he snaps as her hand creeps toward the radio.

“Jeez, Wes, you ever been on a freakin’ date before? Because most people would, like, be looking forward to it,” she says, determined not to lose her stones and let him turn the car around.

“How unfortunate that I'm not most people,” he says tartly, then waves at her. “Put on the bloody radio then.”

She can't help but giggle at him getting all British and bloody and he flares his nostrils, the tips of his ears pinking up. Faith leans forward, turns on the radio and keeps pushing the tuner button until she finds a station playing something old. A woman with a voice a bit like his singing about slow boats to China and she sits back and shoots him a satisfied look. “You gotta admit that you're a tiny bit excited.”

He gives her a glare that could curdle milk. “I don't have to admit any such thing. Now left or right at the traffic lights?”

Giving him directions leads to another almost argument when she tries to direct him down a one-way street. Which isn't her fault because most of the time she walks everywhere. By the time he's found a parking space and she's insisted on feeding her coins into the meter, he's looking tired and miserable.

She ignores his bad mood. If she ignores it long enough, it might just go away. “C'mon. Look, I promise you're going to enjoy this. No loud music, no monster trucks. Please, Wes, will you just get the stick out of your ass?”

He sighs, pulls the collar of his black wool overcoat up and nods. “Really, Faith, you should think about a career in the Intelligence Corps. It seems that clandestine operations are your forte.”
“Whatever, Wes!” She grabs hold of his hand and tugs him across the road to the Revival House, which has been advertising their Tennessee Williams double bill all week.

Chapter Twenty-Four

He stands looking at the black and white photos of Liz Taylor and Marlon Brando displayed in the foyer, while she goes to buy tickets, then looks at her expectantly as she returns.

“I paid extra for the fancy seats in the balcony,” she tells him brightly. “They’re, like, these little sofas. You want some popcorn, my treat?”

There’s the faintest glimmer of a smile starting to break through. “I never snack between meals,” he informs her gravely.

“Wes, it’s the fucking movies. We get some popcorn, some Milk Duds, hell, maybe even some M&Ms. Then we get gigantic servings of Dr Pepper to wash it all down, while we watch the talking pictures. You clear?”

“As crystal. And what happens after that? Do we spontaneously vomit from ingesting too much sugar?”

She resists the urge to slap him upside his head, but rolls her eyes and gestures to the concession stand. “You ever had someone force-feed you junk food? Because you’re this close, Wes.” She holds up her thumb and forefinger to show him that she means business and he sighs and slips his arm round her shoulders. Like, they’re a regular couple and bickering at the movies is all part of their whole couple vibe.

They keep being a regular couple all the way through A Streetcar Named Desire. He sits sprawled out and even chuckles when she slings her legs over the back of the empty seat in front of her. Every now and again, he whispers something in her ear about the movie as it unfolds on the screen in front of them. Their sticky hands collide as they reach for handfuls of buttery popcorn and she’s trying to tamp down the gloating feeling inside her that she got him here and forced him to enjoy himself.

Baby Doll was maybe not such a good choice when you’re an eighteen-year-old girl taking your thirty-seven-year-old boss out for a romantic evening at the movies. She slumps down in her seat, her cheeks burning, as Carroll Baker Lolitas her way through the film. Fuck! She has a slip just like that one somewhere.

Then there’s a warm hand curving round her knee and he leans across to whisper in her ear: “This is an inspired choice, Faith. Maybe we can expand on some of the themes later.”

His palm slides farther up her thigh and she clamps her legs together, enjoying the flex and twist of his fingers against her flesh, even as she shoots him a prim, annoyed look. “Ssh,” she hisses. “You’re not meant to talk!”

She doesn’t remember much of the movie after that, just the feel of his hand as he inches it slowly up her tightly shut legs. It takes him to the end of the movie to reach her mound and skate his fingertips across it. He makes a pleased noise when she finally relaxes but she’s already jumping to her feet and she stands there with her arms folded as the lights come up.

“I never go to third base on a first date,” she tells him in an outraged voice, her eyes going wide and her bottom lip quivering. “You want to watch your hands, mister!”

He stays seated, his long legs hunched up in the enclosed space, and rolls his eyes so hard she’s amazed he doesn’t dislocate his eyeballs. “Just you wait until I get you home,” he promises silkily
and has to turn away because her stomach just started dancing the Marenga and if she looks at him right now, she'll beg him to throw her down on the floor amid the popcorn kernels and fuck her senseless.

By the time she's managed to compose herself, he's at her side and looking kinda chipper again. “Are we done now?” he asks eagerly.

“Nope.” She shakes her head. “Now I'm going to wine and dine you. C'mon!”

“I think I've eaten more today than I have all year,” he complains as she drags him out into the street. “I don't know where you put it all.”

“My mom reckons I have a tapeworm,” she blurts out before she can stop herself, then pulls a face. “Fuck! I have, like, a high metabolism or something.”

He puts a hand on her shoulder to steady her and begins to button up her jacket. “You're freezing, Faith. You need to wear something warmer than this,” he chides her gently.

He doesn't pull away when she slides her hand into his and entwines their fingers. It's what you're meant to do on dates. “Y'see, big, woolly coats don't go with the whole urban boho theme I have going on.”

He gives her such a warm, tender smile that she knows she'll be living off the memory for days to come. “I see. Then we'd better get some food in you to warm you up.”

“Cept I'm paying,” she says in a 'don't mess with me' voice. “And, before you ask, I'm not taking you to Chuck E. Cheese.”

He shudders just once, then squeezes her hand.

She takes him to her favorite Chinese restaurant. The one with the really rude waiting staff, but they give you prawn crackers in little bowls while you're waiting hours for them to come and serve you.

It's weird not to see Xander staring back at her from across the table, but Wes, looking around him curiously at the Bruce Lee posters taped to the wall and fingering his chopsticks like they're about to jump up and attack him. It's not like he's out of place but maybe he should have changed out of his suit before they left the house. Even though she's starting to get really fond of his charcoal suits.

“You okay, Wes? Because if you really don't like it here we could go…”

His knee bumps hers under the table. “It's fine, Faith. I find myself quite famished. What would you recommend?”

And it's going to be all right. Really all right because she's talking him through the menu and he even smiles when she tells him how Xander came in here with fake ID and one of the waiters brought him the biggest pitcher of beer they'd ever seen and made him drink it in one go.

“It got wicked ugly about five minutes later,” she says, laughing as she thinks of Xander's dash for the john. Someone coughs and she looks up to see Buffy Summers and her little gang of perfect friends just standing there.

She presses her knee hard against his because if he's there, then she's not still the trashy kid that Buffy used to pick on in grades three through nine. Because he wouldn't be interested in a trashy kid.

“Faith!” Buffy says brightly, flicking back one perfect strand of golden hair and smiling sweetly.
“We thought it was you, didn't we.”

“Oh, hey, B,” she mutters and stares at the menu like the blurry photos of chicken chow mein are speaking to her.

“So, I heard you were in juvie,” Buffy continues, her gaze skittering over Wes who's sitting there with a blank expression on his face. “You get weekend release or something?”

“I… That was way back,” Faith begins angrily and she's trying not to blow it, not to stand and smack the smug expression off golden girl's face but it doesn't really matter because everything's been ruined now anyway.

“Buffy,” Willow's speaking now, one hand touching her friend's arm. “We should go.”

Buffy narrows her eyes and sticks out her pointy little chin. “But Faith and I are just catching up,” she says all faux innocence and wide eyes. “After all we haven't seen each other since she ruined my prom outfit.”

“Look, I'm sorry about that, but where did you get off being such a fucking bitch to me all the way through school?” There's more she wants to say. Actually scream it at the top of her voice but Wes has straightened and is glaring at Buffy so fiercely that she takes a step back.

“Is there any reason why you're persisting in ruining our evening?” he asks calmly.

“Buffy, can we just go?” Willow's pleading now, casting worried looks from Wes to Faith and back to Buffy again.

“Yeah,” chimes in Cordelia now that she's stopped primping in front of her compact. “Let's leave Miss White Trash and her British sugar daddy.”

All she wants to do is get the fuck out of here. And maybe send Buffy crashing through the window, but his hand is curling round her wrist. “Really, Faith, I had no idea you knew such frightful people,” he drawls, his accent so sharp you could cut glass with it.

There's one moment of awkward silence that should come with an R rating, then Buffy's flicking her hair back again. “I should totally have sent you my dry cleaning bill,” she hisses before disappearing in a cloud of Anna Sui's Sweet Dreams.

“Bye, Faith, nice to see you,” Willow mutters miserably, following Cordelia and Buffy away and Faith's sitting back and pulling out her cigarettes with shaking fingers.

“Fucking bitches,” she hisses under her breath and lets her shoulders slump as he releases her wrist.

“I bet Lilah never put on a show like that for you, did she?”

He pauses in the middle of unfolding his napkin and frowns as Lilah's name settles in the air between them. “She had rather a pedestrian idea of what constitutes a date,” he says sniffily. Then he throws her another of those smiles that turns her insides out. Which makes two in the space of half an hour and he really needs to watch that. “Now I refuse to let those harpies ruin such a pleasant evening and neither should you.”

“I s'pose,” she agrees sulkily, sucking down hard on her cigarette.

“You keep pouting like that and you can forget about coming at all tonight,” he purrs, his voice low and she can feel tendrils of desire creeping their way up her body and stopping right at her heart, squeezing it tight so it starts thumping out a frantic rhythm.
“I never score a home run on a first date,” she smirks, sweeping her lashes down over her eyes in a flirtatious manner.

“Oh Faith, I don't have to fuck you to make you come,” he reminds her with a gleam in his eyes, then turns to the waiter who's been standing there for long enough to hear exactly what he said. “Can we have our order to go, please?”

She's grateful that he's there to buoy her mood, and her boiling rage is nearly a faint memory by the time she's got him carrying two full bags of takeout boxes out into the cold night and back to the car.

“Perhaps you really do have a tapeworm, Faith.” He's clearly amused she's planning to eat two orders of General Tso's Chicken with fried rice, four eggrolls, and about fifteen fortune cookies. “We should have you fully examined by a qualified physician.”

She bumps her hip into his, playfully. “Hey, even if I don't eat it all tonight, there's nothing better than a Sunday morning brunch of cold Chinese food, Wes.”

His distaste at the very thought of her leftovers stinking up his fridge creeps over his face. “Oh, Faith, I can think of nothing more vile.”

“Than leftovers? Oh please! Hey, I was right about the popcorn and Dr Pepper, right?”

“I have a distaste for warmed-over food, if you must know,” he says primly, but his eyes are still sparkling with amusement.

“Hey, if you'll recall I never said anything about like, nuking it in the microwave. I said cold leftovers, Wes.” She snuggles closer to him to block the chilly air and he laughs, playfully leaning over to kiss the top of her head.

“Well, isn't this just delightfully cozy?” Without warning, they've come careening around a corner to run smack into the frosty presence of Lilah. “Wesley, I'm surprised—I would have expected you'd be preparing for our motions hearing on Monday, not out cavorting with your little secretary.” She spits out the last words, like Faith's the most repulsive thing she's ever seen.

He really must have something good on that bitch, Faith thinks, because for the umpteenth time now he's not buckling in her presence. And Lilah's as pissed off as a caged tiger.

Instead of pushing her away, as she expects him to do, Wes slides his free arm over her back, gripping her waist—and that's where the whole truth lies. His fingers press into her flesh firmly, but not painfully, and he pulls her a little closer. Like she's a lifebuoy in a choppy sea churned up by a spurned bitch goddess. “Ah, Lilah, how wonderful to see you. It's a lovely evening, isn't it?” She tries to interrupt, but he steamrolls right over her. “I'm sorry to hear that you haven't received the documents I sent over to your office by courier this afternoon. Perhaps he missed you on the early evening delivery? Because if you had read the briefs, I think you'd be pleasantly surprised to discover that I have everything in order.” He smiles thinly. “I truly am looking forward to seeing you in court on Monday, Lilah; it's going to be a pleasure to crush your poorly argued case to bits in front of a very valuable, but very fickle client. Now, if you'll excuse us, our dinner's getting cold.”

And with that, they're swinging past her on the sidewalk, grinning at each other conspiratorially when one burgundy kid gloved hand clamps down on Faith's wrist, pulling them to a halt.

“Listen to me, Wesley,” Lilah hisses at them, eyes burning. “I don't care to be made a fool of, especially in front of this piece of trash.” Faith wrenches her hand back, and it takes all she's got not to slap Lilah across the face—especially when she knows doing so will pack a killer sting thanks to
the rather frosty ambient temperature. “I don't need to remind you that I have no qualms about playing dirty with you, and I will win. I can make sure your name is mud in this town by the end of the week.”

“Not by nine o'clock Monday, Lilah? I'm shocked! If I didn't know better, I'd say you were slipping.” He pours on that frigid charm and slips his arm from around Faith's waist, grasping her hand, pulling her away down the sidewalk.

“Well, that was quite enough excitement for one night,” he says as soon as they're out of earshot. He's still hanging on to her tightly, but his tone is lighter than she would expect, under the circumstances.

She laughs tentatively. “Maybe there's a meeting of the Superbitch Society down here tonight or something. We’d better get the hell outta here, or else my mom will show up next!”

“Don’t even say that.” The chilly terseness is back, and that’s enough to quiet her.

They’re silent as the car pulls out of the parking spot. And silent for the five minutes after that. She doesn’t even dare put on the radio.

She can’t stand it anymore and tries to lighten the mood. “Well, that still went better than most of the dates I’ve been on.”

That draws a smile out of him. “It was a lovely evening, Faith.” He even takes his eyes off the road for a second, so he can look at her when he says “Thank you.”

She doesn’t want him to see how much it means to her, what he’s said, and she tries in vain to school her features into some semblance of neutral but she’s can’t help beaming. She looks away, staring quietly out her window while the reflected image of downtown recedes in the distance. At that very moment, the Art Deco neon sign of the revival house goes dark and she smiles again. It was sort of perfect, wasn’t it? As perfect as it gets for people like them. And anyway, she’s had her whole life to get used to the fact that her existence will never be exactly drama-free.

His attentions have turned back to driving; he’s staring ahead, all business-like and eyes on the road, but his hand strays to her thigh again and stays there, warm and resolute, as though she’s the only thing keeping him grounded. She remembers this old Greek myth from school, the one about Antaeus, and she threads her fingers through his and squeezes lightly. He returns the gentle pressure. She’s a little sleepy and content and yeah, happy. It’s not a feeling she’s entirely comfortable with, but she’s not going to question it.

Finally they’re pulling in to his winding driveway, and he has to swerve to avoid hitting the remains of a smashed glass bottle. There are glass shards strewn everywhere.

“Damn neighbor kids,” he mutters. “Tomorrow I’ll have to…” But he doesn’t have time to finish his statement, because there’s someone standing there, blocking the garage door.

Wes stops the car, turns off the motor, and starts to get out. He turns back to Faith, his voice grave and a little alarmed: “Stay here. Keep the doors locked.”

The high-beams are still on, and Faith gets a good glimpse of an all-too familiar form. A chill runs up her spine and she tries to warn Wes but all she can manage is a woefully inarticulate cry that borders on a scream.

Her father doesn’t even look at Wes, just manages this lopsided drunken leer that might be the most chilling thing she’s ever seen. He weaves his way unsteadily toward the car and slams his hands
down on the hood.

“You fucking little slut. Should have known you’d be just like your fucking cunt of a mother—”

That’s when Wes grabs his arm. “I will not have you talk to her that way, not ever. You’re going to leave, right now.”

Liam shrugs him off easily. He may be a linebacker-gone-to-seed but he’s still got that residual strength. He’s solid, through and through. Faith’s seen him punch through drywall a few too many times for her liking.

“And you. You think just because you’re some hot-shot lawyer that it’s okay? You fucking—”

She can see him coiling up, getting ready to strike, and before she knows it she’s out of the car and hanging on to him, trying in vain to hold him back. He backhands her and effortlessly sends her sprawling to the pavement.

That’s when Wes’ fist connects directly with her father's twice-broken nose. There's a sickening crunch as blood starts running down her father's chin. His expression registers shock and dazed surprise.

“I think you’re going to leave now, one way or another.” Faith's never heard Wes this angry. She doesn't want to be on the receiving end of that, not ever. “Now, apologize.”

She drags herself into a sitting position, gravel clinging to her stinging, bleeding palms as her father staggers a couple of steps and puts a shaking hand up to his nose.

Wes is standing there like an avenging angel; his whole body tense and ready.

“I'm not apologizing to that little piece of shit,” her father sneers and spits a mouthful of blood in the direction of Wes' feet. “And I ain't going fucking anywhere unless she comes with me.”

“I don't believe that's an option,” Wes says firmly. Then his gaze sweeps over her as she's struggling to get to an upright position and trying to ignore the pain in her skinned knees. “Get in the house, Faith.”

“Don't even fucking try it, missy.” Her father's edging toward her, one eye on Wes who's following his movements with keen interest. “I've had your goddamn mother on the phone for the last two days telling me to drag you back home.”

“I'm okay here,” she manages to say shakily. “Please, Dad, will you just leave?”

“Yeah, bet you're real fine here, aren't you, Faithy? You giving it away for free or you making him pay?” Her father makes an obscene gesture with his hand and Wes springs forward.

“No! Don't!” she shrieks, grabbing onto the tail of his coat. “Just leave it, Wes. Please! Just leave it!”

He's careful not to touch her but shakes himself free of her grip and advances toward her father. He's in full-on scary motherfucker mode but then her Dad isn't no slouch in those stakes either.

“If you don't get off my property, I'm going to call the police,” Wes says, reaching into his inside pocket for his cellphone.

Her father gives a B-movie villain laugh and backs away with his hands in the air. “Yeah? Maybe you can tell the cops how long you've been fucking my daughter. Wonder how long that's been
going on? Reckon it might have been in juvie when she was still underage. Wonder what you get for statutory rape in this state?"

Wes pauses with his finger over the key-pad. “I believe it's ten years. Now are you going to go of your own accord or do I need to have you escorted off the premises?”

She can’t help but cower behind Wes as her father brushes past them, knocking his shoulder into the pair of them as he goes. “You haven't heard the last of this,” he promises. “And Faithy, you'd better get your whoring ass back home or you and your boyfriend are gonna be in a world of fucking trouble.”

“What? What are you going to do?” Her voice is so shrill that dogs from miles around must be going into a frenzy. “He hasn't laid a fucking finger on me!”

She just gets a cackle in return but finally he's going, drunkenly lurching down the driveway.

Wes retrieves the bags of Chinese food from the car. “Well, it's certainly been an eventful evening,” he remarks but his face is in shadow and his voice is giving nothing away. “Shall we get inside before another ghost of Christmas past decides to pop out of nowhere?”

Faith doesn't get the reference but she follows him inside and into the kitchen. “Are you still hungry?” he asks and when she shakes her head, he opens a cupboard door which houses a rubbish bin and drops the two bags inside with a decisive thud. “No, neither am I.”

Seeing the food that they carefully chosen get thrown away makes her heart sink so it's somewhere just above her ankles. Her and her fucking genius ideas. Everything would have been all right if they'd just stayed home and instead she has to try and show him that she's what? Like, some kind of fucking perfect girlfriend, when really she's the most high maintenance fuck-up that he's ever come across.

She sits down gingerly in one of the high backed chairs and looks at the blood trickling down her shin. “I'm sorry,” she says dully. “About all of it. And him. He wouldn't ever…”

He holds up his hand and she notices that the skin across his knuckles is split open and red. “Please, Faith. I've had enough drama for one day.”

It's so hard to talk to him when his face is shuttered and his voice is sbrusque. Not in that clipped way of his which she now thinks of his as his sex voice but biting out the words like they taste funny in his mouth.

“Stay here.” He walks out of the kitchen and she rests her elbows on the table so she can put her head in her hands. God, she's so fucking tired of being her.

When he comes back, his hands are full of bathroom cabinet stuff. He places antiseptic cream, plasters, and tweezers in front of her on the table, then steps back. “You should clean up your legs before they get infected,” he says. “I'm going to bed. I'll see you in the morning.”

And just like that she's been dismissed. Sent to the guest room without any dinner.

Chapter Twenty-Five

She wanders aimlessly round the house because she's too wired to sleep and she's never had a chance to explore. There's a cozy little den in the basement, and if the night had gone as planned, she'd have pushed him down on the red sofa, made a fort out of the throws and the cushions, and made out with him for hours like they were both in High School and their only worries were about
acing their SATs.

But it didn't go like that. So she grabs the medical supplies and shuffles up the stairs. In the bathroom, she strips off her clothes and starts running a bath. Before her mom decided that she couldn't get through life sober and the divorce was hanging over their heads like a bad storm cloud, she used to take a lot of baths. Faith would be dying for a pee and Darla would be locked in the bathroom with a stack of True Crime magazines, telling her to fuck off because she needed to calm down.

The hot water makes her cuts smart as she slowly lowers herself into the bath. She reaches over and turns on the basin cold tap and it's only then with the sound of water pouring out of the faucet that she lets herself start crying.

It's kinda nice to just lie there, the ends of her hair trailing in the water, and bawl her eyes out until there's nothing left but the occasional hiccuppy sob and she feels numb and empty. Like, she can't feel anything anymore.

The water's getting cool so she hauls herself up and out of the bath and begins the fiddly task of picking bits of grit out of her skin, before smothering them in antiseptic. Then she pads back into her bedroom and pulls on her pajamas. She doesn't want to be naked in this big, spooky house with her big, spooky boss two doors down maintaining radio silence.

But after an hour when she's stared up at the ceiling, counted sheep, recited song lyrics, and tried to remember all the capitals of all the states, she still can't sleep. Not like she's going to be able to have a cigarette in his precious house without him going ballistic on her ass. If she was at home, she'd sneak a couple of Darla's sleeping pills and she knows that someone as tightly wound as Wes has got to have at least one bottle in the house.

She creeps out of bed, opens the door and pads down the corridor until she gets to his room. There's a sliver of light peeking out as she knocks on the door.

"Wes?" she calls softly but there's no reply.

When she tentatively turns the handle and steps over the threshold, the room's empty. The covers are turned back on the bed and the lamp on the side is switched on and casting a friendly glow over the millpond smoothness of the sheets. She looks longingly at the bed, not just because of the stuff they've done on it, but the afterward when he holds her and she thinks that when she goes to sleep, she never wants to wake up so she can stay in his arms forever.

She hears the faint sound of running water from the en suite bathroom and tiptoes over to the door. "Wes? Can I come in?"

There's the clatter of something being put down on one of the marble tops before the door is wrenched open. He's wearing a pair of boxer shorts and for a few seconds, she just stares at him. She never really gets a chance to look at his body with the benefit of really good lighting and now she can't help but feast her eyes on all that long, lean muscle. The little trail of hair that starts just above his waistband…

"Faith." Great. Maybe if he tried a little harder, he could manage to sound even more pissed off. "What do you want?"

She can feel the familiar prickle at the back of her eyes, even though she thought she'd used up every last drop of fluid in her tear ducts. "I can't sleep," she tries to explain and she sounds like the most forlorn thing this side of Little Orphan Annie. "I… Have you got any sleeping pills?"
He's staring too. Her faded pink pajamas aren't exactly the last thing in haute couture.

"It's not a good idea for you to be in here right now."

Her eyebrows shoot up so high that she's gonna need surgery to remove them from her hairline. "Excuse me? You suddenly had an attack of conscience about fucking your eighteen-year-old secretary. Well, fuck you!"

As she's storming out, stubbing her toe on the doorjamb on the way just for that sophisticated touch so necessary to a dramatic exit, it occurs to her that she hasn't had this kind of hissy fit well, ever since she went to work for him.

Slamming her door so hard that it shudders against the frame doesn't make her feel any better. After hopping around on one foot while she holds her injured toe and swears a lot, she yanks open her suitcase and begins throwing the clothes she wore today back in it.

"Who the fuck does he think he is?" she asks her dirty T-shirt as she viciously stuffs it into the corner of the case. "Fucking son of a fucking bitch. Any other guy would be like, fucking grateful to have some eighteen-year-old ass fawning all over him."

She doesn't even realize that he's followed her until he starts laughing. She whips around and pins him with her best superbitch glare as he leans against the wall and shakes with mirth. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Apparently, my head examined," he says. "Though I don’t care to hear you talk about yourself that way. And ‘fawning’? Odd that, try as I might, I can’t quite seem to recall you doing that." He tilts his head and gives her this long, considering look. "Or did you mean coming all over me? You’ve certainly done that."

"I mean it," she says flatly. "What do you want? Not me; that’s coming over loud and fucking clear, trust me."

He stares at the suitcase. "Where are you planning on going to, Faith? Back to your mother?"

"I’d say that was my business, Wes—sorry, sir. You’re my employer, remember? You don’t get a say in where I am outside the office. I’ll be at work on Monday, 8.30 sharp, just the way you like it. Good enough?"

And maybe she’s not as brave as her dad, because he straightens and steps into the room—without asking, too, as if it’s not her room now she’s planning on leaving—and she’s swallowing, with a dry mouth making it harder than usual, as he comes toward her, his eyes cold.

"Good enough? No, it really isn’t," he says. "And I’ve never numbered stupidity among your flaws, Faith, but if you make any more little speeches like that, I’m afraid I’ll have to start." He turns away so fast she’s left gaping at the space where he was and before she can stop him, he’s emptied out her suitcase onto the bed, closed the lid with a snap and set it over in the corner of the room. "That’s better," he murmurs.

"You can’t make me stay here, Wes," she says.

"I wouldn’t dream of it," he says and he’s as self-possessed in a pair of boxers as he is in one of his suits, but it’s easier to tell what’s on his mind and yeah, he’s hard and she doesn’t know why. Not like she’s looking all that sexy right now. “But I’d prefer it if you left without being forced into it by other people who don’t really matter.”
“Fuck, Wes! He’s my father. You can’t expect him to be cool with me moving in with you.”

“He’s a drunk. Violent, abusive and pathetic.”

“He’s all that, yeah. Doesn’t change anything.”

“Legally, he has no authority over you, Faith. You’re a free agent.”

“I’ll tell him that next time he’s about to hit me, and see what good it does, huh?”

They’re throwing the words at each other without a break, and he’s getting closer with every comment, until he’s all she can see. He’s gloriously angry now, but she knows it’s not going to be enough to let her take a single step away from him if he wants her here.

“If he hits you again, I’ll break every finger on each hand.”

And it’s such a ridiculously boy thing to say that she bursts out laughing until she sees his eyes and realizes he means it. “Fuck, Wes, you already reshaped his nose,” she murmurs, reaching out and taking his hand, studying the broken skin. “And you hurt your hand.”

“Yes, I did,” he says, without taking his eyes off her. He sounds plaintive and he’s not very good at it, but that just makes it even fucking cuter. “It’s very painful.”

And when he’s this close, and smiling, she’s lost. She brings his hand to her lips and kisses it gently. “That better?”

His hand slides around her waist and he leads her out of her room and into his, and it’s such a short walk but she loses a bit more of her bad temper with every step. “I think you’ve got the right idea, but I see no reason why you should confine your attentions to such a small area.”

“It’s the bit that got hurt,” she points out, getting off on him being playful like this but still not letting herself hope they can salvage the evening. Any minute now, something’s going to go wrong, she just knows it.

He closes the door behind them. “I favor a more holistic approach myself.”

And she’s not quite sure what he means, but she knows what he wants.

She turns and kisses him, sliding her arms around his waist. “This is different,” she says, moving her hands against his back. “Me wearing more clothes than you, I mean.”

“So you are,” he says. “I don’t think I like it.”

Something sparks to life between them then and she gets one of those light bulb moments. He’s just been fighting. For her. And he won, though she knows her dad will be back, and what’s that saying? ‘To the victor, the spoils’?

“Maybe you should get me how you want me then,” she says, and her hands and knees stop hurting, because, yeah, it was kinda hot seeing him defend her like that, and she’s not just talking about her dad either.

It’s like throwing oil on a fire and watching it blaze high. “I want you naked,” he says, his eyes narrowing and his voice pitched so low she doesn’t know how it’s still got that commanding edge to it.

“Then get me naked,” she tells him, and it’s all he needs to hear. His hands move to grip the lapels of
her shirt and his thumbs scrape against the top of her breasts, but it’s only for a second, because he tears the shirt open in one controlled, forceful tug. It’s so old the buttons pop open, or pop off, as obediently as if they’re in love with him too. He pushes the shirt back over her shoulders and lets her shrug out of it, but by then his hands are on her breasts, flat, fingers pointed upwards, so that her little shimmy pushes them against his palms and he squeezes just enough to make her gasp and arch against him.

He spreads his fingers slowly, and lets them move over her, as if he’s claiming every part he touches. When he gets to the waistband of her pajamas he whispers, “Off,” and bites hard on her shoulder as she’s pushing them down, using his tongue and lips to take the pain away before she feels it. When her pants hit the floor, his shorts join them, then she’s being picked up and turned and her back’s against the wall and he’s sliding down her body and fucking her skin with his fingers and mouth as he does it.

She can hear herself making these little mewling sounds and she spreads her legs, so that when he’s on his knees in front of her, he’s going to have to be blind to miss how wet she is already.

“Wes—” Her clit’s waiting for that flick he gives it with his tongue and when it gets it, her body starts to quiver, but he’s not telling her stay still so she lets herself go and, fuck, she’s painting his face, she’s so wet, and he’s letting her grind against him as if he can’t get enough of her, and his mouth’s greedy and hot on her slick skin.

She’s about to come, just needs one finger in her, one more violent, hungry suck at her swollen clit, but his hands clamp down around her hips suddenly and pull her down into his lap. She feels her knees buckle and goes with it, her hands smacking against his shoulders for balance.

And his cock’s there waiting, hard and all hers, and it’s inside her before she can catch a breath, in a sudden, shocking slide of cock into cunt and she’s filled and she’s coming too hard to scream, riding him in an undulation that never lets even an inch of him escape her, every muscle she has clenched, and his hands are still on her hips but he can’t stop her moving on him as she wants to, and he isn’t even trying because he’s coming too, and her name never sounded like that on anyone else’s lips.

“Faith,” he says again, reverently. Sweetly.

She tips her head, making their foreheads meet and kisses him with a slight brush of her lips. “Didn't think the worst date ever would end this good.” She's still out of breath, still wedged on top of him, still sensitive to his touch.

“End this well,” he corrects her, brushing her still-damp hair off her shoulders. “Really, Faith. I rather expected I would've had a greater influence on your speech habits by now.”

She's mock offended, hand flying to her chest dramatically, and he bites his lip to keep from laughing. “Oh, excuse me, but I had other things on my mind than perfect grammar just now, y'know?” He levels his gaze on her, teasingly stern. “Okay, okay Wes! Jeez! I didn't think it would end this well.”

His smile fades a little, but not entirely. “Frankly, I didn't either.” He sighs, offering a hand so she can slide off him, and she springs to her feet a little too quickly, nearly teetering over from the headrush. He spends a considerably longer time getting to his feet, running his hands over her, kissing his way up. When he reaches her lips, he whispers between kisses, “Faith, I'm sorry about earlier. I'm sorry.”

She's amazed at how he can flip from fucking scary to master of the bedroom to stammering and uncertain all in the span of a few minutes.
She takes his hand, runs her lips over the cuts again. “It's okay. Really. I think I may be starting to get you a little, Wes, y'know? You can try all stiff upper lip-y about things, but...” She blushes, worried she's gone too far, but for once, he's not shutting down, not hiding from her.

“But what, Faith? Tell me.” His eyes are fixed on hers, unrelenting.

“Well, it's just...well. You're really fucking angry. I can appreciate that, I mean, I am too.”

“I believe I've had more than few opportunities to see your anger in action, including a few minutes ago when I was certain you'd knocked a certain door off its hinges.”

“Seriously, Wes, listen. Yeah, you're angry and you don't know how to deal with it. But doesn't make it hurt any less that you just stormed off to your room after we got back, leaving me in the kitchen like that. Alone. After everything. That was just way harsh.” She swallows deliberately, slowing herself down. “But I think I understand. You didn't trust yourself, didn't want to maybe hurt me more than you wanted to. Right?” She falters a bit, tries to look away—anywhere but in his eyes—the intensity's making her a little nauseous and her knees wobbly.

He sees the effort it's taking for her to say this and he pulls her onto the bed, on top of those smooth, perfect sheets. And holds her. They're face to face and her heart is squeezed tight and feels like it’s gonna explode every time he strokes her hair, her cheek, her arms. Just being that close to him, when they’re both so still...she really does want to stop time and never leave this moment.

She lets her eyes flutter closed, trying to memorize every tingle, every brush of his fingertips, but he clears his throat. “You were saying?”

“Oh, well. That was it, really.” She can tell he's not buying it. And he's probably not gonna write off this conversation, even if she starts in with the heavy petting. She smiles ruefully at him. “It's just kind of funny, the way both our fathers are perfect fucking assholes, huh?”

The corner of his mouth twitches up faintly. “Faith, I admit, yes, I suppose that is part of the reason.” He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, as if hiding from himself, not her.

“What's the rest, then?” She tries to say that as encouragingly as possible, but he's pulling away, involuntarily slipping behind his protective facade.

She grips his chin and turns his head toward her. His eyes are downcast and she presses gentle kisses on his eyelids as his hands tighten round her waist.

“Hey,” she says softly. “This is me. You don't ever have to hide from me. Shit, I mean, Wes, you've seen just about all my secrets and they ain't pretty.”

“I'm not used to having someone need so much from me,” he murmurs finally and her face shifts into hurt puppy mode, which makes him smile. “Are you scheduling in your next teenage snit?”

She pouts then and wishes that she did that more because he pulls her bottom lip into his mouth and nibbles on it. Then there's long moments of this openmouthed kiss that sends flames of licking over every inch of her until she finds the strength to pull away from him.

“You can't French kiss your way out of this, Wes,” she tells him mock-seriously “I'm sorry I'm so fucking needy right now. I am. It's just everything… I hate that it's so fucking complicated, that you have to put up with so much of my shit.”

He smoothes his hands down her back, curves them over her ass and pulls her into him. “Very eloquently put, as usual,” he rasps in her ear. “But it's rather nice to be needed though, as you're
probably well aware, it often leaves me at a loss as to the best way to take care of you.”

“I don’t need you to take care of me!” she bursts out and he doesn’t say anything. The upward quirk of his eyebrow does that for him. “Well, maybe I do but I could take of you too, couldn’t I? I mean, I do, don’t I? Not just the fucking part but I’ve been there for you.”

He sighs and lets go of her so he can roll over on his back but before she can feel adrift, lost at sea, he’s taking her hand and placing it on the warm hollow of his chest where his heart is still beating too fast. “This is not something I wanted or expected,” he says to the ceiling and tightens his fingers round hers when she’s trying to yank her hand away. “Which is not to say that the way events have panned out is unwelcome. It’s just a little disconcerting and if I don’t always act in a manner that’s reassuring, it’s because I don’t deal well with surprises.”

It’s a careful speech and she needs time to decipher exactly what he does and doesn’t say. “Well, having some weirdass relationship with my boss wasn’t exactly on my list of things to do before I turned twenty-one, y’know?” she reminds him. She expects him to give her some more neither here nor there doublespeak but he surprises her by snorting rather inelegantly.

“Shall I let you into a little secret, Faith?” he drawls and she can’t help the little thrill that runs through her when his voice gets all dark and treacly.

“What?” she says a little too eagerly.

“I was never going to give you the job, not with your appalling employment record and your youth and the sullen way you came into my office,” he confesses and she can feel herself stiffen. “But then I looked up from the puddle of water you were dripping over my floor and I suddenly wanted to haul those revolting, damp clothes off you and fuck you over my desk.”

“You did?” She doesn’t think she should sound quite so pleased about as she does.

“Oh, most definitely,” he assures her, entwining his fingers around hers. “Something happened between us in that moment, I’m utterly convinced of it.”

Then she remembers that she’s still kinda mad at him, though she can’t exactly remember the details. “Yeah, well I thought you were some uptight control freak,” she says. “And that whole first week I was gonna walk out because you were working my last fucking nerve.”

She props herself up on one elbow so she can be sure of the huffy expression on his face. “Oh,” he says and he sounds really fucking hurt. “Oh. And there I was imagining a rather different scenario.”

“Well, I thought you were hot in a tightly wound, fucking scary kinda way,” she says brightly.

“If I didn’t have other plans for your delectable arse,” he tells her, “I’d be tipping you over my knee right now.”

And just like that, the whole tenor of the mood shifts along with her squirming body as she scoots over so she’s pressed against him. “You shouldn’t say stuff like that,” she mumbles, her face flaming red.

“Did I offend your maidenly sensibilities?” He hauls herself up so she’s straddling him, pinning his hands to his sides so he can see what it feels like.

“No, Wes.” She rubs against the start of a really promising erection. “You just got me really turned on. Your voice… man, the things you come out with. You ever think about a career change to phone sex operator?”
Funny how he can be bare-ass naked, cock half hard and still manage a look of complete indignation. “Certainly not! Not that is isn't delightful to have you writhing against me like this but I feel things have been a little rushed already this evening.”

“Wes,” she protests, catching her clit on the head of his cock and smirking as he gives a tiny groan.

“Off, now!” he orders and she takes her time about it, sliding sinuously over him to get to her side of the bed.

“You're no fun.”

“But I can be.” He peers at the clock by the bed. “Despite all the sturm und drang of this evening, it's not even midnight and I'm rather anxious to hear what you had planned for the rest of our date.”

She'll never get used to these lightning twists in his moods, as he swings his legs over the side of the bed and gets up.

“Well, there was gonna be Chinese food,” she reminds him, propping herself up on the pillows. “And then… then I wanted to make out with you.” It doesn't sound any less stupid to say it out loud.

“Make out with me?” he echoes incredulously as he pulls on his boxer shorts.

“Well, yeah. For, like hours and hours of kissing and dry humping and all that kind of shit.” This dreamy, wistful tone is creeping into her voice, and that needs to stop right now. “But I guess you have a lot of work to do tomorrow because of the court case and stuff. You nervous?” That sounds way better, like she's a professional, supportive girlfriend.

He looks surprised. “Not in the least. In fact, I'm looking forward to it,” he tells her with this grim satisfaction that sends little shivers down her spine because she wouldn't want to swap places with Lilah for all the fancy designer outfits in the world. “So, my plans until Monday morning were a little less prosaic than studying my briefs.”

She almost cracks out some lame joke about how he can study hers instead but manages to stop herself. Over the last few weeks, he's had quite an effect on her usually non-existent self-restraint.

“What are your plans then?”

“I'm going to unplug the phone,” he says, walking over to the bedside table and doing just that. “Because I'm heartily sick of the outside world intruding on us. And then I'm going to spend the next thirty-six hours fucking you.”

Her heart does this leap and ends up right in her mouth as she stares at him wide-eyed. His hands are pressing down on the mattress so he can lean in and whisper in her ear: “I'm going to fuck your arse and your cunt and your mouth. I'm going to make you come so many times that you'll swear you've just seen God. I might even let you sleep occasionally. Is that all right with you, Faith?”

She's nodding because what the fuck else is she going to do when her entire body has just suddenly liquefied?

“Good,” he says, straightening up. “But food first, I think. And you should probably have a quick shower.”

She wills her brain to pass a message on to her legs to start moving but it isn't listening and all she can do is stare transfixed at him as he walks toward the door.
He suddenly turns round and she can feel herself getting all hot and cold as his gaze sweeps over her, both tender and so ferocious that she has to press herself back against the cushions to put some distance between them. “Three things before I forget.”

There's a whole list of commands and orders that she's expecting. Positions he wants her in. Things he wants her to do. But that's not what happens.

“One, no matter how I might act, I never want you to think that I would hurt you or let you down. So, if you're having problems about anything, I expect you to come to me and let me help. Is that clear?”

The heart in her mouth thing is competing with the lump in her throat. “Yeah,” she whispers. “I'll do that.”

“Good. The second thing; on Monday, you're to phone your friend, Xander is it? Apologize to him and try to explain our situation in a way that you feel he'll be comfortable with.”

And even though he calls this, his sperm trickling out of her, the feeling of safety that he's gifted her with and which is going to take a hell of a lot of getting used to, a situation, she knows what it really is. Even if he can't say it.

She nods again. “What's the third thing?”

He gives her this slow, sultry smile that cranks up the heat. “There was a slip in your suitcase, a black and red thing, yes? I want you to put it on and be here on the bed when I get back.”

Faith beats all world showering records and drags the slip on over her still damp body. It's one of her favorite thrift store finds. Dull red silk with black lace edges, and if it's a little weird putting it on for him after watching Baby Doll a few hours earlier, then whatever. But if he even thinks about tearing it off her, then she's gonna get medieval on his British ass.

Which makes her wonder about exactly what he's going to do to her ass. She's had guys try to slip it in the wrong hole before and has been out of their cars or their rec rooms faster than a speeding train. But it's him and because it's him the thought of what he wants to do to her would have her crawling through broken glass on her hands and knees if that was what he wanted as a pre-show.

As it is, she's already getting wet again as she races down the corridor into his room. She hears his tread on the stairs and jumps onto the bed. When he pushes the door open with his foot, she's kneeling up expectantly.

He's holding a tray laden with bowls and plates that seem to have a lot of Chinese food in them if she's not mistaken.

“You went and got this out of the garbage?”

“Well, it was very firmly wrapped up. Besides, you were quite adamant that it was edible cold though I have my doubts,” he says, stepping into the room. “Can you get the bottle? It's slipping”

She retrieves the bottle of wine that he's wedged under his arm and looks greedily at the food. “Hey, y'know that…”

“I know exactly what you're going to say,” he interrupts. “That it tastes better out of the cartons but you have to allow me some foibles.”

“I'm just sayin'.” There's only one pair of chopsticks on the tray that he places on the bed and she's
suddenly starving. He firmly ignores her plaintive look and sits down. “Wes, I'm so hungry. You'd better be speedy with those chopsticks or we're gonna have a problem.”

It would have been much quicker if he just let her shovel the General Tso's Chicken into her mouth herself but it wouldn't be so much fun. He lets her have two of the egg rolls as he opens the wine, then he's pushing the tray out of her reach and clicking the chopsticks together in a playful manner.

She sits cross-legged, in front of him, the slip pulled demurely over her knees, and lets him feed her. Occasionally he holds the food away from her mouth so she has to pout and lever herself up, one hand on his shoulder to snatch a mouthful of rice away from him.

But what he said before, what he promised hangs heavy in the air between them. And she hasn't even had half of her share before she's closing her mouth and shaking her head as he offers her another egg roll. “Maybe I'm not as hungry as I thought I was,” she tells him, running her fingers over his cock, which is straining against the cotton shorts. “Not for food anyway.”

He pops the egg roll into his mouth and chews ruminatively, then swallows. “If you think that I'm going to let you come as quickly as I did before then you're very much mistaken,” he says throatily, his hand covering hers so they can stroke the length of him together, before he removes her fingers. He places the tray on the side table in the corner and walks back to the bed, his hands full of the gold foil-wrapped fortune cookies. He tosses them into her lap. There's a gleam in his eyes that's connected on a trip wire straight to her clit, which starts pulsing frantically. “Now, Faith, we're going to play a little game.”

She stirs them with her finger and looks up at him under her lashes, which is corny, but effective, because she sees him react to it with one of those quirky little grins she's crazy about. “Never was too good at chess, or anything complicated, Wes. Strictly the Go Fish type.”

“Oh, the rules are very simple,” he says. “Open one and read it out.”

She tears at the foil and snaps the cookie in half, popping one stray piece into her mouth to crunch on, and unrolling the narrow strip of paper. “Hmm, let’s see. ‘In your quest for fulfillment, do not overlook the details.’ God, who writes these?”

“I rather like that one,” he says. “And stop eating the cookie. You said you were full, remember?”

“Sorry.” She gathers up the debris and squirms over to deposit it in a bowl on the table by the bed, ignoring his faint moan of protest. He’s the only person she knows who has bowls everywhere that stay empty and don’t end up overflowing with junk. It was either that or the floor, so he can just stop being so fucking fussy. “What now?”

“Ten words,” he says thoughtfully, scooping up the cookies that she’s still got and piling them on the table. “Tell me, Faith; how many different positions have you ever tried?”

She feels a flush creep over her. “God, Wes. Never really counted them up, you know? The usual.” She tries to think. Back of a car doesn’t let you get fancy and most of the boys she’s been with haven’t exactly been Cosmo readers. “Four maybe?”

“There are dozens,” he tells her, “though most are variations on a theme.” It’s kinda freaky getting lectured about stuff like this in the same tone of voice her history teacher used to have when he was talking about Reconstruction but Wes could read the fucking phone book and turn her on, so she listens without complaining.

He pushes her back against the pillows and smiles down at her. “Count to ten for me, Faith,” he
whispers, “and you can come at a hundred, but not before.”

A hundred what?

He pushes her slip up to her waist and bares her to his finger, running lightly over the smooth, shaved skin that she’s become used to now, and dipping inside the folds, testing her. “So ready for me, always,” he says and there’s a bit of wonder in there, as well as the satisfaction she expected.

“Yeah,” she says, and makes it sound challenging. “What am I ready for, Wesley?”

He’s in her again in another quick thrust and she’s going to cry real tears when he goes back to teasing her because she could get used to this. She’s all arched and rubbing against him, but he’s not moving. “What?” she says.

“I’m waiting,” he reminds her.

“Huh? Oh! One.”

“That’s better.”

His lips find a square inch of skin on her neck that she doesn’t think he’s kissed before and fasten on in a kiss that’s sweet and soft, and his hips do this lazy back and forth before he stops again. “This is going to take a long time, if I have to keep reminding you,” he says. “Not that I mind that, of course.”

“Oh, fuck. Two. Look, Wes, can’t I count in my head, or something?”

He nips at her skin with sharp teeth. “Absolutely not.”

The next thrust comes and she snaps out, “Three!” on the button, and gets another right away...and another...and she’s getting into a nice rhythm now and the counting’s becoming part of it, so she’s sighing out the numbers into his ear as he lets her hold him to her and it’s really fucking nice—

“You stopped!”

He’s sitting back on his heels, cock wet and hard, eyes gleaming. “You got to ten,” he says.

“Wasn’t it supposed to be a hundred?” She’s getting seriously grumpy now.

“Ten strokes in ten positions equal a hundred, yes.”

She’s rolling her eyes in disbelief, which she feels she does a lot with him. “You’re going to do this nine more times? Get me going and stop? Wes!”

“I’m taking care of the details in my quest for fulfillment,” he says, looking insufferably smug. “Now, this next one, I’m going to trust you not to go beyond ten. Don’t let me down.”

He rolls to his back and gives her an expectant look. Fine. He’s not the only one with patience or a sadistic streak. She straddles him and wraps her hand around the sticky hot shaft, holding it in place and easing down on it slowly. “One.”

She draws it out in a way that has him biting his lip by five, rising up slowly and sliding back down in an agonizingly gradual descent that’s got her thigh muscles screaming. All the time, she’s running her hands over his chest, pinching his nipples to hardness, enjoying the chance to touch him.

“Going to tie you up one day, Wes,” she says, capturing his wrists and putting them over his head.
“Three. God, yes, you look good like that. Keep them there? Perfect.” She scratches her nails down the smooth skin of his exposed underarm, feeling how soft it is. “Listen to you—four—beg me, the way I beg you.”

“It’s always good to have dreams,” he says dryly. “I trust you of course, but I don’t think—”

She doesn’t let him finish, reaching around behind herself and brushing her fingers over his balls, tickling them until he glares at her even as his hips are lifting, just a little.

“Five.” And she throws him a curve and slams down on him in three blurringly fast bounces that drive him inside her and start off a tingle that warns her she’s too fucking close when they’ve got “Sixseveneight,” eighty-two more of these to go.

He’s got his fists full of pillow and his eyes are closed to slits as she makes the last two as slow as molasses dripping off a spoon.

She eases off him and smiles innocently. “How do you want me now?”

His hands move from where she left them and he pulls her to him, kissing her hard.

“I think after that little performance, we’ll have a short intermission,” he says and flips her over so that she’s lying face down across his lap.

“Hey, Wes! No fair!” She’s wriggling and giggling at the same time. “I didn’t break the rules.”

“No, you did an excellent job,” he assures her. “I just think you’re losing sight of one important fact.”

“What?”

His hand comes down in a slap that’s just hard enough to sting, but doesn’t hurt. “I make the rules. Count to ten.”

When he’s done and her ass is a pretty shade of pink, or so he says, he rolls her over so she’s looking up at him.

“Does that count toward the hundred?” she asks.

“Did it do as much for you as the other twenty did?”

It’s a serious question, which throws her a bit. “God, Wes.” She stirs against his lap, thinking about it, but she’s only got to remember how she felt, ass up and waiting, to know what the answer is. “Yeah. Don’t know if you could make me come by spanking me—” And fuck, don’t his eyes light up at that idea. “But it turns me on. Yeah. I like it.”

And her face matches her ass admitting it but it’s worth it to see him smile. “Then we’ll count it.” He strokes her grazed knees. “Are they too sore for you to get on your hands and knees for me?”

She shakes her head. They probably are, but the covers are soft and she’s not letting anything her father did interfere with anything Wes has planned. Even the thought’s enough to make her wince and Wes sees it and frowns.

“They’re really not,” she says, pulling him down for a kiss that turns into her sitting in his lap, with her legs wrapped around his waist.

And, turns out, he’d had that position planned anyway, so they use up another ten with her moaning
the numbers against his lips because he doesn’t stop kissing her the whole time and it’s so much fun, he’s halfway into eleven when he catches himself and she’s laughing at him as he tries to tell her she’s lost count.

The positions he puts her into start to blur and the laughter dies away as they’re brought to the edge over and over. She’d have given up by fifty, but he’s relentless, stopping, with a muscle jumping in his cheek as he sets his teeth, and pulling out of her; making her count when she’s close to forgetting her name, she’s so lost in the feel of his body as it rests against hers or hovers over her, impossibly distant and out of reach.

They end as they began, with him between her legs, but he’s standing and the bed’s high enough that he doesn’t need to bend or crouch. He pulls her so her ass is on the edge of the bed and lifts her legs high onto his shoulders, so that when he pushes inside her he goes deeper than before, and it’s almost painful, but there’s no fucking way she wants him to stop. Her hands grip the edge of the mattress and he’s giving her stroke after stroke now, fast and hard and perfect and she’s shaping the word ten with lips that haven’t been able to do more than that for a long time now, when he comes with a hoarse cry, and falls forward, gathering her to him as her legs slip down and around his waist and he doesn’t stop moving inside her until she’s stopped writhing against him.

They end up sprawled across the bed, and she’s trying to decide if there’s any part of her that isn’t trembling, when he moves away and a second later a cookie lands on her stomach.

“Open it,” he says in a voice that’s still slightly breathless. “And I’ll pour us some wine.”

She just lies there for a moment, not wanting to move. The mere thought of having to reach for the cookie and actually open the damn thing is too much for her. “Holy shit, Wes, I think I’m…”

He’s pouring two large glasses of wine for them. “Yes?”

“Let’s just say I have a whole new understanding of the phrase ‘shagged out.’ And, to be honest, I’ve never even thought about it before now.”

He looks at her with what might be classified as terminal bemusement. “You’re not going to get away that easily, I’m afraid. Wine?”

“Sure. Why not? As long as you’re not going to make me, like, get up to get it.”

“Don’t be silly.” He brings the wine over to the bed and hands her one long-stemmed glass. She does feel silly, and definitely self-conscious, sitting there naked, drinking wine out of a fancy glass. She’s more familiar with $9.99 box wines, sticky-sweet wine coolers, and the like, usually sipped straight from a Dixie cup. She has Wes figured as someone with a freaking wine cellar. She doesn’t even need to ask him, really—it’s pretty much a foregone conclusion.

Problem is, the wine isn’t restoring her so much as putting her to sleep. Wes sees her head droop, and snatches the glass away from her. “Hey! I was drinking that!” she yelps, and tries to take it back from him. She doesn’t succeed.

He nods rather sternly in the direction of the forgotten fortune cookie, which has tumbled unceremoniously onto the bed. “I do believe that I charged you with a rather simple task, Faith. Now open it.”

She reaches for the goddamn fortune, not with entirely good grace either.

“All right, all right.” She cracks the cookie open and unfurls the tiny slip of paper.
She reads it to herself, and just rolls her eyes.

“Do share, Faith,” he says, with more than a little impatience.

“A surprise will titillate and frighten you, but you will accept it.”

Wes just smiles. It’s a cagey, difficult-to-read smile, and Faith is suddenly dying to know what sort of devious plan he’s got in mind. Whatever the fuck it is, she makes a silent vow to get back at him one day.

“You remember what I told you before, Faith?”

“Yeah, of course.” She swallows audibly, her mouth suddenly dry. “Why?”

“Don’t be afraid to tell me anything you need to tell me, all right?”

“Wes, what are you—”

He presses his fingertips to her lips. “Shh, Faith. Now, turn around.”

His air of detached calm is making her nervous. “Wait, Wes, I need to know—”

“Just remember, Faith. I promise that nothing will happen to you that you don’t want to happen. Do you trust me?”

Now there’s a loaded question. “Y-yes.” She says it again, this time with no hesitation. “Yes, I do.”

“Good. Now, close your eyes.” She does, and she can feel the nearness of his hands as they reach around in front of her and place a strip of cool fabric on her brow. He ties it tightly around the back of her head. Her eyes snap open reflexively. Of course she can’t see a goddamn thing.

“Hands on the bed, Faith. And keep them there.”

She has no choice but to comply. She feels like she’s being readied for an inspection. And of course he’s making her fucking wait, expectant and more than a little anxious. What is he doing? She can’t even hear him. Stealthy bastard.

And yeah, the waiting game turns her on too. With her legs parted slightly, she can feel the cool air on her wet cunt. Then the bed tips slightly, and she can feel his proximity again.

Now he’s leaning over her, cock right up against the cleft of her ass, and that’s making her even wetter. “God, are you going to—” She’s practically breathless, just waiting for him.

“Shh, shh.” His whisper is meant to calm her but it’s just more fuel for the fire and God, would he just—

But he’s kissing her shoulder, pulling her hair aside so he can trail small kisses down her back. He raises his hands to her breasts, thumbs tracing agonizing little concentric circles over her aching nipples. He’s put her under a spell where all she can do is make these little inchoate moans.

When he removes his hands suddenly, she almost collapses onto the bed with a startled cry. He’s leaning in so close to her that she can feel him take a breath, and he doesn’t let her fall. He steadies one hand against her stomach and the other slips to her neglected clit. She’s so wet that three fingers doesn’t seem like enough—she’s greedy and wants his fist inside her, wants to work against all those muscles—but he seems determined to give her the slow and the agonizing this evening so she settles. His fingers still inside her for a moment, and he says, “I’m going to let go of you now. Is that all
“Right?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good.”

He takes his hand away from her belly but keeps working her clit. His other hand trails down her back, slowly, slowly, until she thinks she might scream. He stops short at the base of her spine.

“Take a deep breath, Faith.”

She steadies herself, knowing what’s coming next.

But she’s surprised, because it’s not his cock sliding into her asshole but a finger. It’s still a shock and she gasps. There’s resistance, a sharp little pain that gives way to mild discomfort, but the lube he’s using, a cold dollop of it, and his ardent finger-fuck help mitigate that and she gradually starts to relax. As she contracts around his finger, he takes that as a sign to keep forging ahead. She’s starting to rub herself against him, and that’s even better, but it’s not enough.

“Does that feel good?”

She’s not feeling too coherent, but she manages a breathless, “Fuck, yeah.”

“Anything else you want?” His voice is slurred just a little, not as in-control as usual. It’s so fucking sexy.

“Want your cock in me.” And he’d better not be asking any more questions that require any answer other than “oh,” or “fuck,” because that took every ounce of concentration she had left.

“That’s what I thought.”

She knows she should be relaxed, knows that will make it all easier. Hell, she had been relaxed until a few moments before. Those last words shoot straight through her. Of course he knows exactly what she wants. She grabs handfuls of sheet, knuckles white, to keep from collapsing altogether. Deep, deep breaths, she thinks, trying to push all the anticipatory tension out through the soles of her feet, past her curled toes.

He slides around her back, finger still working in her ass, whispers in her ear: “Yes, I think you’re ready now. Just relax.”

She nods, his voice—his pretty, pretty voice blowing the nascent waves of tension away—and shivers, involuntarily. All those times she's felt utterly boneless before have nothing on this. He runs his warm lips down her back again, planting a light kiss on that tiny bit of skin between the small of her back and the cleft of her ass, and that warm tingling finally hits her brain like a shower of stars.

He pulls away for a moment, leaving her there so very prone and adrift. But in the next instant, she has to stifle a near-hysterical giggle at the cold squelching of the lube on his cock; it's so much funnier than she expected it to be, after all that wine.

And then he's pressed against her again, one hand back to working her clit, gently, and the head of his cock lightly kissing her asshole.

“Take a deep breath,” he orders again, and though he's so plainly in control, he sounds nearly as unhinged as she feels. And before she can be either surprised or titillated, he's gently sliding in, just the head. Her fingers scrabble for steadier purchase on the sheets. They're both so slick with lube that
for a moment she hardly feels a thing until he pushes in just a tiny bit farther, and the shock of that unfamiliar sensation nearly sends her into a fit of feral growling, but instead it all comes out as a strangled little cry that catches in her throat.

“You're all right.” He's not asking—he's telling her she's all right.

“Oh, Wes, I’m more than all rig...” But she doesn't get the last syllable out because he's slid in another few centimeters, and she's lost the ability to speak at all.

He moves deliberately, letting her adjust as she takes each slick inch. She's pretty sure she's making some kind of noise, a kind of low, steady moan, but she's so far removed from that now. The only real sensation is his slick length penetrating her, sliding into the dark places she didn't even know were there.

When he's finally all the way in, and he hovers there locked inside her, all she can think is that there's no way anyone else could ever possibly be closer to her than he is at that very moment.

It's a feeling that's almost too huge to be contained, yet at the same time so small and precious that she wants to hide it away in case it gets lost, or forgotten.

And it's probably not the best time in the world to realize how much you love someone when he's got his cock in your ass.

There's all these thoughts ricocheting through her head but the pair of them are still as statues, frozen in time and she knows that he's waiting for her to say something, to give some little sign that she's okay but she wants to draw out this moment as long as she can.

Then his finger lightly circles her clit in an almost reassuring gesture and she can't help but shift her hips slightly in response. He draws back slowly and she can't bear it.

“No!” Her cry is pitiful and she lunges back so he's embedded in her again, groaning at her undulations. “No! Don't leave me!”

“Sssh,” he breathes against her neck. “I've got you, Faith.”

When he starts slowly sliding out again and she's canting her hips to try and keep him there, his voice is like her lighthouse, guiding her away from the rocks. “Sssh,” he murmurs again. “Let me take care of you.”

So she does. And he begins this slow pull and push, dragging his cock out of her the slightest of degrees and then pressing it farther and farther in so this deep, dark pleasure envelopes her and she's squeezing down on him and just wanting him to never stop.

His finger is pressing down harder on her clit, worrying at it and it's not enough. “I want more,” she begs. “Want your fingers inside me now.”

He gently probes her aching, empty cunt with one finger and it's not enough. “More!” she growls.

Then two fingers inside her, then three and he's slowly, very slowly grinding the heel of his hand against her clit and she's going to die right here on his bed.

It's so weird how she can feel his cock and his fingers at the same time. Weird but really, really fucking good so she stops thinking about love and loss and all that other stuff that just gets in the way. He's going too slowly, like she's made of finely spun glass and she's going to shatter at any minute, which is not even close.
The next time he starts to back out, she raises herself up on her knees so that just the head of his cock is inside her and then lowers herself quickly so he's deeper inside her than he was before. His hands clamp around her waist as she hisses between gritted teeth like he's worried that she's hurt herself but she repeats the motion, leaning back against his chest to steady herself.

“Like this,” she groans, dragging his hand back to her syrupy cunt. “I want you to fuck me like this.”

His three fingers are twisting roughly inside her again and she brings her hand down to rub against her clit as she starts twisting her hips and sliding up and down on his cock.

“Such a beautiful girl,” he purrs and he sounds out-of-focus, like he's a long way away. “Do you like getting fucked in the arse, Faith?”

“Yeah, fuck yeah.”

He's all over her. One hand pinching her nipple in time to the thrust of his fingers in her twitching cunt and his mouth… Sweet fucking Jesus his mouth, dragging his teeth against the back of her neck and then sucking down hard on her skin. When the tips of his fingers skitter over that little bump deep inside her she clenches every single muscle she has, a few she didn't even know about and he thrusts up into her harder than before. His cock feels huge and relentless and she revels in it.

All the separate raw, sweet sensations merge and she momentarily stills as her climax hits her with wave after wave that makes her toes and fingers curl up and he shoves his cock into her one final time, breaching his way through her spasming channel so she can feel his cock spurting deep inside her.

Afterward she bursts into tears when he pulls out of her because it feels like something has changed or gone away and she doesn't even know what it is. Or, like, how to get it back.

He tugs her back into his arms so she's nestled against him and holds her while she gets tears and snot all over his pillow. When her sobs have subsided so all she's got left is the occasional tearful sniffle, she feels ridiculously shy. Which is stupid for someone who just let a guy fuck her in the ass.

“I'm such a fucking dork,” she mumbles, rolling over so she can wipe her face on the pillowcase. She can feel his pained glare shooting daggers into her back even though he can't even see the smears of mascara on the snowy white linen yet.

“I'm not entirely sure what that is but I'm sure you're not.” She raises her head so she can look at him; it's hard to tell what kind of mood he's in from his voice which has gone back to the mild setting.

He's propped up on one elbow and he looks sleek and satisfied like a well-fed tom cat. “Do you think I'm, like, a total slut for letting you do that?”

“I'm not even going to dignify that with a response.” His fingers walk across the bedspread so he can stroke a path along her thigh. “I imagine it was a little overwhelming, yes?”

“You think? Wes, it was fucking amazing but kinda weird and scary too.” She tries to explain it but she's not even sure that she understands.

“Too weird and scary?”

“You're such a guy some times,” she sneers at him but she can feel this goofy smile spreading over her face. “You just wanna know if you're gonna get any more back door action from me.”

He winces beautifully. There might even be an elegant little shudder in there somewhere. “Well,
when you put it like that, Faith, how could I resist?"

She flops over onto her back and gives a tiny 'oh' as her ass connects with the bed. What with the spanking and the ass fucking, she’s feeling a little done in.

“I imagine a hot bath would be rather welcome right now.”

But before he can get off the bed, before he even has time to move more than one inch away from her, she hauls herself up and slides onto him, rubbing her breasts against the smooth, warm skin of his chest. Then she rolls them so he's on top of her and sore ass be damned. “Wes, I really need you to just hold me for a second, okay?”

It's probably the closest she's gotten to telling him how much he means to her. So she lets her hands and lips do it for her as she strokes the back of his neck, lets her fingers tangle in his hair and places teasing kisses against the curve of his mouth.

After a while, he gives this regretful sigh and pushes her away gently. “I really do think we need to bathe,” he says firmly. Before she’s got time to protest, because she’d really been enjoying the chance to cuddle up against him, she’s treated to a nice view of his ass as he disappears into the bathroom and turns on the taps. Left alone, she starts to feel all sorts of feelings that aren’t rating high on the fun scale. There’s this dull ache deep inside and she’s got a horrible feeling that if she doesn’t get off it soon the bed’s going to have worse than mascara, snot, and tears on it.

Wesley appears at the door, gives her a thoughtful glance and a wadded up bunch of tissues, and strolls out, calling out something about a snack.

By the time he comes back, she’s neck deep in bubbles and feeling better. Still sore, still moving carefully, but there’s this rich, dark satisfied feeling inside her that isn’t going away because every time she closes her eyes she hears Wesley telling her she’s beautiful.

Maybe she is.

Wesley brings a small table over to the side of the bath and puts a tray on it, before stepping into the bath and flicking bubbles at her, in a move that has her mouth gaping open in shock.

“Wes, for you that’s playful,” she tells him. “Bring out a rubber duck, and I’m going to think the aliens took you over when I wasn’t looking.”

He narrows his eyes and does it again. “I can be playful,” he says, sounding hurt.

“Wes, I bet you iron your socks.”

That gets her toes tickled and by the time she’s retaliated, the floor’s looking like a lake and Wesley’s glaring at her as if it’s all her fault.

“Feed me,” she says, to distract him, glancing over at the tray. It’s dessert time by the look of it; the last of the raspberries, a small bowl full of fancy looking chocolates, and a larger one with vanilla ice cream. She looks for the spoon, preparing to play fledgling to his mamma bird, but there isn’t one.

“Very well,” Wesley says. “I suppose keeping your energy levels up is in my best interests, after all.”

She dimples at him and watches a smile ghost across his face as he reaches for a raspberry. He makes her part her lips so he can place the berry in her mouth and takes one for himself. “I used to pick wild raspberries as a child,” he says. “I’d stand there and eat them off the bushes and try not to get my fingers stained.”
“Why?” she says, glancing at his hand and seeing the red juice dappling his fingertips.

He brings his hand to his mouth and licks it clean. “My nanny was convinced eating fruit that hadn’t been cleaned first, until it tasted of water and soap, was dangerous. She tried to dissuade me, but until you’ve tasted them like that, you’ve never tasted them at all, and I was always a little stubborn.”

It’s a tiny glimpse into his past and it’s all she gets, because he fills her mouth with a chocolate that’s a bite of heaven and by the time she’s swallowed regretfully, he’s reaching for the ice cream.

“You forgot the spoon,” she tells him.

“I don’t forget things,” he says, sounding impossibly stuffy. His finger digs into the creamy mound and he studies her before moving, with a mini tidal wave of bubbles, to kneel between her legs. Brushing aside the bubbles, he lets the dollop of ice cream fall onto her nipple, smiling as she squeaks.

“Cold! Wesley, that’s fucking cold!”

Her breasts are flushed pink from the heat of the water and the ice cream’s like an icy kiss, peaking her nipple even as it melts and starts to slide over her skin in a sticky, chilly stream.

“Really? I’ll have to write to the manufacturers and complain,” he murmurs, leaning forward and tracing his tongue through the coolness. “Dear Sir, your ice cream is cold. This must stop immediately.”

She snorts with laughter and then gasps as he does it again on her other breast. “Don’t I get to eat any?” she asks.

He pulls out the plug and the water begins to drain away. “Not just yet,” he says, watching the level of water. When it’s low enough that her belly’s exposed he smiles and replaces the plug, and she starts to whimper. “Nooo! Wesley, I’m hot and that’s fucking freezing.”

He stares at the hands she’s waving around in protest and says firmly, “Place your hands on the sides of the bath, Faith.”

Pouting, but knowing it won’t save her, she obeys him and her stomach muscles clench as he drips on a pattern that he tells her is a heart, as if that makes it warmer. Besides, it’s a fucking pathetic attempt at a heart. Looks more like a butterfly. His tongue’s stopped being comforting now, because it’s as cold as the ice cream and she’s shivering and moaning as he ends up just where she knew he would, with the last fingerful landing and slipping down over her clit, drizzled in a torturous, teasing dribble that has her wishing he’d brought up two bowls because he’s swirling his tongue all over the place, with his sleek, wet head bobbing up and down as he chases every drop.

Finally, when she’s gone up the scale saying his name, he sits back and scoops up handfuls of water and washes her clean.

“I think I’m developing a sweet tooth,” he says thoughtfully.

“Yeah,” she mutters. Her eyes widen indignantly as she glances at the bowl. “It’s all gone! Don’t I get a turn?”

Dark eyebrows climb in surprise. “All gone? Really? Dear me.”

There’s a pool of ice cream in the bowl and she gives it a speculative look before picking it up, pushing him back and tipping it up, painting a line down his chest and stomach and running her
finger around the bowl so the very last drops land on the head of his cock.

He’s yelping and squirming, but she sneers, “Suck it up, Wes, you baby,” and works her way down him, taking her time.

When she gets to his cock, the water’s going cold and her elbows and knees are suffering but he’s hot and hard in her mouth and she’ll never say vanilla’s boring again and demand chocolate.

Chapter Twenty-Six

He helps her out and wraps her up in one of those towels that are so heavy and thick she can barely lift them, drying her off carefully and then watching her as she sits before the mirror and yanks tangles out of her wet hair with a ruthless efficiency.

“Do I get to sleep now?” she says, throwing a glance at him. He’s put on a robe but, as ever, he makes it look as elegant as one of his suits.

“Are you sleepy?” he asks.

“Not really. Night owl, me.”

That gets her a smile. “I wasn’t going to let you anyway,” he says. “But I think we need a little time to recover.” He stands up. “Follow me.”

He takes her hand and they skitter barefoot across the cold black slate floors of the hallways and common areas up to the library.

When they reach the red lacquer door again, Faith pulls back a little, clears her throat. She hasn’t been inside since that first night they were together—when he read to her and he still wanted her in those ridiculous but sexy clothes. And her mother had called. The rest is kind of jumbled in a blur, that whole night. Good—no, very, very good to a point, then sickeningly bad once the light of day shone in all its dark corners.

Of course, things couldn’t be more different—she's clad in one of his extra robes, for starters and then there's the fact that she’s actually living here now—but it still makes her heart skip a beat to think of them back inside the warm, red heart of the house, with its musty books and naughty pictures and soft lighting. Then the whole room seemed as cordoned-off and intangible as the man himself.

His hand's on the heavy doorknob when he feels her pull away; he turns quickly and looks her straight in the eye.

“I believe you said something about making out. That is what you said earlier, yes?”

She's pink up to the tips of her ears because there's a slightly sardonic emphasis on her repeated words. “Well, yeah, Wes, but I didn't think, like, that would be your speed.” She's screaming at herself on the inside not to fuck this up. Would he just hold her, kiss her, tell her it's all gonna be all right?

“Well, were we to pause for such an interlude, don't you think this would be the appropriate location?”

She wants to say no, she wants to say; let's take in the view. Or show me the rest of the house—or how about a cup of tea, instead? But he's cracked the door open, and both he and the throbbing redness of the decor are drawing her in.
“Only if you...” She sighs, resigned. Remembering the one way she had felt safe in that room.

“Only if I what, my dear, bossy Faith?”

Her voice is nearly imperceptible, eyes lowered. “Only if you read to me.”

“Oh, Faith, really. You needn't be shy about asking for that, remember?” He tips her chin up and plants a soft kiss on her full lips. “Honestly, that wasn't quite what I had in mind for us. You'll be fully tired of my yammering on once it comes time to run over my arguments for the case Sunday evening. Now come in, please. You remember—this is the room where I chop up my secretaries before I dump them in the river after I've alienated them from their family and friends and invite them to live with me.”

She smiles then, backhands him on the arm with a generous dose of eye rolling.

The glowing wall sconces throw a dim light on the new addition to the room, a chaise lounge where the two chairs had been. She slides up to it, throwing herself dramatically across the plush velvet upholstery, sighing. He's fiddling with something hidden in shadow along the far wall, something that turns out to be a stereo. She jumps when a speaker and subwoofer hidden behind the chaise lounge hum with a rasping cello.

“Handel. Passacaglia,” he says, seeming pleased with himself as he joins her on the chaise. He leans against her propped-up legs, languid and relaxed, and she tries not to become completely unhinged by the intimacy of his action.

She doesn't say anything, just pulls him close, swinging her legs over his lap, and gives him one of those deep and hot classic movie kisses. His hands try to wander, but she slaps them away, and slips out of the kiss. “Hey, we're still on first base here, Mr. Best Things Come To Those Who Wait. Watch the hands!”

He looks at her in mock disbelief. “Your game has rules?”

She knows that her expression of aggrieved hurt is absolutely perfect; she's had years to work on it after all. “It has bases, Wes. And y'know, technically we're still in the middle of our first date so I don't know how far I should let you go.”

And then she kisses the incredulous look right off his face.

It's everything she wanted and never got in high school. Better because it's not some sweaty jock or fucked-up stoner shoving his tongue down her throat or groping her breasts like they're made out of Play-Doh. This time it means something.

Yeah, he might think it's a game but he's playing by her rules for once and she finds the part of virginal sophomore ingénue frighteningly easy to assume. Maybe that's why her hands are shaking as she cups his face and kisses the sharp curve of his cheekbones. She shifts awkwardly on his lap like it's entirely new territory to her and she can feel his hard-on pressing against her, which just adds a delicious fucked-up role reversal to the whole thing. Gonna teach him a thing or two about how it feels to wait for the good stuff.

He's behaving himself; keeping his hands lightly clasped around her waist, following her lead. But when she opens her mouth to sigh dreamily, his tongue slips between her lips. She draws back with an outraged gasp.

“Hey! What do you think you're doing?”
His lips purse as he gives her the old eyebrow arch and tightens his hold on her. “We're playing that game, are we, Faith?”

If her eyes get any wider then they're going to pop out of her head. “It's just y'know, you're like way older than me and all experienced and stuff. I've never French kissed anyone before.”

He's smiling now like he really doesn't want to but he just can't help himself. “What, never?”

She shakes her head and bites her lip, before she decides that maybe she's laying it on too thick. “Maybe you could…show me how to do it?” And then she wriggles extra hard on his lap so she can feel the pulsing of his cock even through the thick velour of her robe. “Just the French kissing because…”

“Yes, it's our first date,” he bites out. “I believe you did mention it once or twice.”

And then like she's the jumpiest virgin this side of a debutante's Coming Out dance, he slides his hand round the back of her neck so he can tug her closer. “It's very simple, Faith. I'm going to put my tongue in your mouth and stroke it against yours.”

Turns out she's a natural at French kissing. Who'd a thunk it? She's literally swooning in his arms as he traces the roof of her mouth, the inside of her cheeks, and her teeth with the tip of his tongue.

They do nothing but kiss for what seems like hours and her mind drifts off to this place where life is simple and there was never anyone else before him. When he finally stops kissing her tingling mouth, she can't help but bury her head in the curve of his neck and hug him tightly to her. “Wes,” she whispers against the salty sheen of his skin. And if he thinks it's just part of the game, then she knows different.

Then she's getting some primo hair-stroking before his hand slips along her neck and down and down…

“Oh my God! Where is your hand, Wes?”

She knows full well where his hand is. It's currently cupping her breast, his thumb rubbing against the cloth-covered nipple. “I think you're ready for second base,” he drawls into her ear, as she arches into his palm.

“I don't know, Wes. You might get the wrong idea about me.” This time she has to duck her head so he doesn't see the smirk.

One of his fingers joins his thumb, gently tugging at the hard point of her nipple. “Why don't we try it for a little while and you can see whether you like it or not,” he suggests, his eyes glittering like the window display in the fancy jeweler’s shop in town.

“Second base, you mean?” That quivering note of outrage should get her a frickin' Academy Award. “Well, only if you promise not to tell anyone that I let you.”

And she has this whole speech prepared about how he isn't allowed to go under her clothes, but when he starts pushing the robe off her shoulders so he can bend his head and suck her nipple into the wet heat of his mouth, she kinda forgets her next line.

His mouth is so talented that it should have its own show on the WB. She promises herself that she's going to find her motivation but then he'll do something sneaky like drag the flat of his tongue around her areola and it's forgotten. But when his teeth start to graze and give her that sweet edge of dark pain that has her grinding into his cock, she grabs his hair and yanks hard.
“Hey! Hey!” she squeaks indignantly. “Just what kind of girl do you think I am?” She pinches the hand that’s creeping up her thigh so hard that he whimpers like a big wuss. “No way, no how, am I going to third base, Mister.”

He’s giving her the evil eye like he wants to turn her to stone. “Faith,” he says quietly, warningly. “You shouldn’t play games, if you can’t remember your own rules.” And he looks pointedly at her gleaming breasts.

It’d be the easiest thing to back down or strip off her dressing gown, lie down on the sheepskin rug and beg him to fuck her. But she deserves this. Deserves it for all the times she got treated like shit by some lousy guy who only wanted her for one thing. And she deserves it from him because she knows they’re on a clock and as soon as her novelty value wears off or he comes to his senses, then she’s gonna be out on the ass that he just fucked.

Besides, hasn’t she played all his games? Followed his rules even when it was obvious he was making them up as he went along? If he thinks that he can glare her into submission, then he’s gonna have blue balls for the rest of the fucking night.

She wraps the robe firmly about her, folds her arms and pouts at him. “I’m sorry, Wes. I didn’t mean to lead you on or nothing.” If she concentrates really hard, she can make her bottom lip wobble alarmingly. “Does this mean you’re gonna break up with me?”

“No,” he drawls. “This means I have to try a new tack. If at first you don’t succeed…” He flashes her the most insinuating smile in his arsenal. She tries not to quaver in the face of it but it’s tough. She wraps the robe around herself a little tighter, hoping she’s not overdoing the defensive virgin act. The defensive bit is suitably method, at least.

She’ll be damned if she’s going to let him beat her at her game.

He must see the determination in her eyes because he adds a quick, “I’ll be good, I promise.” He wraps his arms around her waist and pulls her toward him. “See? My hands are staying put.”

She’s back in full mock-effrontery mode. “Yeah, well, I’m not so sure I can trust you when you say that.” She swivels on the chaise and crosses her legs with what she hopes is firm—no, unswerving resolve.

“Frankly, Faith, I’m hurt.” In response, he starts peppering her exposed neck with these devastating little kisses that are so goddamn sweet but they’re still turning her insides to mush. “Might there be any way I could make it up to you?” he asks huskily, in between. And yeah, his hands still haven’t moved from their spot at the small of her back, haven’t even strayed to her ass once.

Her voice softens, like she’s reconsidering her stance. “Maybe?”

He looks dreadfully amused at her indecision. “Really, Faith, you can do better than that.”

She considers that for a moment. “You’re right.” She plucks his hands away from her and wriggles free of him. “Now, I’d like you to sit back. Hands at your sides. And don’t move until I tell you to.” He complies. She gets up off the chaise and crosses the room to the seemingly endless row of bookshelves. As her fingers drift lazily over the the worn and cracked spines, she wonders if he remembers when and where he was when he bought each and every one. She smiles to herself—she knows the answer to that one, easy.

She starts to slide a random book off the shelf but stops short and puts it back. She turns to find him sitting stock still, watching her with interest. “So, Wes, I’ve got a tough one for you. If you had to
pick one book, and one book only, which one would you pick?” He practically blanches, as though she’s asked him to encapsulate the meaning of life in one short pithy phrase, and she knows the satisfaction of a job well done. And they haven’t even gotten to the fun part yet.

“One?” He shakes his head and looks firm. “I couldn’t. Not possibly.”

“I said it was tough,” she reminds him, making her voice inflexible.

“It’s impossible!” he says, with the words bursting out of him indignantly. “Do you know how many I own? And they’re all special, for different reasons. I can’t choose one from the thousands and I won’t.”

His mouth’s set or she’d suspect he was pouting. “Gotta pay a forfeit then, Wes,” she says, making her voice regretful, though there’s a fountain of giggles wanting to spray out of her mouth.

“I really don’t.”

“You really do,” she says mockingly, mimicking his voice perfectly. “I’ll give you an easier one now though; where’s your first book?”

He relaxes. “Not as easy as you might think; do you mean the first book I bought, or the first I owned?”

She shrugs, coming to lean on the back on the chaise and running her hand through his hair. So soft, and for all the severe cut, it’s long enough to curl her fingers into. “Whichever you still have.”

He laughs. “That would be both of them,” he informs her. “I don’t—or very rarely—give away my books. The exception being an expurgated version of The Three Musketeers with Lady de Winter conspicuous by her absence. That, I got for my birthday from an aunt, and passed onto the village jumble sale three days later, which led to me getting in all sorts of trouble when my father found out, but it was worth it. Cut or condensed books are an abomination.”

She doesn’t ask what his father did to him for that little act of generosity. “So where are they?”

“For someone who doesn’t like to read, you’re very interested in my library,” he murmurs. “They’re in here.”

He stands and walks over to a door she’d never really noticed, set into a dark corner. She’s past thinking there’s a secret pleasure room filled with exotic stuff, because the whole house feels that way to her now. Every table’s one he could bend her over, every counter top’s the right height for her to sit while his tongue teaches her how to beg, every square foot of floor’s made for her to lie, strut or crawl on or over. Her Wesley doesn’t need special rooms; he just has to fucking walk into one.

So finding it full of more books, brightly colored spines gaudy against dark paneling, isn’t a shock, though the giggles won’t stay inside when he hands her a copy of Biggles Goes Alone and tells her he bought it with his Christmas money at the tender age of six.

“Kids books? All of them?” Her eyes wander around the small space and she shakes her head. “Wes, you’re kinda weird, y’know?” She turns to the flyleaf and sees a bookplate pasted in.

“Ah, the follies of youth,” Wesley says. “I was too young to appreciate the fact that I’d just taken a third off its value by doing that. I learned better as I got older.”

His name’s written in a careful, neat script in faded navy ink, a world away from the slashing
scribble he uses now. She brushes her fingers against it, seeing him, bare scabbed knees, in shorts, with his blue eyes looking out at the world under a thick fringe of hair, and she melts a little.

“You look positively maudlin, Faith,” he says, twitching the book from her hands. “Will it reassure you if I tell you that they’re all insured for a considerable sum and are quite an investment? The P G Wodehouse school books alone… Never mind.”

“Have you got any photos, Wes? Of you as a kid?” It’s the one thing the house is lacking, she realizes; not a single photograph on any of the walls or tables. Even her parents had a cheap frame for her school picture, and kept it up to date, until the year she missed photo day because she had a bruise on her face from her father’s fist, swung wildly as he argued with a neighbor over a broken fence panel. Her thirteen-year old face still grins out from the family room wall.

“No.” It’s said with too much finality for her to question it and she follows him back into the main library with a familiar sense of having blown it and ruined the mood. Fuck.

He sits back on the couch but there’s a sense of patience running thin now and her mind’s scrambling to get them back where they were, when he sighs and looks up at her with narrowed eyes. “Am I released from my forfeit then?”

It’s that languid drawl of his and she shivers even as she’s going over to him. “No, Wes, you’re not. You got the second part but until you tell me which one you’d pick—” She lets it hang in the air, but he gives her a cool glare so she shakes her head in reproof and carries on, “you have to uh, suffer the consequences.”

“Oh which would be?”

There’s a muscle jumping in his cheek and she can’t tell if it’s because he’s angry, amused or aroused. Though with him, all three tend to go together sometimes.

“First date’s nearly over,” she says, avoiding the question. “We watched a movie, we ate, and we made out up to halfway to third.”

“I’m so glad my teenage days are behind me,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“You don’t like just kissing me?” There’s a hurt at that thought that she can’t keep from her voice, and he soothes it like a kiss does a skinned knee.

“Kissing you is rapidly becoming one of my favorite pastimes,” he says and knocks her breathless because his eyes drop to her lips as he says it and he smiles, just a little. “I’m just out of practice at an evening ending there.”

“Not ended yet, Wes,” she tells him. “You’ve got to walk me home, like a gentleman—”

He glances around and she expects him to tell her she is home but he stands and offers her his arm, elbow crooked. “Very well.”

She lets him take her out of the library but when he heads for the stairs, she digs in her heels. “Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you back to your place,” he says, urging her up the stairs. “What happens then? I’m sure there’s more.”

When they reach her bedroom door she gets it. Cute. “You kiss me good night and thank me for a lovely evening,” she says.
Or you promise to call, cut me dead at school the next day, and spread stories about me so every group of boys I pass snickers and leers.

“I see.”

He reaches for the handle and opens it, then takes her hand. “Thank you for a delightful evening, Faith. I hope we can see each other again very soon.”

Then he kisses her and makes it a bumped nose, clumsy, closed mouth kiss, that shouldn’t make her knees weak but it does and somehow it melts into sweetness and his hands stay above her waist and he doesn’t lean in close and it’s the kiss she would’ve got from him at fifteen, sixteen and she wishes...

It ends and she floats inside, giving him a shy, dazzled smile and closes the door in his face. Forfeit time, Wesley.

The room’s dark and she flips on a light and flings herself across the bed, kicking her heels and waiting for him to tap at the door or call her name so she can tease him for, oh, five minutes maybe. The room still smells of the flowers he gave her and she feels a dark wave of sleepiness tug her under. Pulling up the quilt, she waits for Wesley to knock and falls asleep still waiting.
Part Four

Chapter Summary

Wes and Lilah face off in court and Wesley goes too far with Faith.

Part Four

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When she wakes, she’s sharing the bed with three roses, stems damp, petals shading from gold to pink, anchoring a folded piece of paper to the bed.

She tugs it free, smiling and probably looking really fucking sappy, and unfolds it.

You now cease to remind me of the princess who slept on a pea and instead bring Sleeping Beauty to mind. Breakfast is waiting.

It’s signed with a ‘W’ and a squiggle that she can’t quite make look like a cross no matter how hard she squints at it.

Still, even if he didn't sign off with a kiss on paper, there's the matter of the roses, that look and smell as if they’re filled with sunshine. She unfurls her sleep-stiff limbs into the patches of sun streaming on to the bed through the windows, brushing the petals over her face.

Which is when she realizes he's won her game, the bastard. She mutters a few choice obscenities to herself, and tosses the roses down on the mattress, annoyed. She was supposed to stay awake and he was supposed to come back. Hadn't that been clear? Had he come back, and found her asleep? Or had he not come back at all, not till this morning? And if she was Sleeping Beauty, then how come he didn't wake her with a kiss? Oh hell, she'd probably needed the sleep, after all. She groans at the barrage of complex thoughts before coffee and heaves herself out of the bed, deciding to take a shower because if it's already nine, he can sure as hell keep waiting for her appearance a few minutes longer.

But it's not like she takes her time exactly, and she's pink and scrubbed and dressed (after a brief skirt/trousers debate she decides on another cute tee/skirt combo), albeit still a little damp, in less than ten minutes. She's jonesing for a kiss, some coffee, a cigarette, and some kind of food. In that order.

She tries to keep her footsteps as quiet as possible, tiptoeing over the cold slate to the kitchen. And she's so stealthy, he doesn't even look up when she slips into the common area.

He's sitting in the glassed-in great room that's suffused with pale sunlight, orderly stacks of the Sunday paper stacked around him, doing the crossword. Must be the New York Times, she thinks. He'd never take the local; fifty percent of the Sunday bulk was the want ads, the other half was Walmart circulars and coupons. She snickers inwardly at the thought of him methodically clipping coupons and keeping them precisely ordered in a tiny accordion file.

She clears her throat, and he looks up. He's smiling, melting away the last of her fussy resolve to give him shit about the end of the evening. “Good morning,” she says, voice still gravelly with sleep.
“Good morning to you too, my sleeping princess.” She can't believe she heard that correctly, and within moments, he's in the kitchen and is fixing her a cup of coffee, adding to her bemusement.

“It seems like you could use this.” He's so disgustingly sunny; a morning person, annoyingly so. Well, most of the time, anyway.

The coffee's warmth and caffeine hit her with a jolt of clarity. “Did you come back last night? To my room?”

“Last night? Why would I have done that?” His voice is completely flat, but it seems like he could be joking, she can't tell. She gulps down more coffee, hoping that will shock the last sleepy edges off her brain.

“Oh,” she says forlornly, having decided in a split second to go with the pity angle, and not the anger one. “I just thought that maybe you came back, and I was asleep. And if I was, I'm...”

He kisses the top of her head, slides his lips over her hair, down to whisper in her ear. “Oh, Faith. Drop the act.” It makes her extra shivery, that disconcerting way he can see through her, right through her like that.

She sticks her out her lip, pouting it. “I mean it; where'd you go?”

“Directly to bed! As I suspected you did as well. By the way, did you sleep well? Does your bed meet your exacting specifications?”

“Yes, thank you—hey, wait!” She chugs down the rest of the coffee in the mug. “Don't try and distract me.”

“Oh Faith, really. Now, go grab the magazine section of the paper and get your jacket and shoes. We're going out for breakfast.” He's already slipped into a dark leather jacket and is digging in the pocket of his wool overcoat for something, keys probably.

“Are you sure that's entirely safe?” she says, padding across the great room. He's nearly completed the massive, sprawling crossword. In pen. One clue catches her eye, and she laughs to see it's the one he's not filled in. “Especially after last night? Shouldn't we stay holed up in here till Monday morning?” She thwaks the magazine down on the counter, just as he discovers his car keys, secreted away in an inner pocket. “67 across is Timberlake, by the way.”

“I'm relatively sure that where we're going, we won't encounter any of our unsavory mortal enemies, mutual or otherwise. Besides, I haven't anything to cook. My supplies on hand are generally rather Spartan. You were lucky the other night.” He squints at her in that endearing way of his, and shakes his head a little. “I'm sorry, did you say something about 67 across?”

“Yeah, I just gave you the answer. The clue's ‘Back’ woods boy? It's Timberlake. As in, Justin Timberlake?” She expects a flicker of recognition at that, but he gives none. “Jeez, Wes, nice rock you live under. Cozy?” She laughs, and he looks a little pained. She soothes without a second thought. “Hey, that's kinda cute actually. It is!” She plants a peck on his protest-laden lips. “Let me just get my shoes and we can go. I'm starving!”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

They drive out of town, and she's expecting some classy place, tucked away in a picturesque setting, known to only a chosen few. Instead, he goes ten miles to a mom and pop diner set back just far enough from the road to let half a dozen cars park in front of it. There's one space left, and he pulls into it and turns off the engine.
“Here?” she says in an incredulous voice.

He gives her a sidelong glance. “Yes. Any objections?”

“Depends,” she answers, letting her seat belt slide back and running her fingers through her hair.

“On what?”

“Place like this is going to do killer fucking pancakes; you try and make me have a salad and I’m going to get—”

“Does every second word out of your mouth have to be that one?” he interrupts, and he’s sounding as pissed as she’s going to be if she’s faced with something you can’t put syrup on.

“What, I’m offending your delicate sensibilities or something?”

Criticism. She doesn’t deal well with that but Wes tends not to care.

“It’s a perfectly good verb, Faith. It’s also a useful curse. Save it for begging me to do it to you, or when you’re angry, and I won’t say a word. Interject it into your conversation with the tedious regularity you’re so fond of and I will.”

“Fuck off, Wes,” she tells him, with a pleasant smile as she opens the door. “And that’s allowed because I’m fuck—I’m angry, okay?”

She slams the door and stalks over to the diner feeling bruised. So she isn’t fucking good enough for him? Not news, Wesley, really it isn’t. No fucking need to rub it in.

The door swings open just as she’s reaching for the handle and she collides with a beer gut the size of Texas and has to step back a pace.

“Sorry,” she spits out, tilting her head back with a glare all ready to go if he looks even a little bit out of line.

Brown eyes in a forest of facial hair stare back down at her. “Take it easy, little lady. I didn’t eat all the waffles. No need to rush.” Before she’s worked out the perfect retort, and she knows there is one, the guy’s staring over her head at Wesley, who, if this guy’s greasy jeans and plaid shirt are anything to go by, is way overdressed for this place. Shit. It’s amazing how protective she feels all of a sudden, but it turns to shock as the first words out of his mouth are, “Wes! Didn’t think you were in town. What time do you call this? Elsie’s already on her third pot of coffee and you know she just adds water to the grounds—” There’s a yell of protest from inside and he grins.

“You’ll be paying for that with cold toast for the next month,” Wesley says from behind her, and this is some kind of fucking dream, because Wesley’s launching into a conversation with the guy who just has to be the owner of the red pick-up truck with a bumper sticker saying, ‘Hoot if you like hooters’ and they’re like, long lost buds, the way they’re chuckling.

Finally, when a voice from inside screams to Chuck to shut the door because she’s not paying to heat the outside, they get to go into a steamy warmth that’s so thick with good smells, Faith can’t help lifting up her nose and snuffling them in.

“You look like a Bisto kid,” Wesley says in her ear and she gives him a blank, cold look of what the fuck? and twitches her ass into a booth seat.

“I normally sit—oh, never mind, this will do.” Wes slides in opposite her, doesn’t even glance at the
menù, and there’s two cups of coffee in front of them before she’s got time to start drooling over what’s included in the all-day breakfast.

“Morning, Wes. Usual?”

Faith gives Cindy points for not quite shoving her tits into the coffee she’s just put down on the table when she leans over to adjust the sugar shaker, but still managing to make sure Wes gets an eyeful.

“Yes, I think so. Faith? Need a little longer?”

“No hungry.”

Her stomach growls and Cindy smirks. “Honey, if you’re dieting, I can bring you some dry toast, maybe.”

“She’ll have the same as me,” Wesley says firmly. He gives her one of those assessing looks. “Orange juice, not grapefruit.”

Faith’s doomed to never get off any of the remarks she’s got boiling up inside, because Wes cuts her feet from under her by leaning forward and saying softly, “I come here most Sundays, Faith and I’ve always come alone up until now. Please don’t make me regret changing one of my habits because I commented on one of yours.”

She only forgives him because his usual is a stack of blueberry pancakes drenched in butter and syrup with fluffy scrambled eggs and bacon crisp enough to snap. The hand that reaches under the table and strokes the inside of her knee gently has nothing to do with it.

“So, Wes, spill.” He takes a long sip at his juice and gives her a puzzled look that sends her foot out to kick his shin. “I mean it; tell me.”

He relents and answers her. “I do pro bono work now and then; the owners had a problem and I resolved it. I called in one morning with some paperwork, discovered that Elsie makes coffee just the way I like it, and started to come here for breakfast. Not really a mystery to it.”

“And that guy at the door?”

“Same thing. Some developers wanted to knock down his home and he was only too willing, as it was on the verge of falling down, but they were offering him a fraction of what they should have been.” His eyes gleam. “They were judging him on the way he looked, you see. On the way he spoke. They didn’t anticipate that he’d have the intelligence to realize he was being cheated.”

“I get the message, Wes. God, did ‘subtle’ get left out when they made you?”

The bill arrives and he pays it at the counter, chatting with Elsie for a few minutes. Faith sees Elsie stare at her and forces herself to smile when she feels like growling.

“She thinks you’re going to give me trouble,” Wes tells her as they go back to the car. “I told her you already had and she says to tell you good luck.”

“What with?”

Wes holds the door open for her and walks around the car. “I really can’t imagine.”

She’s full, and she’s dying for a cigarette, but she doesn’t bother asking if she can smoke in the car. “You trying to break me of smoking too?” she asks, “because I’ll be in a sweeter mood when I’ve
had one.”

“Oh, well, how can I turn down that incentive?” He nods at the great outdoors. “Five minutes, Faith, no more.”

She’s about to ask him what the hurry is, when he pulls her lighter out of his pocket. “Here.”

The cool weight of it feels odd in her hand after weeks of using matches or cheap disposable ones but she’s not interested in using it for anything but to light up. She kisses him, licking teasingly at a sticky spot of syrup on his lips and pulling back when his mouth opens under hers. “Thanks, Wes. Back in five.”

When they’re driving again, she starts to recognize familiar signs, and realizes he’s swinging around in a circle and taking them back into town. “So what do you do next, Wes?”

Somehow she knows he does something; structure, routine; he’s not going to be able to switch that habit off easily, not if his reaction to being taken out is anything to go by.

“Shop,” he says. “And now I have you to feed, I suspect I won’t be going through the ten items or less checkout.”

“We’re going to the supermarket?” She giggles; can’t help it. “Wes, there’s some places I just can’t picture you, y’know? That’s one of them.”

“And I’m supposed to do what? Get supplies delivered? Live on fresh air and takeaways?”

He sounds defensive and she pats his knee. “No. I dunno; a little delicatessen where you hand-pick each olive and the cheese is imported just for you, maybe?”

He snorts. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I push a trolley around and curse when I have to queue behind someone who’s apparently shopping for a family of ten, just like everyone else.”

“So, do I get to pick stuff too? Because, no offense, Wes, but I got needs, you know? And they include snack food.”

He pulls up at a red light and turns to stare at her. “I hate to think you have needs I can’t satisfy, Faith,” he drawls, lips twitching into a smile. “Even ones that require chemical-laden, nutritionally deficient—”

“They’re called Twinkies,” she says. “And chips. And, yeah, I go for caramel popcorn and—”

“Enough.” He pulls away with a stamp on the gas that has her curling her fingers around the edge of the seat. “We’ll see.”

Watching Wesley choose a cart and begin to push it down the first aisle has to be the most incongruous sight imaginable. Seeing him walk behind it sedately drives her mad. “You’re doing that all wrong,” she says. “Empty aisle; no eggs in the cart—you need to take it for a spin, show it who’s boss.”

“What?” He’s looking at her as if she’s mad as he throws in a bag of fresh pasta.

“The wheels lock on you, don’t they?”

“Sometimes,” he agrees cautiously. “I imagine the maintenance done on them is minimal, and—”

“Nothing to do with that,” she interrupts, bumping her hip into him and taking over. “Watch and
learn, Wes.”

It’s a skill she’s mastered at the cost of skinned elbows, ripped clothes and bruises but it’s worth it to be able to send the cart skimming over the floor as she jumps up on the back, riding it, and balancing her weight just right so it doesn’t flip.

She brings it to a gentle halt and turns around, only to see Wesley standing where she left him, arms folded, looking like the Wrath of God in person—and she starts to say her prayers.

Just for a second, she’s tempted to push the trolley around the corner before he can get to her with his long, angry stride and ride the trolley down the next aisle and out of the automatic doors. Another look at his frostbitten gaze and her feet are already groping for the metal bar.

“Don’t even think about it,” he warns her with a very unWes-like growl. She’s poised for flight but he seizes on her momentary hesitation, grabbing her around the waist and placing her back on the ground before snatching the trolley out of her grasp. Bet he'd hog the remote control too, if he actually had a TV.

“Fuck, Wes, you never ridden a grocery cart? It’s right up there with well, a whole bunch of other stuff I guess you’ve never done.” She pins a bright smile to her face and tries to ignore the way that the temperature has just dropped to below zero.

“I can’t say I have, Faith.” He picks up a jar of sundried tomatoes and places it neatly in the cart. “I’m sure I must seem very boring to you, but I rather value the full use of all my limbs.” And then he drops the mild tone and flashes her a face of righteous fury. “You could have fallen off and smashed your head against the side of a cabinet. Or the trolley could have spun out of control and you could have fallen underneath it and crushed a few ribs. Then again, all of this pales into insignificance compared to the utter embarrassment of watching my… you behaving like a five-year old.”

He finishes with an angry intake of breath but she doesn’t care. What she cares about is that he’s all pissy at the thought of her hurting herself. Where she comes from, there isn’t a day goes by when she hasn't added another bruise, another graze, another scar to her collection. Add in that little pause just after 'my' when she'd bet her last dollar that he was going to call her his girlfriend and all she can do is link her arm with his and rub her head against his shoulder.

“I fail to see why my disapproval is delighting you quite so much,” he says huffily as they enter another aisle, but he doesn’t seem to mind that she’s hanging on to him like he’s her personal monkey bar.

“Nah, I guess you don't, Wes,” she agrees with a smirk and then wrenches free of him. “Hey! Alphabetti Spaghetti! Fuck, we have to get some of this!”

Wes takes it out of her hand and places it back on the shelf. “Absolutely not. If you promise to behave yourself I may allow you some small treats but I forbid you to put any junk food in this trolley that you think actually constitutes part of a well-balanced meal.”

“Yes and then you die of rickets several years later,” Wes supplies smoothly. His gaze skitters down the length of her legs in way that isn't totally appropriate for Aisle 4.

She rests her hand on her hip and sticks out her chest. “Aw, c'mon Wes. Let me have the Alphabetti Spaghetti and there's a blow job in it for you.”
He pushes the trolley past her and taps her neatly on the ass. “Nice try, Faith, but now that you mention it, there are certain conditions attached to everything you put in the trolley.” He grinds to a halt by the bottled water and selects a case of San Pellegrino.

She hoists up a six pack of Diet Dr Pepper and looks challengingly at him as she holds it over the cart. “Yeah? Like what?”

“Well, if you're going to have treats, then it's only fair that you pay a forfeit.”

She drops the six-pack into the cart with a resounding thud. “But Wes, those forfeits of yours kinda work out pretty well for me.” And she's so got him.

He peers at the Dr Pepper quizzically. “Six cans? I wonder if you'd be able to last six hours without coming. Especially if I made you bend naked over my desk for the duration and let you touch yourself for six minutes at a time. Hmmm, it could be an interesting experiment.”

Faith yanks the Dr Pepper out of the cart and practically hurls it back on the shelf. “You can be such a twisted fuck sometimes,” she snarls at him, because there's delayed pleasure and then there's just being fucking sadistic. “I don't even like Dr Pepper that much.”

She's sulking as she marches alongside him, her arms folded and the mother of all pouts on her face. He shoots her these amused little glances as her expression gets extra sour with each thing he puts in the cart. It's apparently okay for him to have his digestive biscuits and his fancy Belgian chocolates. How the fuck can he even think about eating that stinky cheese?

By the time they get to the deli counter and he takes a ticket and waits patiently in line, she's vibrating with the injustice of it all.

“Do you have a preference for olives?” he asks her, like she gives a fuck. “The green ones stuffed with pimento are rather good.”

“Whatever,” she bites out.

“And I suppose you don't have an opinion on Bresola ham versus Parma?” He wraps a sneaky arm around her shoulder so he can draw her in and brush his lips against her cheek and she's melting against him. “You're being an absolute brat, you know that?”

And it's true. She seems to have regressed about fifteen years. “But it's not fair. You're not being fair,” she whines. “I have my own money and I…”

“You're a guest in my house,” he insists, his fingers brushing against her neck. “It would be entirely unacceptable for me not to provide for you.”

And wow! Talk about loaded statements. “I want to pay my way. I'm not mooching off you, Wes.”

“Well then we find ourselves at an impasse because I refuse to let you pay for any groceries,” he murmurs into her ear. “Even if they are positively laden with noxious additives and carcinogenic chemicals.”

“But…” She's groping for a winning argument but he's the lawyer and when his lips graze her earlobe it's like her cognitive thought processes have suddenly short circuited.

“Besides, you bought dinner last night,” he adds, gently disentangling himself when his number is called. “Go and get three things to put in the trolley and meet me back here.”
And she doesn't even bother asking him about the forfeits because she knows that he's already got a myriad of positions and games that he wants her to play and this is just an excuse to use them. Six hours or six minutes—he's still gonna make her come so hard that she forgets her name.

It takes her a long time to choose. The whole forfeits thing really makes her prioritize her junk food needs. Gotta be worth whatever torture he's planning on inflicting on her after all. The Cheetos are a no-brainer but Twinkie or Hostess Cupcakes is a dilemma worthy of some fucked-up game show. But then she sees that they have a special offer on Peanut Butter Twix so she grabs a family-sized bag, which means her chocolate craving is covered and the Twinkies are go.

She's mentally counting the number of depraved things he could do with just one Twinkie when she reaches the deli counter and sees him still peering through the glass and pointing at various tubs of gloop. The sales assistant is laughing at something he's said and she hangs back for a second.

Every time. Every fucking time she thinks she has him pinned down like one of those frogs they used to dissect in Biology he has to show her that she don't know shit. He's like an onion. She's trying to peel away his layers, even though sometimes it makes her cry because there's always another one and another one. Trying to find all the pieces of Wes so she can steal them and lock them away so that he never leaves her.

“Faith!”

She obediently hurries over as he turns and sees her. “I got my stuff,” she says with enough defiance to cover the sudden flip-flopping of her stomach as he takes in the bags in her arms with a gleam in his eyes.

“Give them to me,” he orders and she's not imagining the way his tongue, all pink and wet, just swiped across his bottom lip.

“I'll share them with you,” she offers sweetly as he scrutinizes each item before tossing them into the cart with a lot less grace than he showed his stinky cheese. “So you don't feel left out.”

“Oh, I intend to get immense satisfaction from these…Cheetos.” His lips are practically smacking together and he's eyeing her up like she should be displayed, all glistening and fresh, in one of the white bowls behind the deli counter.

Her gaze rests firmly on the rounded toes of her Mary Janes. “So. we done yet?”

“Almost. Just fruit and vegetables.”

He steers the cart with his arm around her shoulders and she can't help it. She drifts off into another one of her perfect couple fantasies where they're living in England and they go to the supermarket and they buy weird British food like Yorkshire puddings and custard.

“Stop day-dreaming and go and get some fruit. Raspberries, as you seem to like them so much, cherries, oranges, the small sweet ones, and apples. Make sure they're crisp.”

He shows the same attention to detail when it comes to fruit as he does to just about everything else.

His hand at the small of her back gives her a gentle nudge.

“Yes sir,” she snaps smartly because it's almost like he's back in office mode and she goes off to get fruit that doesn't come in cans or as flavor on a packet of bubble gum.

When she gets back the trolley is full of green stuff. Like, loads of green stuff. Lettuce, celery,
peppers and some stuff she doesn't even recognize.

“Woah, Wes! That is a fuck of a lot of vegetables. You planning on running the marathon or something?”

He's picking out mushrooms one by one, making sure that they come up to his impossibly high standards. They're gonna be here for hours at this rate. When he said last night he was going to fuck her for thirty-six hours, he didn't mention that about thirty of those hours were going to be spent in the fresh produce aisle.

“Stop being annoying. Otherwise I'll make you eat nothing but vegetables all week.”

She pulls a disgusted face like she can already taste them in her mouth and he laughs.

“You wouldn't fucking dare!” She grins. “I'd sleep in my room every night.”

“I doubt that very much, Faith,” he tells her, but he's smiling too. Though it's not exactly one of his pretty, I'm-going-to-turn-Faith-into-a-puddle-of-girl-shaped-mush smiles, and it has her stomach somersaulting again in a way that she can never decide is bad or good or somewhere in between.

She follows him along the aisle and watches with just the faintest hint of boredom as he starts selecting what he calls courgettes because the English are weird. “You know the forfeits?” he says conversationally, which doesn't really explain why she's just popped out in goose bumps.

“What about them?”

He's got a zucchini-courgette in his hands. Keeps turning it this way and that, stroking his fingers along its nubbly length and she can't tear her eyes away.

“I think for one of them, yes… I'm going to fuck you with this while you're begging for my cock. But I won't let you have it, instead I plan to keep fucking you with this until you come.”

“Wes.”

“Yes, I think that would be a very suitable forfeit for eating junk food.”

Color is staining her skin. She can feel it sweeping down from her hairlines, across her chest and down to her toes. “You shouldn't say fucking stuff like that,” she murmurs weakly.

“Why? Is it getting you wet, you dirty little girl?” he drawls and then he tosses the zucchini into the cart and strides off, while she trails red-faced in his wake.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

He's in an insanely good mood on the drive back. He let her pick an oldie station on the radio and he's humming along to the big band numbers while she sits there in an erotic daze. Her body is hot and heavy and she's painfully aware of the stickiness between her legs. Seems to spend all her days wet and ready for him. She presses her hot face against the window and stares unseeingly out as the houses and offices make way for green open spaces and the large expanse of gray sky.

“You're awfully quiet, Faith,” he remarks and he knows, because one hand comes to rest on her knee and then he's sliding it up her leg, pushing her skirt out of the way.

“I'm just thinking,” she gasps and she knows she should stop him because Mr. Don't Ride On The Trolley would probably think that finger-fucking her while he's doing seventy on a side road is just
dandy and she doesn't want the emergency crew to have to cut them out of the wreck and find his hand still wedged in her snatch. So why is she sliding down on the seat and parting her legs just to make it that little bit easier for him?

“Now, now,” he says prissily, giving her inner thigh a quick pinch before taking his hand away. “Everything comes to she who waits, Faith. Surely you've learnt that by now?”

“So I gotta pay three forfeits?” she asks curiously. “Or do I have to pay a forfeit every time I eat something that isn't part of the five major food groups?”

She'd love to wipe the smirk off his face with a pan scourer. “The first lesson I learnt in law school, Faith, was to always check the small print,” he tells her with a sickening amount of smugness.

“Just answer the question, counselor!”

“If I were you, Faith, I'd be less worried about the forfeits and more concerned about your punishment for repeatedly swearing when I'd asked you not to.”

“Say fucking what?” It's out of her mouth before she can even think about it. “You are fucking kidding me!”

He sighs really heavily as he makes the sharp left onto the driveway. “You know it's for your own good. You used various permutations of 'fuck' eight times in the last hour.”

“So?” As the car stops, she's shooting him the most baleful glare she can muster. “I swear. It's no big deal.”

“It's a very big deal,” he says simply.

“Yeah, because I'm not fucking good enough for you and every time I open my fucking mouth, you're reminded of it.” She's spitting out the words now, like she's an angry cat with her fur standing up.

His fury matches hers. Really, really pissed. All the color draining from his face as if someone's turned down his contrast button. “You think I care about things like that? I care that you make no attempt to better yourself, to realize your potential and to rise above all the things you claim to hate about your life.”

“I do.”

“Then why do you persist in constantly swearing? You're an intelligent girl, yet every other word out of your mouth is…”

“Don't! Please, Wes, don't.” She doesn't know what's at the end of the sentence and she doesn't want to. Because he's getting closer and closer to all the reasons why this will end. Which is why she's clutching his hand, trying to smooth the taut, white skin off his clenched knuckles “I'm sorry. It's just a habit is all.”

“And one that I intend to break you of,” he says, and the frigid, icy note is back in his voice. “You've said it ten times now and unless it's something that you'd like me to do you, then I don't want to hear it coming out of your mouth.”

When he says it like that, wrapping it up in a lovely promise and punctuating it with a clinging, tender kiss, then she knows that burning stuff isn't the only thing she's going to give up for him.
“Okay,” she says, against his mouth. “I’ll try. I’ll really try.”

“Very well. Now help me unpack the groceries and then…well, I’m sure we can think of something to do to pass the time.”

Wes is as particular about putting the groceries away as he is about everything else. His kitchen is neat as a pin and possibly the most orderly room in the house, which is really fucking saying something when she considers the rest of his home. Everything has its proper place. Disorder doesn’t seem to exist here.

His extensive collection of spices and powders has its own cunning little rack hidden on the door. Most of them she’s never heard of. Hot paprikash and crushed fennel and thyme and… okay, curry she knows, but only because her mom went through this drunken experimental cooking phase that ended with the most vile curried lentil dish the world will ever see. She likes the gentle, slightly pungent accretion of smells, though. It’s oddly pleasant.

When she’s putting things away, she tries to follow his organizational strategy. The cans and jars and tins stop just short of alphabetization (that’s a relief, she thinks, because he’s anal enough already), but are grouped by type. She’s not really sure where Marmite goes, so she stashes it near the anchovies.

And Jesus, she hasn’t seen one dust mote or speck of dirt the whole time she’s been in the house. She positively cringes when she compares this to her kitchen at home. The grease spots on the ceiling alone…

He must have noticed her reverie, because he touches her shoulder. She jumps. “Are you all right, Faith?”

“Oh, yeah. Just…yeah, I’m fine.”

“I think we’re done here.” He brushes the hair away from the nape of her neck and kisses her there. “I seem to recall we were in the midst of a rather heated discussion. You were behaving like a spoiled brat.”

“I said I was sorry.” She tries not to sound pouty, even if she feels it.

“Well.” He pauses, as though he’s thinking about whether to dole out praise or not. “You did a lovely job putting everything away. For that, I might even be willing to temporarily forgive your little problem with favoring certain expletives.”

She can’t help beaming, like she’s gotten the fucking gold star for the day. And he says it in such a honeyed tone, his fingertips straying closer to her slightly parted thighs, it’s particularly impossible for her to resist. She’s been wet for him ever since she got in the car and she wants him to touch her again.

Then he unwraps his arms and steps away from her. “I have some work to do for a little while. Can you entertain yourself until I’m finished?”

It’s like a switch has been thrown. His tone is curt and all-business again. She’s thankful that she’s turned away from him, because her face crumples. She doesn’t even know why she feels so hurt. She’s a big girl; she can be on her own for a few hours. Hell, he doesn’t have to babysit her. So how come she can’t take it when his attention falters for one second? What the fuck is wrong with her?

She doesn’t want to cry, not now. She blinks back tears, trying to keep it together until he leaves the room. But he’s not leaving—she can feel his gaze on her.
What the fuck is wrong with him, that he can just turn on a dime like that? She’s really fucking angry, and she whirls on her heels to face him. He’s leaning against the butcher-block side table, arms crossed over his chest, looking really fucking smug. She’s never wanted to haul off and slap him more than at right this moment.

He takes note of her barely contained flash of anger and gives her one of his slow, glacial smiles. “Save that for later, will you, Faith? Now, come on. I haven’t shown you my study, have I?”

And she finds herself falling into the old pattern again, like clockwork: he beckons and she follows.

Chapter Thirty

His study is on the other side of the house, past the living room and up a half-flight of stairs. The hallway leading up to it is lined with still more bookshelves, heavy law tomes all of them. What Wes probably considers light reading.

She expects another inner sanctum—a dark place filled with heavy furniture and an even heavier atmosphere—but she’s pleasantly surprised. The room is light, with big picture windows and a large, uncharacteristically cluttered desk in the center. No typewriter or computer anywhere, she notes.

He sits down behind the desk in a leather chair. She stands there looking for somewhere to sit and not finding anything. “So, uh, do you want me to take a memo or something?” she offers, half-heartedly, desire and disappointment washing over her in alternating waves.

“I do not. It’s your day off. I wouldn’t dream of it.” There’s that chilly efficiency again.

This is one game she cannot for the life of her figure out. Where did all those dark promises go? It’s as though he’s been body-snatched by All Work and No Play Wes.

She’s still standing there, expectantly, and he finally takes notice of her discomfort. “I’m terribly sorry. I seem to have an appalling lack of chairs in this office. Well. I think there’s only one place for you.” He slides the chair back a little bit, away from the desk. “Come here, Faith.”

She blanches, unsure of what to do. He’d needed to work, he said. And surely that takes precedence over any forfeit, any little game he had planned. Right?

A few moments later, she’s rapidly losing confidence in that idea as they stare each other down.

“Faith. Come here.” His biting voice is like sheets of ice careening off a pitched roof.

She takes a tentative half-step back and takes a deep breath. She feels oddly calm, considering what she’s about to do. “No.”

He’s a little stunned, as if this latest round of her willfulness wasn’t expected. Part of her swells with pride, but the rest sounding warning bells she can't ignore as his thin smile turns to a sneer.

“I believe you're in enough trouble without being defiant, Faith. Now come here. I'll not tell you again.”

It’s an order, not a question, and he’s hooked her with that, just needs to reel her in. She looks away and sighs. “I thought...” This is easier if she isn't looking at him, and she hates that. “You have work to do, Wes. I can just go read the paper or something. Really. I’ll leave you alone.” She tries to take another step back, but the frosty silence she receives in response to that suggestion drags her feet forward, and she gives up fighting him.
“That's a good girl.” He's turned on the honeyed charm again, pulling her closer with just a tiny modulation of his voice. “Now, come stand here.”

She takes a position close by his chair, on the left, his knee brushing hers.

“Take off your skirt.”

She doesn't even hesitate to obey, caught in a trance of longing. He slips his hand down the front of her panties, flashing that feral smile. “Your body never lies to me, Faith, even when your wayward mouth attempts to.” She tries not to make a sound as he slides a finger over her wet pussy, pausing to lightly nudge her clit teasingly, but a stifled whimper escapes. She's trying to grind into his fingers when he slips his hand out, one glistening finger hooked on the elastic waistband of her underwear.

“Remove these as well. And then the rest of your clothing.”

She tries to slither gracefully out of everything, but her fingers go clumsy and she spends an extra few seconds struggling to unhook her bra.

He slips his hand up over her back, and pulls her hand away. “Let me do that.” He's quieter now that she's near him, less cold. Her other arm falls slack by her side as he pops open the hooks with one efficient flick of the wrist.

“Ahh, yes, that's better.” He sighs as the bra slips to the floor to join the rest of her clothes. After taking a long look at her hardened nipples, he picks up a large black fountain pen and begins scribbling notes on a legal pad. With his other hand he strokes her, laying feather-light caresses on her skin and occasionally slipping a finger in to run teasingly over her clit. “Stand still. You were so concerned that I needed to work, and the only way I can accomplish that is if you stay perfectly still.”

Her knees turn nearly useless, and she tries not to lean against the edge of the desk. “Wes, please.” There's no way she can stand there, still as a statue, even with only half his attention on her.

“Mmm?” He doesn't look up. Just keeps writing and, taking advantage of her shifting stance, plunges two fingers inside her, thumb still working her clit.

A hoarse cry flies from her throat before she can stop it, and her left hand grasps at nothing, in a vain attempt to hang on to the edge of the desk for stability.

He glances up at her. “Faith, I can't possibly get anything done here if you don't stand still. You must try harder.”

Her breath escapes slowly from her gritted teeth as she locks her quivering knees in place, and presses her arms to her sides, fingernails digging into the flesh of her thighs. She knows better than to say anything, but her mind is teeming, fighting every twitch of her limbs, every word she can't say, every begging request, every moaned endearment.

She's floating now; the only thing she can concentrate on are the warm fingers curled inside and around her pussy and the scratching of the pen's fine gold nib across the page.

After an eternity, she gets sufficient control to be able to breathe deeply enough for it to actually give her body some oxygen, and her vision clears. She's perfectly still but for the tiny quivers as her cunt clutches greedily at his fingers, infinitesimal shudders and spasms that she can barely feel, but which must be plain as print to his fingers.

So what the fuck is he writing as his fingers invade and retreat like an indecisive general? She slants a glance down at the desk and discovers she can't focus on the dark scrawl because seeing his
fingers bent and curled around the pen as his other hand is bent and curled on her makes her lose
what turns out to be a tenuous hold on control. She moves, sways, thrusts her hips forward—oh, an
inch, no more, but when you’re playing statues, it’s enough to get you taken out of the game and sent
to stand and watch.

“Really, Faith.” The scolding tone in his voice is like sandpaper on her skin. “I’m disappointed in
you.” And it’s just part of his game, it’s not real, but there’s still that scalding sense of shame and
God, they’re so fucked-up, because she doesn’t even need to shift her gaze to know he’s hard and
being told off like that is making her so wet his fingers must be coated thick and sticky, as if he’s got
his hand in honey.

She gets to see that for herself as he pulls them out and yes, they’re glistening from root to tip, and he
didn’t have them that far in her.

The pen’s laid down across the words she never got to read, and she feels herself tense and get ready
for whatever he’s got planned, but she never is.

“Kneel down, Faith.”

He always says her name when he’s giving her these orders, and it makes it so fucking personal
somehow. No one says it the way he does, no one makes it sound precious, special, pretty.

The carpet’s soft for now as she kneels beside him and looks up expectantly.

“Open your mouth.”

One wet finger slides past her lips, then the other, and she can taste herself on him and she doesn’t
have to be told what to do next. She keeps her eyes on him as she sucks and licks at the long, elegant
fingers that she’s felt on her and in her so often and she sees his face soften, the way it does when
he’s pleased with her.

But he’s not forgotten why he stopped fucking her with his fingers, has he, and she doesn’t really
think this is what he’d class as punishment, and she’s right.

“I think you need a lesson in remaining still, Faith, don’t you?”

He waits for an answer, but she can only nod, and he lets it go and smiles; one of those cold, baring
of the teeth smiles that he’s so fucking good at.

“In the corner. Ten minutes, and we’ll see how you manage. If you move, well, let’s cross that
bridge when we...”

He carries on speaking, but her ears are buzzing. He’s putting her in the fucking corner? Like a kid
in a Victorian school or something? Though, thinking about it, that’s just his style.

She stands up, her heart thudding and gives him this desperate, imploring look that makes his smile
wider.

“That corner, I think,” he says, nodding over at it. It’s to the left of his desk, and it means he can
carry on writing and still have his eyes on her. She’s not going to be able to scratch or shift position
without him noticing.

“It’s a little easy, you think?” he asks as she starts to walk over there, every step making her cunt
throb and leak. She pauses, waiting. “Hmm, perhaps you’re right.”
Hello? She hasn’t fucking said a word! As ever, it’s the anger that gives her the strength to stay still and the anger that makes it not so very likely that she’s going to be able to keep quiet.

“Don’t stop, Faith.” His voice is mild. “Get into position.”

She stops, facing the wall, and makes sure she’s comfortable, though even ten minutes is going to make any position unbearable. The wall’s a plain primrose yellow so there’s nothing to look at; no cracks, and whoever painted it was fucking good, because there’s not a single drip to stare at.

She hears his chair scrape back against the carpet and a drawer pull open. There are the small noises of someone searching and then, he walks over to her. “I really do have to concentrate on what I’m doing,” he says, oh so fucking pleasantly. “So this will help us both accomplish what we have in mind.”

And he places a book on her head, with a careful precision and steps back. “Oh, yes. Your ten minutes start now, Faith.”

And she’s been in the corner for at least ninety seconds, so she’s starting off with a gutful of resentment already.

It’s easy at first. The book isn’t all that heavy; he’s chosen it well, in fact; enough weight not to shift easily, not so much that it’s hurting her head. She keeps her breathing even and she keeps her neck steady.

There’s a satisfaction in doing this and proving to him that she can get something right. She closes her eyes to shut out the yellow and concentrates—and finds that with her eyes shut, she starts to lose her balance, and has to open them again, with a panicky feeling sending cold ripples down her back as the book shifts, just a little.

Once it’s not exactly where he put it, it’s so much harder. The muscles in her neck ache as she tilts her head slightly to compensate for the change in position and she’s starting to sweat slightly.

It’s so fucking quiet that she can hear her heart beating and his pen scratch against the paper. Beat. Scratch. Beat—oh fuck it’s slipping! Is moving allowed, if it keeps the book on her head?

“You moved, Faith. That means an extra minute, I’m afraid.”

She knows that voice well enough to hear that he’s turned on, for all the coolness and it hits her just what a view he’s got; her hands, fingers extended and trembling slightly, as they press against her thighs, her ass, curved and waiting for whatever he decides to do it today, if there’s anything left.

Another minute. Which makes it more than likely she’ll move again, which will add another minute, which will mean...She recalls a math problem about a frog jumping out of a circle and each jump was half the size of the one before, and somehow little froggy never got to leave the circle, though it’s a fucking stupid idea as of course he could if he wanted, just like she could walk away from this, throw the book at him, but she knows she can’t. She’s feeling like that frog now. She’s going to be in this corner forever, getting hotter at the thought of Wes staring at her ass, getting—The book slides, with a finality that’s inescapable, and thuds to the floor.

“Oh!” And the frustration she feels is made worse by the fact that she’d wanted to say ‘Oh, fuck’ and remembered just in time, but he doesn’t know that, so she’s not going to get any credit for it.

“Dear me, and you just had twenty-seven seconds left. Well, that wasn’t too bad an attempt, all things considered.” And why does that small amount of approval make her feel so pathetically grateful? “Come back to the desk, Faith.”
The way he phrased that should warned her, but it doesn’t, so when she turns, so glad to be moving again that she’s smiling, and sees him standing in front of his desk holding a long ruler, it’s almost enough to send her to her knees.

“Twenty-seven seconds,” he says, in a considering voice. “I think we should deal with that small disobedience now, don’t you? How many times do you think I can strike you in that amount of time? Or would you rather have twenty-seven strokes? It’s an interesting choice, isn’t it?” He beckons her with a crooked finger. “Well, Faith? Which shall it be?”

It’s not an interesting choice. It’s a *fuck* of a choice. It’s one bigass ruler so she's not even going to have the tiny comfort of his hand on her skin. Just the sting of the wood. And, besides, it doesn’t matter what she chooses, he's still going to make it work for him.

If she chooses twenty-seven strokes, he's gonna drag 'em out so she wishes she'd gone for twenty-seven seconds. And if she chooses twenty-seven seconds, he'll cram as many strokes in as is humanly possible. Makes the whole froggy jumping out the circle deal look as easy as ABC.

“Come on, Faith, I'm waiting,” he says and slaps the ruler against the palm of his hand for emphasis.

“Gimme a second, okay?” she blusters and before the words have left her mouth she knows what his answer will be.

“Very well, but I think it only fair to warn you that every second we wait is an extra stroke or an extra second on your final tally,” he says with this Cheshire cat grin.

She's done thinking. “Twenty-seven seconds!” she hisses and gives the ruler a wary look. At least she can deal with a time limit. No way is she going to be bent over him, the desk, what the *fuck* ever, for what could be hours.

“See, that wasn’t so difficult. Let's call it a round thirty,” he suggests silkily. “Now, what would be the best position for you, do you think? Over the desk? Maybe on your hands and knees?”

It's so much easier when he decides. That way she doesn't have to do anything but feel, but be this thing that's made solely for his pleasure. Giving her an opinion isn't doing much of anything but making her wonder why she's standing here in nothing but her Mary Janes and giving serious thought as to exactly how she wants him to beat her.

And she knows the answer to that. In Elementary, she and Xander had a weekly appointment with the principal for their daily misdemeanors and she'd always ask them the same question, as they squirmed in front of her desk and tried not to giggle.

“Really, you two,” Ms. Frobisher would say sternly. “If either of you asked the other one to put your head in an oven, would you?”

They'd turn to each other and grin and know they would. It's pretty much what's going on here.

“Across your lap please, sir,” she says and it slips out of her mouth so easily now.

He beams at her, gesturing for her to come closer. “An excellent choice, Faith.”

She shifts her weight from foot to foot, her nipples peaked and puckered, her cunt oozing as he sits down on the leather chair and then pats his thighs temptingly.

He's achingly hard. She can feel the rigid length of him as she drapes herself over her legs and lets him arrange her more to his liking.
“Spread your legs please, Faith,” he murmurs and she wriggles on his lap as she complies, getting herself ready to take whatever he wants to give her. “That's perfect.”

She tenses up, waiting for the first blow because he's still got the ruler in his hand.

There's a clock on the wall directly opposite her and she looks up to see that the second hand is creeping toward the twelve and now she knows why they're waiting. Likes to do things by the book, does Wes.

“I know you're worried that the ruler might hurt you but I believe I've come up with a rather cunning plan to distract you,” he says conversationally as they watch the hand sail slowly past the nine and he shoves three fingers right up to the hilt of her sopping cunt, tips brushing against that tiny little bump inside which causes her to buck her hips so violently that she almost falls off his lap.

“Fuck!” she squeaks and the son of a bitch just laughs.

“Finally you're using that word in the correct connotation,” he chuckles. “Now you're not to come, Faith, but I will allow you to move.”

Bingo! She can almost hear the resolute click as the second hand reaches the twelve but it's drowned out by the sound of the ruler as he lifts it up and then proceeds to rain down a flurry of furious blows on the tender skin of her ass.

Her brain slithers away in the first five seconds never to return again. Every lightning quick smart of the ruler against her cheeks increases her wriggling and squirming, the only thing stopping her from falling on the floor the steadying weight of his fingers inside her as she fucks herself on them. She clenches around them with each a stinging blow.

Don't come, don't come, don't come, don't come, don't come…

He stops. The ruler clatters on to the desk as he pulls his fingers out of her and she gives an ungodly howl of frustration.

“Wes! Please.” God, has she ever sounded this pitiful as he gently tugs on her shaking, trembling body so she can curl herself around him.

“Poor baby,” he coos soothingly, stroking her flushed face with the sticky hand that's been inside her. “My poor little girl.”

The rough denim of his jeans against her sore buttocks makes the stinging worse and she gives an anguished cry and bites down on her lip viciously so she doesn't give way to weeping. Ain't nothing compared to the neediness of her cunt which is aching with the want to be filled by his cock, his fingers, his tongue, his fucking anything.

“Wes,” she moans again, curling her arm round his neck so she can smoosh her hot face into his chest. “You have to… Please…”

“You need something sweet to take away the shock, don't you, Faith?”

She nods eagerly. “I do. I really fucking do.”

He gives her his prettiest smile yet. “I thought so. I've got just the thing.”

When he leans forward, she thinks he's going to unzip and ram his cock into her as hard and far and as fast as he can. Not fucking even!
He's reaching for something on his desk. Something she didn't even notice until now. She watches with a confused frown as he tears off the corner of the clear wrapper and then offers it to her.

“I don't want it,” she mumbles, turning her head away because food is the last thing on her mind.

“Now, Faith,” he says reasonably. Way too reasonably. “I was a little eager to exact punishment. I really think you need the sugar to ease your distress before we can move on.”

And it's the moving on she really needs so she lifts up her head just a fraction and lets him feed her the stupid, fucking Twinkie bite by bite, swallowing hard as it gets stuck in her dry throat.

When it's all gone, she looks at him expectantly and can't help the tiny sigh of satisfaction as he rubs an idle finger over the hard tip of her breast.

It's enough to make her whimper. By the time he gets to her cunt, she's going to be screaming like the best friend in a slasher movie. “What the fuck?”

He's snatched his hand away and is glaring at her.

“What the fuck did I do now?” And yeah, she's swearing. He's lucky she's not trying to stab him through the heart with his letter opener.

“Faith.” Shit. The tone of his voice must have been directly imported from some frozen tundra. “I thought I might it perfectly clear that if you wanted to eat junk food, there would be a forfeit.”

“No way. No fucking way, Wes.” She's trying to scramble off his lap now but it's too late because he's already curved an arm like a steel bar under her knees and around her shoulders and is standing up.

“And I believe that I was very specific about exactly what form the forfeit should take,” he continues calmly, as if she's not spitting and twisting in his arms, even though the last half an hour has sapped her strength as surely as a truckload of Kryptonite. He even ignores the puny pummeling of her fists against his shoulders as he walks to the door. “Let's reconvene in the kitchen, shall we?”

She curses him steadily as they go down the stairs but has the sense to stop hitting him until they’re back on level ground again.

“And I didn’t even want it! I said I didn’t and you made me eat it...” Her voice trails away as she realizes she sounds about five and she settles for a skin-searing glare as he sets her down on her feet in front of the fridge.

“Faith,” and his voice is dripping with fake confusion and concern, “do you think you're being punished for eating that delightful, concocted in a laboratory confection? No, no.” And his voice changes so each word's freeze-dried now. “You’re paying the price for choosing them, which, if memory serves, you did of your own free will and aware of the consequences.”

“That's not fucking fair!”

“I'm going to start counting those again,” he says absently, pulling open the fridge door and rummaging inside. “Your little tantrum’s gone on quite long enough.”

Tantrum? She’s so turned on she can barely stand, he’s about to shove a fucking zucchini up her, when she’s dying for his cock, and he's fussing about her swearing? It’s too much. She wails and he turns to stare at her, one dark eyebrow winging its way up.
“Wesley, I’ll throw them away, okay? Trash them. Anything, just don’t—”

“Now, Faith.” He’s holding that fucking green veggie in his hand and when she thinks what he’s got planned for it, it’s looking huge. “You have needs, remember? I wouldn’t dream of depriving you of something you value so highly.”

He steps past her and saunters over to the sink and begins to wash the zucchini carefully before patting it dry with some kitchen towel.

“Do you like courgettes?” he says in a conversational voice. “I find them a little watery, but they’re good in a ratatouille, of course.”

“They’re called zucchini,” she rasps out losing patience with him. He’s in the States, he can fucking speak American.

“I was aware of that,” he says patiently, walking over to her, “but old habits, a rose by any other name, and all that. If it makes you happier to be fucked by a zucchini rather than a courgette, please, feel free.”

“You can’t be serious,” she says, her eyes fixed on it. Shit, it’s ridged and bumped like it’s sheathed in a fancy-ass condom or something. Something occurs to her and she gives him a hopeful smile. “And what about you, Wes? You don’t get to come this way.”

She goes to him and snuggles up close. His cock’s so hard she gets a reaction from him as she rubs against it; a swift intake of breath that for Wes is the equivalent of a scream, but he shakes his head.

“I’d be remiss in my duty if I let my desires interfere with instructing you,” he says primly. “Nothing’s more important than that.”

And the weird thing is, she thinks he means it, though he’s getting off on this in a big way too, so she’s not going to cry over the fact he’s suffering.

He pushes her back gently, after one kiss that’s as sweet as sugar, and glances around the kitchen. “I think...yes. Come here, Faith.”

She ends up on her back on the table, with a towel to cushion her head, feeling faintly ridiculous. Then Wesley’s lips ghost over her throat and fasten over the pulse that’s started to hammer away just because he’s close, and she stops feeling anything but desperate. He’s positioned her with her knees bent and she feels them fall apart and her ass lift up in a movement she can’t help and didn’t plan. It’s a primitive response and sometimes that’s how he makes her feel, which is scary and comforting and it’s when it’s comforting it’s the scariest. He can’t even see it because he’s moved down and he’s doing stuff to her nipples that has her panting; mouth on one, fingers on the other, squeezing hard, licking softly, worrying at them with his teeth until they’re swollen and aching and her head’s moving restlessly from side to side as she whimpers for him.

His hand goes away and he paints a line down her stomach of wet, soft kisses. She’s hoping he was teasing, and any minute now he’s going to be in her. She can’t wait.

Then she feels a cold, smooth pressure against her cunt and she cries out as it pushes inside her. “Wes!”

He’s shushing her, slow kisses on her lips as they shape frantic words and she wants to be filled and her body’s stupid, so it’s opening to let it slide in, inch by inch, and fuck, it’s stretching her wide and that’s good, yeah, but it’s not Wes and she can feel the tears leak out of her eyes.
“Don’t want it, Wes. Want you, please, Wes...”

His hand starts to work it in and out of her and she moans because his thumb’s flicking over her clit with every stroke.

“I can’t come like this, Wes, I just can’t.”

And she really doesn’t think she can, but she’s never known him stop once he’s started something, and she doesn’t really think he will now. His hand stills and he whispers, “Do you want me to help you come, Faith? It’ll be over then.”

She can’t even say words any more, but she nods and he pushes it in deeper than he has before and it’s feeling warmer now, thick and solid in her, and she’s still so wet that it’s easy for him to nudge it in and leave it, wedged inside her. He pulls out a chair, sits down at the end of the table between her legs and she feels his tongue on her, lapping away at her clit, running around the skin stretched taut by that fucking zucchini, which she’s going to chop into a thousand fucking pieces when this is over and feed to the waste disposal.

She’s gasping now, making hungry, desperate noises, and he doesn’t stop, but his hand comes up and she feels the thickness within her shift and move again, faster now, short jabbing thrusts that force her to the edge, and her body gives up and comes under the relentless onslaught from his tongue, and that fucking thing he’s got inside her.

She comes screaming his name, and not in a good way, and feels it slip out of her, leaving her gaping wide down there and still not satisfied, because that wasn’t any fucking fun at all.

With the last bit of strength she has she swings her legs off the table and stands. Wes is staring at her thoughtfully and it’s the last final straw. She hauls off and slaps him across the face, hard enough to leave a mark that flares up scarlet against his cheek.

“You—” There aren’t words for how angry she’s feeling and how frustrated, and she gives up, turning and running up the stairs to her room. Her room. And if he needs an invitation to come in, he can fucking stand there until midnight and see how he likes it.

She’s crying too hard to hear him knock anyway.

Chapter Thirty-One

As soon as the door’s slammed behind her, she's bolting out of her clothes and into the shower. She cranks the water as hot as it will go and stands under it, the scalding water raising welts on her arms that throb in tandem with her still-twitchy cunt. The only soap in here is his, and she throws the translucent orange bar against the wall in what she knows is a hideously melodramatic act before sinking in a corner, head to her knees, racked with sobs.

She sits that way for a long time, long after she’s sure her insides have recovered and telescoped back down to normal state. And in those long minutes, little whispers of a plan start to curl in her mind and by the time she’s pulled herself out of the shower and is standing wrapped in a towel in front of her suitcase, she knows what she needs to do.

There's a pair of jeans folded on the bottom—she hardly wears them, even though they are the super-low-rise kind. She's just not a jeans kind of girl. She digs around deeper, knows it's in there somewhere—ahh, yes. She smiles and pulls out a chunky cabled sweater her grandmother knit for her one Christmas. It's not pretty, as a matter of fact, it's pretty repulsive, all bright and acrylic, but it actually fits the dress code of her mission perfectly. She smiles at the thought of that, grabs her
wallet, and slips out the door. He's not there, of course, but she can hear him in the kitchen, and
whatever he's cooking smells phenomenal. It's starting to chip away at her resolve, but she
straightens up, and takes a deep breath before entering.

“Hello,” he says quietly, glass of wine in one hand, long wooden spoon in the other. She tries not to
think of him spanking her with it, but it's too late. She shoves the thought out of her mind and opens
up her wallet, pulls out a ten, and slaps it on the counter.

“Where's my food?” Her eyes narrow on him, and it's her turn to be glacial, demanding.

Surprisingly, he doesn't argue, doesn't push the issue. But really, who would argue with her when
she looks as she does in this moment? “Third cabinet from the left. Second shelf.” It's his turn to be
soft and accommodating; his voice is barely a whisper.

She swings it open and finds all her Twinkies carefully stacked in a neat pyramid and the Cheetos
nestled against the giant bag of Twix.

She sweeps everything into her arms, tucking a few escapee Twinkies in her pockets, closes the
cabinet door, and walks away. She doesn't even turn to see the look in his eyes. Something tells her
the dark hurt there would melt her resolve faster than the delicious smell of his cooking would.

And it's not until she's down the hall, and in her room that she realizes he'd set the table for two, that
he was going to come for her eventually, that she might want to eat what he was cooking after all, if
he said the right things.

“Fuck it,” she mutters, kicking the door shut with a decisive kick backward. “First course: Cheetos.”
She announces it like a fussy maitre'd and rips into the bag with abandon, licking the orange powder
off her fingers after the first mouthful. It's heavenly, and soon she's devoured half the Twinkies too,
digging out the creme filling with her tongue first, deliberately chewing on the slightly stale, spongy
yellow cake as an afterthought.

She's deciding whether to keep on with the Twinkies, or move to the Twix when she hears two
sharp raps on the door.

And as soon as she hears them, it kinda becomes clear that this isn't a game and that she has every
reason, no, fuck that, she has every right to be mad at him.

But she wishes that being mad at him didn't feel like this; the nagging, gut-clenching, simmering rage
that she usually associates with her parents, with the kids at school who used to look down on her, or
the guys who'd fuck her and then scrawl her name and number on bathroom walls. He was meant to
be different.

The raps sound again and then her name, “Faith,” with his voice low and questioning.

She gets off the bed and walks over to the door, opens it, and peers out. “What?”

He's standing there with a steaming mug of coffee and it smells so good, so rich and aromatic that her
nose is practically twitching. “I thought you might like this,” he says all soft and concerned and in
that moment she's pretty certain that she hates him and his bullshit mugs of coffee.

Because he's thinking that this is just another one of her little hissy fits and he can jolly her out of it
with some little thoughtful gesture because he's oh-so-fucking civilized and mature. He doesn't get
what he's done and he doesn't understand that when she feels like this, it isn't about swearing and
stamping her foot until she feels better. Fuck! Last time she felt like this, she didn't speak to Darla for
two months. Couldn't speak to her.
He steps forward and she does too, sidling out from behind the door to stand on the landing because
it's her room and she doesn't want him in there. “Thanks,” she bites out and the effort nearly kills her.
Not nearly as much as it does though to take the mug and be really careful not to touch him as she
does.

She shoots him a venomous look from under her lashes and he's staring back at her, running his eyes
down the baggy sweater and coming to rest on her bare feet poking out from the slightly too long
legs of her jeans.

“Are you going to come down for dinner?” His voice is so careful, like she's some hysterical harpy
who's due for another snit any minute now.

She tamps down the tsunami of anger that's currently bubbling up. “Not hungry.” Would it fucking
kill him to apologize? He has to know why she's so furious. Even he's not that fucked-up.

“Are you sure you won't come downstairs?”

He is unfuckingbelievable! There's this red haze sweeping over her and the next thing she knows,
she's thrown the mug of coffee at the wall. She's glad he jumps as her arm arcs out and the mug
shatters. There's this hideous brown explosion of java splattered over his perfectly painted white
walls. “I said I didn't! Why do you have so much of a problem understanding me? I said, no! I don't
want any fucking dinner! I didn't want to get fooled with a fucking zucchini either. What part of that
didn't you fucking hear?”

And when she gets like this, she can't be in her own skin and she's this close to hurting him again.
Somehow she's in enough control to realize that she shouldn't but it doesn't really help when she's so
lost and angry and she doesn't know how to make it any better.

He's gazing at the coffee trickling down onto the floor in fascination but he's swinging back to her as
she starts smashing her fists into the wall. The impact jars all the way up her arms and it hurts, which
is good. And she's screaming, which is even better because she has to let out.

“Faith, please…”

She's going to this place where the sound of his voice is coming from a long, long way away, barely
audible over the sound that's coming out of her mouth.

Then his arms come round her, immobilizing her, pulling her away and she's kicking out with her
feet so they go sprawling into a heap on the floor.

“Faith, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.” He doesn't stop saying it, even as he shifts her in his arms so she's
cradled against him and he can stroke her hair as she cries.

And it's so fucked-up that he's made her feel like this but he's the only one who can take the pain
away.

She's still hiccupping and sobbing so it takes a while for him to decipher what's coming out of her
mouth.

“Why did you think I'd want that?” she splutters. “Why didn't you believe me?”

She peers at his face through sticky, red-rimmed eyes, seeing all these emotions flicker there faster
than a slideshow. “But I thought… that is… you usually enjoy the things I do to you, even when you
think you won't.” Stammering Wes hasn't put in an appearance for quite a while.
The conversation is like trying to do a really complicated jigsaw puzzle with no picture on the box. Her brow wrinkles and he's trying to smooth the frown away with his fingertips. “Well, I do but I thought I was making it pretty clear that this time I wasn't enjoying myself.”

He's blushing now. The mighty, 100 percent in control at all-time Wesley Wyndam-Pryce Esquire's face is stained with red. “We should have boundaries,” he finally whispers.

“What about boundaries?”

“I should have established where yours were before we began this relationship,” he tells her ruefully. And she should be delirious with joy because did he just say that they were in a relationship? But it's kinda not important right now.

“Y'know, last time I checked, 'I don't want it' was, like, pretty easy to understand,” she says snottily.

He entwinines his fingers with her and she wishes she had the balls to wrench away from his grip. “Faith, you have to believe me when I say that I'm dreadfully sorry that I stepped outside the parameters of what was acceptable,” he says urgently. “The things we do…there are so many blurred lines. And you're so willing, so hungry, so generous with your desires.”

Tears are leaking out again, even though she'd have sworn that her tear ducts had dried up. “That's because I trusted you. I trusted you that when you hurt me, you'd always make it better and this time you didn't.”

He kisses the tears away, brushing them back with his lips. “Please don't cry.” And he's begging her now, his voice almost frantic with it. “I really am sorry.”

And she's kissing him back, painting kisses on the sharp lines of his cheekbones. “I get that you are, Wes, but you totally forced me to do something, to come, when I didn't want to. And now it's all fucked-up and weird and I don't know how to make it okay again.”

“Do you want it to be okay again?” he asks her carefully. “We could aim for a more normal…”

“No! I don't want normal! I like it when you smack me and you don't let me come and, man, I even liked it when you fucked me in the ass, you know I did, but you should listen to me when I say I don't like it.” And this is officially the weirdest conversation she's ever had.

“Of course, of course,” he assures her, peppering her neck with kisses and she suddenly realizes how tense he is. How shit scared he is that he's fucked everything up. “We'll have a safeword and when…”

“We'll have a what?”

That gets her a smile. It even gets her that goddamn arching eyebrow. “Faith.” And the drawl is back. “I forget how relatively inexperienced you are.”

“Yeah, well I was until I met you,” she reminds him pointedly. “What's the deal with this whole safeword?”

“You pick a word,” he explains as he pushes her off his lap so he can stand. “A random word but a memorable one and if things are getting too frightening or overwhelming for you, you say it. And I'll stop. I promise that I will.”

She takes his hand and lets him haul her to her feet. “So how do I pick a word?”
“Well, it shouldn't be something that you might call out in the throes of passion, so I suggest you
don't choose ‘fuck.'“

She leans back against the wall and scratches her neck. The jumper is wicked itchy. “Neruda,” she
says decisively. “My safeword is going to be Neruda.”

He lets out a breath that he seems to have been holding for way too long. “Good. Are we friends
again then?”

Jesus! She's almost close to crying again when he asks her that. Instead she just nods. “Yeah, we
are.”

“And are you going to come downstairs now and have some dinner. If it's not burned to a crisp, that
is.”

She scuffs her big toe against the parquet flooring. “What is it?”

He's standing as awkwardly as she is, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, his feet shuffling from
side to side. But he gives her a slow, sweet smile and it's impossible not to smile back. “Macaroni
and cheese,” he says gravely. “Perfect comfort food.”

“It doesn't smell like Mac and cheese.”

“Yes, well that's because it hasn't been thermo-blasted in a microwave,” he says huffily. “It's also not
a peculiar shade of nuclear orange but I'm sure you might manage a couple of mouthfuls.”

When his hand reaches out, she takes it and lets him lead her down the stairs.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Sitting down at the table where he’d done that would’ve been too much, so she’s beyond relieved
when he heaps pale yellow pasta and sauce into heavy bowls, puts them onto a tray with cutlery,
napkins and two glasses of…

“Wes? What is this?”

He gives her a look. “It’s milk, Faith. I find it hard to believe you’ve not come across it before.”

“Very funny.” She gives it a dubious look and then decides to go along with it since she doesn’t
think he’s going to have anything with bubbles unless it’s champagne. And she doesn’t think that’s
usually served with Kraft dinner, even the posh kind.

He leads them into the family room and over to a small table by a window, setting the food down
and then pulling back her chair for her. She’d put that down to him still trying to make up to her, but
he does it so naturally, she guesses it’s just something he does.

It’s difficult to know what to say, but the first bite makes it easy. “God, Wes, this is fuc—” She
pauses and then starts again. Just call her Eliza fucking Doolittle, but she’s trying, she’s making an
effort. “This tastes delicious, Wesley.”

He smiles and it's so warm, it dries up every last sniffly tear inside her. “Thank you, Faith,” he says
gravely. “Perhaps you’d like me to show you how to cook it? It’s very simple.”

“Fuck, no,” she says without thinking, aghast at the very idea.

There’s a pause, and she waits for an icy glare, but he starts to laugh, hard enough that he chokes on
a mouthful of pasta and has to gulp down most of his milk, and after that it’s as back to normal as it ever is with them.

She’s feeling full after her frenzy of junk food consumption, and she shakes her head when he mentions dessert.

“Then what would you like to do now?” he says, giving her a look that, for once, isn’t making her feel that she’s going to be naked in minutes.

“I want to get out of this sweater, because it’s itchy as hell,” she says, knowing it’ll get her that flash of amusement in his eyes, “and I want you to show me where you keep your mops and stuff.”

Comprehension replaces amusement. “You don’t have to do that,” he says.

“Yeah. I really do.”

She might not have been brought up like him but she knows you don’t make a mess like she did in someone’s house and not clean it up. Especially this house, where there’s not a speck of dust or smudge of dirt to be seen.

“We’ll do it together,” he says, and she’s certain he’s freaking that she’ll miss a spot, because there’s this panicky look on his face. Fine. She’s not feeling guilty enough to argue with him. “And after that?”

There’s a faint hint of suggestion creeping back in now and she’s not ready for that, not yet. She’s not wearing her watch so she reaches over the table and grabs his wrist, turning it so that she can peek at his watch. God, just touching him’s enough to make her want to crawl into his lap and cuddle for hours. His skin’s so warm under her fingers. “Four o’clock. Don’t you need to start acting like a lawyer for tomorrow?”

“I can do that later.”

“Do it now,” she says impulsively. “Let me help, if I can. Get it done and you can relax; get an early night.”

He stretches out a hand and feels her forehead. “Are you quite well, Faith? All this sensible advice...”

“Knock it off,” she snaps. “I’m your secretary as well as your...”

Things freeze and stick, stop moving and grind to a halt.

“My?” he prompts, blue eyes blank, so she can’t tell what he’s thinking.

“You tell me, Wes.” He’s going to be the one, she decides, the one to say it. Not her.

His chair scrapes back and he stands and looks down at her.

“I’m not sure what you want from me here, Faith,” he says in a soft voice. “To be told that I care for you? I do. To be told that you’re important to me? You are.”

He hesitates and she gets that he’s really struggling here and takes pity on him. Besides, she’s gone into a meltdown over what he’s said and she’s thinking that it’s been forever since she got kissed, just plain kissed.

“Stop wriggling, Wes,” she says, jumping up and wrapping her arms around him. “Not a big deal.”
She tilts her head back and waits to be kissed and she doesn’t have to wait long, but it’s such a slow, sweet kiss that it leaves her wanting another, a kiss she doesn’t get until the cleaning’s done. And fuck, Wes takes so long over it, she’s regretting what had been a truly satisfying smash before they’ve finished picking up the shards of crockery and resolving never to do it again by the time he’s sponged wall and floor until they gleam.

“Now,” he says, “I believe you wanted to put in some overtime?”

She nods firmly and he smiles, one finger tracing a path from her forehead to her chin. “Time and a half?”

“Payment in kind,” she says and watches him frown with suspicion.

“Meaning?”

“You’re not just going say, ‘Yes, Faith?’” she teases. “Is that a lawyer thing?”

“It’s basic survival instincts,” he tells her, leading them back to the office. “What did you have in mind as reimbursement for your services?”

And damn, when he drawls it out in that accent of his, he could make anything sound suggestive, so it’s really no wonder that her body wakes up again and reminds her that she’s been waiting all day, hell, and all night, for what he can do to her.

“You’re not feeling so guilty that you’ll agree to anything?”

He spins around and pushes her against the wall, capturing her wrists and slowly sliding them up above her head, his eyes never leaving hers. “I’m not sure, Faith,” he says pleasantly. “I think I can guarantee with you in this mood I’m unlikely to agree to being tied up to await your pleasure, but...”

She closes her eyes because fuck that’s a pretty picture, and comes to when he changes his grip so one hand’s free and runs it over her breast. “You really like that idea, don’t you?” he murmurs, silky soft against her ear.

“Really do, Wes,” she tells him arching her back so her breast fills his palm. “Just for once, yeah, I do.”

“Pick something else,” he says, hand skimming down over her hip, fingers spread wide.

“I want to come tomorrow. To the court,” she blurts out. “I’ll sit in the back, but I want to see you when you win.”

He releases her and steps back. “You want...Why?” He’s frowning, but he’s not angry, just puzzled.

“I just do. I want to see you in action.”

She can imagine it; Wes in one of his suits, cool and icy, utterly, totally sure of himself, pacing up and down; Lilah getting flustered—well, maybe not flustered but jittery, yeah.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” he says slowly. “Lilah won’t like it.”

“What? What the fuck has she got to do with it?” And she’s sounding jealous, she knows, but damn, he married that bitch after all.

“I’m going to win,” he says simply. “She’s going to lose, and I’m going to make it humiliating.” Bet you are, Wes. “If she knows you witnessed that, well, she’s got enough spite to be capable of almost...”
“Fuck her,” she tells him, and there’s no bravado in it, it’s just the way she feels. She’s sick of being scared of people, sick of being pushed around.

“No, thank you,” he says dryly.

“I want to come.”

He shrugs and nods. “Then you shall.” He starts to walk away. “But you haven’t earned it yet.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Earning it takes four hours, when there’s nothing of the lover in him, so that she’s calling him ‘sir’ without irony. She takes down notes and reads them back to him, listens to him make speeches and spots a place where he contradicts himself; remembers enough from the work she did when he was away to be able to find a reference he’s searching for. Not much, maybe, but she’s useful and that’s not happened often enough in her life for the novelty to have worn off.

Finally, he sighs, stacks papers neatly, and snaps his briefcase closed. “Done. Any more and I’ll go stale.” He stands and goes over to her. “Thank you, Faith. I didn’t intend to take up so much of your time.”

“I wanted to do it,” she says, and it’s the truth.

“Really?” He draws her hand to his lips and brushes a kiss across her fingertips. “That’s very admirable of you, Faith. Perhaps you’ve earned a bonus.”

She swallows. “Yeah? What did you have in mind...sir?”

His smile’s enough to make her nipples harden and her cunt slick up expectantly. Which isn’t romantic—shouldn’t her heart flutter or something?—but it’s not something she can help. “Would you like a detailed list, or the basic plan?” he asks, tucking her hair behind her ear and managing to pinch her ear lobe as he does it so that shivers spread out over her and leave her skin tingling.

“Hit the high spots,” she says and she’s sounding breathless already.

“We’re going to my bedroom,” he says. “You’re going to strip while I watch you, and you’re going to do it slowly, Faith. If I think you’re rushing, I’ll exact a penalty.”

“What?”

“Oh, let’s not assume you’re going to fail, Faith,” he purrs. “So negative. When you’re naked, you get to undress me, and again, with the utmost care not to rush. Perhaps I’ll make it easier for you to achieve that by forbidding you the use of your hands. Once we’re both naked, there’s the little matter of your earlier indulgence.”

It takes her a second to realize he’s talking about her bedroom binge and she flushes. “Didn’t think we were doing that anymore,” she says weakly.

“Oh, Faith,” he says chidingly. “I might have agreed to amend the penalty, but do away with it altogether? Certainly not.”

And there’s something comforting about that.

They walk toward the door and she glances up at him. “This plan of yours, Wes?”
“Yes?”

“Does it include me getting fucked? By you? Tonight? So I come?”

There’s a pause and she watches him start to smile. “You’re getting the idea of small print beautifully, Faith. To answer your questions; yes, yes, within the hour, and I won’t stop until you do.”

“I want to come three times,” she says firmly.

“Really?” He sounds interested. “Only three? Well, I suppose I can alter the plan a little.”

They take their time getting upstairs, pausing halfway up for a kiss that’s equal parts urgent and sweet, maybe even a little clumsy, and that’s okay. It’s like they have to earn their way back to how things were. His fingers seem to be everywhere at once—threaded through her hair, brushing past her hips or under that goddamn sweater—and when his lips find this spot right under her earlobe, pressing a fervent kiss on the tender flesh there, he wraps his arms tightly around her as though he’ll never let go.

They manage to stumble up toward the bedroom, lost in this embrace that’s oddly protective, but kinda needy too. Where she comes from, Faith’s used to one without the other—this might not be perfect but at least it’s hers.

There’s one of those glacially slow, exploratory kisses that she’d always dreamed of getting from the boys at school. His tongue slides into her mouth and no matter how many times he’s done that it always sends a little shiver through her. He brushes the tips of her nipples with the flat of his thumb and then actually starts to slip the hideous sweater over her head. She stops him. “Is that impatience, Wes? Am I going to have to exact a penalty on your ass?” She cocks one eyebrow, daring him.

He doesn’t roll his eyes at her because he doesn’t do that, but he comes damn close.

“Oh c’mon, Wes. Fucking lighten up.” She’s trying not to laugh.

“Do I need to start a swear jar for you, Faith?”

She doesn’t answer his question directly, just retorts, “What, no forfeit for that one?”

“Let’s call that even.”

She giggles. “You are lightening up.”

“I assure you it won’t happen again.” He tries to sound dead serious, but he can’t quite hold it together.

“My bedroom or yours?”

Her room would remind her of the earlier unpleasantness, plus there’s the small matter of the junk-food explosion that she hasn’t cleaned up, so she says without hesitation: “Yours.”

Once in his room, she just wants to sprawl on the bed and make out for hours. It’s been a long, draining day, and she’s a little tired. Plus, her current attire is possibly the least conducive to a slow, sexy striptease in the history of impromptu stripteases.

By now the awful, scratchy-as-hell sweater is the most hated piece of clothing she’s ever owned, and that includes the Easter Sunday dress with the giant fucking tulip on it that her grandmother bought
for her ninth birthday and made her wear to Sunday Mass. She can’t wait to get it off her body, and not just because then she’s got the promise of undressing Wes to look forward to. But hurrying out of it isn’t an option.

Wes sits in the chair. There’s no shirt slung over the back and she guesses that it got hung up as-is, still rumpled, in the back of his closet. The only shirt he owns that he’ll never iron again; the only one missing buttons. She smiles warmly at the memory, and between that and the prickly heat from the sweater she’s going pink all over.

“I’m waiting, Faith.” He’s back to stern Wes again, and she snaps out of her reverie.

And it would be so easy to just shuck off the stupid sweater in one lightning quick up and over motion but he said slow and he's gonna get slow. Gonna get something he never expected either.

“Wes?” she coos, batting her eyelashes and he fixes her with a glare.

“What?”

“I just need to get one thing from the bathroom, okay?”

That kind of throws him and he's probably thinking that she needs to pee and is too embarrassed to say so, so she gets a brusque nod and she's practically skipping into the en-suite.

The scissors are where he left them; neatly arranged on the shelf above the wash-basin with the rest of the implements he used to shave her. She has a sense memory of them nudging against the plump flesh of her mound, his fingers pressing down.

When she walks back into the bedroom he's sitting with his legs crossed and his arms folded, a suspicious look on his face at the smirk she can't quite hide.

“I do hope you're not planning any surprises, Faith,” he says sharply.

She tries for a mysterious smile but doesn't quite succeed. “No, sir, just one slow striptease coming up, just like you ordered.”

She starts with the sleeves, just like he told her he would, digging the blades into the slightly unraveled cuffs. She wondered if it'll be too difficult but the scissors are razor sharp (which she's glad she didn't realize when he was preparing her to be shaved) and her grandmother was one of the world's worst knitters, using cheap wool and sloppy stitches.

By the time she's got to the top of one sleeve which seems to take several years, all it needs is a sharp tug and she's throwing it on the floor at his feet. He's leaning forward, gaze intent on her as she starts on the other sleeve. And she doesn't know why because this seemed like it was going to be sexy in her head but actually not so much.

She's getting impatient and she's not even at her elbow before she rips the sleeve out of the armhole and chucks it next to its twin. He's sitting back now, eyes narrowed and assessing and scared that she's going to lose his interest, her hands wander down to the button of her jeans.

She slowly pops it out of the buttonhole and starts dragging the zipper down, shimmying her hips slightly as she does and his eyes are gleaming again, staring at the little patch of pink cotton that's coming into view.

By her estimation she takes a good five minutes to get the zipper down and she's soaked by the time she's finished. All she wants to do is yank her jeans and panties off in one go and then push his face
into her wet pussy and beg him to eat her. Instead she grits her teeth and slides her jeans down. As her pink panties come into view, sticking damply to her crotch, she can hear the hitch in his breathing and if she's not very much mistaken, he's packing an erection so hard it looks painful.

It's kinda distracting too, so she turns her back on him as she wiggles the denim down her legs, thrusting out her ass and bending over so he's got something pretty to look at. When the jeans are pooled round her ankles, she kicks them free and then pauses.

“Y’know, Wes, there wasn't anything in the small print about audience participation,” she tells him smugly. “This is taking way longer than I thought it would; you wanna give me a hand?”

His lips curl wryly as he considers the question. “I suppose I could be prevailed upon to assist you,” he replies. “What did you have in mind?”

She advances toward him, the lips of her cunt moving slickly against each other. If she doesn't get out of this fucking sweater soon, she's gonna explode. “It's very simple, Wes,” she says, picking one of the loose threads at the bottom. “I have this theory, right, that if you tugged this really, really hard, then the rest of this wicked itchy sweater's just going to fall to pieces.”

“That is a very interesting theory.” He swallows visibly as she comes closer. She doesn't think she's ever got him this hot and bothered before. He really gets off on the whole delayed pleasure thing. “Shall we put it to the test?”

There was jackshit in the small print about not straddling him, so she climbs onto his lap, legs clamping around his waist and hands covering his, which are white-knuckled and gripping the arm rests of the chair. “Knock yourself out, Wes.”

Turns out her theory was right and old Granny would be spinning in her grave, if she was, like, actually dead, to see her revolting sweater being ripped off her half-naked granddaughter by the same stuffy, twice her age, English guy whose lap she was currently writhing on.

Faith wriggles luxuriously as the sweater starts unraveling and then it's Wes who's getting impatient, using both hands to pull and tear and rip it off her until she's on his lap in her pink bra and panties and a shit-eating grin on her face. “Thanks, Wes,” she says huskily. She makes a move to get off his lap, but his hands clamp around her waist and hold her there.

“I'm faced with something of a dilemma, Faith,” he says in her ear as she smooshes her breasts into his chest and gives in to the urge to lick a long, damp line up his neck. “Stop that!” he barks but it loses its bite when she can feel his hard-on grinding against the damp heat of her.

“Nothing in the small print says I can't,” she says with a pout and he groans.

“I can see that I've been hoist with my own petard." She doesn't know what that means. Besides, she's still gotta get rid of her underwear and take off his clothes and work on the whole not exploding thing. “What's your dilemma?” she asks impatiently.

“Well, I asked you to take your time stripping, which you did most effectively.” He's gulping again and her new favorite game is chasing his bobbing Adam's apple with her tongue. “And then you were going to take my clothes off very slowly, possibly without using your hands, though maybe I wasn't being entirely practical when I…”

He really picks a time to start yammering, especially when she's pretty sure she's going to come, just from the tight bite of his fingers on the soft skin of her hips, his cock nudging right against her clit. “Huh?” she mutters, wondering if he'll notice if she just starts to very discreetly grind her crotch into
“Then there was the small matter of your most recent forfeit. But I also promised to fuck you and make you come within the hour and there’s only three minutes to go,” he drawls, grabbing a handful of her hair and tugging gently. “And what kind of man would I be if I didn’t keep my promises? I’m sure you can appreciate my dilemma.”

She grins. “Thought lawyers could wriggle through loopholes. Want me to help you?” She gives a little squirm as she says ‘wriggle’ and watches the results. Wes bites his lip hard enough that there’s a little patch of white where his teeth dig in and a second later she rides out a wave that, before she met Wes, she might have called an orgasm, but now is nothing more than a teaser for the main event.

“By all means,” he says in a husky whisper, never taking his eyes off her.

“You see,” she says, moving back a bit, “you never said what order the fucking and the stripping came in. So you can make me come now—” She deftly, slowly, carefully pulls down the zipper on his jeans, and oh, look, still not wearing underwear. Her grandmother would freak about that too. Wes might get hit by a bus, and wouldn’t his face be red then? “And I can undress you slowly afterward.”

His cock’s so hard, wet-tipped and twitching against her fingers, that just touching it sends another shudder of almost, not-quite, over her body. The arm rests don’t make it easy, but hey, she’s adaptable, and they’re on a clock here. She stands up, watching his eyes flicker with what might be alarm that she’s leaving, and moves behind the chair, taking hold of it and shifting it around so it’s facing the bed, less than a foot away. In fact, he’s so close now that his knees are brushing against the heavy fall of draped sheets.

She gives him the scissors and hooks a finger in the side of her panties, pulling them away from her body. With a slow exhalation of breath he slides the blades around the fabric on each side and snips one, twice, so that the only thing stopping them from fluttering down is the fact that she’s so soaked they’re sticking to her. He tears them away like a scared kid peeling off a band aid; an agonizingly slow tug that plucks at her clit and makes her whimper.

“Ninety seconds left,” she whispers, and yeah, she’s kinda making that number up, but what the hell. He can do it. She gets back on his lap, facing away from him now, her arms resting on the bed as they once rested on his desk, her ass there for his hands to cup and caress, her feet resting on the floor.

She hears him say her name, but it’s hard to tell because as he says it his finger runs from sticky slickness up to her asshole, lightly scratching her skin and she thinks she starts to come just from that, but she’ll never know because a second later his hands are both on her hips and he’s driving into her in one smooth, hard thrust that rips the air from her lungs, because after she’s cried out something that doesn’t translate but if it did, it’d be ‘fuck, yes!’ in a thousand languages, she forgets to breathe for what’s left of the ninety seconds.

After three strokes, he growls, yeah, he really does, and she saves that to play back later, because making Wes lose it is getting to be a hobby, no, a fucking vocation of hers. She’s pushed forward by an insistent hand, so that she’s bent over the bed and he’s standing behind her, hampered by his jeans, which he’s pushed down just enough that she can feel bare skin against her ass as he fucks her, but still able to go deep and fast.

He’s really taking advantage of that too.

It doesn’t last long, but it doesn’t need to. She’s coming, surges of heat and sensation lapping at her,
pouring over her, melting her down from the inside out and he’s slamming into her in hard, fast, perfect strokes that she tries to trap inside her and never can because as soon as he’s fully in her, he’s pulling back again, greedy, impatient, hungry as she is.

When he climaxes, she feels the ripple as his spunk rises and spills inside her in jerky, ragged spurts, hears the hoarse guttural sounds as far removed from his cool, drawling voice as possible, smells the mingled tang of sweat and come. It’s all there, wrapped up in a package and topped with a bow.

His hands move forward to cover hers with a convulsive grip.

And they stay that way for what feels like minutes. They’re both floating somewhere else, waiting for coherent thought to return, their linked hands the only thing anchoring them to the bed.

Gradually she regains some semblance of consciousness, and even though she’s just come harder than she’s ever come in her life, this is the moment she wants to fucking frame. The weight of his body against hers is reassuring somehow. His breathing is ragged and heavy in her ear, and she can feel the rise and fall of his stomach against the cooling damp along her back. His fingers are coupled with hers, and she squeezes them with a gentle pressure.

“Hey,” she whispers.

His soft little moan doesn’t translate into any language she knows, but she’ll take that as a “hey” in return.

She slumps onto the bed and he follows, and it’s another minute still before she can even think about moving.

“Jesus, Wes, that was…” Not wanting words to fail her yet again, she just lets the sentence trail off.

“Mmm?” He says it like it’s a question, so she takes it as such.

“Mmm is right,” she teases, and she twists her body out from under him and rolls onto her side. He comes to rest, curved against her hip. “And, y’know, this isn’t so bad either.” She snuggles closer to him and her eyes start to drift closed.

“You’re not allowed to sleep yet,” he whispers, “I seem to recall the number three being bandied about not so very long ago.”

“Yeah, well, this is just as important.” She smiles, her eyes still closed.

“It really is to you, isn’t it?” he asks. “The...cuddling.”

He says it like it’s a foreign word, a perversion, an alien concept and she struggles out of sleepiness to stare at him. “Well, yeah, Wes. You don’t like it?”

He brushes her hair away from her face and kisses the cheek he’s uncovered. “I’ve never had the opportunity to form an opinion before.”

She waits, pity stirring, but keeping it off her face.

“It doesn’t suck,” he says finally.

It takes a second for her to process that and the giggles she gets wake her up like nothing else could. “You—Wes, you did not say that! You didn’t! Oh, shit, I’m corrupting you, aren’t I?”

He smirks, enjoying her reaction, and leans back. “I’m still dressed,” he says idly. “I do believe
we’ve accomplished our goal of fucking you, so perhaps we could get on with the rest of the plan?”

He makes it sound as if he’s at work, faced with a ‘to do’ list a mile long of tedious chores, but there’s a gleam in his eyes and she answers it with a slow smile.

“Sorry, sir, I was taking a break. Back on the clock now.”

She seems to remember he’d nixed the no hands deal, but she still uses them as little as possible, working shirt buttons through holes with her teeth and snatching the chance to kiss his chest and tickle it with her hair as she moves down his body.

His jeans are already half off him and he looks fucking hot like that, the denim framing a cock that’s already starting to stir again, dark hair curling around it, crisp and soft at the same time.

“Still so—”

“If you say that word again, Faith, the consequences will be dire,” he warns her, eyes half-closed.

“But you are, Wes,” she whines, not even trying to convince him she was going to say anything but ‘pretty’. She pouts and whispers it almost too low to be heard and his mouth snaps shut as he grabs her.

The tussle that follows is undignified, breathless, chaotic, and more fun than she’s had in ages. His jeans fall to around his knees, which help her a lot, but he’s got enough weight on her that once she’s pinned under him, it’s game over.

So she never lets it get to that. There's squirming, wriggling, tickling, and yeah, she’s not above biting, though he gasps with so much outrage when she does, that she knows she’s gonna be paying for the moments when she makes him squeal like a girl.

Finally, she’s never quite sure how, he’s sprawled on his stomach, jeans long since kicked off, she’s kneeling back on her heels, and his bare ass is there and she lands two, three slaps on it, getting a kick out of the sight, sound and feel of her hand landing squarely on his skin. It goes ominously quiet and she’s starting to panic when he twists, not to get free, but to get at her, and pushes his way between her thighs, licking and biting at her cunt so that she cries out and spreads her knees wide, wider, apart, and her hands go to his hair, holding him there and staring down at him.

He shifts, putting his ass out of reach, and as diversionary tactics go, it’s a winner, because she’s way too busy to chase him. Positioned as she is— and he’s not letting her move, or lie back—he can’t get to all of her easily, but he’s doing wonders with what his tongue can reach. The hands clamped on her spread knees slide along thighs quivering with an arousal that’s almost too soon since she came to be bearable, fingers spread wide, tracing each muscle delicately. His tongue’s never still. It circles, jabs, strokes and laps at her, making folds still wet with his come wetter still, and she’s chanting his name and mixing in ‘please’ until that’s all she’s saying and she’s saying it over and over, but it’s all one word now, no breaks, no gaps, nothing but ‘please’.

His fingers slide into a space his cock widened, and fill it, one, two, three, and it’s not enough, not deep enough, because the bed’s stopping him and she can’t lie back, but she can kneel up and she does, so she’s over him and he rolls to his back, between her legs.

She’s looking down his body at his cock, and it’s so hard again. She bends, flower stem in the wind curve to her back, and there’s a fancy word for this, but she doesn’t bother attaching labels, she just opens her mouth and holds his cock steady as she lets it slip between her lips and feels his mouth on her.
She’s so open to him, so blatantly wide open, that it makes her feel a fierce glow of satisfaction. She
can imagine what he’s seeing and she knows why he retreats and his fingers slide over what his
tongue’s slicked, because she knows he’s looking at her and she can tell when he is, because his
cock hardens even more and she tastes the result against her tongue.

She’s using her hands on him too, cupping his balls gently, stroking along his thighs, spread as wide
as hers.

And she doesn’t know she’s been waiting until she feels his finger slide in her ass, through a skim of
slipperiness that makes it easy, and his thumb curves into her cunt and she lifts her head for long
enough to moan softly, because that feels fucking unbelievable, and he says her name in a warning
that has her ducking her head back fast as he comes, catching each spurt against her lips, trapping the
head of his cock between them and feeling her climax roll over her, achingly sweet, as his hand
thrusts inside her insistently.

When he finally lets go, pulling his hand gently out of her, she collapses, breathless, next to him.

Faced with his feet—which, she thinks, are still so very nice as far as feet go, really—she runs one
jagged fingernail up the arch.

“Faith,” he’s just teetering on the verge of a stifled laugh, trying in vain to be serious. “Stop that, and
come here. I’m warming up to the idea of an extended cuddle as I don’t think we’re in any state for
another tussle—so stop intentionally provoking me like that, if you know what’s good for you.”

“How...” She flips over, runs her lips along his leg, over the perfectly angular hipbone. “First you say
’suck’ and now you want to cuddle more? I’m shocked! I think you’re getting a little soft.”

The pun’s so lame, she rolls her eyes—but she can’t see if he does too. He says nothing, just runs his
hand through her hair, and pulls her up the rest of the way. “Or not.” she gasps, nuzzling against his
neck, the roots of her hair tingling and sending incendiary shivers down her back.

And that’s when he wraps his long, warm arms around her and she realizes that this is probably the
first time he’s held on to her like this, and not the other way around. He strokes the goose-pimpled
flesh of her forearm with a fingertip, but it just flares up again in the wake of his tender touch. Soon,
he’s tracing around her skin, seemingly fascinated at the reaction he causes.

“So wonderfully tactile,” he murmurs, more to himself than to her, sliding his hand down her back,
skimming fingers over her ass and gently cupping a cheek, still holding her pleasure-heavy and
whimpering body molded close to his.

“Don’t stop,” she begs, her voice far-away and unrecognizable. “Please.”

“Now why,” he pulls away a bit so as to pet the damp down between her legs, then runs a splayed
hand over her belly, ever so lightly, “would I want to stop, when you make such lovely and
fascinating little noises when I do this.” He brushes his fingers over her hard nipples, not even really
touching them—she just feels a slight displacement of air and nothing more—but it's enough to set
turn the smoldering bit of desire still inside into a hot flame. It's all she can do to not scream or snatch
his lips into a kiss. No, she wants him to keep touching her, keep talking while he's doing it. So all
she can do is snuggle even closer, running her lips up his neck and letting out a long, low sigh in his
ear.

There’s a hitch in his breathing then, and she runs a free hand through his fuck-rumpled hair. “See,
the whole cuddling thing works both ways,” she whispers, and runs her tongue along his earlobe.
“Nice, don’t you think?”
She can feel him stiffen a bit, swallow heavily. His wandering hands pause, except for a thumb absentmindedly stroking the same square inch of her thigh over and over. She can't believe it—didn't think it was possible, but she realizes she might have caused something to short circuit inside his brain.

She slides her hand down to grip his twitchy thumb. “It's all right, Wes.” She's still near his ear; her voice is husky and she hopes, soothing too. “You can enjoy this. You're allowed to.” His hand slides up, stroking the dimple in her chin and he tilts her around to look him in the eye.

“I know. I just...” But he's lost already, stammering and looking away, cheeks flushed. It's her turn to reel him back in, stroke his cheek until he can meet her gaze again. He sighs and runs the tip of his tongue nervously over his lower lip in a way that makes her want to personally hunt down and bitchslap every woman he's ever slept with before now, starting with a certain ex-wife. She may not've had the most skillful or attentive lovers before now, but at least the stoned ones would pet her absentmindedly for a few minutes after they'd done the deed.

“It's okay. I take it maybe the others weren't so tactile?” The word slips over her lips stiffly, and he can't help but smile.

“Not really into post-coital intima...”

“Sucks for them.” She kisses him lightly and smiles. “They were really missing out.”

He kisses her this time, tongue twirling around hers, still tangy from her juices. And then they're a tangle of wandering hands and entwined limbs and languid kisses for what seems hours before he pulls away, strokes her birds-nesty hair away from her flushed cheeks.

He looks so very serious and far away, lost in thought and her heart nearly stops in her chest, beaming out little rays of pain that try to burst through her sternum. “Uh, you're not supposed to do any heavy thinking after sex, y'know?” But the jest falls flat before it even leaves her mouth.

That little furrow in his brow scares her, and she can't help but try and smooth it away.

When he finally speaks, his voice is measured but not detached, and it's not what she's expecting to hear.

“Promise me something, Faith.” She nods blankly, eyes wide. “Promise me that we'll make this last as long as possible.”

And she knows, of course, that he doesn't exactly mean their session of post-coital intimacy. “Sure. Yes.” Her voice quivers, and she drops her head to rest on his shoulder, snaking an arm around his chest, holding on tight. “We will. I promise.”

He's not promising forever, and deep down, if she's honest with herself, she never expected him to.

His fingertips skim the curve of her shoulder and she can feel the words welling up inside her again and again so she knows she has to say it, just once. Whatever the consequences. Owes it to her and him.

“Wes?”

His fingers still and then smooth down her arm. “Hmm?”

“I love you.”
It sounds really, really weird out loud. Not cried out because she's coasting the mother of all orgasms, but something she's thought about. His eyes widen comically like a cartoon character just as it's getting hit on the head with a fifty-pound weight and she waits for him to pull away, retreat, order her back to her bed.

“I don't expect you to say it back, y'know,” she whispers, her hand over his heart, feeling it beat out quite a steady rhythm all things considered. “Just wanted you to know.”

She's not being entirely truthful. Somewhere in her head, she's played out this scene a million times and he does say it back, all throaty and gravelly, and takes her in his arms for this spine-tingling, fade-to-black kiss.

But that isn't real. This is his bed and she's still being held by him, his lips softly kissing the top of head and then he says, so low that she almost doesn't hear it, “Thank you.”

And she can live with 'thank you.' She can live very well with thank you—for now.

It's like a huge weight's been lifted off her and she's light and boneless, only his hands on her, anchoring her to this plane of existence. Her eyelids flicker shut and she's trying desperately to stay awake, to store up this memory, the smell and feel and sound of him, imprint it on her mind so she can wrap it round her on those nights when sleep is a long time coming.

“Are you falling asleep on me?” His voice sounds so fucking fond.

“Yeah,” she mutters, fighting the waves of tiredness lapping over her. “I mean, no. Just gimme a minute, okay?”

His chest rumbles against her ear as he chuckles. “You still have one orgasm pending.”

She smooshes against him, her hand tucked under him, one leg hitched over his. “You can owe me,” she manages to say, pretty coherently all things considered, before she falls asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Four

She’s woken by a hand shaking her impatiently, which would be grounds for biting if Wes’ other hand wasn’t holding a mug of coffee. She lets the smell of it lift her eyelids—and the way he makes it, it’s strong enough—and manages a blurry smile.

“Hey.”

She gets a nod back. No chance of a quickie this morning; no chance of cuddles either. Wes is fully dressed, vibrating with an eagerness that’s got nothing to do with the fact that she’s sat up and flashed him perky breasts, and he’s raring to go.

Except it’s 6.30.

“Shit, Wes, the court case is at ten,” she says. “Why’re you up so early? More to the point, why am I?”

He looks impatient. “There’s a considerable amount to do before that. And we need to call by the office as well.” He looks at her. “Are you still sure you want to come?”

Stubbornness has her lower lip jutting out. “I’m going, Wes.” She smiles. “You’re looking so spiffy —”
“So, what?”

His frown’s gone from zero to sixty in under a second, and she snickers. “‘Spiffy’, not pretty,” she says, trying it without a mouthful of coffee. “You’re going to knock ’em dead.”

He really does. Blindingly white shirt, dark suit, tie that’s a blend of blues and grays and makes his eyes look even bluer than usual. It takes a real effort of will to keep her hands off him, but she does.

“Faith, if I have to rely on the excellence of my tailor to win a case, I’m not a very good lawyer.”

It’s said with enough huffiness that a month ago she’d have shriveled up and backed away. Now she sets the coffee down and crawls across the bed, kneeling up and stroking her fingers down an ice-smooth cheek. “You’re not a good lawyer, Wes. You’re the best.”

He smiles and there’s enough amusement in his eyes to make her stop worrying. He’s not nervous; he’s just wanting to get on with it.

And if she ever truly pitied Lilah, just a little, it’s in that moment, because all the softening in Wes’ face is for her and there’s no mercy in his eyes for Lilah.

He’s a cold bastard sometimes and it scares her as much as it turns her on.

“Get ready, Faith,” he says, glancing at his watch. “We’re not going to be late today.”

It’s a warning she doesn’t need.

When she comes out of the bathroom, pink, damp, and naked, he’s gone, and he’s taken her coffee with him, which means he’d better have more downstairs as she hadn’t finished it and it’s still early enough that her eyes keep trying to close.

The bed’s smooth again and he’s laid out some clothes; new ones, though the heels and the stockings are the same. Seems Wes wants her to match him and she’s got a crisp white shirt, slim skirt to just below the knees, and a tailored jacket, both in a black with the dull sheen of jet.

She gets dressed and peacocks in front of the mirror before realizing her head doesn’t match. Her face looks too bare without makeup and her hair’s wild.

So she goes to her room and digs around for supplies. Toning down the makeup’s a pain. She’s used to bright, brash effects for dark bars after all, but she manages to achieve something subtle and blows a kiss at her reflection with perfectly painted, three shades deeper than normal lips.

Her hair she attacks with a ruthless ferocity that subdues it after ten minutes into an honest to God fucking braid, fancy and French that leaves her face bare. It’ll last about fifteen minutes before her hair makes a break for freedom and little bits start to uncurl, but she can make running repairs, she supposes.

Wes’ expression is worth the ache in her skull from half a dozen hairpins. For the first time that morning she feels him look at her as if he wants to fuck her and the air’s humming with a promise of ‘later’ that has her quivering. Then he points to the table, where toast, fruit and more coffee wait and says softly. “Fifteen minutes, Faith, and then you’re back on the clock.”

By the time they get in the car, she’s lost him to the case, but she doesn’t mind.

He’s taught her to be patient, after all.
The courthouse is imposing enough that she’s glad she’s with Wes, who walks up the steps without a glance at a small group of reporters and sweeps up to the security guard with her trailing two steps behind. Formalities over, he shows her to a seat at the back, gives her a tight, cool smile that she barely has time to respond to, and vanishes before she has chance to tell him to break a leg, or whatever you say to lawyers.

The room fills up quickly and Lilah walks by without glancing around, poised and glittering, chatting quietly to a good-looking man, silver-haired, with the coldest eyes Faith’s ever seen. She spots the man Wes and she had breakfast with and she feels the tension curl and twist in her gut remembering that day.

It also brings Xander to mind. Fuck; Wes had told her she had to call him today; apologize and stuff. Not like she doesn’t want to make it right, because she does, but what do you say? She’s planning out ways to make what she and Wes have sound more than it looks and getting nowhere, when the judge comes in.

It’s both boring and gripping at the same time. She’s only got enough knowledge of what it’s all about the grasp the basics and it’s getting fucking technical out there. Wes is quoting from books and entering in documents, Lilah’s snake-smooth and dismissive, and the judge, an elderly, skinny woman who looks tired, with sharp, dark eyes, is snapping at them both.

Wes isn’t trying to be charming but, fuck, he looks and sounds so good, he doesn’t have to. She can see he’s on top of his game; can feel the confidence he’s giving off work to make him convincing. Lilah’s frowning, jewel-bright nails drumming against her desk, the asides to the man with her hissed and increasingly frantic, if you were paying attention, and Faith is.

Finally, they break for lunch. Wes doesn’t move and she doesn’t expect him to, but she decides to slip out to the rest room.

She’s glad she got to pee before Lilah walks in.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Lilah’s only caught off guard for a split second. If you'd blinked, you'd have missed it, but Faith doesn’t. “I didn't realize Wesley was bringing his little pep squad today.” On the other hand, any insecurity she's feeling is funneled right into her biting words. Faith had forgotten that about her, and Lilah is still in paper chase mode, still sniffing for a fight.

Faith decides it's best to ignore Lilah completely. All those months of ignoring Darla in close quarters were a good preparation for something, finally. She turns on the taps and vigorously lathers up, taking her sweet time washing her hands, and trying not to smirk as Lilah's expression in the mirror slides from simmering into a roiling boil at not getting a rise out of her.

She takes her time drying her hands, too, and it's not until she whips out her lipstick from where she'd secreted it in one of the fitted blazer's side pockets, does Lilah take the opportunity to lunge at her again. “That shade seems a little dark for daytime wear, don't you think?”

Faith blinks slowly at her (in an effort not to roll her eyes, more than anything else) and turns back to rouging her lips with deliberate care, then blots them on a rough paper towels.

“Not really,” she finally says, stemming off a feathery smudge with a swipe of her pinkie. In the time it's taken to perform these seemingly insignificant actions, she's steeled herself for whatever Lilah’s about to lay on her. Lilah's angular frame is blocking the escape route and Faith knows she won't be able to slip out until Lilah's spilled all the bile that's collected over the past few weeks. Hell hath no
fury like a woman in the middle of a messy divorce, she thinks. Or something like that.

“So, how old are you Faith?” Lilah's all smiles, putting on her slickest legal guise. When she's greeted with more silence, she adds, “Eighteen, I've heard. Or is it seventeen?”

Faith shakes her head. “Eighteen,” she says politely as possible.

“Of course. A perfectly legal adult now—but still, your parents are so very concerned about your welfare, as well they should be.”

Faith looks past her, willing someone—anyone—to come bustling through the restroom's swinging door. Preferably the judge, but the court reporter would be fine, too, in a pinch.

“I'm so glad we're getting this little chance to chat. It's so rare that one has a chance to air their grievances to their successor.” Lilah sighs with faux wistfulness. “You know, Faith, I think that what you and Wesley have is really very sweet, I suppose. It's just lovely that he's finally found someone to indulge his little foibles in the bedroom.”

Faith's chewed nails dig deeper into her palms the longer Lilah speaks, and she discreetly unfurls her fingers from instinctual, tightly-balled fists and presses them behind her into the cold marble of the counter.

Lilah takes a step closer, and Faith immediately wishes she weren't pressed into the counter now, with nowhere to move.

“I tried to be the most accommodating, most understanding wife as possible, you see.” Lilah's lips curl into a sardonic smile, and Faith knows that can't possibly be true—the thought of Lilah accommodating anyone, least of all Wesley, is absurd. “I'm afraid things were so frigid between us, and there was nothing I could do to salvage that. He's so closed off, so moody, so temperamental—I'm sure you must have seen that side of him by now.”

Faith tries to keep her face blank and neutral, but she can feel a snicker rise in her throat. She swallows it back down, and Lilah leans in even closer. Her voice drops too, but never threatens to slide into a whisper.

“You see, Faith, Wesley can eat little things like you for breakfast—but when faced with a more equally-matched partner, he was rendered completely impotent. He seems to have some sort of difficulty picturing women in any position but complete submission.” The smile slips into a thin line, but Lilah's voice is still pleasant. She steps back, waves dismissively. “Of course, one expects to eventually be replaced in these kinds of situations, but you must understand that I wasn't expecting that replacement to be a teen-aged hussy playing dress up.”

Faith's bristling by the time Lilah stops, and she's biting her lip to keep any unfortunate stray words from spilling out. Her ankles are starting to scream from standing so long in the spiked heels. She wills them not to wobble, and succeeds, mostly. She needn't really worry about digging her grave with a catty response, because before she can open her mouth, Lilah's taken another tack.

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“Of course, I feel I should also tell you that Wesley doesn't take kindly to people who don't meet his impossibly high standards. Just look at the way he's handling me out there in court today.” She laughs harshly. “Someday he won't find your little insubordinations such a turn-on anymore. Take my advice: that's the day you'd better pack your little suitcase and move on. You're not perfect, Faith, and neither was I—but really, so few are Wesley's equal.”

Under other circumstances, that last bit might have softened Faith's heart, coming from some other
woman, but this is Lilah. Wes mihjy be mopping the floor with her today, but there were times that he didn't, and she aches for the weeks, the months he must have spent trapped in Lilah's caustic grip. Instead, the ill-advised words that she's been pushing down for the last five minutes finally come bursting out.

"You know, Lilah, maybe you should have let him fuck you up the ass." Satisfied at getting the last word in a conversation she barely took part in, she shoves past Lilah and out the swinging door and into the corridor.

She’s shaking now; almost light-headed from the confrontation, with Lilah’s acid-dipped words eating their way through the barrier she’d thrown up.

Not that Lilah has told her anything she doesn’t know, or hasn’t guessed, but to hear it laid out like that: Wes is kinky, way too old, and he’s got standards you’re never going to match up to, well, it’s enough to leave her panicking. She needs Wes. When she’s about to explode into a million jagged-edged shards, he’s the only person who calms her down, has ever been able to control her.

She doesn’t give a fuck about his foibles either. They suit her and that’s all that mattered. Though she has to wonder what the hell Wes had been thinking when he said ‘I do’ to Lilah.

And impotent? Wes? She snickers, drawing a curious glance from a couple who pass her, and feels herself settle back down. Lilah might have intended that as an insult, but it was so impossible to picture Wes not ready and raring to go that she’d made herself seem like the problem.

And to Wes, she probably was.

Seeing a place to buy sandwiches and coffee, she goes in and orders, eating quickly, because she wants to see Wes again.

He’s still there in the courtroom, but he’s not reading through notes, he’s standing, arms folded, listening to Lilah and he’s turned away slightly, so Faith can’t see his face. Lilah’s smiling in a way that looks feral, eyes sparkling with spite, but as Faith watches, silent and unmoving by the door, she falters and loses track of whatever she was saying. Faith frowns and steps sideways. Wesley’s not touching her, not threatening her, but Lilah’s backing off.

Then she sees Wesley’s face and understands why.

He’s so fucking angry he’s shut down; face blank, eyes staring through Lilah, lips thinned to nothing. Lilah’s not stupid, and Faith doesn’t have her down as a coward, but fuck, Wes ever gives her that look and she’ll be running. Lilah doesn’t have anywhere to run to, though; the door behind Faith is pushed open, and the room begins to fill again.

It’s almost a formality what follows; Wesley rips through everything Lilah brings up and tosses it aside; at one point he comes close to doing it literally, but restrains himself, in a way that tells Faith he did it deliberately. The judge’s composure cracks just a little as she warns him, and there’s something in her eyes that looks like amusement. Guess maybe Lilah’s sneering attitude pisses off more than just Faith.

He wins, ignores Lilah’s exit, all tapping, clacking heels and bitter, hissed asides to her companion, packs up his papers and turns to see her waiting for him by the door. The briefest of smiles touches his lips and she returns it, before slipping out. There are going to be reporters waiting, and she doesn’t want to intrude on his moment.

The crowd let her pass and the cameras swing to focus on Wes as he walks with slow deliberation
down the steps. He lets them snap questions at him but doesn’t answer any until they go quiet, making them wait. She’s feeling a glow of pride she doesn’t think she’s ever had before. She’s never loved anyone who’s done anything to inspire this feeling before; accomplished something, done it perfectly, worked for it.

He gives them a statement, short and sweet, delivered in that precise English voice, avoiding any outright digs at Lilah but making it clear that she’d gotten the whole thing wrong, avoiding the trap of being too modest or too boastful. It’s a fucking work of art. Then he holds up his hand and ends it, moving away quickly.

She’s trailing after him, looking unobtrusive, when she hears a voice say. “You want the dirt, boys, why not ask her? She’s sure to know.”

She turns, sickness stirring, and faces what Wesley just did, but without any preparation. Lilah’s smiling and the dogs she’s loosed are scenting blood.

A microphone’s shove under her nose and a voice barks, “Miss? Who’re you then?”

“No one,” she says, backing away. “No one.”

“Oh, but that’s not quite true, is it?” Lilah purrs, appearing at her side, so close that the smell of her perfume clouds the air. “You’re very close to Mr. Wyndam-Pryce, aren’t you, dear?”

It’s too much. Wes has gone, she’s got all these hungry, avid eyes fixed on her and Lilah’s turning her stomach. Fuck, did she take a bath in whatever the hell she’s doused herself in?

“I’m his—” She swallows a word Wes wouldn’t approve of and tries for a calm smile. It doesn’t come off that well, but at least it’s not the snarl she feels like giving them all. “I’m his secretary, that’s all. I don’t know anything. Look, I’ve got to go. Excuse me.”

She struggles free and Wes is waiting at the bottom of the steps, leaning against his car. He beckons her, in front of them all, and she walks toward him, quickly, but not running, head up, shoulders back, and he opens the door for her, ushers her in, and is beside her and driving away before the press have chance to do more than start toward them.

They drive in silence for a while, Faith still gasping for breath, as if she’s been running, heart pounding, then Wes’ hand reaches over and his fingers rest against hers for a moment. She’s expecting him to say something about winning, maybe give her hell for letting the journalists catch up with her, or for what she said to Lilah, but he just remarks casually, as his fingers tighten and then slip away,

“I think we’ll take the rest of the day off, Faith.”

Her heart stops hammering through panic, and slows in anticipation, because he smiles and adds softly, “I believe I owe you something from last night. I’d rather like to take care of that. With interest.”

And she stops worrying about what they’ve left behind, and Lilah’s threats, and grins because he’s looking so fucking pleased with himself and he’s sharing it with her, just her.

She’s never seen him so relaxed as one hand rests lightly on the steering wheel, the other one tapping out a beat on her knee in time to a song leaking out of the radio.

There’s this little half-smile playing around the corners of his mouth like there's this joke that only he knows the punch-line to but she's smiling as well. Because he's happy and that makes her happy.
Simple as that, really.

As the car enters into the driveway, he slides his hand off her knee and says casually, “You need to make a phone call, Faith. Ten minutes and then, I'm afraid, I'll need your undivided attention for the rest of the day.”

Her undivided attention? Like, she can think of anything else when it's just him and her in a room together and he's looking at her pretty much the way he is now. His eyes heavy-lidded and glinting; his tongue sweeping out to moisten the curve of his bottom lip.

“Okay, Wes,” she agrees and she sounds so fucking dreamy. She really needs to do something about that. As he turns the key in the ignition, she rummages in her bag and pulls out her cell and her cigarettes. “If I stay out here, I can call Xand and smoke at the same time.”

For one second, she thinks he's going to give her some grief about smoking but he's in too good a mood for her nicotine habit to fuck it up.

“At least stand in the yard, if you must,” he says, his arm wrapping casually around her shoulders so he can guide her in the direction of the front door.

It occurs to her as she hangs her jacket on the coat stand and wanders down the hall, through the kitchen and out the back door, that this place is starting to feel like home. A home she feels safe in, which is kind of a first for her. He shuts the doors and won't let anyone get at her.

“Ten minutes, Faith,” he calls after her before she shuts the door and the sound of his voice, the promise in it of exactly what he has in store for her when her time is up, makes her smile again.

She's had her phone switched off for days, ever since Wes got back from New York and as she powers it up, it starts beeping. She has eight messages on her voice-mail, and as she scrolls down she sees five of them are from Darla, one of them's from an unlisted number and two are from Xander, plus about a gazillion text messages from him, which makes everything way easier.

He answers on the first ring. “Faith! Hey, you don't write, you don't call, you don't text message.”

“Kinda been busy, Xand thinking up this really wicked apology,” she says throatily, because just hearing his voice, how fucking happy he is that it's her at the end of the phone, makes her realize how much she's missed him.

“Okay, don't let me stop you,” he says and laughs.

“Man, I am so fucking sorry. Just stuff was crazy, y'know? It was all fucked-up and I was freaked out and you kinda got caught up in that.”

There's a pause and then Xander's making his trademark “pffftftt”, so she knows that everything is cool. “Ten out of ten for sincerity but I'm only going to give you a five for content.”

“Fuck you!” And, yeah, it's good to be able to swear a blue streak and get it out of her system before she goes back in.

“Talking of which…” He sounds guarded for, like the first time ever with her. “Darla's been ringing me about every half hour wanting to know when her little Faithy's coming home.”

Faith snorts down the phone. “Yeah? Well, she should have thought about that before she packed up all my shit into a box and threw me out.”
“So where are you staying? Mr. Sex Bruises still putting you up in the Holiday Inn's finest en-suite?”

“He has a name, Xand, and, well, I'm staying with Wes right now but I have, like, my own room and stuff.”

There's an even longer pause and she lights another cigarette from the one that's almost burned down, before speaking. “Xand? You have to be cool about this because it's serious.”

“Serious like a heart attack?”

She looks up to the gray sky and wishes he was here so she could slap him upside his head. “Serious like I love him. Fuck! Xander, he's so good to me and he's funny and kind and you know how like I said that I could never really come unless I got on top and really…”

Xander makes this pained noise like he's just stubbed his toe on something. “Faith? Do we need to have a little talk about over-sharing?”

“I'm just sayin', dude.”

“So does he love you?”

It's her turn to pause and watch the flaming end of her cigarette burn down as the wind tugs at it. “He cares for me. And yeah, I think he does.”

He probably does, just hasn't said it yet. But he's gonna, she thinks, just as Wes taps on the window. She looks round and he's just standing there in that washing powder ad of a white shirt looking at his watch and nodding as she holds up a finger to let him know she's almost done.

“Well, I still think he's too old and too scary and way too suity for you.” Xander says in his Big Brother voice. “But you don't sound like you've been chained up in his cellar while he films himself performing depraved acts on you and hawking the tapes on the Internet.”

Which is a little too close to the truth and makes her giggle knowingly. “He says he's gonna cut me in for 25 percent of the profits.”

“Only 25 percent? Faith! Didn't I teach you anything?”

“Xand, I gotta go but I'm real sorry and we should do something this week, go out or meet for lunch.”

She's already turning and walking toward the back door. “Call me. And you have to ring Darla, if only to get her off my back.”

“I'll ring you tomorrow and, well, look, I'll think about calling her but if you speak to her, just tell her I'm fine.”

“Faith…”

But Wes is opening the door and standing back so she can go back in to the house.

“Just tell her I'm fine. Love you, Xan. I'll call you, 'kay?”

And then she's switching the phone off and stepping back into the warmth of the kitchen.

He holds out his hand for her phone and she willingly gives it up.
“I take it everything is in order?” he asks and she nods.

“He thinks you've got me chained up in the cellar most of the time,” she murmurs. “Like, doing really kinky things to me.”

His eyes flash and he gives her an interested look. “What kinds of really kinky things?”

She has to think for a minute because there isn't that much she could come up with, that they haven't already done. In the end, she shrugs. “Man, I don't like to say. It would shock you, Wes. I was kinda blushing myself by the end of it.”

He straightens, closes his eyes slowly and when he opens them again, it's like he's back in the court room, all cold and precise and one hard bastard of a lawyer. She'd be shitting herself if it wasn't for the wild look in his eyes, the way he's gulping. She's getting to know the signs and 'sides the bulge of his cock is breaking up the smooth line of his trousers.

“I see, Faith,” he bites out. “The study, I think.”

He's grabs her by the wrist, pulling her against his body, then pushes her down the hall, his hands roaming all over her as she stumbles along. Hands cupping her breasts, her ass, his mouth sucking at her neck, and she knows that he just wants to lift up her skirts, rip off her panties and fuck her into the middle of next week. But he won't. Gonna make it worth waiting for and fuck! He's pinching her nipples hard now and every time she sucks in a breath, he's soothing the hurt away, rubbing the pads of his thumbs against them.

He reaches around her, his cock digging into the small of her back, to open the door and pushes her into the room.

“Take your clothes off,” he grits out, leaning against the wall. “Leave on your shoes and stockings and bend over the desk.”

There's not going to be a repeat of last night's, long, laborious tease. She's already undone the first couple of buttons of her blouse and she yanks it over her head, throwing it on the floor, so she can unzip her skirt and slide it over her hips. Then the bra and she's so turned on that just the feel of the air ghosting across her nipples makes her gasp. Finally, there's the familiar feel of her panties clinging to her damp snatch as she pulls them down and steps out of them.

It seems to take forever to walk to the desk and she's grateful for all the practice she put into learning how to move in the fuckmeWesrightnow shoes, so her hips gently sway with every step she takes.

She leans over, her forearms flat against the desk, her heavy breasts grazing the polished wood and sticks her ass out.

He's moving, coming toward her and she can feel his eyes raking over her. “It's very simple, Faith. When I ask a question, I expect an answer. A detailed answer. Just like I do when I have a witness on the stand. Do you understand me?”

“Yes sir,” she says, though her tongue feels so thick in her mouth, it's a wonder she can sound the words out.

“Spread your legs.”

She shuffles her feet farther and farther apart, craving the feel of his hand on her ass.

“I want you to list every depraved act, every perversion I've visited on your innocent flesh in order,”
he hisses, his fingers skimming the damp seam between her legs, so she has to bite her lip not to cry out. “And for every one I'm going to hit you. For every one you get wrong, I'm going to hit you. And then, and only then, Faith, will I let you come.”

Her mind's a blank. It's just a seamless mass of his hands and his cock and his tongue and his voice fucking her, turning her inside out and pulling it into a coherent sequence of events so they have one more happy memory to add to the pile is almost beyond her.

And then… and then… and then the flat of his hand is hitting her soaked pussy. Not her ass, or her thighs but right there where she's aching for him.

“You spanked me,” she yelps and his hand crashes down again, the tips of his fingers just glancing against her swollen, pulsing clit.

“Very good,” he purrs. “Then what did I do to you?”

“You ignored me, treated me like crap for days after.” Not surprisingly, that rates a swat—on her ass, this time, thankfully. “So you—no, I—” She realizes she's got to 'fess up for intentionally making the error that led to their second encounter. It seems so removed from where they were at this point that she's almost forgotten that little detail. The bigger memories of that day kind of overshadow it. But she knows better than to lie.

“Yes, Faith? You what?”

The words tumble out, unchecked. “I intentionally made an error, on a letter. I misspelled your name. On purpose.”

“And why would you do that?”

_Objection! Leading the witness!_ she wants to snap at him. She's watched enough “Law and Order” reruns to know that old trick. But he's tracing his fingers over her already stinging ass and any organization behind her thought process crumbles on the spot.

“I wanted your attention. Best way to do that, make a major typo.”

“And did your actions lead to the desired effect?” His voice is still cool, but his hand slips away from her ass, no doubt pulling back for the next slap that's going to happen right...

“Yes,” she says faintly, the anticipation and the memory making her stomach flip. “You wadded up the letter. Stuck it inside my underwear.”

...about now. She chokes on the last syllable because his hand's made sharp contact with her skin before she's had a chance to finish speaking.

“Tell me what you remember most about that moment.”

“I don't remember much of anything.” _I plead the Fifth._

“Come now, Faith. You can't possibly think that I'll believe you don't remember anything?”

“I was happy. Scared. Some of both, I suppose.”

“You were happy that your ruse had worked.”

“Yes.”
“But scared of the consequences?”

“No.”

“Scared of me? Of what I would do to you?”

She can’t lie. “A little.”

“And if I told you I’d surmised you’d deliberately made that mistake to get a rise out of me, would you still be happy?”

She’s stunned, but should have guessed it, really. “Yes,” she gasps, and flinches in preparation for the next smack.

He makes her wait, a few seconds telescoped into minutes. Then he slaps the skin where ass cheek meets thigh. Once. Twice. She doesn't pause to ask why she got two for that one, and she's sure there's an elaborate plan to his scoring method.

“And you…” Her mind races to remember all the details, every last one. Because she knows he won't have forgotten. “You punished me for every steno pad I burned.”

“And how many was that?”

“Ten.” Another smack. “No, no, eleven.” He switches to the other cheek, circling his hand over her flesh before laying down yet another blow.

“Yes, if I recall correctly, it was eleven.” He's doing that smug thing she remembers from court, when he'd skewer Lilah's argument to the judge, except that this time he's slipping his free hand down to tease her clit.

She's lost in a swirl of blurred memories. The only thing she can focus on is how his finger, barely stroking that tender bit of skin, sends a chain reaction of sparks and desire up to her brain, that sits triumphantly on her last rational thought.

“Faith. I'm waiting.”

The witness will answer counsel's question, says the Law and Order judge voice in her head. She's sorting through her memories as fast as she can, fast forwarding through endless, jumbled thoughts that keep serving up memories from other times. Until yes. Yes. That was the day he'd...

“And then you jacked off while getting me off with your hands. And you came all over my ass. Some of it got on my blouse too, but I didn't notice until later. That was a real bitch to get out.”

The last slap sends her slamming into the edge of the desk. He hasn't hit her this hard with his bare hands since, well, she can't really remember when right now.

“I’m impressed by your recollection of such inconsequential details, Faith,” he says sarcastically, and his voice is floating up there, above her, miles away, but his hand is close; not touching her, no, but close, hovering. “Please continue.”

She flexes her fingers, and feels them slide against the polished wood that’s warming up under her breasts. This is getting hard now. She’s so lost in a delirium of wanting him that remembering the times when she had him is torture. Swallowing, she closes her eyes and tries to sort out a coherent arrangement of, ‘fuck, you fucked me, made me come, made me scream, do it again, do it now.’
“You, ah, you got me those clothes. Made me wear them. You dressed me the way you wanted me.”

And she knows the slap she gets for that is because she got it right, because it’s gentler than the last one, but it’s aimed between her legs again and he lets his palm stroke the punished flesh for a moment. She remembers pulling on those clothes for the first time, knowing what she was silently agreeing to; that he had the right to dictate her life to that extent, and she whimpers, and hears him chuckle.

“I did, yes. And you liked wearing them, didn’t you?”

“Was like you were touching me all day,” she says, gasping out the words because his hand’s still there between her legs, steady and still, and she wants to grind against it, writhe on fingers pushed inside her, rub and press against the heel of his hand, and she can’t because if she does, she’ll come.

“You’d love it if I did, wouldn’t you?” he says, but it’s not really a question. “Go on.”

It’s as if a sponge has swept her mind clear of everything but that snowflake light presence of his hand. “Can’t remember,” she says, and feels his hand disappear with something like relief.

The slap she gets is square across her ass and his hand doesn’t linger. “Really? I can, quite clearly. Perhaps I should introduce a piece of evidence.”

He steps to the side and she hears a faint sound that she can’t interpret, a clink of something against glass. Her eyes flutter open and she blinks at a wooden pencil, resting across his palm.

“Exhibit A,” he says in a silky voice. “Open your mouth, Faith. Or is this a sufficient prompt?”

She flushes, feeling the carpet rough against her knees in her memory. How many times had he made her crawl to fetch it until she did it right?

“I remember it now,” she says quickly, desperately. “You threw it, a pencil I mean. Made me fetch it—and—”

“Details, Faith. I really must insist.”

He’s behind her again now, and the pencil’s tapping lightly against her ass. It doesn’t hurt but it’s unsettling and she’s stumbling over her words. “On my knees, you made me crawl, and then I had to pick it up between my teeth and—”

“Please strive for a little more clarity,” he says, with a bored patience, and the pencil slides into her, blunt end first, and he starts to fuck her with it. It’s not thick enough to do more than torment her, but the sudden coolness makes the words tumble out of her in a flood. “I knelt and you took it from me and then you made me kneel again and unzip you with my mouth, just my mouth, and then we—”

Fuck, they fought, didn’t they? She can remember the scalding rage when she’d discovered he’d been watching her, but now it’s all changed to a different heat because knowing he wanted her back then makes sense now. She cries out, her hips jerking, and the pencil is pulled out and he hits her twice, fast and hard.

“You were, perhaps understandably—”

But she doesn’t want this to be about the times they clashed, not today, so she interrupts and finds the control to make her voice husky and slow. “You went down on me, Wes. Spread me out on your desk and used your tongue and your fingers on me. Made me come, made me moan. No one had ever done that to me before. It was...”
“Like this?” he whispers, and he must have knelt, because his tongue’s warm against her cunt, lapping and licking and delving inside her, going to the source of the wetness that’s he’s tasting against his lips.

“Wes!” It’s a warning and a plea all at once, because fuck, if he touches her clit, it’ll all be over. He turns his head away and presses a slow, reluctant kiss against her reddened ass and she hurries on. “Then you took me here—brought me—” Home. But she can’t say that, not yet, so she continues. “Made me strip—no, you read to me first—”

“Out of order,” he says, and there’s a slight tremor in his voice and she’s not sure if it’s amusement at the pun, or if this is taking longer than he can bear, but his hand cracks against her ass with no hesitation. She grits her teeth against a surge of arousal because it’s getting so she’s craving his hand on her body, and she doesn’t care what it’s doing as long as it’s touching her.

She remembers what followed that—remembers the strange, uncomfortable thrill of being alone with him in that room, with his gaze intent on her, making her—

“You made me …tell you what I wanted, while I—” She pauses, swallowing hard. His fingers are insinuating themselves deeper between her legs and that’s enough to give her pause again.

“Yes, Faith? I’m waiting.” Is that bemusement? Fucking bastard. She’s got some good payback scenarios going in her fevered brain, although they’re somewhat crowded out by the urgent fuckmejustfuckmeanddoitnow that seems to be on endless loop.

“I masturbated for you until I came.” She readies herself for a blow that’s taking a long time to arrive.

She turns her head to find him standing there with his eyes closed. He looks serene—all the harsh lines have been temporarily smoothed away. Then his eyes snap open abruptly, and he sees her watching. She shifts her posture so she’s facing forward again.

His voice sounds far away. “Yes. That was lovely.” She aches to see the wistful smile that’s probably ghosting across his features. Instead she gets another firm blow to her left buttock. And God, she feels bereft when he removes his hand. She’s gotten so that she can’t bear to lose that connection, even for a second. At least she’s left with this delirious heat slowly spreading though her limbs, making her feel like she’s in a dream. A dream where she’s always kept just at the edge of coming, and it’s delicious and agonizing at the same time. She doesn’t want to leave it, wants it to go on and on…

“And then?” The crispness of his voice snaps her out of her reverie. He’s leading the witness again, but she’s not going to argue.

“You blindfolded me. I was scared when you did that, didn’t know what you were going to—”

He whispers under his breath, “Bluebeard.”

“What?” she asks, shakily. He must sense her sudden nervousness, because his hands are on her, steadying her, holding her up, and oh, that’s good. It’s so much better when he’s touching her. The gentle caresses are as galvanizing as the hard blows.

“Nothing, Faith. I didn’t mean to interrupt. Please, carry on.” He gives her reddened ass an indulgent little pat.

“And then…you made me finish the job I’d started.” She smiles, knowing that’s going to—
He hits her hard enough that she nearly sprawls out on top of the desk but he pulls her back from the brink with his other arm. And God, she’s on fucking fire now. Her ass must be practically visible from outer space.

“That was woefully incomplete, Faith.” He clucks his tongue. “Really. And here I thought you were improving markedly.” The flat of his palm descends to her other cheek, and he grits out a terse, “Again.”

She has to pause to catch her breath, then the words are spilling out of her in a feverish rush. “Got down on my hands and knees and showed you what I was going to do to your cock, gave your finger quite a show, and God, I just wanted you to fuck me, couldn’t bear to have you so close yet so —”

“That was an unnecessary digression, Faith.” She feels the air shift before another blow lands on her flesh, this time between her thighs. His fingers are inside her again, skirting near her clit but not nearly close enough and she just wants to scream in frustration. He sighs. “You’re just so easily distracted. Whatever shall I do with you?”

Fuck me! she screams in her head but she figures this is just one of those Judge Judy-style rhetorical questions.

His fingers are still inside her and she stumbles out an: “I don't know, sir,” just to keep all her options open, as it were.

“No, you really don’t,” he murmurs almost to himself and then he pulls his fingers out of her cunt, which doesn't want to let him go and she's gritting her teeth so hard, she's surprised they're not worn down to a fine powder.

He gives her rump a playful tap with his knuckles, which barely registers now. “So you sucked on my fingers, then what?”

She's really trying to remember. “Um, I licked your fingers and then you put your cock in my mouth and I licked that. Then you took it away and it was your fingers again and I wanted your cock so badly and I bit down.” It’s just spilling out of her now, total recall of the taste of him in her mouth, on her tongue.

He gives a short, sharp laugh. “I never probably reprimanded you for that little trick, did I?” He makes up for it now, his hand coming down on the tops of her thighs in a flurry of slaps that gives her poor, smarting ass some relief but just ignites the burn all over again.

It occurs to her that the sooner she gets through this pornaganza, the sooner he can make her come. It's not enough to think it, the words are flying out now and his hands can barely keep up.

“You fucked my mouth, came in my mouth, oh, you tasted so good, carried me upstairs, then your hands were on my tits for the first time and there was a bath, you’d run a bath, told me to get in with the blindfold on and I did nothing because you told me to and you washed my hair, washed me, there was a sponge, then your hands…”

Those same hands are rhythmically slapping her ass and the heat cranks up several degrees, so it hurts more in the millisecond pauses when he's drawing back to hit her again.

“I doubt that either the judge or the jury would be able to make much sense of this,” he remarks but he's not sounding like he cares that much. “Carry on.”

“You shaved me with a razor… wanted to cut my clothes off… touching me… your finger in my
cunt but you took it away and I got out of the bath…”

Her nails are digging into the desk top now, or trying to and his blows are this constant, concentrated force. First her right cheek and then her left and she can feel the slaps echoing against her clit and in her cunt and she thinks that she's going to come soon just from this, just from his hands spanking her. Needs it and dreads it in equal measure.

She's gasping for breath and trying to spit the words out. “You started drying my hair and just wanted you to fuck me… Jesus, want you to fuck me, Wes and you got mad, and bent me over this stool and whipped me with this leather thing and I begged you to fuck me and you wouldn't and I had to get myself off and you watched and then you fucked me with the handle of the razor and I came and I still wanted you to fuck me…”

Her voice is several pitches higher every time the words “fuck” and “me” happen. She hisses as his hand slides between her legs and she wriggles because he's hitting her there now. Not really hard but hard enough that she feels the relentless blows across her clit and if she wasn't almost paralyzed from trying to hold in her orgasm, she'd be grinding against his hand.

“So you admit that you begged me to fuck you?” he hisses right against her ear.

“Yes, yes,” she almost screams. “Jumped on you and then I kissed you for the first time and your cock was against me, you freaked, in your room now and… stripped you… touched your cock finally… so hard… wet… showed me what to do…”

“And did I let you make me come?”

He's not even hitting her any more, just tapping against her clit and she wishes he'd put his fingers inside her, his fist…”

“Wes…” She's sobbing now.

“Just answer the question, Faith.”

“Oh God, you asked me if I wanted you inside me and I said yes… fuck…”

He's hitting her sopping cunt again and she's so wet she can barely feel it. Just the pressure of the flat of his hand; the press of his fingertips on her clit at second intervals.

“Would you like to take a moment to collect your thoughts? This is obviously distressing.”

He's doing the unthinkable. He's slowing down.

“I'm fine, please,” she yelps frantically. “We kissed again and I'm on the bed, you're on top of me and then you're in me, your cock's in me. Slow, then fast and you're fucking me. Your cock's fucking me…”

His hand speeds up and she's going to be fined for contempt of court. Sent down.

“Fuck me… Wes… you were fucking me…”

And she comes, just like she once thought she could, from him spanking her and as he hits her, so does her climax, and she slumps over the desk and screams because he shoves two fingers into her rippling cunt so he can feel her riding the wave.

Her legs give out and his arm wraps round her waist as he stands there and lets her lean back against
him. She whimpers as the wool of his trousers rubs against the just-flayed-feeling of her ass.

“I knew you'd cave under pressure,” he drawls smugly and if she wasn't all quivery and trembly, she'd hit him. Still, it is his special day, but she's damned if she's going to let him think she's anything other than an expert witness.

She shrugs out of his hold and leans over the desk again; throws him a challenging look over her shoulder. “I don't think my ass can take much more but I'm sure you've got something up your sleeve, counselor,” she hisses.

He looks so terribly amused. “I'm not entirely sure where you're going with this, Faith.”

It's her turn to smirk. “I'm going to end up getting fucked, Wes, by you, over this desk just like you did two weeks later in your office. This ringing any bells?”

He doesn't move a muscle but his cock is twitching under the wool like a kite on a windy day. “Ah yes, after a fortnight of willful and disgraceful behavior on the part of my disgruntled secretary. What can I say? I was provoked.”

“You made me lift up my skirt and pull off my panties and then you made me lie over your lap and you spanked me,” she says coolly and why can't he just unzip and fuck her already?

It's like he can read her mind but she already knows that because he walks over and runs a hand over the heated red flesh of her buttocks. She hisses just a little and he gentles the caress. “Tell me, Faith, how could I possibly fuck you over my desk, not that I don't appreciate the offer, when you're somewhat incapacitated?”

Just the soft baby-brush of his fingers is igniting all sorts of feelings in her again. Most of them seem to begin and end in her cunt. He sighs almost regretfully with one last lingering stroke across her ass. “I rather think, despite the fact that you came far too soon, I might have to let you go on top.”

“Then I sat in your lap and you fingered me and we were off the clock so I kissed you and your cock was nudging right against my clit and you pulled off my T-shirt and I took out your cock…”

“Faith, did you hear what I just said?”

“And I slid right down on it and then you pulled out and you fucked me over the desk, Wes. You fucked me over the desk. I don't give a fuck if it hurts, because it's a good kind of hurt, I want you to fuck me over the desk.”

Really, she can't say it any plainer than that and for one second, she wonders if she's over-stepped the mark. Been too pushy. Too domineering, but then she hears the rasp of his zipper.

She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, smiles faintly. She's gonna win this one. Correction: he's gonna let her win this one. Her fingers smooth over the surface of the desk, drumming in a nervous anticipation.

Except she's still waiting long after she'd expected him to be fucking her until next Tuesday. He hasn't said anything; but then again, it's not as if the tell-tale sound of skin slapping on skin is starting either. What is he doing back there? Finally, she hears his shallow breathing quicken, as his warm fingers trace gently over her chafed ass again.

She's afraid to look back over her shoulder, afraid she'll see him staring her down stonily for her insubordination.
Just when she's decided to look back, challenge him, he finally speaks.

“I seem to remember that, unfortunately, the next little scenario led to one of your infamous snits.”

Her cheeks burn with annoyance and shame at the memory, and she looks over her shoulder, her face a mask of petulance. “Only because you were such a fucking...”

“A fucking bastard. Yes, I know.” He's smiling, just a little, but it's enough to wipe away her rage. He leans over her then, cock bumping her ass, just as it did then. “Perhaps I can make it up to you, then,” he murmurs in her ear.

And she doesn't need him to spell it out, it's like they're thinking in tandem.

“Are you going to...there?” She'd so tried hard to block out some of the later parts of this interlude, and she's surprised to find she has a perfect carbon copy waiting in her memory, feeding her the dialog.

His finger's slipping over her wet cunt, in preparation for what comes next. “Am I going to fuck you in the arse?” he intones, a perfect echo of his voice in her memory. “Do you want me to?” And then he's teasing over her asshole, sliding his finger in, and she gasps, though she's careful not to bite her lip again.

His words and gently probing finger still make her wobbly inside; she's still as unsteady and scared and turned on as she was then, even though he's already deflowered her ass, already possessed every last inch of her flesh.

“Do you want to get fucked in the arse, Faith?” It's her cue.

“I've never...” For a moment, she's afraid these words won't come out without a nervous giggle at the silliness of her demureness now, but it's as if they're back at that point, and she's torn between begging for his cock in her ass and fearing he might take her up on the offer. She draws in a sharp breath, “But I'd let you. I'd let you fuck me there if you wanted to, Wes.”

And on cue himself, he's slamming in her cunt, one hand sliding down to massage her tender clit, the other to toy with her hard nipples. He's wrapped completely around her, and her elbows scream under the weight of supporting the two of them, keeping the whole arrangement from crashing into the desk.

Her guttural cries of pleasure don't exactly match up with the memory, but that doesn't matter anymore; the chance to deviate from the script is rushing toward them. He's ramming into her wet cunt, and she pulls tight around him, every thrust magnified when he intersects with her still-throbbing ass, when her hipbones jut against the desk.

“Such a good girl, Faith.” He's murmuring in her ear, and even though she's given herself over to him completely, now, he still echoes his final line. “I'll take care of you.” Hands slide over her hips, and his whimper is needier, hungrier this time as his urgent thrusts alternate between shallow jabs and long, deep strokes.

She doesn't even have time to marvel how those words, with his voice all gravelly and tender like that, get her every time, nail her in that white-hot point inside that his cock is sliding against as well. She doesn't even have time to question the wisdom of following the script because she's coming and moaning his name and it happens too fast all over again, and she means it all the more this time, without a trace of regret: “I love you.”

And it's her words that make him come again, grunting and shoving her into the edge of the desk, his
heat mingling with hers, deep inside.

She knows it's really wishing much too much for this to lead where she hopes it does. But when he
doesn't immediately pull out, when he instead pulls her closer, doesn't let her fall painfully against the
desk as he slumps against her, spent—it's unmistakable, his faint whisper: “And I love you, Faith.”

She lets the words warm her, fill her, soak into her, and when he eases out of her, with a reluctant
sigh, she lets them give her the confidence she needs to turn, smile and murmur, “Thank you, Wes,”
meaning it on so many levels.

His hand links with hers, and he holds her steady as she kicks off her shoes with an anguished moan.
Her body starts to complain, overloading her with messages about stinging, bruised skin, and he
smiles. “I think we should go back a few steps, in this recreation of our past excesses,” he says. “A
bath seems in order, don’t you agree?”

She’s acutely aware of every place her body met the desk; tender, chafed flesh at hips and forearms
and the top of her thighs, and her ass is bruised; she can almost feel them appearing on her skin, faint
blue among the scarlet. Oddly, it’s her feet that hurt the most; throbbing as if she’s walked miles in
the ridiculously high heels.

“Sounds good to me,” she says, leaning into him as they begin to walk out of the room.

He starts the bath running and then disappears, returning a few minutes later with champagne and
flutes, slender and fragile as the bubbles foaming up in fragrant masses. She grins. “You had that
waiting, didn’t you?” she teases him as she climbs into the bath, biting back a wince at the first sharp
sting before it begins to soothe her abused skin. “Guess you were feeling confident?”

“Oh, yes,” he says seriously. “I knew I would win. There was no other possible outcome.” He eases
out the cork and pours the wine carefully, then sets it down on the table he’d used for the dessert
he’d fed her the last time they’d bathed together. Stripping quickly, he joins her in the water.

“Here,” he says, passing her a glass.

She takes it and waits, wondering if he’s going to make a toast, with a confused memory of
weddings, and a scratchy necked bridesmaid’s dress she’s been forced into at the last minute when
her cousin Amy came down with chicken pox and she’d—God, the humiliation!—been asked to
replace her. Amy was four inches shorter and twenty pounds heavier; the buttercup yellow dress had
been a disaster, and they’d left her out of the photographs in the end. She’d wandered away, found a
glass of champagne and drank it, thinking it was soda because of the bubbles.

“If I throw up, or start to dance, stop me, right?” she says suddenly.

Wesley frowns. “You can drink vodka milkshakes without flinching but a single glass of Perrier-
Jouet worries you?”

She stares at the bottle. It’s pretty; white flowers trailing over it in a lushly romantic flourish. “Last
time I had it, I was eight, and it was this bright pink.” Wes shudders. “And I think it was on special at
the supermarket because no way June and Peter could have afforded anything better.”

“It wasn’t champagne,” Wesley says firmly. “I can see it made a lasting impression on you, but trust
me, you’ll like this.”

She sips and smiles and leans back. “Right again, Wesley,” she says dreamily, stretching out and
getting her feet somewhere around his waist. She wiggles her toes luxuriously. “God, this feels nice.”
They relax in the bath for a while, and she tells him more about the wedding from hell, giggling as his eyebrows lift and his eyes widen with fascination. “Really?” he murmurs at intervals, sounding utterly fascinated, as if she’s describing the mating rituals of Martians, or something.

When she invents a tradition of the bride throwing her panties, rather than a bouquet, to the waiting crowd, he reaches over and takes the empty glass—refilled twice—from her hand and helps her out of the bath.

“You know, if it weren’t for the fact that your pretty little backside’s a charmingly bright shade of scarlet already, I’d be tempted to spank it again, for that,” he says.

“Can if you want to,” she says, twining her arms around his neck.

“No,” he says firmly, rubbing her dry with a brisk efficiency because she’s swaying slightly. “Although I might pay it some attention.”

Before she can work out what he means, he’s scooped her up in his arms and carried her through to the bedroom. The bedroom’s filled with the soft light of late afternoon, pooling on the bed and tinting the white sheets golden. She rests against them, face-down and listens to him rummage about.

“What’re you doing?” she says drowsily.

An icy cold splodge of something lands against her ass and she yelps, changing it to a squeal of protest as another one follows. “Wes! A word of warning would be nice, y’know?”

“But not half as amusing,” he says in a purr as his fingers work the cream into her skin, circling around, smoothing and gliding. “It’s arnica based. Should help the bruises.” He makes this little, self-reproachful sound. “I might have been a little too—”

“No!” She twists around and glares up at him. “Did you hear me saying my, you know, my safeword? Did you?”

His eyes are startled. “No,” he says quietly. “I didn’t.”

“Then don’t say that. It’s like...” She takes a deep breath and tries to say something that she, not the champagne, wants to say. “I trust you, Wes. Not to do anything too much. And you’ve gotta trust me to know when it’s too much too.” She frowns. “That didn’t make any sense,” she decides, and flops back down again. “Keep rubbing my ass, Wes,” she says. “Feels kinda nice.”

There’s a pause and a soft laugh, and then his hands are on her again, but now they’re doing more than just massaging in the cream and she whimpers, parting her legs a little.

“So, I believe you had an encounter with Lilah,” he says, just as one slick finger taps gently against her asshole.

“Fuck, Wes!”

It jabs inside her, hard, just a little, just an inch or two and twists and she makes this ‘uhn!’ sound that’s got to be the neediest noise she has because just there, just like that, it’s driving her crazy.

“I think you might want to rephrase that,” he says.

“How did you—oh, she told you, didn’t she? Fucking bitch.”

“I’ll allow that one,” he murmurs, moving his finger in a gentle rhythm that has her hips lifting off the
bed. “Yes, she did, but I find myself curious as to your version of events.”

She snorts. Wes wants to know what they said about him, does he? Well, he can want, she thinks. No fucking way is she repeating that poison. “Girl talk, Wes. You don’t want to know.”

He brushes his thumb against her cunt, waking up all sorts of feelings, sending tingles and pulses of heat through her, so that she shudders. “Faith, when I ask a question, it’s generally with the expectation of an answer,” he says. “Do I need to ask you again?”

His voice is inflexible enough to make her shiver, but it’s just because that’s what it does that she digs in her heels. “No.”

“Good. I’m waiting.”

“Lipstick.”

His hand leaves her and she feels his fingers drum against her ass. “Faith.”

“Swear to God, Wes. We talked about lipstick. Seems mine’s too dark, but then, I’m a hussy, so what would I know?”

That last bit clinches it as authentic, it seems, because he sweeps her up and cuddles her and if it’s kind of hard on her ass to be sitting in his lap, it’s worth it to be held against him. “I’m sorry,” he says against her hair. “I didn’t anticipate that you and she would ever be alone like that. I hope she didn’t say anything—”

Her hand goes to his face and cups it. “Wes, she said a lot of stuff. Don’t think she likes me, but, you know, I’m not sure she wasn’t trying to warn me too. That I’m not good enough. That you’ll get bored of me. It’s nothing I haven’t thought myself.”

It’s difficult to say that; as if saying it will make it happen, but she owes him honesty and he gets it. She watches his eyes darken and then he’s kissing her, giving it everything he’s got, which means after three seconds she’s clutching onto his shoulder as the only stable point in a giddily-spinning world.

“If you ever say that again,” Wes whispers into her ear when they come up for air, “I’ll spank you, no matter what shade your arse is, do you understand?”

And there’s so much tenderness in his eyes, she forgives the slap he uses to illustrate his point. He clears his throat. “Hearing you recite all the wicked depravities you’ve endured made me—”

“Horny?” she suggests with an impudent grin, almost welcoming the change in mood, especially if it means Lilah doesn’t get mentioned again.

His eyes narrow in pretended annoyance and then he smiles back. “You noticed?”

“Oh, yeah, Wes. Hard not to,” she says, winding her arms around him and kissing him because he’s there, and she can, and fuck, why doesn’t she just do this more often?

“Made me realize,” he says, tugging her arms down and glaring at her. “That I’ve neglected one part of your body.”

“Feels like you’ve been everywhere, done everything, Wes,” she answers.

“And even close,” he says as his fingers trace around one hardening nipple. “These have been
overlooked far too much considering how sensitive and responsive they are. But there’s no rush, after all.”

There’s a promise of a future in that and she saves it up to think about later, because Wes’s fingers are pinching at her nipple again and she can feel an answering throb in her clit.

“So what did you have in mind, Wes?”

“You came from being spanked, didn’t you?” he asks and she squirms and nods, feeling a blush mount in her cheeks. “I want to get you so ready to come that just one touch here,” his fingers drift down and brush her clit, “and you’re screaming. Just one.”

She swallows. “Get me ready how?” she asks.

His fingers are back at her breast again. “Why don’t I show you?”

He dips his head low to her breast, tip of his tongue skirting around one hard nipple. He pinches the other sharply between thumb and forefinger, and the sensation speeds directly to her clit, makes her hips buck involuntarily off the bed. She lets out this little tiny moan, and he stops what he’s doing so he can watch her. “Looks like you’re almost there already. That was far easier than I thought.” Devious little self-satisfied smile he’s got.

“You know it ain’t gonna be that easy, Wes. C’mon, back to it.” He draws her nipple back into his mouth and her laugh turns to a low moan.

“So very bossy today. I’ll let that slide, Faith, but just this once.” But his voice is soft, not stern, and she knows he’s just indulging her. This is a new game altogether, and by necessity his concentration is elsewhere.

His other hand splays flat against her belly, rising and falling with her sharp intakes of breath. It’s frustratingly far from her clit, and seemingly staying put. She wants desperately for something to grind against, but knows if she tried to use her fingers she’d get a reprimand—maybe not a stinging swat to her poor aggrieved ass, but something. Wes was really fucking resourceful that way.

And God, she wants his cock too, but that’s not the objective right now. She closes her eyes and tries to bide her time as calmly as she can when she’s dying to fucking jump him.

He’s intent on his task, not paying any attention to her feverish unease. When he breaks contact with her nipple for a second, the cool air hits it, causing it to contract slightly, and she moans again, twisting against the bedclothes.

“You seem awfully impatient, Faith. Really, now. Good things come to those who wait, yes?”

“Y-yes.” She can barely force the word out. He’s chosen this moment to cup one breast in his hand and swipe his tongue with agonizing deliberation around the circumference of her areola. And finally, finally, finally, his other hand is starting to make a slow descent to her neglected cunt. By the time his fingers brush lightly against her swollen clit, she almost jumps.

“Ah. I’m glad to see that my reputation for being a man of my word isn’t in doubt.” He sounds almost smug when he says it. But she can’t even hold it against him because nothing matters beyond the simple fact that he’s going to make her come again, with his fingers and his ardent tongue and his cock if she’s lucky…

With that he circles her clit again, dipping his fingers into the wetness between her legs and anointing her clit with it. Her clit is about to go into sensory overload and she’s shivering, gripping the sheets
and trying not to thrash too much but not succeeding very well. “God, it’s too much—” It comes out sounding like a whimper.

He pulls his fingers away and looks at her, concerned. “Would you like me to stop?”

“No, just…”

“I’ll direct my attentions elsewhere for the time being.” And with that he slides down between her thighs, which she spreads apart to accommodate him.

He takes his time sliding down, strategically kissing and nibbling the soft flesh of her belly; then he's languidly curling his tongue in long strokes over her naked sex, teasingly edging toward her clit, but never fully reaching it.

And she can't help it; her hands slip up to her breasts, and she continues to pinch and rub her hard nipples absentmindedly. When he lifts his head for a moment, he clucks his tongue at her in mock-chastisement.

“One thing at a time, Faith. Hands at your sides.”

She obeys with a little whimper of protest, arms sliding limply to the bed, and she hopes it's okay to at least grab desperate handfuls of the sheet as he flicks his tongue over her clit, then pulls away. Her whimper turns to a frustrated moan. “Wes, stop.”

He laughs gently, mouth still against her pussy, and the little vibrations nearly make her scream. He tilts his head up to speak, though, and it's a welcome reprieve. “I didn't hear the name of that esteemed poet cross your lips, Faith, so I can only assume you mean…”

“I meant stop teasing me!” she blurts, writhing and bucking her hips, desperately trying to draw his mouth back down on her. But he's only returned to intermittently lapping over her outer lips still, so she finally swings her legs up and plants her heels on his shoulders. She can't help but let out a little emphatic grunt when she slides her ass up off the bed, unfurling herself wide and open for him.

He doesn't stop the teasing of course, but he can't avoid the rest of her now and he swirls his tongue in and around her wet hole, then slips it swiftly to her clit, lingering there, sucking at it gently.

A tiny nip from his teeth makes her frantically whisper his name and before the last drawn-out sibilant sound fades, he's slipped his fingers across her wet slit and inside her pussy and asshole simultaneously. She doesn't even have time to register what he's done before she's coming hard and fast, gasping for air, the way she always seems to when there's a long tease involved. She's on the edge of passing out again, even, but his long fingers—still working away inside—anchor her in consciousness as she rides out wave of pleasure, babbling an incoherent mantra of his name and shallow gasps and fucks and oh gods.

And she's still prattling on until she's nearly screeching, expecting him to stop, but he doesn't. For an instant, the thought crosses her mind that she's glad there's no one around to mistake her desperate, pleasured screams for those of someone in distress. Then the second orgasm floods her mind with a sensory overload the moment his fingers crook inside to hit those two perfect spots a split second apart, and all she can do is scream his name one last time.

“Oh God, Wes, are you trying to kill me?” she pants after a few long moments, sliding her slightly cramping legs back down to the bed. She's aching for his cock, but knows that really would send her over the edge, and she's suddenly very drowsy with pleasure and those glasses of champagne. She's completely surprised to find she's content to wait for later—because there will definitely be a later,
she thinks, noticing that the bedroom is now full of the purple of early twilight.

Wes must have sensed it too, because he's already slipped away—after planting a near-chaste kiss of farewell on her throbbing pussy. He gathers her in his arms and holds her close while stroking her hair, running soft kisses over her neck and nibbling at an earlobe, even though his hard cock is insistently nudging her thigh.

“I wouldn't dream of it, Faith,” he says, his voice soft near her ear. “Just settling my debt from last night. I do believe I've met my interest obligations.”

“Oh boy, Wes. Yeah, you're paid up in full.” She snuggles against him and gives up trying to keep her eyes open. “Just need to rest a minute now. Sorry.” And she fades into to sleep as he strokes her cheek and gently runs a fingertip along the arch of an eyebrow.
Part Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

She's not sure how long she's been asleep, but dark comes not long before seven o'clock on these early spring evenings. The shades are closed now and the bedside lamp casts a warm glow that doesn't entirely reach the furthest corners of the room. The best indication of the hour is a low grumble of hunger in her stomach. She flips over to find she's alone in the bed and squinting at the clock discovers it's nearly seven-thirty.

There's a robe draped by her feet—not the one she's used to, not one of his spares. It's a short silk kimono in a black and red jacquard, and she can't help but sigh wistfully as she puts it on, its light weight both impossibly warm and cool at the same time as it slides against her skin.

Her stomach rumbles again, more insistently, and she really hopes he's slipped away to whip up dinner for them, or hell, order a fucking pizza, at least.

The kitchen's empty and too neat to have been the source of the garlicky, spicy smell that's making her mouth water. Even Wes can't clean up that fast. Probably. She follows her nose and finds him in the formal dining room leading off the living room. The table seats eight, but he's set it so they're sitting together; one at the head, the other to the right of that. She works out which place is hers because one wineglass is empty and one is full.

“Faith. You look rested. Are you hungry?”

Wes has changed into a dark green shirt and casual trousers but she doesn’t feel out of place in her robe. If he’d wanted her dressed, he’d have put out something else for her to wear.

“Starving, but, Wes, you didn’t cook all this?”

She waves at casserole dishes filled with food and drops into her seat, trying not to drool.

“I didn’t, no.” He shrugs. “I persuaded a restaurant in town to deliver. They have rather exotic names for their dishes but boiled down to the essentials, it’s chicken casserole, scalloped potatoes, and an assortment of vegetables. Do help yourself.”

It sounds boring but it tastes divine, and she even, under the encouragement of a severe look from Wes, heaps some veggies on her plate. He pours her a half glass of red wine but she does no more than sip at it before deciding she’s had enough alcohol for one night and sticking to water.

They chat, and she’s discovering that she can, because he doesn’t try and impress her or make her feel ignorant. She asks about places he’s been and even, daringly, where he grew up, hearing about a house on the outskirts of a village that sounds like something out of a story, with its orchard and wood, surrounded by hills, and with a stream running through the garden. She doesn’t ask about his parents though, who lurk in the background, like the ogres and witches every fairy tale has, and she’s left with the image of a lonely little boy reading a book, hidden high in a tree, or in a den he’d made in the center of a tangle of rhododendron bushes.

The meal ends and she sighs. “That was good. Never thought I’d say that about something that didn’t come with fries, but it was.”
“We can go there for dinner one night, if you like,” he says. “Perhaps Friday? Or do you have other plans?”

She shakes her head, bemused. “Plans? No.” She can’t think of anything she’d rather be doing than spending time with Wesley anyway.

“Xander?” he says, a little doubtfully. “Don’t you usually go out with him?”

She takes one last drink from her glass. “He’s got this new boyfriend; they’ll be out clubbing. I’d just be in the way. I’ll meet him for lunch on his day off. Maybe you could—umm.”

“Perhaps later,” he says dryly, working out what she had been about to say without much difficulty. He stands. “Would you like to—”

“Collapse somewhere?” she says. “Never thought I’d not care that you’re not big on desserts, but I couldn’t manage another bite.”


The sidelong glance he gives her as they walk toward the couch is full of promise and she feels arousal stir. “Give me half an hour and tell me more,” she says, settling down with her feet in his lap, stretched out.

“Thirty minutes? Very well.”

He leans over and picks up a remote, pressing buttons and filling the room with more of the music he likes so that all she has to do is lie there and listen as his fingers stroke her bare feet gently and then begin to move up higher. By the time the music ends, he’s reached her thighs and the kimono’s slipped away to bare her legs to his eyes.

“Have you regained your appetite?” he asks.

“Guess I could manage to nibble on something,” she says, gazing at him under her lashes seductively and hoping she doesn’t just look sleepy.

“Stay here.”

He’s gone for so short a time she guesses he had this planned, which doesn’t surprise her at all. He returns with one of the black scarves he’s used on her before and a bowl of brightly colored candies.

“What’re they, Wes?” she asks, reaching out.

He smacks her fingers lightly. “Smarties.”

She frowns. “No, they’re not.”

“English Smarties,” he clarified. “I believe they’re similar to M&M’s.”

She stirs them with her finger; red and blue, yellow, brown, green and orange. “And what do you plan to do with them, Wesley?”

She loves the gleam he gets in his eyes when he’s come up with something that’s going to have her begging.

“Why, we’re going to eat them, Faith. What else would one do with them?” He lets the edge of the scarf trail along her leg. “If you think you can stay perfectly still, we can do this here,” he says.
“Otherwise I’ll have to take you upstairs and tie you in place.”

She closes her eyes. “Wes, when you say stuff like that, do you know what it does to me?” she asks plaintively.

His fingers slip between her legs to where she’s already ready for whatever he has in mind. “Yes.” He lets his lips curl in a smile. “It’s rather convenient, wouldn’t you say?”

He lifts her so that she can shrug out of the kimono and blindfolds her, but his hands never leave her and she lies back and waits with nothing but expectation speeding up her heartbeat.

“It’s very simple,” Wesley says, dropping a candy into the hollow of her throat. “I’m going to put them on you and then I’m going to take them off again.”

She chuckles and he hisses in annoyance as the candy he’s just placed on the swell of her breast slides off. “Sorry, Wes. Just don’t think it’s gonna be that simple somehow.”

“Perhaps I need to go into a little more detail,” he says, “but you should stop talking unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

She purses her lips and blows him a kiss. To her surprise, he leans over and kisses her back, capturing her bottom lip between his and sucking on it gently. “Good girl,” he murmurs, which sends a shiver through her.

He carries on dotting her skin with the small candies, in some sort of pattern; circling her nipples, in a line down her stomach. She’s lost count but there must be about twenty of them. Breathing shallowly, she waits.

“You saw the colors they came in, Faith,” he says. “Tell me a color and we can start.”

“Blue,” she says, thinking of his eyes and wondering what they’re looking like right now.

“There are five blue ones,” he says. “I’m going to start at the top, so that means...this one.”

His mouth’s against her breast, warm and soft but he’s careful not to touch her anywhere else, so that, in the dark as she is, the fleeting touch is both unexpected and profound. She feels her nipples harden, waiting for a touch they never get, and then his mouth is against hers and the candy slips between her lips.

She lets it melt in her mouth, feeling the smooth coating dissolve and the chocolate spread on her tongue. Nice, but she's waiting for the twist.

“Now,” Wesley says. “There are two on either side of that one. Guess the color correctly, and you get to eat it. Get it wrong and I do.”

She frowns, still certain there’s something he’s not telling her. So far the worst that can happen is that he gets to eat them all, which, okay, would be a pity, but...

“Uh, green?”

“Very good,” he says, dipping his head and nipping at her skin, using just his teeth this time. She parts her lips and crunches this one up. Kinda yummy.

“Now tell me what color this one is,” he says, moving over to tap a finger against the one at her throat.
“Orange,” she says, imagining it lying there, glowing brightly.

“Oh, if only it were. But it’s another blue one,” he says with false regret dripping from every word.

His fingers scoop it up and she pouts. No kiss? Then his mouth fastens against her throat in a long hot kiss, tongue swirling against her skin and she’s confused again.

“Wes—” she begins, but then his fingers part her legs and caress her cunt, spreading the folds apart and darting inside her. “What are you doing? You get to eat that one, right?”

“I do.” She feels something cool get pushed inside her. “I’m saving it for later though.”

It’s almost a relief to know what he’s got in mind.

The game takes way longer than she’d expected, and every candy he wins means she gets his fingers toying with her clit, teasing her for long moments before he pushes the sweet just inside her cunt. For once though, it’s a win/win situation—which makes her think he’s in a really good mood—because if she guesses right, she gets a candy and a kiss and the kisses get longer and longer until she’s swallowing the candy un-tasted so that she can concentrate on his tongue as it slides against hers.

She loses the last one and blinks in the light as he tugs the blindfold free. “You look like a piece of modern art,” he remarks.

She looks down. The heat from her body has made the candies melt as they rested on her and her skin’s smudged here and there with color, rainbowed and bright.

“It comes off, right?” she says, stretching out after staying still for so long

“I imagine so,” he says, tracing a pattern over her clit.

“So how many did you win?” she says letting her leg slip off the side of the couch invitingly.

He glances down and smiles. “Twelve and they’re melting fast.”

“Better hurry, then,” she says.

“I can’t see why,” he says as his tongue swirls inside her, lapping at the thick, rich chocolate. “Though I think I prefer you au naturel. Some things just can’t be improved upon.”

His tongue’s coated with tiny bits of the candy shell, so that when he drags it over her clit, it scratches it lightly and her hips lift up, wanting more. “Wes...want you in me,” she whispers. God, he's still dressed and she wants to touch him now, wants an end to the games and instead the simplicity of his cock in her and his mouth gasping out her name against her hair or her neck as he fucks her.

He stands and scoops her into his arms.

“You have chocolate on your mouth,” she says. He waits, eyebrow raised, for her to kiss it off, she guesses, but instead she spits on her finger and scrubs him clean, giggling at his look of outrage.


“I see,” is all he says, but his arms tighten around her and he walks to the kitchen, not the stairs, and drops her on the counter beside the sink.

“Wes? Hey!”
She’s struggling and yelping but he turns her so that her ass is on the edge of the sink and turns on the tap—the cold fucking tap—and begins to wash her cunt clean with icy water, sluicing her down with a half-smile that only fades when she reaches out a hand and scoops up a handful of water and flips it down inside his shirt.

“Oh, Faith,” Wesley says softly. “I do believe I’m going to make you regret that.”

He looks so fucking good with his shirt plastered to him that she really doesn’t care.

And she does it again, flicking him in the face this time so his indignant expression is marred by the drops of water clinging to his eyelashes.

“What you gonna do, Wes?” She giggles, twisting round and jumping off the counter as he shakes his head like a dog and gives her a look of utter outrage. “Don’t think my poor ass can take another spanking.”

“I'm sure I'll think of something,” he splutters and he looks so damn cute all wet and furious, especially when she ducks round him, slapping at his hands which are trying to grab hold of her, and skips out of the kitchen.

“Gotta catch me first!” she chirps over her shoulder and she's not entirely sure but she thinks he just growled but he's not going to do anything as undignified as run after her.

Anyway, before she started smoking and bunking off to sit by the South Doors so she could really hone her smoke rings, she was, like, the star athlete of the school track team. Which is why he hasn't got a chance in hell of catching her with his his slow, deliberate tread as she races up the stairs.

She's kinda out of breath by the time she gets to his room and she pants wildly, her eyes skittering around the dimly lit interior. She wants to blow his mind. Take advantage of his freakishly good mood to play something new.

When he steps into the room, her eyes are shut, but she knows from his sharp intake of breath that she's managed to surprise him. Not every day you walk into your room to find a naked girl spread-eagled on your bed, her fingers rubbing against her clit in a fast, circular stroke.

He doesn't say anything for the longest time and she starts to feel this icy grip of fear freezing her. She's completely over-played her hand. Heard him say that he loved her and let herself get carried away. Fucked everything up again.

She takes her hand away and sits up, her eyes still screwed shut because she'll be all right as long as she doesn't have to say the disappointment on his face, that frostbitten glaze to his eyes.

“I don't recall telling you to stop,” he says drily and she slumps back down on the coverlet. “Such a pretty picture you make too.”

“I wanted to give you a reward,” she says throatily, her index finger nudging against her clit again. “I was so proud of you today, Wes.”

He makes this tiny little noise in the back of his throat and she feels the mattress give as he sits down on the bed. “I must admit the sight of you sitting in the back of the court seemed to spur me on,” he murmurs.

“Yeah?” She sighs happily, arching her back and opening her legs wider.

“Oh yes,” he agrees and her eyes snap open because she knows she won't be able to come without
seeing his pretty face.

And she doesn't want to come without him. Besides which, he must really need to come. Really, really need to and as soon as she thinks that she's on her knees and pressing herself against his back.

“Wes,” she whispers in his ear, slipping out the tip of his tongue to trace the bottom of his lobe. “I want you to fuck me. I want your cock.”

Her hands are smoothing down the damp cotton so she can feel the way his heart speeds up underneath her palm. “Where do you want my cock? You need to be specific, Faith.”

“In my cunt,” she hisses. “And I want you naked. Wanna feel your skin against mine.”

And he seems to want that too because he's helping her unbutton his shirt and he doesn't get mad when a couple of the buttons pings off in her frantic haste to get him ready. “You really are terribly demanding today,” he comments, rubbing his face against the crook of her arm. “But I'm feeling rather indulgent so I've decided to let it go just this once.”

Once his shirt is off, she can't wait any longer but tugs him down on top of her and mashes his mouth against hers. He's very obliging; curling his tongue into her mouth and lifting off her slightly so she can work his belt loose, unzip him and clutch her hand around the hot, pulsing length of him.

“What if I wanted to tie you up?” he asks, bucking his hips slightly, as she traces her thumb over the damp head of his cock.

“I'd let you,” she says and she sounds so fierce.

Somehow she manages to drag his pants down with her feet and he kicks them off and settles between her thighs, rocking against her but not inside her. “And what would you do if I turned you over and wanted to fuck your arse?”

It's pretty appealing and for a moment she's tempted to wriggle out from under him and get on her hands and knees but the head of his cock is butting against her clit and instead she whimpers: “I'd let you do that too. I'd let you do whatever you wanted, Wes, you know that.”

His head swoops down and his hand tangles in her hair, lifting her up so he can give her one of those intense kisses, biting at her lips and sucking on her tongue, which makes her head swim.

When he lets her go, it's mainly to breathe but she's not done yet. “I'd let you do anything you wanted. Anything,” she gasps and he raises himself up and plunges inside her in one hard, smooth stroke that has her clutching at his shoulders.

“Do you know what I want to do?” he purrs in her ear and he's not moving and he hasn't said that she can't so she's practically writhing on his cock, wrapping her legs round his hips so she can grind her clit against the base.

“Anything!”

“I want to have my pretty, little Faith in my bed every day,” he says, punctuating it with a sly twist of his hips, but it's his words that make her cry out. “Always ready for me, always so wet and needy for me so I can fuck you.”

His hands scoop under her ass to lift her up so he can start plunging into her with these fucking perfect deep strokes that tease her with this maddening itch that makes her mewl helplessly and clutch at his arms.
“I want that too,” she whimpers. “Just you fucking me all the time.”

And she can't shut up and he doesn't seem to mind because he's fucking her faster and faster, sucking at her neck, at her nipples as she tells him again and again how much she needs his cock, how much she loves him fucking her and how much she loves him until she has to stop talking and cry pitifully every time he pulls out of her so he can plunge back in faster and deeper and harder than he did the time before that.

She strokes his face, trying to soothe away the frown, the tense line of his jaw as he grits his teeth because he's waiting for her and for once the getting there is even fucking better than the being there.

“Tell me that I'm the best you've ever had, Wes.”

“You are, you know you are.”

“Tell me that you always want me.”

“I always do, can't stop…”

“Tell me that you love fucking me.”

“I love fucking you.”

“Tell me that you love me again, Wes. Please…”

He thrusts into her one final time and she's wrapped so tight round him that she can hardly breathe and she's coming and he's coming and as he does he says it again: “I love you, Faith, so very much,” and it's so perfect that she thinks her heart might just shatter in a thousand sparkly pieces right then.

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It's not like she goes round thinking about how happy she is but the next day and the day after that and the day after that, she knows that she never really knew what happy was.

Because she's so happy that she's almost sick with it. This goofy smile pinned on her face as she wakes up and he's standing there with a mug of coffee for her.

He washes her and dresses her, feeds her, and brushes her hair, then they drive into work together, his hand on her knee.

And even when he kisses her chastely on the cheek before disappearing into his office, the smile's still there making her face ache as she doodles hearts and flowers on her steno pad.

It's not like it was before when she was anxiously storing up all the times he hit her and fucked her and even deigned to smile at her because she thought that that was all she was going to get. All that she deserved.

Everything's different now.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

And yeah, so they have this routine. But it's not routine routine. It's the kind of routine she could get used to. And yet she never does.

She doesn’t think she’ll ever get used to settling in to his crisp, three-hundred count Egyptian cotton sheets and sleeping next to him.
She never tells him that she watches him sleep sometimes. He’s so lovely in repose, and she never tires of the steady rise-and-fall of his breathing, or of the graceful curve of his back when he rolls over onto his stomach.

Some nights he’s still and quiet; others he thrashes fitfully and murmurs under his breath—nothing she can make out, no equivalent to “Rosebud,” just word salad mostly—but she listens for clues, concerned and curious, before she finally falls back to sleep. But he always reaches for her and she’s there, she’s always there.

And every morning when she wakes up, with the morning light filtering weakly through the slight part in the curtains, she’s always just a bit surprised to find that he’s still holding her tight. It’s so very far away from anything else she’s known.

**

Days pass and it seems as though her world has shrunk down to Wes’ house and his car and the office and nothing exists outside of it. She sure as hell hasn’t called Darla, and she’s also forgotten her promise to Xander about lunch. She’s almost shocked to see him standing in the doorway of the office promptly at half past noon.

“Xander! What are you—”

He leans against the doorframe, crossing his arms and smiling at her broadly. “Lunch, remember? Or are you too busy? Because, y’know, if you have a lunchtime spanking scheduled, I can come back.”

She practically hisses at him. “Jesus, Xander, keep it down!” He ignores her pique, and crosses over to the desk to give her a big hug. “I’ve missed you, sweetie.” She hugs him back fiercely.

When she lets him go, she grins. “Nice to see you too, stranger.”

He snorts. “You should fucking talk!”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s just—”

“You don’t have to explain.” He shushes her and links his arm with hers. “Now, where do you want to go? My treat.”

“Let me just grab my purse and leave a note.” She scrawls something out hastily on a sheet of monogrammed notepaper, and as she grabs her purse her phone—long neglected and nearly forgotten about—starts to ring. She fishes around for it in the bottom of the bag, and only succeeds in retrieving it after some concerted effort on her part.

“Faith, that thing is like the fucking Bermuda Triangle of purses.”

She gives him the patented Faith glare-of-death and checks the phone so she can see who’s calling her.

It’s her dad. The number’s from a payphone, so it’s got to be her dad. _Fuck_. He only calls her from payphones when he’s really desperate for cash. That means that his phone at the apartment has been turned off, _again_. _Fuck_ that shit. No way she’s picking up. She turns the ringer off and dumps the phone somewhat unceremoniously back into her purse.

“Who was it?” Xander asks.

She tries not to look shaken and smiles through it. “Nobody. Let’s go, huh?”
Chapter Thirty-Eight

She steers Xander away from the place she and Wes usually go for lunch; that’s one encounter she wants to put off for a while. Like, forever. She loves them both and they love her but there’s this little snippet from math class running around in her head; something about two things being equal to the same thing not being equal to each other. Or something. Put simply, Wes and Xander? Never going to be best buds.

But she doesn’t have to worry about Wes joining them, because Xander drags her in for a Mac meal, and she’s so busy inhaling cardboard fries and a burger she barely has to chew, that there’s no time to do more than reflect that Wes’ll freak when he asks her what she had to eat, and that adds more of a spice to the meal than the five sachets of ketchup she gets through. Though maybe the super-sized shake was a mistake; her stomach’s complaining, and she wonders if Wes’ cooking has spoiled her for junk food, but that’s too fucking scary to contemplate, so she takes one last defiant slurp at the shake and pushes it away.

It’s weird at first, sitting across and staring into brown eyes, not blue, hearing Xander’s babble not Wes’ drawled English voice, but this is Xander and it all drifts into focus in no time, like someone’s twiddling buttons somewhere.

He tells her about his love life—back to hopeful, and she reaches over and squeezes his hand sympathetically, glaring at him when he glances down at her wrist, as if he’s checking her out for cuff marks, or something.

“Xander, will you give it a fuc—a rest?” She barely notices that she’s censoring herself, but he does and his thick eyebrows snap shut.

“Faith, you’re looking good, I’ll give you that.” His hands wave in the air vaguely. “All shiny and stuff, but you can’t tell me there’s no bad here.”

She shrugs and sneaks one of his fries. “Can’t see one, Xan. In love, happy, living in a house—God, Xander, you should see it!—no one yelling at me, calling me names.”

“In love. Right.” Xander drags out the last word and rolls his eyes. “He’s old enough to be—”

“Don’t you fucking say that!” she snaps, the memory of the phone call sharpening her voice. “Don’t even compare—” She takes a breath, trying not to lash out. “Xander, he’s older, yeah, but shit, what’s that got to do with it? Like I ever met any Prince Charmings in the eighteen to twenty-five age group. He’s what I want. He’s what I need—and I’m not gonna justify it to you. It’s my choice.”

“You paying him rent?” Xander says abruptly. “Or is living way up in the clouds just another perk along with the bruised ass?”

She kicks him under the table, connecting with his shin and smiling as he winces. “Hey, Xander; we’re friends; I got bruises, I’m willing to share.”

“Gee, thanks.” He reaches down to rub at his leg and says it again. “Rent.”

“I offered,” she says. “Wes said it didn’t matter, but, yeah, we sorted something out. What’s your point?”

He’d said more than that, but it was none of Xander’s business. She’d got him to agree to her contributing something, and done it without pouting, sulking or seducing him, which yeah, she was kinda proud of. The fact that every time she handed over what they’d agreed on, she ended up over his lap within the hour getting a spank for every dollar, because Wesley wasn’t the forgiving sort and
she’d forced him into a corner, isn’t something Xander needs to know.

“Nothing signed? No, guess not. So he could throw you out when he wanted and you’d be left...”

“No worse off than I was before. Xander, will you fucking stop this?” She’s getting pissed off now and her head’s throbbing under the bright, artificial lights. “Tell me what’s really bugging you the most, because right now, it’s feeling like you prefer me miserable so you can give me a shoulder to cry on.”

“Maybe I do,” Xander says, standing up. “Seems that’s about the only time you bother to remember I exist.”

He’s halfway to the door when she catches up with him, yanking at his arm. “Look, this is bullshit, Xander. Yeah, I’ve been busy, but too busy for you? Not gonna happen.”

She watches his face crunch up, the way it used to when he had to choose what to spend his pocket money on; candy or comics, then he sighs and punches her shoulder gently. “Faith, you’re a pain in my ass, you know that?”

“But a familiar pain, right?” she says, grinning. “One you’d miss if it went away?”

He rolls his eyes. “Well, that’s kinda what I’ve been saying.”

She gives him a hug, exuberant and fast and rubs her head against his arm. “Prat.”

“Say what now?”

She giggles. “I can insult you in two languages now, Xander. English and American.”

“And you expect me to like this man?” he asks, mock offended, as they leave and begin to walk along the street.

She shakes her head. “No. Just lay off him a bit. He cares about me and up to now you’re the only one who’s done that.”

“Maybe I don’t like him taking over my job,” Xander says lightly.

There’s too much truth in that for her to brush it off with a joke, and she slides her hand under his arm and says nothing.

After promising to call him, go out, meet up, whatever—get outta here, Xander, my lunch break was over twenty minutes ago—she’s back at her desk, tapping away at her typewriter and noticing that her note to Wes is where she left it but it’s been moved. Yeah. She can tell. Wes’ door is closed, like always, but he’s in there; she can hear him talking to someone and when the man she still thinks of as ‘tweedy guy’ comes out a bit later she wonders what they’ve been discussing.

Wes ushers him out with a smile that’s polite but not entirely friendly and turns to Faith.

“My office, Faith. Now.”

Well, fuck. Not seen him in a mood like this for a while. She seriously doubts he wants her in there to take down a letter, but she grabs pen and pad and follows him down the corridor.

He doesn’t waste time. “Faith, unless I’m mistaken, you were extremely late back from lunch.”

“Yeah; see Xander came around and—”
“I’m not interested in whom you were with. I find myself more concerned with the fact that when a client arrived I had to make him wait while I made coffee.”

There’s a petulant bite to his voice and she decides the next time she sees that guy she’s going to fucking kick his ass, because one way or another he always leaves Wes in a pissy mood.

“I’m sorry, sir. It won’t happen again.”

“I sincerely hope not.”

His eyes rake her up and down and she feels that treacherous warmth seep through her as she waits, a trickle of moisture between her legs. Been a while since he did much to her at work, though the minute they get in the car to go home, his hand slides high on her thigh and she gets a kiss that leaves her so breathless she doesn’t come around until Wes’ fingers driving into her, first chance he gets, snap her back into focus.

“That will be all,” he says. “I imagine you’ve got rather a lot to catch up on.” She opens her mouth to say something and gets a frosty look. “I’m not paying you to argue, Faith.”

The unfairness of it on top of the threat of a call from her dad, and Xander’s attitude, spark off a full scale snit. “Yeah, right. But you are paying me and that means I’ve got rights, sir.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m taking the rest of the day off sick,” she says.

The air turns as heavy as it does before a summer storm and though he’s still leaning against his desk, arms folded, she takes a step backward.

“You seem in good health to me,” he says softly. “Positively blooming, in fact.”

“Cramps,” she says, realizing as she says it that it’s true. Shit. The headache, tummy pains and dampness between her legs all snap into place and she sighs.

Then she sees Wes is checking his fucking calendar, flicking back as if he’s looking for something and she goes off the scale with a shriek that freezes him in place. “What the fuck are you doing, Wes? Checking up on me?”

She stalks over to him and slams her hand down on the desk. “I got cramps, a killer headache, and two men in my life who think they can push me around.” He looks just the littlest bit stricken and she softens her voice when she adds, “And I love them both, but I’m going home, Wes. I don’t want to argue with you.”

It hangs there for a moment, two worlds clashing, and then it’s Wes who’s reaching out to tuck her hair behind her ear.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “And I wasn’t checking up on your dates.” He sounds indignant. “I was simply seeing if it’s the day the cleaners are at the house—and they are—so it might not be very peaceful.” He regains a measure of composure and smiles. “If you want to lie down, you can rest on the couch in the library here.”

She sighs, stroking her hand down his face. “I’ll manage. Got some Midol in my desk.” There’s a pause and she says hesitantly. “That guy—wasn’t bad news was it? Nothing to do with—”

She can’t bring herself to say Lilah’s name, but he shakes his head. “No; rather good news actually.
There’s a merger coming up and he wants me to be in charge of the details of the contract. It’s going to be insanely complicated.”

“You can handle it.”

“I’m going to be the one making it complicated, Faith,” he says with a smile that needs to have ‘smug bastard’ attached to it.

She rolls her eyes. “Lawyers.” The smile stays smug and she frowns. “So what’s with the attitude? You didn’t mind me lunching with Xander, did you? He just showed up, and I haven’t seen him—”

“No, I didn’t mind that at all,” he says. “Though I really would prefer you not be late back,” his finger ghosts against her lips and he tastes it thoughtfully, “after consuming junk food that you know I don’t like you eating.”

“You got delusions of being Sherlock?” she snaps, glaring at his complacent smile.

“It wasn’t difficult to deduce,” he said. “Now, off you go—and Faith?”

“Yes?”

“Do let me know when you’re feeling better.”

“Why?” she asks suspiciously.

His mouth twitches. “Oh, Faith, you know why.” He pats her ass gently. “Have a nice day.”

She’s back at her desk before she realizes she still doesn’t know why he got mad at her.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The cleaners are still there when she gets home, though she can’t imagine what they actually need to do with Wes’ neat freak obsession with tidiness.

But she’s starting to feel pretty crappy; feverishly hot and the cramps have taken up residence in her belly and seem to be really keen on twisting her insides up into knots. What she really wants to do is run a scalding hot bath, put on Wes’ shirt with the missing button, which is hers now and crawl into bed.

Not gonna happen though. The two Kosovan cleaners with much gesturing and a bottle of bathroom cleaner make it clear that she’s surplus to requirements and instead she kicks off her shoes as soon as she gets into the study and curls herself up on the couch.

She just wants to go to sleep but there’s this nagging ache in her tummy that even four Midol won’t ease and she tosses and turns and wishes he was here to stroke her hair and make the pain go away.

And what the fuck has he done to her anyway? Because in the end; she’s getting up from the couch, and actually looking for something to read. They’re not all posh porno books either. Eventually she finds a copy of Pride and Prejudice, which they were doing at school before she got hauled off to juvie and when he comes home, she’s curled into the corner of the couch, working her way through chapter eleven with the help of a big dictionary.

“I’m sorry, I think I must have the wrong house,” he says.

She looks up and him and blinks because all that tiny print has made her eyes swim.
“I couldn't sleep and you don't have a TV,” she says defensively because she's still feeling like hell and it's making her prickly and irritable.

He sits down next to her and tips his head to see the cover of the book. “Jane Austen? There is something quite Elizabeth Bennett-like about you, Faith.”

Even after all the time, she's never quite sure how to decipher that bland tone to his voice; work out whether he's laughing at her. “Lydia is way cooler,” she says sulkily. “I'm much more of a Lydia.”

“Are you? Should I be worried that you're going to run off with a rakish ne'er do well?” And now she knows that he's teasing her but in a way that she doesn't mind, which is why she's crawling into his lap.

“Thought I already did, Wes.” She sighs, rubbing her aching head against the cool cotton of his shirt. He tenses up for just the merest hint of a second before his hand is in her hair, stroking through the strands and rubbing her scalp with gentle fingers. “This is rather unfortunate, you being so indisposed.”

“I have my period,” she hisses because she's racked with pain and all he's worried about is that she's not doing her usual impersonation of a horny, teenage nymphet. “You gonna banish me to the spare room again so I don't contaminate the 300 thread count sheets?”

His hands slide down to start working out the knots in her shoulders. “I'm going to ignore that remark and the exceedingly peevish tone to your voice because I imagine that you're feeling rather ill,” he says mildly, and his fingers are walking down her spine so he can knead his palm against the small of her back. How does he know that's just what she needs? She gives a tiny moan.

“Sorry, I feel like shit. Didn't mean to be such a bitch,” she mutters and arches into his touch. “But, like, why is my agony so unfortunate?”

“I'm afraid I have to go to New York tomorrow and though we did talk about it last time, it would be rather impossible to take you with me.”

New York would have been a blast but she gets that it's a work thing. Really, she does. But she still bursts into tears because he's going away, which means that he won't be here with her. And she's currently overdosing on progesterone.

“I don't want you to go,” she wails, twisting around and burying her head against his neck.

“It's only for four days, Faith,” he says softly, scooping her into his arms as he stands up. “And you can eat as much disgusting junk food as you like while I'm gone and you can go out with your friend, Xander and drink those revolting vodka milkshakes.”

He walks up the stairs with her and she knows she's being the whiniest ass cry baby in the world and that she needs to snap out of it right the hell now. “I'm gonna eat greasy take-out in your bed,” she hiccups.

“Which will make for a very interesting and time-consuming evening when I get home,” he says sternly. “And I was going to buy you a present for every day that I was away too.”

He places her gently on the bed and she swivels round so he can unzip her dress. “You don't have to do that—you don't have to buy me stuff,” she mutters. “And I was only crying because…”

“You're feeling absolutely horrible and I came home with my news and compounded matters,” he
finishes, kneeling at her feet and running a hand up her leg to start rolling down her stocking. “I wish this trip was better timed.”

“But I can stay here, right?” she asks urgently. “You're not going to make me go back to the hotel?”

He kisses the soft skin of her inner thigh. “And subject you to the tender mercies of the scratchy sheets? Well, that would be entirely unreasonable of me.”

She pulls back the quilt and burrows down under it. “Just so we’re clear.” She leans up so he can kiss her forehead.

“Would you like me to stay here with you?”

“Nah, you've got work to do and I'm gonna try and sleep the worst of it off. Wake up feeling less like a bitch on wheels, y'know?”

Her eyes shut obediently as he reaches over to tuck the covers tight around her so she's safe and snugly and she's fast asleep before he even shuts the door.

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The four days drag by, like someone somewhere has stretched out time so the seconds become minutes and the minutes become hours and the hours become days.

She hates coming home to the big, empty house that he fills even when he's miles away. The silence and the way the rooms echo with memories, make her go out every night with Xander just so she doesn't have to be alone.

Except she wishes it was that simple. Truth is without him there, it's a big, spooky house with big, spooky house sounds like creaking stairs and gurgling pipes that sound exactly like an ax-wielding maniac is hanging around and just waiting for the right moment to disembowel her.

And then there are the other things that she sure as shit knows isn't just her over-active imagination. Like, the way the phone keeps ringing but when she snatches it up, the caller's rung off. It's not Wes because he phones her every morning and every evening, but this time, she gets her instructions about couriers and documents and depositions and then he asks her about her day, about how she slept and then she gets a teasing reference to the present that he plans to buy her for the twenty-four hours she's been without him.

He tells her how pretty Central Park looks now that the weather's getting warmer. About the tedious judge he had to have lunch with who fell asleep in the middle of his dessert. The pair of shoes he saw in the window of a shop as he walked through Greenwich Village that caused him to be ten minutes late for a meeting because he had to go in and buy them for her. So, definitely not Wes ringing and hanging up and leaving the messages that are nothing more than two minutes of static silence on the answerphone.

It's not just the way she can't sleep now, unless they're skin on skin together; nestled against him, his hand over her heart. And it's not the way that she misses the comfortable silence in the morning and the frantic, sheet-clawing tumbles of evening that's making her so edgy.

No, that's because of the little pile of cigarette butts at the bottom of the drive when she gets home. And it's the chewing gum that's been shoved into the alarm on the gate so she has to ask Wes to call the security firm so she can get in on Wednesday night.

She doesn't know how she gets through Thursday night after she's spoken to Wes. Not like she's going to admit to him that his eighteen-year-old girlfriend's too chickenshit to be left on her own.
In the end, she leaves all the lights on, gets the two deadliest looking kitchen knives from the sharpening block in the kitchen and puts them on the pillow next to her, and sits up in bed trying to read *Pride And Prejudice* and jumping every time she hears one of those scary intruder-on-the-stairs sound effects.

One moment it's three in the morning and she's still wide-eyed and terrified. Next thing she knows, it's eight freakin' thirty, and she's being woken up by the angry beeping of her cellphone.

She reaches out a hand for the phone and blearily switches it on, trying to kid herself that she can sound all perky and chipper for Wes.

“Yeah? Hey.”

“Faithy?”

“Mom?”

She's tempted to slam the phone down. Instead she grips it tightly in a hand that's gone sweaty.

“Faithy. I've been calling you and calling you,” Darla's voice is fractious. “When are you coming home?”

It isn't quite what she was expecting but it's enough to make all her hackles rise. “You threw me out, remember? Got the whole never darken my doorstep shtick, yeah?”

“You staying with him?” Darla sounds curious, rather than pissed about it. “Hasn't got tired of you yet?”

Faith pulls a face as her insides clench up. “It might be hard for you to get your head round but he likes having me around.”

“Saw him on the TV, after that big trial. And you know what I thought, Faithy? I thought there is one cold son of a bitch. Is he treating my little girl properly?”

In a million years, she never expected the concerned Mom routine. Didn't even know that Darla had it in her. “Why the hell are you calling me this early anyway? Hasn't your hangover had time to kick in yet?”

“I saw Xander in town yesterday and he said you seemed kinda tense.” And again with the personality transplant.

Something's really off with this conversation and then she realizes what it is. Darla's sober for the first time in living memory and it's making her voice soft, like she cares and it's making her feel, well, like a daughter.

“He's gone away on business and I'm on my own in this scary ass house and it's freaking me out,” she hears herself whining and she's transported back to the sagging couch in their front room, huddled under her quilt with Darla, as they bonded over bad husbands and bad boyfriends, eating HoHos and watching *The Breakfast Club*.

“Well, at least he hasn't kicked you out yet.” Darla snorts, then sighs. “You know, baby, you can come home if you want. I kinda got used to having you round the place.”

“Yeah, well…” Got used to having a Faith-shaped vodka dispenser. “So is that why you've been calling? Because I don't want to live with you. I want to stay here with him.” And it's funny that she
won't say his name to Darla because it seems wrong.

And then the sober woman who's inhabiting Darla's body starts to talk really fast, like she's got to get the words out before she forgets them. “Faithy, I'm sorry I've been such a bad mom to you. I love you, baby. Know things were rough with that lousy fuck of a father and the divorce but I never meant to take it out on you.”

And she's crying now because about the only constant thing in her life, before Wes, was the simmering rage and resentment she feels toward Darla. Not her dad because that's more to do with wanting to get as far away from him as possible but mothers were meant to love you, no matter what you did. And keep you safe. “Don't… just don't,” she snivels. “Don't fucking say you love me and that you're sorry because I don't believe you.”

It's really fucking weird to be curled up in Wes' bed, holding the phone to her ear so she can hear her mother apologize for eighteen years of treating her like nothing more than the thing that ruined her life and all she can do is sob.

“Baby, we need to talk about stuff. I could meet you for lunch,” Darla finally offers, when she's all cried out. “Jesus, Faithy. I'm trying here. You gonna meet me halfway or what?”

Sometimes when she was old enough to realize other girls' moms didn't go out and leave them on their own all night or come back drunk and throw up in the kitchen sink, she used to have this fantasy that Darla would suddenly turn into the perfect mom. Like an apple pie-baking mom who'd take her into the city in a Saturday afternoon and buy her cashmere sweaters and Guess jeans.

And lunch at the only diner in town that serves vodka with the meatloaf special really isn't her idea of fun. “What stuff do we need to talk about?” she asks, while she's trying to think of some way to wriggle out of quality time with mom.

There's a sharp intake of breath as Darla lights a cigarette. “That Morgan bitch for one thing.”

“Lilah?” For one second, she actually thinks she's going to be sick.

“I don't know what her first name is, Faith, all I know is she's been calling here every day, wanting to know all kinds of shit about you and telling me stuff I really don't wanna hear about that cold fish you're shacked up with.”

She's taking deep breaths now, trying to ignore the cold sweat that's covering her body. “Like what? What's she said about him?”

“If he's done one quarter of the things she reckons he's doing to you, Faith, I am coming up there and dragging you home by the scruff of your goddamn neck, do you hear me?” She's never heard Darla say anything like that before. Well, there's been plenty of things about dragging her out of clubs and bars by the scruff of her neck but not that white-hot fury at the thought of someone hurting her. Which is kinda ironic when you think about it. So ironic that she's gonna puke any second now.

“Mom, you fucking listen to me,” she hisses down the phone. “He hasn't done anything to me that I haven't fucking begged him to. And where the fuck was your Mom of the Year routine when your husband was making me wish that I'd never been born?”

“Faithy…”

“Don't ever fucking call me again,” she screams and then throws the phone so hard at the wall that the casing smashes to pieces.
She makes it to the bathroom in time to throw up a mouthful of bile, then slumps down on the tiles, with her fingers pressed tight against her forehead like she can stop herself thinking if she tries hard enough.

It's too much. All of it. Four days in a house that should have its own starring role in a horror film. Darla trying to pretend like she actually gives a fuck, weirdass no-one there phone hang-ups, not to mention that call which may or may not have been her father, and to top it all, Lilah Morgan trying to fuck her shit up.

And in the end, she gives up because it's Friday morning and he's coming back to her. Birds are singing, the sun is shining, and all is right in her world.

At lunch, she heads for the really swank beauty parlor a couple of blocks from the office to get waxed and pedicured and buffed and polished and when she gets back to the office he's there. Sitting on the edge of her desk, foot tapping against the floor and looking pointedly at his watch. And just for a second all she can do is stare at him because he glances up and his face is lit with this blinding smile just because she's walked into the room.

“You're late,” he says silkily and folds his arms so he can glare at her.

“And you're back.” She has to step outside the lines that he's already drawn so she can skip forward, throw her arms round him and press her lips against his.

He kisses her back, hands cupping her face gently before pushing her away. “Really, Faith, don't think you can soft-soap your way into my good books,” he chides her and that beloved bite is back where it belongs. “I'm severely displeased with you. I almost missed my flight because I spent half an hour trying to get you on the phone this morning and now you're half an hour late back from lunch.”

“I was late back from lunch the day before you left too,” she reminds him, hanging up her jacket. “Just can't kick that bad time-keeping habit of mine, sir.”

His eyes are all over her as she walks back toward him, causing tiny brush fires over her skin as he starts at the toes of her stilettos and travels up the curves that are covered by her tight black dress.

“I take it you're feeling better?” he asks, his voice dipping low so she gets this ache deep down in her belly. “No aches and pains that I should be aware of?”

“Not at the moment, but maybe you should ask me again in an hour.”

“I see. In my office now, Faith.”

And that swoony, delicious, yet totally horrifying feeling currently swirling through her stomach? She hopes that never goes away when he looks at her like that—summing her up, thoughtfully, eyes cold and without a flicker of emotion. She rides out the adrenaline rush of the fight-or-flight feeling he stirs in her, and her legs nearly don't follow him when he insouciantly slides off the desk and leaves the front office. Because she knows he's plotting how he's gonna lean her over the desk or take her over his lap, make her come when he says to, make her writhe and scream.

“Holy fucking shit!”

Her feet do move eventually, of course—she's standing in the doorway to his office now. The two chairs in front of the desk, the big cushy leather ones? They're stacked with carrier bags. Quite a few. More than four, at any rate. With names in spare modern type and swirly script that she sort of remembers reading in the “Dress Like the Stars!” sections of the gossip rags Darla left lying around the house.
“That’s certainly not the thanks I was expecting, Faith.” He’s still stern, but she can see that he’s secretly pleased that she’s so overwhelmed.

“Oh God. Wes. You really didn't need to...” She gestures at the pile and shakes her head slowly, at a loss.

“That's not for you to say, Faith. And, it's most unfortunate. Since you were so unconscionably late, I'm afraid the gifts will have to wait until after we had a discussion about your recurring tardiness.”

Her face falls, pouty lip and everything. “Not even one first? Since you were gone so long?” She plays up the naughty, spoiled mistress bit; strides across the room, hips swaying, snatching the first bag she can grab. But he's there a split second later, not succeeding at prying her fingers away.

“Please, Wes? I haven't been that bad. It's only a few minutes, really.” But no amount of cajoling will work now. He's got her by the wrists, stroking the divot between wrist and palm softly with his thumb, and she's practically whimpering by the time she drops the bag to the floor.

“That's better. Now, do we understand each other? It goes without saying that I'd rather not restrain you.” He caresses her palms, and it's like he's stroking her clit instead, sending a new wave of lust straight through her. It's all she can do not to kiss that pretty angry mouth of his.

“Yes, sir.” She barely gets the words out.

“Good,” he purrs at her, suddenly dropping her hands. “Now, have a seat.”

She's about to ask where, exactly, since every possible square inch of the ass-swallowing chairs are covered with bags, when she notices the little desk is back. With the cunning little blue typewriter.

She looks at him, confused. “I thought...” When his eyebrow shoots up, the words dry up in her throat, fall away unsaid.

“I thought you were going to spank me.”

“Yes, Faith?”

“Nothing. Nothing,” she mutters, sliding into the little stool, ankles crossed demurely. It's impossibly uncomfortable, the little seat, the spindly, creaky desk. She can't imagine staying here long; can't imagine what he could possibly want her to do.

He's behind her now, brushing her hair back from her shoulders, then slipping a cool black silk scarf over her eyes, tying it just so. Suddenly, it's very clear what she's to do, and tension jostles the greedy heat creeping over her skin.

He leans over, murmurs in her ear. “How many days was I gone, Faith?”

“Four, sir.”

“And how many days did you come back late from your lunch hour? And the emphasis is on hour, Faith.”

“Four, sir.”

“I see a theme.” He laughs harshly. “And how late were you each day?”

Fuck. She can't remember the first day. Fifteen, twenty, maybe? His hands are still stroking her hair, her neck. As if it weren't hard enough to concentrate already.

“Fifteen the first day. Twenty the next? And thirty the last two,” she decides. That sounds about
“That’s nearly a hundred minutes, Faith. Over four days?” His hands pause on her shoulders, grip them tightly.

“Yes, sir.”

“You are impossible, Faith. I can only hope that this little exercise will instill you with a better appreciation of other people’s time.” He sighs, traces one finger down her spine, all the way down. She tries not to shiver, but doesn’t succeed. “And do sit up straight.” She can tell he’s very nearly really annoyed by that flaw.

“Now then. You’ll find the paper next to the typewriter.” Her hand stretches out cautiously, and she finds a short stack of his thick bond paper. “You will type a little epigram, Faith. Four hundred times, with no errors. Before the hour is up.”

Four hundred? And what time was it anyway? Her brain seizes up. It’s not that she can’t touch type —of course she can, fast too—she’s almost up to 120 words a minute now. But, everyone looks down sometimes, right? Sometimes you lose your place, your fingers wander off the right key. And how will she know if she’s made an error, if she can’t see? And how the hell will she make sure the paper's lined up just right?

“Sir, I...”

He cuts her off. “Repeat after me: “Punctuality is the stern virtue of men of business…””

She parrots back the first phrase, careful the swallow the quiver of nervousness that's creeping into her voice.

“...and the graceful courtesy of princes.' Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton.”

She repeats it back again, but stumbles over the last name. “Bulwer-Lytton. With a double ‘t’, sir?”

“That's correct, Faith. It would seem your understanding of the vagaries of English surnames has improved greatly. For that, I will do you the favor of inserting each sheet into the typewriter, when you've finished with the previous one.”

Oh shit. How's she gonna know when she's gotten to the bottom of the page? She's about to open her mouth when he answers the question for her.

“Fifty per page, Faith. Keep count. You have fifteen minutes.”

Eight pages in fifteen minutes. She gulps, feeling the cold trickle of sweat starting right at the back of her neck where the blindfold is gathered. Damn thing is fucking itchy.

And she’s resentful, yeah, because four days away from him and this is what she fucking gets.

But she pushes all that aside. She knows he’ll make it all worth her while—she just has to work a little for it. So she steels herself, sits up straight and proud in that cramped, cheap-ass chair and places her fingers in model-perfect position at the keyboard. “Ready, sir.”

“Good, Faith,” he drawls. “Now.”

And she starts in, her fingers a blur across the keys. She’s really proud of the fact that she’s got the quotation down pretty well, but for some reason the difficulty is in remembering the “G.” Once she
stumbles on that for the first time, it starts this chain reaction and the next time around (her twenty-fourth, she’s keeping careful count), she types “Lyon” instead of “Lytton.” She can sense it. That must be her weird super-power. Just her luck not to get something cool like invincibility or X-ray vision, but a fucking sixth sense for **typographical** errors. “Fuck!” she yelps, before she can stop herself.

She half-expects a ruler to come rapping down hard on her knuckles for her little outburst, but all she hears is the disapproving cluck of Wes’ tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“That’s five, Faith. And I’ll pretend I didn’t hear a certain invective. But you had better not say it again.”

*Five* mistakes? She’s surprised. But she doesn’t let it register because she’s got seven more pages to go. Wes slides a sheet of linen bond into the typewriter, advances it in the carriage, and whispers, “Ready.”

And again. And again. And again. Halfway there and her fingers are starting to cramp. She’s not used to typing with such speed, and without breaks. She wants nothing more than to pause for a second and rest her aching fingers. But she’s trying to beat the clock, and it’s a point of pride at this point that she finish—because she’s pretty damn sure that Wes is going to take her over his knee and give her a seeing-to for every misplaced comma, transposed letter, and dropped consonant in the entire fucking thing.

She’s really quite fond of his reward system.

And, dammit! She bites back another curse. She’s hates that she’s so easily distracted. Was that forty-four now, or forty-five? Now the cold sweat is back. She’ll just have to guess. But five more and Wes is pulling the paper from the machine and she’s sure he’s put them all in an impeccable little pile.

Her fingers are still poised at the ready but he walks up behind her and starts to undo the blindfold. Then he stops. “You’re done, Faith.” He doesn’t sound pleased and her relief is turning just as abruptly to a knot of nervous anticipation in her stomach. He leans in close to her ear and dammit if his crisp, caramel-smooth enunciation isn’t having the usual effect. She’s so fucking wet. And if he clucks his tongue again she’ll be a puddle on the floor. “Page two should be framed. But beyond that? A rather dispiriting showing. Twenty-three mistakes all told, and you were two minutes over your allotted time. I’m terribly disappointed.” His hands are resting on her shoulders, and it takes all her willpower not to rest her head against them. It’s been too long.

One hand strays to her breast, index and forefinger pinching her nipple through the fabric of her dress. “So, Faith. What should your punishment be? Would you like to choose?”

Choose? That means thinking, right? And all she can get her mind to do is picture his cock, hard and hot against her, in her, or his fingers, those long, elegant fingers, touching skin he’s heated and slicked just by being there beside her after an eternity of waiting.

“I’m waiting.”

Icy cold whisper and a second warning pinch to punctuate it.

“Sorry, I’m just... I have to choose?” She tries to focus, swallows and straightens her back, hoping that’ll stave off another pinch, because fuck, she might come just from that. “You mean like last time?” She remembers the ruler smacking down in a flurry of blows and fuck, that’d been thirty seconds. She can’t take two minutes of Wes in fast forward speed.
But it’d mean in less than five minutes she’d be over that desk getting fucked and she doesn’t need to look to know Wes is hard, and the only reason he’s not trembling like she is, is because he’s so fucking good at this, but he’d like it if she chose that, wouldn’t he?

She sighs, folds her hands in her lap and looks straight ahead. “Twenty-three.” She hesitates. What’s he going to use on her? She wants it to be his hand, needs it to be.

“Why, Faith!” His voice, low and amused, curls around her the way his fingers are curved around her shoulders, gripping her tightly. “Can it be that you’ve finally appreciated the virtue of patience? Perhaps the next time we do this, should occasion arise, I’ll choose a Kierkegaard quotation: ‘Most men pursue pleasure with such breathless haste that they hurry past it.’ That’s a fault I strive to avoid.”

“Think you go in the opposite direction, Wes,” she says, unable to resist the dig because she was just realizing how deep a hole she’d dug for them both. Sure, Wes could deliver twenty-three slaps in under a minute, but after that quotation? She’ll be lucky if she gets to come in an hour.

Fuck. She bites back a wail of despair, at that thought, so that all that emerges is a faint, needy whimper, and waits to see what she’ll get for answering him back—and gets his fingers threading through her hair, catching up a handful and tugging on it so her head tips back and she’s staring up into Wesley’s face, taut with the control he’s mastered, blue eyes dark with arousal. “Really? Much as I value your observations on my character, Faith, might I suggest that you save them for a time when I’m not about to administer a well-earned reprimand? For your own sake?”

Well, isn’t he just so kind and fucking considerate? “Yes, sir,” she says, snapping out the words and biting back another clever remark.

“Very well.”

He’s still pretty upside down, she thinks hazily, and she loses herself in a silent, appreciative contemplation of the clean, straight line of his jaw and the ways his lips are shaped to be kissed, until he sighs, releases her and strides over to the bags.

“Perhaps you could have one present now,” he says. “Page two was perfect after all, and I believe in rewarding achievement quite as much as punishing failure.”

_Good to know_, she thinks wryly, trying to think of any times she’s earned a reward that didn’t leave a sting in her tail.

Curiosity swirls through the lust as he rummages through the bags. Fuck, so many of them. It’s not so much that she wants the gifts, though she does, she really fucking does, as seeing that, yes, he’s been thinking about her, has made time to shop. She’s picturing him stalking into shops, late for appointments, quivering with the impatience that he’s got in fucking spades when it comes to being on time, pointing at stuff, snapping his fingers, making the assistants run, or giving them that slow smile of his, dropping his voice right down and charming them into giggles and sighs and fluttering eyelashes. She’s pouting just thinking about that.

Looks like mostly clothes, but she’s already head to toe in what he thinks the ideal secretary should be wearing; corset sheathing her, silky panties caressing her, high heels stretching her calf muscles taut, so she’s really wondering.

Wes straightens, with not one, but two, small gift bags dangling from his fingers, and walks over to her. “Another choice,” he says with a smile she doesn’t trust one little fucking bit.
She stares wide-eyed at what spills out of the bags as she tips them up on the desk; a slither of black Italian leather, supple and soft, the buckle on the belt silver and square, echoing the watch that’s clasped around her wrist. It’s meant for jeans but it probably cost more than the last three pairs she bought.

The second gift is a hair brush, the flat wooden oval of the back completely plain, the handle embossed in gold with words that shimmer in front of desire-dazzled eyes.

“Mason Pearson,” Wesley says helpfully. “English, of course.”

Figures.

“They were both bought with no ulterior motive, I promise,” Wesley says, and he’s almost convincing. “I simply remembered that your own hairbrush was a little the worse for wear.” He gives her hair a hundred strokes every morning, as it crackles and spits like an angry cat, then clings to his fingers; part of the morning routine she’s grown to love because she gets to watch him in the mirror, lips curved in a gentle smile as he takes care of her.

He picks them up and holds them out. “Well?”

She shakes her head slowly, takes them from him, and bends her head to brush a kiss against the hand he’ll use. “Told you that you didn’t have to bring me anything, Wes,” she says softly as she stands.

There’s a faint gleam of warmth in his eyes as his hand curls closed over the kiss and then he’s leading her over to the desk.

She doesn’t need to be told to get in position; she’s already leaning forward, legs spread, forearms flat on the desk top because she needs this. Maybe even more than his cock, though it’s pretty much a judgment call.

He’s been away four days and what with all the bullshit that’s been going on, she needs the simplicity of this; his hand on her ass, his cock in her cunt so that everything else just melts away.

“Lift up your skirt, Faith,” he orders and she wriggles the tight wool up over her hips. His fingers slide into the low waistband of her panties and push them down so they end up around her knees.

She lifts up her foot to shuffle them off. “No, leave them there.” And it should feel ridiculous to be bent over his desk, her panties halfway down her legs, stretched tight by her splayed pose but it doesn’t. Just makes her feel hotter.

And finally she feels the warm weight of his hands as he cups her ass, follows the contours and slips between her legs so he can graze the tips of his fingers over her newly waxed mound. He makes an appreciative noise but he’s already moving his hand, skirting the lips of her pussy.

“Tell me something, Faith,” he says conversationally. “How long have you been wet?”

The tip of his finger is circling her clit but not touching it, which makes thinking really hard. “Um, when you said, ’In my office, now’, she mutters, almost swaying with the force of her want but managing to hold herself in check.

“And I believe I was very explicit in my instructions while I was in New York that you were not to touch yourself, not to…”

“I didn’t!” she protests indignantly and bucks against the edge of the desk as he pinches her clit hard.
“Don't interrupt,” he barks and then soothes the hurt away with the pads of his fingers so she's counting backward from a hundred and trying to remember song lyrics, anything not to come.

“Wes,” she pleads when he starts rubbing her clit with his thumb. “I'm going to come if you keep doing that.”

The fucking bastard just speeds up. “No you won't, Faith, because I haven't given you permission.”

And just when she's right on the edge of the cliff, peering down and about to go free-fall, he takes his fingers away and brings the flat of his hand down sharply across the tops of her thighs.

“Count!”

“One.”

He spanks her hard. Really hard. So she's rocking forward with each new blow and he follows the movement of her body, keeping his hand on her stinging flesh so it seems like every smack lasts an eternity and she can't think of anyone or anything but him and how he makes the rest of the world slip away so all there is is this.

“Twenty-two,” she cries out as he strikes her on the softest part of her ass and he takes his hands away. She can hear the soft swish of his belt being undone and the rasp of his zipper and much as she loves the pre-show, she can't wait for it to be done so she gets his cock.

His hand slams down, right between her legs this time, plunging two fingers into her, before she's even finished sounding out the number.

“You did that very well, Faith. You only lost your place once, which is a marked improvement on the last time.”

“Thank you, sir,” she says on automatic pilot because how is she meant to think with his fingers twisting deeper and deeper inside her and the wet head of his cock nudging against the crease of her thigh and buttock?

“But it occurs to me that I've only addressed your secretarial shortcomings,” he muses. “There's still the matter of your shoddy timekeeping.”

She doesn't answer for a while because the whole not moving/not coming problem is back but eventually he stills his fingers for a second, because he's all fucking heart. “Did you want to say something?”

“I could owe you,” she suggests shakily, trying to lift her torso slightly off the desk because her breasts are so tight and swollen that the friction is getting too much.

He places a hand on the small of her back and pushes her back down. “I have a much better idea,” he drawls as he slams his cock into her and in the same motion, brings his palm cracking down on her ass again. “Two birds, one stone.”

Thank God, he's not bitching at her to count his thrusts or the slaps because they're too fast and frequent and she's surprised that she hasn't gouged holes in the desk with her nails.

As it is, she's reached the stage where she's beyond words. All she can do is moan in an increasingly higher pitch as the pistoning of his cock inside her is sweetened by the force with which he hits her. She clutches around him, wriggling and wiggling frantically until he grabs a handful of her hair and tugs her up.
“You can come now, Faith,” he whispers, his breath ragged and hot in her ear as he pulls harder on her hair. It's all she needs to squeeze the muscles of her cunt almost viciously tight round his cock and give an ungodly scream as she feels herself come undone.

She collapses onto the desk, whimpering, still rippling round him, and his hands grip her hips, holding her steady as he spurts inside her.

The edge of the desk is digging into her belly and her legs are shaking with the effort of staying upright, plus the elastic of her panties still hooked round her knees is threatening to cut off her blood circulation but still… She loves the weight of him across her back, his spent cock half-hard still and twitching inside her and when he makes a move to lift himself away, she gives a tiny mewl of protest.

He strokes her hair out of the way so he can press a hot kiss against the back of her neck. “If you don't let me get up, how am I going to give you your presents?” he asks her and he sounds so fucking tender and sweet that she can feel the fierce prickle of tears.

“I don't need presents.”

“Well, I suppose I could send them back,” he says, gently straightening her up and smoothing down her skirt, while she kicks off the stupid panties once and for all.

That's so not what she meant at all. “I said I don't need them,” she corrects him with a pouty smile. “But I still want them. Rather have a kiss right now though.”

And when he sits down in his big, lawyer's chair and she climbs onto his lap and winds her arms round her neck? Just as damn good as the spanking and fucking. Maybe even better.

It takes a lot to distract her when he's taking tiny sips from her lips like she's a bottle of one of his really expensive wines. But as he tilts his head so he can fasten his mouth to the spot behind her ear, which makes her curl even tighter around him, she catches a white flash of something out of the corner of her eye.

“Huh? Do you think it's going to storm?” she asks him, squinting out of the window at the clear, blue sky. “Was that lightning?”

He catches the plump flesh of her earlobe between his teeth and worries at it. “I'm trying to seduce you, Faith, and all this talk of the weather is rather off-putting.”

She giggles and pulls him down for a wet, sloppy kiss. “Don't be dumb, Wes. I'm already totally seduced. I'm, like, in a constant state of seduction.”

But the moment's gone and he's already looking at his watch and giving her an apologetic look. “They're sending someone from the security firm to have a look at the alarm,” he reminds her. “In half an hour.”

“They reckoned it was local kids,” she says, sliding off his lap. “Said they'd have to reset the alarm and replace the front of it. I got a quote.” And she gives him her most convincing, doe-eyed look even though it sits about as well on her as a white lacy ball gown would.

He gives her a light swat on her tender ass. “I do hope you're not fishing for compliments or expecting your presents until later on this evening,” he says sternly, but his mouth is quirking upwards and she can't help it.

“Oh, c'mon Wes. Just one,” she whines but he's already gathering up the bags and holding them out
of reach of her eager little hands. “Tonight, Faith. You can open every single bag and try on all the beautiful things I bought, I might even let you keep a couple.”

And she's howling with mock-outrage as he ushers her out of the office.

***

The security guy is already waiting for them, when they pull into the driveway. She leaves Wes (and all the fucking bags from Marc Jacobs and Miu Miu and Barneys) outside and dives into all the rooms she's been in over the past four days to check for remnants of junk food binges and sly cigarettes she's sneaked when it's been too cold to go outside.

When she's satisfied that the place has been Wes-proofed, she climbs the stairs, reveling in the twinges in her thighs, the aching emptiness of her cunt, even the feel of his spunk coating her thighs. Man, she really needs a shower.

She uses the en suite in her room, even though she's been camped out in his bed while he's away. Figures he'll want to clean up. Once she's squeaky clean, she tugs on an old vintage sundress and wanders into his room.

He's sitting on the bed, still dressed in his suit, with the carving knives and her smashed cellphone arranged on the covers.

“Is there something you want to tell me, Faith?” he asks her carefully and she's almost ready to spill it all out. The phone calls and Darla and how fucking scared she was without him, but she stops herself just in time. She's not fucking helpless and she can't cling to him like she is, no matter how tempting he makes it. Sooner or later, he'll have to go away and she'd rather be terrified and in his house, smelling his shirts and stroking the covers of the books he's read, then in a sterile hotel room with scratchy sheets.

“I'm just glad you're back, Wes,” she says simply, scuffing her bare toes into the deep pile of the carpet.

He runs the pad of his thumb along the sharp blade of one of the knives. “We have a deal, Faith,” he reminds her softly. “You never have to hide anything from me.”

She nods. “I know.” But there's hiding stuff and then there's just wanting things to be perfect because he's come home. All the other stuff can wait until tomorrow or the day after that or the day after that…

“If you were frightened of being on your own in the house after the alarm had been tampered with, you should have called me,” he says, standing up and wrapping his arms round her. She sinks into the embrace.

“I was fine,” she insists. “But your house makes these freaky noises and there ain't much you can do about that when you're in the Tri-State Area.”

He kisses the top of her head. “And how did you manage to inflict so much damage on your poor defenseless phone?”

She shrugs out of his arms and follows his gaze to the dent in the wall where she'd thrown the phone. But no fucking way is she telling him about Darla's phone call. Because then it's back to Lilah and the things she's been spreading about him, making what they have seem like this perverted game where she's the helpless teenybopper in thrall to the older, richer man. And he'll get that look, that icy, furious look and everything will be fucked up.
“If I tell you, you'll think I'm so fucking immature,” she begins, noting the way his jaw tightens when she swears, which is exactly why she did it.

He taps her lightly on the nose with his finger. “Does this explanation have to involve expletives?”

“Well, no, I guess not,” she decides and she's playing for time, searching around for a story he'll find convincing, entertaining. “See, I'm in bed last night and I hear this noise and I think it's just your pipes in the bathroom and then I hear it again and I'm almost dropping off to sleep and, fuck! Wes, it was so loud and I panicked and just threw the phone in the general direction.”

He's trying really hard not to laugh, willing his features to look all concerned and caring. “You poor thing,” he coos. “And did some bloodsucking fiend suddenly burst out of my bathroom?”

She bangs into him with her hip, giving him a glare that's as much about all the shit that she's actually protecting him from, as it is part of her Oscar-winning performance. “Nah! I hadn't turned the shower off properly and it was making these weirdass gurgling noises.”

He does laugh then. Throwing his head back and curving an arm round her shoulders, while she gives him her best pissed off girlfriend glare.

“Are you gonna laugh at me or are you gonna start with the big present giving?” she asks petulantly.

He gives her this look that freezes her in place. It’s not an icy glare of displeasure, exactly, but there’s just this flash of annoyance. “If I didn’t know better, Faith,” he snaps, “I’d say that tone was almost childish. I’d hoped that your years of temper tantrums were well behind you.”

She can’t help rolling her eyes and swatting at his arm playfully. “C’mon, Wes. I’ve been good.” She pauses. She flashes him a big grin “Or, at least, amenable.”

He smiles at her choice of words. That seems to put the thaw in him, because his tone shifts to one of bemused indulgence. “All right. Which one would you like to open first?”

Her eyes are nearly bugging out of her head at the choices. It’s like it’s Christmas with all these luxuriously wrapped packages just for her. It’s the Christmas she’s never had, at any rate.

She doesn’t even know what a Miu Miu is, but she wants it more than anything. She only pauses because she’s not sure how to pronounce it properly and she doesn’t want to stumble over it in front of Wes. So she just points at the largest box.

“That one? Are you sure?” One eyebrow is raised and his arms are crossed but he seems more amused than anything else. “The biggest box goes first, hmm?”

She grins. “Yeah, why the hell not?” It’s not like she gets presents every day. Or even on her birthday—especially if Darla’s drunk down all the mad money and her dad’s broke as usual. So she’s gonna do this her way.

“Fair enough. Go on then.”

It’s in this beautiful box, wrapped up all crisp and perfect with a ribbon and she almost doesn’t even want to open it. Almost. The Kierkegaard must still be fresh in her mind, though, because she takes her time with everything. She undoes the ribbon with exacting carefulness, not wanting to mess it up in any way.

Nestled inside the box is this lovely slip of a dress, a fluttering, ethereal thing that she’s afraid to touch in case it dissipates between her clumsy fingers. It’s a rich deep plum color that she’d never
have thought of wearing but now that she’s seen it she knows it will be beautiful on her.

“It’s gorgeous. Wes, I don’t know what to—” She turns to him, clearly touched.

He smiles, enjoying her obvious pleasure. “I’d tell you to try it on but you haven’t quite reached the right box yet.”

Now that certainly piques her curiosity, but he doesn’t say a word, just nods toward the small mountain of bags and boxes.

The second biggest box says “Marc Jacobs” on it in sleek, rounded capitals, and she thinks she’s actually heard of him.

She’s not sure what to expect, but she gets another delicate slip of a thing. It’s such a froth of lace and ribbon and fabric that she doesn’t even know what it is at first. When she pulls it out of the box she sees that it’s a draped top, with two layers of pale yellow silk and a little lace flower gathered at the waist. The silk glides delicately through her fingers, so cool and fluid to the touch. It’s giving her a little thrill and she hasn’t even put it on yet.

“This one?” she asks hopefully.

He shakes his head, no. She almost pouts but hey, she’s got a few more boxes to open and anyway, she’ll get to play dress-up (and dress-down) later.

There are two more Marc Jacobs boxes, the prospect of which makes her positively giddy with delight. She wonders which one she should open—one looks like a shoe box, and the other is larger, almost a bit unwieldy. She decides upon a reverse strategy this time around, going for the smaller box.

Wes must like that because the corners of his mouth turn up just a little bit.

So yeah, she knows they’re going to be shoes. But they’re not like any shoes she’s ever seen before. Because the only shoes she has in her wardrobe fall into two categories: the practical (sneakers, boots, flip flops) and the impractical (nosebleed high platforms and heels, mostly for clubbing-with-Xander purposes).

These aren’t anything like the cheap leather or pleather that she’s all too used to—they’re this soft, buttery leather in the loveliest shade of pink. The shoe is lined in a darker shade of pink that matches the budding peonies she’s seen in Wes’ garden. There are two parallel cut-outs over the widest part of the toe and the tiniest little leather bows on the side. The heel is pretty damn high, but nothing she hasn’t gotten used to already thanks to all her practice sessions. She just runs her fingers appreciatively over the leather, not wanting to ruin the moment with her usual babble.

“I believe you’ve found the right box, Faith.”

“Oh, do you want me to—”

He smiles slowly. “Try them on? You could say that.”

She kicks off her scuffed Old Navy flip flops and picks up one shoe. She’s all ready to tip her foot into it when Wes stops her.

“From the moment I saw them in the window, I knew I just had to have them for you. They’re so classic, and yet there’s something so insouciant about them. And the color—ah.” He closes his eyes for a second, as though he’s dredging up a sense memory of them, even though they’re sitting right
in front of him. His eyes drift open again. “Finding these shoes in your size almost made me late for a meeting in midtown.”

“They’re beautiful, Wes, don’t get me wrong, but they’re just shoes…”

But he keeps going, almost talking over her, as though he’s in some sort of reverie. “I was standing in the store, thinking about which top I wanted to buy for you, and my gaze kept flickering back to them. Suddenly I had the most charming vision of you, bent over the desk in my study, wearing nothing but the shoes and perhaps a swift and matching reddening of your lovely arse.” He seems to drift back to the present, and he looks directly at her. “Faced with that, well, of course I had to buy them.”

She’s pretty sure it's her other cheeks that are the right shade of pink now. She presses her hands over them, trying to push the rush of blood back down, trying to keep tears from welling up and ruining the moment.

“Oh my.” Her voice is a weak little croak. She doesn't want to speak at all, just wants to sit here and run her fingers over the pink buttery leather, make it a good luck charm.

Because they're not just shoes after all.

They're him, a thousand miles away, in a fancy boutique, buying her clothes, running late. Running late! But only thinking of her. Of pleasing her. Of making her look beautiful.

The weight of this is crushing her heart, making it hard to breathe now on top of everything else. Maybe it would just be best to dive headfirst into the heap of expensive silk and leather and disappear forever.

“Oh Faith, that can't embarrass you.” He's been hovering over her expectantly, handing her packages, but now he shoves the boxes and bags and tissue aside, sits down on the bed and pulls her close.

“No. No. It's just overwhelming, y'know? This is more presents in one go than I've gotten in my entire life, Wes.” Her voice cracks, but she doesn't even try and hide it.

He strokes her chin, keeps it from quivering. “Oh, well. That's a relief. I thought maybe I'd finally found the one thing you wouldn't indulge me in.”

She has to laugh at that, sniffling and shaking the tears away. “Of course not! I mean, come on, it's not like there's vegetables involved.”

He looks vaguely horrified that she's brought it up. “Kidding! Kidding!” she blurts.

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“Of course you are.” He's so stern now—but be can only keep his face straight for about three seconds before he's laughing too. He snakes an arm around behind her, offers the odd-shaped box.

“Another present?”

“Thanks.” she rolls her eyes and snatches it out of his hands, tilts up the lid slowly. “Oh God, Wes. I don't need a purse too!” She pulls it out of the dustcover; it's a squat oblong thing—black—with short handles, two pod-like pockets. And a buckle, the purpose of which seems only to be decorative.

“Yes, you do.”

“What's wrong with my purse?”
“It's got that eerie little cartoon girl on it.”

“Emily?”

“Yes.”

“She's not eerie. She's *strange*. Emily the Strange.” He looks miffed. “Oh, come on, Wes. I love this. How could I not? It's gorgeous.” The leather's not as soft as the shoes, of course, but it's still wonderfully supple and warm and smells heavenly.

He just shakes his head, bemused. “I think that's enough presents for now.”

“Yeah, I've flown right past overwhelmed, gone straight to dazzled.” She kisses him playfully on the cheek. “Don't tell me there's more?”

“Just a few more. Not so grand as all this, though.” She can only imagine that whatever he means by not so grand, it will still be lovely. “Dinner now, I think. Do you agree?”

She nods seriously. “Then after, maybe we can take those shoes for a test drive.”

He pulls her up to standing, smacks her lightly across the bottom. “Get dressed, Faith.”

“But what should I wear?” She strikes a melodramatic pose. “I have all these new clothes and I just can't decide!”

“The plum silk, of course.” He pulls it out of the box, unfurling its full length, holding it before her, like an offering.

“Damn, Wes. You takin' me somewhere fancy?”

He just smiled that enigmatic smile he'd whip out when he had something up his sleeve. “You'll see.”

***

They dress impeccably for dinner—at a little Mexican hole-in-the-wall. No one speaks English, but everyone seems to know Wes. She realizes that's gonna happen everywhere they go—and she's beginning to understand why.

They're served cold Tecates and giant plates of hot enchiladas, beans, and rice—apparently on the house, though the tip Wes leaves is huge. And after it's all cleared away, leaving Faith groaningly full, a beautiful solemn girl younger than herself brings a plump baby to the table. Wes clucks at it indulgently, all the while firing off questions in Spanish to the mother. Faith doesn't catch much, seeing as she's skipped out of most of her Spanish classes, but she reads enough of the body language and knows a few key words. He's making sure her drunk, good-for-nothing ex-boyfriend is obeying his restraining order.

In the car on the way home, she strokes his thigh gently, absentmindedly. “Exactly how much pro bono work do you do, Wes?”

He clears his throat, thinks for a moment. “Not as much as I'd like, anymore. The Lilah Morgans of the world take up far too much of my time now, tying my clients up in pointless litigation. That's part of the reason I'd like to leave this grotty city eventually, maybe relocate to New York.”

The mention of Lilah makes her blood run cold, and Faith quickly shrugs it off.

She likes the thought of the two of them running reckless in New York, nothing to tie them down. It
seemed like an impossible dream two weeks ago, but it's inching toward reality daily.

“That sounds nice, Wes. Though I think everyone here that you've helped out would really miss you.” She hopes fervently that when the time comes, she isn't one of those people.

When he doesn't reply, eyes intent on the dark, winding road, she sighs heavily. She's full and content, and pleased she didn't spill anything on the dress. “Wake me up when we get home. I need a power nap before I try those shoes on.”

Chapter Forty

She’s drowsing, not sleeping, but there are long moments when the low growl of the engine and the silence of Wesley beside her drop away and then she’s dreaming, in swift snatches of color and light, jerking awake as the car hits a pothole or a sharp bend. The dreams are as ethereal and light as the clothes he’s given her, filled with Wesley’s arms around her, keeping her safe, Wesley’s eyes looking at her with the love and concern he’s learning to show, Wesley’s voice saying ‘We have a deal, Faith...never have to hide anything from me...never want you to think that I would hurt you...never let you down...you're having problems...come to me...let me help...’

And she’s trying to get to him, she really is, but it’s raining and she’s wearing these heels and they’re slipping and sliding and above her the sky’s dark and the lightning’s scaring her and Wes is so far away...

“Faith!”

She blinks awake and sees Wes giving her an exasperated, if indulgent glare. “What? I wasn’t asleep.”

“I sincerely hope you were,” Wesley says. “Or the drooling ceases to be merely messy and becomes worrying.”

She raises an instinctive hand to her mouth—drool? So not sexy—and then lashes out to punch his shoulder as he grins with satisfaction at fooling her. “Gonna make you pay for that,” she tells him with all the indignation she can muster when he’s chuckling and looking years younger.

“I tremble with apprehension,” he says, schooling his face to solemnity which doesn’t fool her one little bit. “Now, if you’re quite restored after your little snooze—”

“Power nap.”

“—perhaps we could go inside.”

He helps her out, the way he always has, ever since that first time, and she walks into the house which, now she’s with him, feels like home again. She’s kept it tidy, she really has, but Wes spends about ten minutes wandering around adjusting stuff and twitching cushions, until she loses patience, murmurs something about going to pee, and runs upstairs.

She does pee, and brushes her teeth, too, getting ready for whatever he has planned, primping and fussing but doing it fast. Twisting her head around, she manages to see her ass in the bathroom mirror. It’s still marked from the spanking she got at lunchtime, but only faintly, and it’s not even pink. Thinking about what it’s going to look like when he’s done making it match those killer shoes has her whimpering slightly, the sound echoing in the bathroom, startling her.

Stripping bare, she goes back to his bedroom and clears off the bed, stacking the presents, opened, and still waiting to be appreciated alike, on the floor.
Then she picks up the shoes and strokes them with a gentle, wondering finger before slipping into them. There’s a long mirror in the corner of the room and when she goes over to it, she can see a dim reflection of a Faith that shouldn’t exist because she’s beautiful, she’s loved, and she’s smiling.

And in these shoes? She’s fucking hot. They’re making her look more naked than she would have done without them and they’re just going to make Wesley...

“Oh, yes.”

There’s this hum of appreciation in his voice that only needs the temperature turning up beneath it to make it boil over into a throaty growl. Without turning, she watches Wesley walk toward her in the mirror and rest his hands on her shoulders.

“You look just as I imagined you would,” he tells her, as his hands move to up her breasts and his fingers tease at her nipples. “Just as beautiful.” One hand glides down and she widens her stance by a fraction so that he can rub against her clit, arching up into his touch and never taking her eyes off their reflection. “Would you like to see yourself come,” he asks her, kissing her neck, his cock already hard and nudging at her through his clothes, “see what I see?”

She shakes her head slowly, rolling it against his shoulder. “It wouldn’t be the same,” she whispers. “Not if I was watching. It wouldn’t be just yours then.”

His fingers ease inside her, into the slippery warmth, and he holds them still. “I don’t think I’d mind sharing that with you, but perhaps you’re right,” he whispers against her neck. It’s a weird conversation to be having maybe, but she’s getting used to that; which is why, when his fingers start to move, fucking her in a rhythm that’s remorseless and unrelenting, she’s not too thrown when he says, “What do I look like?”

She smiles at his reflection. That’s an easy one.

“If it starts with the letter, ‘p’, I’ll make your arse match the inside of the shoes,” he warns her, interpreting her smile without any difficulty and slowing his fingers.

She arches an eyebrow in a way he’d be proud of. “Oh, Wes, you really do need to work on your threats,” she says. “You look pretty when you come. Prettiest thing I’ve ever seen and I love to watch you because you’re mine then, right then and you’re not hiding anything, or holding back, you know?”

His fingers slip out of her and he spins her around. “Interesting response to a threat,” he murmurs silkily. “One might almost suspect that you want me to be quite severe with you.”

She can’t help squirming a little at that, rubbing against his clothes and wishing they weren’t there. “Can I change my answer?” she asks, hiding a grin against his shirt.

His hand pushes her chin up so she’s forced to meet that blue stare. “Possibly I might give you a second chance,” he says as if there’s an actual chance she can talk herself out of a peony-pink ass.

“You’re not pretty, you’re fucking pretty, Wes, and it makes me want to—”

But she never gets to finish that sentence, because he scoops her up and doesn’t stop kissing her until they reach the study and by then she’s forgotten what she was going to say because the belt and the brush are lying in the middle of the desk, in a pool of light from the single lamp and the rest of the room is deep in shadow.
Three hours later, her entire body still throbbing and twitching, she's wrapped up in the cashmere throw and taking tiny sips of brandy from the bowl-like glass he's holding to her mouth. His hand is shaking slightly.

Everything he's done to her keeps playing back in her head like her personal porno movie.

The way he'd made her crawl toward him on her hands and knees with the belt in her mouth.

“Slower,” he'd hissed. “Start again.”

Took her five goes and the end of the belt lashing across her buttocks before she'd slid forward on her knees, as slinky and as sinuous as a cat, winding her naked body around his legs as he'd sat, sprawled out on the big, leather chair like some dissolute dictator and begged him to hit her with the brush.

How sore her ass was when he'd finally flipped her over after thirty strokes of the flat of the brush against her cheeks. “I do believe that I've matched the shade perfectly,” he'd told her smugly. And the wool of his trousers had irritated her smarting flesh even more but he wouldn't let her move a muscle until he'd stroked the bristles softly over her sopping wet sex until she'd come.

There'd been this wild look in his eyes that she hadn't seen before, the way they darkly glittered over her flushed face like he could see right inside her, knew about all the lies she'd told him already that day and it just made her more desperate to please him now.

But he wouldn't let her touch him but made her sit in the chair, her legs hooked over each of the armrests and made her touch herself to his exact and explicit instructions until she came again.

“Why won't you fuck me?” she'd whined tearfully at him even as she rubbed just her index finger around her clit.

He'd given her a pitying look like he couldn't believe that she was that stupid. “How do you expect me to see those pretty shoes if I'm fucking you, Faith?”

She'd paused, racking her brains for some position that would put her feet right in front of his eyes while he fucked her into the middle of next week and then gave a tiny cry of frustration when she couldn't come up with anything.

When she'd pushed her hands down the side of the chair and refused to carry on because she wanted him to fuck her "right the fucking hell now", he'd got thin-lipped and beautiful in his fury.

Wedged his hand under her arm, hauled her up and spun her round so she was dizzy and stumbling on her pretty pink heels.

“If you won't do as I ask, then there's no point in having your hands free is there?” he'd told her grimly, pulling her arms behind her and wrapping the supple leather of the belt round her wrists.

Then and only then, he'd got on his knees, roughly pushed her legs apart and fucked her with his tongue, ignoring her groaned protests that she was going to fall over.

He'd lifted his glistening face to glare at her. “I expect you to have some semblance of control, Faith,” he'd hissed, tongue swiping slowly and deliberately to lick her juices off his bottom lip. “I wouldn't plan on being able to sit down at all this weekend if you can't remain standing.”
By the time his tongue and his teeth and his lips had coaxed her through another two orgasms, she was skirting the dark place somewhere between pain and pleasure, the muscles in her legs screaming, her clit so tender that all he had to do was gently blow on it to make her scream and her cunt nothing more than an empty, throbbing ache that only wanted to be filled.

He untied her hands long enough so he could pull them over her head and wrap the belt around her wrists again, before lifting her up and sitting her on the edge of the desk. Then he'd slowly unbuckled his belt, while she'd sat there panting and openmouthed, already able to feel his cock stretching her, as he pulled the length of leather slowly out from the belt loops.

She'd started to cry when he'd crouched down and bound her ankles with it because there was no way in hell he was going to be able to give her his cock with her thighs pressed tight together.

“Why are you crying, Faith?” he'd asked her tenderly, smoothing his thumbs over the tracks of her tears.

“I want you in me, I want to touch you,” she'd sobbed, shaking her head to get away from the soft touch of his sneaky hands. “Why are you making me wait? Why the fuck do you always make me wait when I want you so much?”

He'd kissed her then for the first time that evening, this slow, sweet exploration of her mouth, which had her straining against the leather bindings. “I only have to see you and I'm hard,” he'd whispered in her ear, rubbing his cock against her hip. “I touch you during the day like this,” he stroked her hair back behind her ears. “Inconsequential touches but they make me ache with the need to take you into my office, strip your clothes off and fuck you. You torment me in so many different ways, Faith.”

He didn't make it sound like a good thing and she'd frowned. “Like I piss you off?” she'd asked tremulously and he'd given her a feral smile.

“Did you know that when you're concentrating on something, your tongue pokes out of the corner of your mouth?” He'd stolen another kiss, tracing the seam of her lips with his tongue. “Or that when you walk across a room, your hips sway and I can't take my eyes off your delightful little arse?” That got her a sly little pinch on the hip. “So, as I said, Faith, you torment me. Make me want you all the time. You drive me to distraction without even being aware of it and that is why I make you wait.”

But he didn't make her wait after that because she was still crying and telling him that he never had to wait, he could have her any time he wanted. The only way he could fuck her, was to lie her down on pens and papers that dug into her back, lift her legs up so they were practically flat against her heaving chest and slowly, so very fucking slowly, push his cock into her constricted cunt, which had to be persuaded to let him in.

She'd been so wet that soon he could speed up, pistoning into her and telling her that she felt so tight that she was killing him. And she couldn't move, just ripple helplessly around the relentless length of him, make shuddering little cries as he pressed his thumb into her ass because he said that it was so pretty that he couldn't help himself.

After he'd come, his cock jerking and spurting inside her, and she was still lying there, moaning wordlessly because for the first time, ever he hadn't made her come; he'd slipped out of her and fucked her with the handle of the hairbrush. She'd come then, cursing and moaning, her ankles banging against her nose as he'd pressed the heel of his hand against her clit.

It didn't end after that, not even when he'd untied her ankles and carried her upstairs. He'd run her a bath, taken off the shoes and placed them carefully pack in the box where they floated on a sea of tissue paper, then placed her just as reverently in silky hot water that smelt of oranges and bergamot.
“Please untie my hands, Wes,” she'd begged. “I've got wicked aches and pains in my shoulder.”

But he'd shook his head and picked up the bottle of shampoo so he could squirt a dollop into his palms. “You have a word,” he'd reminded her gently. “You can use it at any time but the very fact that you're whining and sniffling but not actually saying it isn't doing much to persuade me to give in to your childish demands.”

By the time he'd washed her and dried her, laid her out on the bed and stroked every quivering inch of her with hands coated in scented oil, she was trembling. He'd spent what felt like days sucking on her nipples, dragging the flat of his tongue over the hard tips of her breasts until she thought she'd come just from that. But it took his cock again, sliding into her with these lazy languid movements that matched the glide of his tongue in her mouth, while she tugged at her wrists, which were now lashed to the headboard, so hard that she'd felt the skin tear.

“Your poor little hands,” he says to her now, kissing the red, bleeding marks that the belt has left and she nestles closer against him. “You can say the word, if you want, Faith. I won't think any less of you.”

“I didn't need to,” she murmurs, winding her sore arms round his neck and lifting up her mouth for a kiss, which he willingly gives. “It's up to me to decide when I want to use it, that's how it works. So stop being a pussy, Wes.”

“Ah, Faith, you have a mastery of the English language that leaves me quite awestruck.” And as he pulls her in closer so her head is on his shoulder and he can stroke the strands of her hair through his fingers, like he's mesmerized by them, she can't help but wonder if the reason she never says the word is because her absolute compliance is the only thing that she really has left to give him.

He's asked her to trust him, have faith in him, let him look after her and today she's managed to fuck all that up in one two minutes conversation. So, nope, she ain't gonna say that word any time soon. She's let him down enough already.

Chapter Forty-Two

If there's one thing she's still not used to, it's waking up to find the rest of the bed empty.

It's always a little disturbing and disorienting, in that first minute of wakefulness, to roll over aching for a good morning kiss or a cuddle and find his half of the bed empty. Not just empty, but cold and long vacated.

These are the times she wonders if he actually sleeps at all. In fact, she wouldn't believe he actually did if it wasn't for the fact that he was there when nightmares shoved her awake; when sometimes he'd hog the big cashmere blanket, leaving her cold and shivering and tugging her half back.

But this morning, his side's not exactly empty when she flops over, stretching her cramped arms. A note is propped up against to a round blue box.

Wear this and the contents of the other boxes. Breakfast in the garden.

She has to smile, blearily, because that long awaited 'x' is squashed up next to the scribbly 'W' of his signature.

The tingle of pleasure at that doesn't last long, though. Leaning out to peer over the edge of the bed and seeing there are three more boxes perfectly lined up to make a little path to the door, a sick-making wave of guilt and hangover (she did end up drinking a lot of brandy) creeps up her gut.
The same way it would when she lied to Darla.

Her old rule had been to remember every truth she'd bent the day before, so as not to slip up and have one tumble out over breakfast—even of if they weren't on speaking terms. She hasn't needed the ritual since moving in with Wes, and isn't exactly happy that she's starting it up again. No, not starting it up, just using it to get through breakfast. She'll tell it all to him later today anyway, or after some coffee at least.

That doesn't seem appease her flip-flopping stomach, though. She can't open these boxes. Can't. Not before a cigarette or two.

*There weren't any phone calls with no one at the other end.*
No cigarette butts at the end of the driveway.
No phone call from Darla.
No sneaking suspicion it wasn't kids that had broken the security gate.

She sets the mantra in her head, slides out the other side of the bed, and creeps down the hallway to grab her cigarettes from her room, sneaking into the unused guest bedroom at the end of the hall. It's the only place she can get to up here without running into him first. She's leaned out the window here, on those interminable cold nights without him, smoking and examining the trees that fenced in that end of the house, a buffer from the neighbors.

This time, though, she's half-edgy that he'll walk in on her, and drag her off for another round of punishment for leaving gifts unopened and smoking in the house. Not exactly what she wants before breakfast.

Nervously, she sucks down three cigarettes in a row, trying to keep an eye one the door, and flicking the butts into the neighbors' trees.

Almost home free, there, Faith, she thinks as she cracks the door to slide back into his room when his voice startles her, and makes the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

“Faith. You're up.” He's paused at the landing of the stairs. “I was just coming to make sure you were still actually asleep and not in some sort of vegetative state.”

“Hey, yeah. I'm up.” She backs closer to the door willing the lingering scent of smoke to dissipate before he reaches her. “I wanted to take a shower before I opened the boxes, but I forgot something.”

Miraculously, he thinks nothing of it, just makes a noncommittal noise and nods, then starts back down the stairs. “Don't take too long,” he calls over his shoulder. “Or the coffee will be cold.”

Her heart's thumping madly, half from the nicotine rush and half from starting the day with another lie. But the only one for today, she tells herself firmly. That's it.

Deciding not to linger in the bedroom in case he returns, she gathers up all the boxes and squirrels them away to her room. And locks the door.

The big royal blue box—the round one—contains a huge sage green straw hat. Do people still wear hats? It's gorgeous though, and it's another item that didn't come on the cheap—that much is obvious from the gold embossing on the lid of the box to the perfect asymmetrical swoop of the brim to the
hand-made peony-pink silk flower perched on the right half. There's another delicate dress, the modern designer equivalent of one of her favorite vintage finds: a shirtwaist from the ’40’s, only this one is silk and has tiny pearl buttons up the front and a matching cashmere shrug. And the smallest box contains appropriate silk lingerie, including a garter belt and stockings.

She slips it all on after a quick shower, and her nervousness all but disappears as she relishes the silk against her skin. Deciding against any makeup, she towels her hair dry as much as possible and puts on the hat.

Standing there in the finished product, her reflection in the mirror is a little astonishing—a little too astonishing. She looks so proper. Not prissy or anything. Proper. The only flaw is the red raw skin on her wrist. Rubbing it absentmindedly, she remembers something about how it's actually not proper to wear hats indoors, carefully removes it, and makes her way down to the garden.

Chapter Forty-Three

The breakfast is over before he comments on her wrists, though he had plenty to say about how pretty she looks, lingering on the word as if it’s getting to be his favorite.

In the clear perfection of the late spring morning, with birds singing, flowers unfurling petals and a blue, blue sky, because Wes seems to have even the fucking weather dancing when he snaps his fingers, the marks on her wrist look out of place.

But they belong in the picture as much as the delicate china she’s drinking from; Minton’s Haddon Hall pattern, he tells her when she runs a finger over the rich green rim of her cup, that matches the grass at her feet so well; his grandmother’s once. They belong because, like the clothes she’s wearing, Wes put them on her.

“I hope...” He pauses, then runs his finger over the marks, tracing them so gently that it feels as if he’s done no more than breathe against her skin. “I hope you understand that you never have to wake up like this if you don’t want to.”

“Thought we covered this last night, Wes,” she says, the words coming out sharper than they should have. “You gave me that word and if I don’t say it, I don’t. It looks worse than it feels and I bruise easy, heal fast.”

It’s what Darla used to say when Faith came to her crying after a spill off her bike or a fall from a tree. Her version of TLC. Wes doesn’t like it any more than she used to from the way he winces and for some reason he’s in a question-asking mood, so she braces herself, hoping he’s not going to go near anything she really doesn’t want to discuss.

“Faith—do you wish I were different?” he asks, and props to Wes for doing this in broad fucking daylight, face to face, not in the dark, except, not, because her face is hot and that’s really fucking silly. He knows every inch, every inch, of her body intimately—and intimately takes on a whole new meaning with Wes—but talking about it, what they do, just makes her feel awkward.

“No,” she says. There’s silence and she’s learned to interpret his oh so fucking eloquent silences by now; this one means, ‘Faith, I’d appreciate a rather more detailed reply and please sit up straight when you talk to me.’

So she tries again. “If you were different, you wouldn’t be you. And I kinda like you.” She takes one of those deep breaths that never really do anything useful and adds, “And it’s not just you, is it? It’s me too. Whatever you are, so am I.”
He’s staring at her now, as if he’s pulling every word apart, every expression and fuck, he’s stripping her bare.

“I don’t think so,” he says finally. “I don’t see how you—you indulge me, and I’m—”

What the fuck?

“Wes? Indulge you? And were you about to say you’re fucking grateful?” She spits the words out and he’s looking shocked, the way he always does when she loses it, as if he’s not used to it. Which makes no sense, since she bets Lilah wasn’t all that restrained when it came to tantrums. “You indulge me with all these presents, and hey, you hadn’t better ever buy them thinking they’re some kind of payment—”

Her voice is rising high enough with outrage to crack the pitcher of freshly squeezed OJ and he goes to his knees on the grass and captures her hands. “Finish that sentence and I’ll be most annoyed,” he says, sounding stern, and somehow that works to calm her better than an apology would, because that’s not Wes and it’s Wes she wants right now. A Wes who’s not freaking because he went a little too far, a Wes who’s in charge because she doesn’t trust herself to be, not given the mess her life’s in.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “Just—don’t spoil it, Wes, y’know? Don’t make me feel I’m part of something you feel guilty about because I’m not. I want this. Want you this way.”

The finger he touched her bruised, torn skin with brushes against her lips. “Even when I make you wait?” he says, with a smile that’s barely there.

“Even then.” She pouts. “Though you really shouldn’t, Wes. Can’t be good for you.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Well, now, I hadn’t considered the deleterious physical effects. Thank you for your concern.”

“You’re not going to stop doing it, are you?” she asks with a resignation she’s not entirely faking.

“I don’t think so,” he says. "Though I suppose, on occasion, we could experiment with a more rapid encounter.”

He’s on his feet as he says it and picking up a throw draped over one of the garden chairs and spreading it out on the lawn. “You told me last night that I could have you anytime I wanted,” he murmurs. “I want you now, Faith.”

She swallows. “Sure. Uh, inside, maybe?”

He lies down on the dark blue blanket and pats it. “No. Right here. Right now.” He looks at her. “I’m waiting,” he says, “and you’re correct. It’s not much fun at all.”

She rolls her eyes and glances around. There’s a high wall, no way anyone can see in, but fuck, they’re outside and it’s like ten o’clock in the morning.

“Faith...”

It’s that insinuating drawl and she moans. Can’t resist it and before she registers what she’s doing she’s taking off her hat and going to lie beside him.

“Aren’t you a little overdressed?” he says, with his fingers flicking open buttons like peas popping from a pod. He pulls the dress over her head and tosses it onto a chair then sends her bra after it. The
sun’s warm on her skin but her nipples pucker and tighten as he stares at them and when his hand slides inside her panties she’s as wet as she always is and as ready.

He kicks off his trousers but leaves on his shirt. His cock’s hard and she reaches out to stroke it as he kneels beside her, loving the catch of his breath as she rubs her hurt wrist along it, feeling the thin, stretched skin shift around the core. She twists around and takes it in her mouth for a moment, as his hand caresses her hair, tasting him, musky and warm against her tongue.

Then he pushes her back gently, spreads her legs, and slides into her and fucks her for the longest time, in the grass, in the light, kissing her mouth as she cries out his name and whispering hers back to her as if it’s precious.

And when she takes him his coffee on Monday morning, she looks at him and he smiles and says softly, “You’re making me wait right now, Faith.”

And she’s blushing when she goes back to her desk, and smiling and tingling when she picks up the phone that’s ringing insistently.

“Mr. Wyndam-Pryce’s— “

“I know his name, Faith,” says her dad. “Know the name of the fucking pervert you’re sleeping with.”

And the sun stops shining, just like that.

Chapter Forty-Four

She’s never been much good at anything. All her life there’s been people lining up to tell her that she’s useless, stupid, never going to amount to anything. But when it comes to lying, she goes all the way to the top of the class, straight As every fucking time.

They go to the diner together and she sits there eating the mushroom omelet and drinking the milk that he’s ordered for her. And she can smile and nod and reply to his conversation in all the right places. Even manages to squeeze his fingers affectionately when he rests his hand on her knee.

Then when they're back in the office and he's lingering by her desk, straightening up the red Sharpies so they're in an even line, she says casually, “Oh yeah, Xand rang earlier, wants me to hang out tonight.”

He doesn't bat an eyelash, just carries on rearranging her pencils. “Any particular place?”

She narrows her eyes at his bent head, tries to detect any hint of suspicion in his voice and decides that she's home and dry. “Nah, we're just gonna meet downtown and take it from there.”

Wes turns and strokes a hand down her cheek, rubbing the corner of her mouth with his thumb.

“Don't be too late. Call me when you’re ready to come home and I'll pick you up.”

As he strides down the corridor, she collapses into her chair and runs her shaking hands through her hair. For one second, she's tempted to scurry after him, tell her who she's really meeting, but it's all going to end in broken noses, broken bottles, and, fuck, this is her mess and she's going to leave him out of it. It's bad enough that she dragged him into it in the first place.

Her father's on time, which kinda warrants a Hallmark card. He's sitting in a corner of this skanky
bar just off Main, with a bottle of beer in front of him and a crooked smile when he looks up and sees her walking toward him in her little black dress and fuck-me pumps.

“Hey there, Faithy,” he says and smirks. “You got a kiss for your old dad?”

She slides onto the bench opposite him and places her sweating hands in her lap, looking at him from under her lashes, trying to gauge how much he's had to drink. It's a judgment call. He can drink and drink for hours without anything more than a slight slurring of his faint Irish accent and then Biff! Bang! Pow! He's smashing heads through walls.

“Hey, Dad,” she says finally, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice. Trying not to mention the phone call or Wes because maybe he just wants to check that she's okay. Like, he suddenly woke up this morning and grew a soul.

“You know, Faithy, you really are a dumb cunt,” he remarks conversationally, before picking up the bottle and chugging down the rest of the beer. “How the fuck old is he anyway?”

She can feel the change in her; her shoulders slumping as her head lowers so she can hide behind her hair. “Thirty-seven,” she mutters unwillingly.

“Well, hey, he's the same age as me.” Liam beams. “Ain't that sweet? I was talking to someone the other day about you. Maybe you know her, Lilah Morgan, she's this snooty bitch of a lawyer but she's a fine piece of ass too. Reckons you got a bit of a daddy complex going on.”

“No, I fucking haven't,” she spits, riled up just like he wants and not caring that he wants her like that so she makes it all her fault when he hits her. “And how the fuck do you know Lilah?”

“Well, that's a funny story. Remember my friend, Hank? Got involved in a little hit and run…”

He's off on one of his dumbass stories that go on forever and ever. Just because he's Irish, he seems to think that he's the king of the yarn when he's just a boring fuck who's had too much to drink. Her mind wanders off and she's trying to work out if he knows anything more than the bare bones when he says something that makes all the blood rush to her head.

“So this Lilah reckons I could sue that sick bastard for personal injury and then she found out that we were related. That's when things got interesting. Really doesn't like you, baby.” He leans across the table, breathing beer fumes in her face and taps her affectionately on the forehead with the bottle.

“I'm living with him, you know that,” she says, trying to be calm like Wes would want her to be. “And yeah, he's older than me. We're not doing anything wrong.”

“He fucked you up the ass then?”

What the fuck? She clutches on to the edge of the table and wonders when the room started spinning. “Saying fucking what?”

“I'm just telling you what Lilah told me you two girls chatted about. Says she had to divorce him when he started making unreasonable sexual demands on her,” Liam recounts with relish. “Always the quiet ones, I guess.”

“He hasn't done anything to me,” she chokes out and then wishes she wasn't wearing such a tight skirt as she tries to scramble to her feet.

“Where the fuck do you think you're going, you little slut?” His hand shoots out and wraps round her wrist, tugging her back down and chafing the welts there so she yelps and tries to snatch her hands
“Well, looks like he's been roughing you up? Shit, Faithy, I've been doing that to you for years, and
never realized it got you all hot and bothered.”

“Fuck you!” she snarls because she's not trapped in the same house as him anymore. Doesn't have to
spend her entire day coming up with a strategy to take herself out of his line of fire when she gets
home from school. “He hasn't done anything and even if he had, you couldn't fucking prove it.”

Liam's grin is completely without humor as he snaps his fingers at the waitress who's been
shamelessly eavesdropping for the last five minutes and orders another beer.

“I want one too!” And man, does she ever fucking need it.

But her father is wagging his finger at her. “Nuh-huh. Don't think you're old enough to drink, baby
girl. Not like it stopped you from going to clubs when you were fourteen and getting smashed. You
started pretty young.”

“Yeah, well I guess I had a couple of really great role models,” she snaps and wills her feet to just get
up and take her out of here. “Kinda hard not to start drinking when you and Mom used to start the
day with whiskey and cornflakes.”

He doesn't even bother to get angry, just gives her another lop-sided smile. “Not the only thing you
started young. Lilah has this affidavit that he was fucking you when you were in juvie. You were
only fifteen then, Faithy, she checked. All it needs to make it legal and ready to be read out in a case
of statutory rape is my signature.”

She doesn't realize she's crying until she feels the hot wash of her tears spilling over her hands.
“You'll fucking ruin him,” she splutters. “You know it's not true.”

“Well shit, hon, course I do,” Liam snatches the beer out of the waitress' hand and bangs it down on
the table so hard that she jumps and almost screams.

Before she even realizes what she's doing, she reaching across the table and actually touching him,
clutching at his arm. “Dad. Please don't. I'm begging you. Don't do this to him.”

And he's patting her hand in this fucking mockery of paternal concern. “Faith? Man, you didn't… I
mean, baby, you think I'd do that to you?”

She nods. Then she shakes her head and finally screws up her face because she wants to sag with
relief but this is her dad who never once gave her anything without following it up five minutes later
by snatching it back. Like the Lil Stardust Schwinn bike that he bought her for her fifth birthday, all
pink and shiny and something she'd wanted ever since she was old enough to walk. Two days later,
he'd lifted her off it, threw it in the back of his pick-up truck and hocked it so he and Darla could
dump her at Xander's and go off on a weekend bender.

“You're not going to sign it then?”

“Shit, honey, we're family,” he says, shaking his head like he can't understand why she would think
so little of him.

Faith slumps back in the seat. “Thank you, I know it's weird that he's older and…”

He cuts right across her. “Not gonna sign some fancy legal document for some stuck-up cunt of a
lawyer, not if you make it worth my while.”
His eyes are shining with malice. Thinks he's got her beat and then she's flash-backing to Wes in court and how in control he was, how he never once let Lilah get the better of him. And the memory is enough to get her to her feet.

“You listen to me, Dad,” she says her voice fierce and urgent. “I don't give a fuck how many affidavits you sign. My word against yours and I'll swear on a fucking stack of Bibles that he never laid a finger on me until I was eighteen. And I'm legal now so all that's going to happen is that Wes' little lawyer friends are going to be jealous that he's getting to screw his secretary. So what the fuck are you going to do about it?”

And it's totally a rhetorical question and she knows that because Wes is always getting her on them so he doesn't have to reply but he's curling his lips into a sneer and pulling an envelope out of his jacket pocket. “I was kinda hoping you were going to ask me that because I've got all these sweet little pictures in here.”

They're spilling out onto the beer-soaked table top and considering that they were taken through the window of Wes' office, they're pretty good. And even though, thank fucking God, the main action is obscured by the desk, you'd have to be certified blind not to realize that she's having the living daylights spanked out of her by her boss, mostly while he's fucking her.

She tries to pick one up but her fingers aren't working and they look so fucking ugly, like some dirty little porn story called Another Day In The Office. That's what it looks like to her father who's watching her with unbridled glee and it will to Lilah and anyone else who sees the photographs.

“Oh, hey, this is a really nice one of you,” Liam says, pointing to the picture where she's clutching on to the desk, Wes poised behind her and she's pulling a face like she's just stubbed her toe. But the one photo her eyes keep coming back to again and again is the shot where she's curled up on his lap, legs against her chest and he's kissing her, cupping her face like she's the most precious, perfect thing in the world.

“I'm gonna be sick,” she whimpers and then it's a race to get to the bathroom in time and throw up in the filthy sink until her stomach's empty and her throat's sore.

There's no point in hiding or lingering among the graffiti-strewn walls and piss-stinking tiles. So she splashes her face with cold water, puts her shoulders back so far that even Wes would be impressed and marches back in there.

“I don't have any money,” she announces, slamming her hands down on the table. “You're gonna fucking give me those pictures or else Wes is going to sue your ass into fucking oblivion.”

He takes his sweet time before replying, sucking down on the beer like it's nectar of the gods. “Yeah, I guess he could do that,” he decides. “And then all those little lawyer friends of his are gonna find out that he's a perverted fuck who likes to beat the shit out of my daughter while's he's fucking her. Y'know, might even get your cousin Billy to make a website…”

She sits again, head in her hands. “How much money do you want?”

That gets her a pat on her head with one meaty paw. “That's the spirit, Faithy. Knew you'd come round in the end.”

He drives her to the all-night pawn shop in the next town so she can sell the watch that Wes bought her for a damn sight less than he must have paid for it.

“They're real rubies,” she protests but the grizzled guy behind the counter just slaps down five one-
hundred dollar bills.

“That's my final offer, take it or leave it.”

Liam takes it and even gives her a lift back. “Hate to think of you out here on your own, baby,” he says, narrowly avoiding a car coming in the opposite direction. “Who knows what might happen to you.”

And he won't shut up about Lilah and Darla and her, saying “Every day I got you bitches busting my balls about some shit or another”, like he wants her to feel sorry for him or something.

As they near the railway sidings in the oldest part of town, she makes him pull over.

“I need some fresh air,” she tries to explain but he's already pulling over, can't wait to get rid of her.

“I'll give you a call in a week or so,” he promises, sticking his head out of the window and grinning at her like she's a little college girl being dropped off by her proud daddy. Then he tosses something at her feet. “Thought you might want this to stick in your pocketbook, baby.”

She looks down to see the picture of her and Wes sat in his chair and kissing like they didn’t have a care in the world getting splattered with tiny crumbs of grit and dirt as he father spins the truck in a circle and drives off.

No way can she call Wes until she calms down. Her chest is heaving and she crouches down and throws up again. It's not enough. She feels like her skin is itching, like she wants to tear it off her bones. So she walks up the slope to one of the old derelict rail cars that she used to know so very well, gets her lighter out and burns all the old newspapers and scraps of paper she can find. Even tries to burn the photograph but just as the flame is licking at the corners, she tamps it down with the tips of her fingers, singeing her skin and feeling glad that it hurts.

And it's only then with the smarting and the stinging that she can get a handle on the rest of it. It gives her something else to concentrate on rather than all the lousy choices that are ricocheting around her head. Should she tell him? How's she gonna find more money? Should she just dump him and get the fuck out of Dodge like she planned when she first turned up for her interview, dripping rainwater all over his parquet flooring?

In the end, she walks back in to town, buys some freshmint gum and a bottle of water from the first deli she comes to so she can wash off the soot, and calls Wes on her cell so he can take her home.
Part Six

Chapter Summary

Faith’s torn between her need to confide in Wes and her fear that she’ll lose him.

Chapter Forty-Five

Wes notices she’s not wearing her watch, but she’s way ahead of him with a story about how it’s hurting her because of the marks on her wrist, chafing them just a bit, no, it’ll be fine in a day, Wes, and he drops the subject with a distant look in his eyes that makes her cry inside.

But she can’t let him see that or he’d take it wrong and fuck knows it’s complicated enough already. So she takes her mind off her guilt and his mind off his and blows him right where he’s sitting in the library, going to her knees as he reads his book, his fingers slowly tightening around it as her tongue licks and swirls at his cock.

And when she’s done, and he’s put the book down because it was that or crumple the pages, when he’s come in her mouth with an anguished soft sound that she’s pulled out of him with a slow scrape of teeth and a fierce, passionate intensity, she feels, for the first time, like a whore.

If he notices that even when her wrists are healed she doesn’t wear the watch again, he doesn’t say anything.

She calls Xander to tell him about it in the end. Has to get it out, has to rant and curse and sob, and when she’s done, there’s this silence and she’s knows there’s nothing he can do. He can’t help her and she feels a helpless panic settle around her.

“Xander?” she begs. “What can I do? Fuck, this is killing me.”

“Darla?” he says finally doubtfully. “Maybe she could say something?”

She laughs, sharp and sour. “God, Xander, like he’d listen to her!” She thinks back to that phone call from her mom. Darla's more likely to encourage him and if he ever told her, showed her those photographs...fuck. It occurs to her that she’d almost rather Wes saw them than Darla. There’s something so deeply sick about her parents seeing her have sex, something that twists at her so all she wants to do is throw up, but she’s not really eating these days, so that’s getting to be painful.

No matter what happens, it’s all been spoiled now. Every memory tainted by being fumbled over by the thick, yellow-stained fingers of a man she doesn’t want to claim as kin.

She starts to dream about killing him, waking with a snarl, fists curled, from blood-stained dreams so real she’s not sure she hasn’t, not sure she hasn’t met him and shoved a gun deep into his beer gut and pulled the trigger, watched him collapse, strings cut and bleed out the last seconds of a worthless life at her feet.

Then he calls again and asks for money and she empties out her savings account, the one her grandmother started with a dollar when she was six, the one she’s kept secret from her parents all her life, the one she’s always known she’d need one day to escape. It’s not much, not really, but when it’s gone and he’s tucked the bills into his back pocket with a smirk that tells her he doesn’t believe
her when she says that’s it, that’s all, she’s not giving him anymore, there’s this constricted feeling, walls closing in, tethered and tied to this place, these people, when all she wants is to grab Wes and run.

But she’s starting to see that there’s nowhere to run and she remembers seeing a cat, plastic bag looped around a hind leg by a malicious hand or blind chance, running, running, and taking his problem with him until he collapsed, exhausted, beaten and terrified—and scratched her to the bone when she tried to free him.

And she meets Wesley’s eyes, which are starting to look remote and tells him she’s fine, fuck, yes, leave her alone. Just—don’t leave her alone.

After that, things are quiet for a couple of days, and she starts to tell herself that everything is going to be okay. Maybe Liam’s found a new mark, some new get-rich-quick scheme—like, he and Hank have come up with some great new scam when they were shit-faced one night—and he’s forgotten all about her. Because when it comes right down to it, she only exists for her father when she’s useful.

She wants to believe that. So why are her hands shaking as she tries to light her cigarette? Because it’s not so simple to rationalize it away. God, how much does she fucking want to fly under her father’s radar again, because the kind of attention he pays to her always was and always will be toxic and wrong?

She’s outside, standing under the great canopy of stars and even though it’s late spring the air is still refreshingly crisp and cool. She wants everything to be perfect again, wants it more than anything she’s ever wanted before. And dammit, it’s a beautiful clear evening and there’s this full new moon and it should be perfect.

She hates being so fucking powerless over her life.

She hears the telltale creak of the French doors and she takes a deep breath and stubs the half-finished cigarette out on the slate.

“Faith? Are you all right? You disappeared so quickly after dinner.” He walks up behind her and touches her shoulder tentatively.

She turns slowly toward him, and when she speaks she tries to sound light-hearted. “Oh. Yeah. I’m fine. Just tired is all.” He looks back at her with concern. That almost makes it worse. She shivers a little and he wraps his arms around her.

“You’re chilled. We should go inside.” She doesn’t answer, just nods and lets him lead her back to the warmth of the house.

Before she knows it she’s being tucked in on the couch with a stack of Austens she hasn’t yet read and a cashmere throw and Wes is building a fire in the long-neglected fireplace. He sets himself to that mundane task in the same way he does everything else: with care and precision and an endearing if slightly maddening attention to detail. Nearly twenty minutes go by before he finally lights the damn thing.

But oh, that look of intense concentration on his face—she’s seen it before, when he’s poring over a particularly thorny legal brief or thinking of new and ingenious ways to torment her—is rather amusing. And Christ, she needs something to feel good about. By the end of the whole arduous fire-building process she’s nearly laughing at him from behind this worn, well-thumbed-through paperback of *Mansfield Park*, which came from the depths of the library complete with little scribbles
in the margins (from Wes’ student days? She can’t imagine him doing any such thing now).

He looks a bit puzzled. “What is it?”

“Wes, for Christ’s sake, I think you’re a lost cause.”

He stands up slowly, comes over to the couch and sits down. He leans over her and gives her one
arched eyebrow. “A lost cause? In what way?” She rests the book on her chest and just looks at him
for a moment. “You’re so serious about everything, Wes. It’s kind of…” She pauses, searching for
the right word, “Charming.”

“Well, I’m glad you find it so.” He’s smiling indulgently at her. At that moment it’s all she needs and
she lifts her head so she can kiss him. It’s sweet and slow and almost enough to make her forget—

When he pulls her down on top of the cashmere blanket so they can, like, make out in front of the
fire, all she can think about is what a fucking bad romance-novel cliché this scene is but then he’s
peeling off her clothing and she doesn’t care if it’s a fucking cliché or not.

He pulls her down onto his lap and she gets to revel in the twin sensations of his denim-clad hard-on
between her thighs and the delicious warmth from the fire. It’s not usually like this with them—just a
straightforward fuck—but that’s unexpected and lovely too. She grinds against him and he grips her
ass so she can get more leverage. She’s making a mess of his perfectly laundered jeans, but he
doesn’t seem to care.

Everything feels so good, so very good. And there's no pretense here, no games—this time she's
grateful for that. Just his lips, his tongue working on her nipples, drawing wordless moans from her.
Just his warm hands caressing her ass, not slapping it until she sees stars. Just her hands, fumbling
with his belt buckle, the button fly of his jeans. Just his hard cock, bucking out of the constricting
fabric, nudging her clit. Just her, gently pushing him to the floor, yanking the jeans down past his
knees, and slowly lowering herself onto his cock, inch by inch, deliberate and languid. Just watching
his face, eyes locked on hers—unblinking, his hands stroking her belly as she lolls her hips from side
to side, a slow burn of a fuck.

This is how it is when you're in love with someone. When they're in love with you. But when you're
in love you shouldn't be hearing voices in your head that are whispering: you're a fraud, this is a lie,
you are a lie. No. No. She pushes them back, but they just double in volume.

She can't look at Wes now, afraid he'll be able to see what's hiding in the furthest corners of her brain
when the flickering light from the fire hits the sharp edges of her secrets.

So all she can do is squeeze her eyes shut tight and will the voices to shut the fuck up.

Disoriented for a moment, she falters a bit, losing her balance and slamming down on the heels of her
palms. He curls an arm around her back and pulls her down into a kiss. In half a second he's rolled
her on her back and without missing a beat, he's fucking her as slowly and methodically as he'd built
and stoked the fire blazing next to them. She locks her legs around his waist, pulling him in deeper
with every stroke.

It doesn't take long for the pleasure to wash over the doubt and the fear. The feral noises that tumble
out of her throat come from a deeper place than the nagging hollow voices in her head and drowns
them out, finally shutting them up.

And then they're both coming, thrusting as one, murmuring each other's names on lips that hover an
inch apart.
It's not until after their breathing evens out and he doesn't pull out, just stays inside her, with his fingers worrying over her damp cheeks, that she realizes that she's been crying the entire time.

Chapter Forty-Six

After the whole crying thing, when he won't fucking stop asking her what the matter is, it hits Faith that maybe she should be more worried about Wes than her father.

Because he's not stupid and he knows that things with her are not frosty. Jesus, how many times has he woken up and realized that she's not in bed, because she's snuck into the guest room to smoke cigarette after cigarette, wide-eyed and worried about what fresh hell the next day is going to bring? But when she creeps back into bed after brushing her teeth, he just makes this contented noise like everything's right in his world, wraps her in his arms and goes back to sleep, while she stays awake and wonders how hard it would be to steal something really expensive, like jewelry or, even better, a sports car so she can take Wes out for a spin and keep driving and driving so the horizon gets nearer and nearer and they never have to come back to this miserable town.

But he doesn't say anything when she pushes the dinner he spent two hours making around her plate. Doesn't even feed her any more. Or wash her, or brush her hair or dress her because he's locked away with his law books all day. And as soon as they get home, he gives her an absent-minded kiss on the forehead, mutters something about ordering pizza if she's hungry and then disappears into the study.

She knows that she should be relieved that all his focus, all that intensity of his is on other things, rather than her. Like, he's weaning himself off her and maybe she should do the same.

But then another day goes by with no phone call from her father. And another. And another and she's starting to remember to breathe out again.

When they get home from work that night, he pats her on the ass as she's taking off her jacket and she turns hopefully. He's been too busy for anything other than some very nice, but very vanilla sex the last week or so.

He's already stepping toward the study but she grabs his hand and tugs him back so she can wind her arms round his waist.

"Wes," she whines, arching up for a kiss, which he willingly gives, backing her up against the wall and dipping his tongue into her mouth.

His hand cups her breast and she leans forward into his touch.

"You know, I think you've lost weight," he remarks, his eyebrow quirking upwards. "Hmm, let me see." His hands shape her breasts, thumbs rubbing over her nipples, that are hard and aching within seconds.

"I don't get to eat junk food anymore," she points out, with a mock-pout. "It's all your fault if I'm not packing the pounds on."

"Well, that and the fact that you barely seem to manage three square meals a day."

And that's a conversation she really doesn't want to have, but it's easy to distract him when she's stroking his erection with the back of her hand. "Maybe you could help me work up an appetite," she suggests with the little half smile that always makes his eyes get heavy lidded. "Or, you could, like, spank me for every pea I leave on my plate."
“Faith,” he says reproachfully, backing away from her exploring hand. “I have work to do, otherwise I'd be more than amenable to ravishing you within an inch of your life.”

She notes that all he wants to do is ravish her now. Not spank her or fuck her up the ass or spend time away from his books, thinking up new games to play in the dim light of the bedroom. And it's nothing to do with the freakin' merger which is all that he can usually talk about. It's not that at all. In fact, he's been Mr. Restraint ever since the whole belt incident. And that's another conversation that they're fated not to have.

“Well fine,” she says dully. “You go and read another twenty fucking depositions and I'll twiddle my thumbs and eat all my vegetables.” She folds her arms and gets ready to stare him down or even follow him into the study and assume the position but he sighs, running a hand through his hair.

“I really don't have time for this, Faith. I'll see you later when I hope to find you in a more agreeable mood.”

It takes her a good two hours to find her more agreeable mood. Then she knocks on the door and waits, like a good little secretary, for his terse “Come in.”

He doesn't look up from the sheaf of papers until she puts the tray down on the one bare patch of desk she can find.

He looks at the cheese sandwich and the cup of tea with astonishment. “What on earth is this?”

“Well, it's, like, dinner and a peace offering,” she says cautiously. “Look, I even remembered to put pepper on it.”

The smile he gives her is worth all the resentment she's had to work through in the last two hours. “That's very thoughtful of you. I hadn't realized it was so late,” he says. “Did you—”

He leans back in the chair and pats his thighs. She clambers on to his knee and presses her fingers over his lips before he can get the rest of the sentence out. “Yeah, yeah. I ate. Had a sandwich too even though I don't like that stinky cheese.”

It's the sweetest time they've had in a long while. She curls his fingers into his hair and rests her head against his chest as he eats the sandwich and sips at the tea, touching his bobbing Adam’s apple with her finger until he slaps her hand away.

“Please, Faith. I've asked you more times than I care to remember not to do that.”

“It's just weird that you have one and I don't,” she explains, peering at it intently.

He finishes the sandwich with an annoyed gulp, which makes her giggle because if he wants to take her attention away from his throat, he just failed miserably and picks up his tea cup.

“So how are you getting on with Mansfield Park?” he asks her, stroking a hand through her hair.

She wriggles on his lap, leaning back against his raised thigh to get comfortable. “Man, Wes, why are you making me read that book?”

“I suppose it's not quite as immediate as Pride And Prejudice.”

“It's not that,” she protests, eyes flashing with annoyance. “I just hate Fanny Price. She's such an uptight little bitch.”
He buries his head in her neck and shakes with laughter, his arms wrapping tight around her as she wiggles in indignation. “Hey! Hey!” She thumps him on the shoulder. “What the fuck's so funny?”

“You are,” he murmurs, raising his head and wiping his eyes. “Really, Faith, I don't think you have any idea quite how much I love you.”

Her mouth hangs open so wide, it's a wonder that her jaw hasn't hit the floor. Wasn't expecting that, not with things so scratchy between them. And wasn't ever expecting him to say that when he wasn't buried balls deep in her cunt.

He's staring at her intently and she has to drop her eyes, can't look at him. “I love you too,” she mutters eventually and she does. With everything she is, which is why it hurts to spit out the words after all the shit she's had to pull.

“Good,” he says decisively and then gently tips her off his lap, holding his hands in front of him when her face drops. “I know this is all very boring for you but I do have rather a lot of work to get through.”

“I know,” she says softly. “I'm just being a brat. It's what I do.”

“And will you pout and give me the silent treatment if I tell you that I have to go to New York next week?”

“Wes!” She's not going to cry. Not if she can help it.

“I like it as little as you,” he says. “But after this is over, how would you like to come with me?”

She leans against the desk and studies her fingernails. “Like, for a vacation?” she says, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice.

“Maybe. For you it would be. An extended, indefinite vacation.”

“Huh?”

But he's already switching on the desk lamp, as dusk is scurrying in and chasing shadows across the room. “We'll talk about this later,” he promises. His head is bent and he seems so remote again.

She picks up the tray and edges toward the door but then she turns round. “Why have you stopped?”

He's thumbing through a folder, not really looking at her or paying her any attention. “Hmm? Why have I stopped what?”

Stopped taking the pain away by giving it back to her in controlled doses so she can get past it. Stopped making her wait. Stopped breaking her down with his tongue and his fingers and his voice and his cock so he can put her together again, piece by piece, creating a new Faith, who's infinitely better than this current version. Stopped because she won't say the word and he doesn't trust himself without it. Stopped. Stopped. Stopped.

“Nothing,” she mutters, toeing open the door with her foot. “It's not important.”

He's still working when she heads up to bed. She has a shower and then, a towel wrapped around her, she goes into the guest room, tugs up the window and blows smoke rings out into the cool, dark night.

She's sneaked a sleeping pill from the tiny stash he has hidden behind the box of sticking plasters in
his bathroom cabinet and she'll just add it to the running tally of all the wrongs she's done him. It's getting cold now and the sleeping pill is kicking in. She doesn't even finish the fourth cigarette, just stubs it out on the window sill and decides to rest on the unmade bed for a second. She's so fucking tired of everything…

At first she thinks she's dreaming and she climbs out of sleep in a panic. She can't move and for one second she imagines that her father has her buried in a box and won't let her out until she's promised him a whole bunch of stuff that she has no right to promise him.

But as she slowly comes back to consciousness, she realizes she can't move because her hands and ankles are bound to the bedposts of Wes' bed. He's standing over her; arms folded, lips in this thin, tight line, eyes blazing with righteous fury.

“How did I get in here?” she mumbles, her tongue thick and heavy.

“After smoking in the house despite the fact I'd expressly forbidden it and then becoming incapacitated after taking a sleeping pill that was not prescribed for you, you passed out on the spare bed,” he tells her, like he's reciting a murder charge to packed jury. “I really think we need to have a talk, Faith.”

She blinks her eyes slowly and she can feel this tense anticipation unfurling in the pit of her stomach, that for once isn't about waiting for the phone to ring. Because it's mixed with excitement and arousal, so she's wet in an instant, not having to be coaxed toward it as she's had to for the last two weeks.

“Um, sorry?” she offers hesitantly, trying to hide the tiny smile of triumph.

He moves away from the side of the bed and begins to unbutton his shirt. “Well, I suppose that's a start,” he says drily. “But it's really not going to be enough. Not nearly enough.”

He strips off his shirt and then sits down beside her. “Before we begin,” he says, “I think I should tell you that, being neither blind nor stupid, I've noticed something's troubling you. I'd like to know what it is.” He smiles slightly, but it just makes the butterflies in her stomach flap faster. “Please note the phrasing. I'm sure I could hiss several melodramatic threats but I'd rather not. I've this foolish hope that when you have a problem, I'll be the first to know, you see.”

It's so unexpected and sweet that the tears that sting her eyes are happy ones, and then she remembers and blinks them back, concentrating fiercely through the haze of the sleeping pill, knowing she’s a slip of the tongue away from confessing.

He doesn’t wait for an answer, just strokes a finger down her leg and says softly, “What’s wrong, Faith?” As she opens her mouth to lie, his hand clamps around her leg and he says, without looking at her. “And, Faith? If the next words out of your mouth are ‘I’m fine, Wes’, or a variant of that, I won’t be happy.”

Said in that voice, light, pleasant, gentle, it is a threat, and she swallows and says nothing. The pressure of his grip eases and he sighs. “I see. Well, perhaps we need to make this a little easier for you, Faith.”

He reaches out and picks up a scarf like the ones that he’s used to bind her and pulls it gently through his fingers as he speaks. “I’ve never gagged you, Faith. You make such delightful little noises; you’re very talented with your mouth and there’s that little word you need to be able to say, isn’t there? So I’m not going to gag you.” He drapes the scarf over her face so that it rests, gossamer-light against her lips. “While that’s in position, Faith, there’s only one word you’re permitted to say, and
that’s your safeword. Do you understand?”

She nods carefully, feeling the fine silk dampen and cling to her lips as she breathes on it, through it.

“Excellent.” He smiles. “We progress. Now I’m going to ask you some questions, Faith, and, because I’d hate for there to be any misunderstandings between us, you have only two options when it comes to answering me. You can tell me the truth, or you can remain silent. Lying is not permitted.”

Too easy. Too fucking easy. Her face must have given her away because his lips twitch and if he doesn’t stop with the fucking smiles, she’s going to scream, because his eyes are hard and angry and hurt and he shouldn’t be quiet and smiling; he should be yelling, hitting her, getting drunk.

“But silence won’t give me what I want,” he continues, “so, naturally, it comes with a penalty.” He bends down and then places something across her thighs and she tilts her head just enough to see what it is.

It’s a wicked-looking slender switch in some dark wood.

“Wes.”

It comes out as a strangled, choking gasp and his lips thin down. “I believe I told you not to speak? Thank you.” He ignores her frantic shake of the head and says, running his fingertips along the wood, “This will hurt you. I know it will. I know how it will sound as it cuts through air and skin, I know how long it’ll take before the pain takes over from the shock and you truly start to feel it. I know what your arse will look like a minute, an hour, a day, a week later.

“I know because it’s the cane my father used on me. It’s the only one of his possessions, apart from his books, that I kept.

“If you think answering me with silence is worth a stroke from this, then do so, Faith.” He picks up the cane and stares at it, before placing it across his knees. “I’m not sure I ever would have, but I don’t recall ever being given a choice by him.”

She’s caught between fading arousal and a gathering rush of fear. A whimper forces its way through her lips and he shakes his head. “You’ve already earned one stroke through speaking, Faith,” he whispers. “I’d be careful, were I you.”

Before she can do more than widen her eyes in an appeal that’s lost on him because he’s not looking at her, he says abruptly, “Do you wish to leave this house, my employ?”

She waits for his hand to drag the scarf away, but the words burst out of her as soon as it’s in his hand. “No! No, Wes.”

There’s a slight relaxation of his shoulders and she can’t believe he could even have thought that she wanted to leave. She smiles at him anxiously but he’s already moving on.

“Something is troubling you. That’s not a question. Is it to do with what I did to you? When I hurt you?”

And she hesitates, because yeah, she might have stopped him if she hadn’t been guilty; toward the end, she might have. Before she can frame a careful answer, assuring him that most of the time it’s fine, but, you know, sometimes, he’s taken hesitation for silence and whispered, ‘one’ almost regretfully and when she starts to stammer out something, anything, her mouth’s kissed with silk again and he doesn’t remove it until he’s finished asking her the third question, which, like the five
that follow it, are pretty much all Wes trying to find out what the fuck’s bugging her, but in a way that never lets her answer without skirting the truth.

She’s sobbing with frustration by the time he gets to the tenth question, confused and stammering, and she lies just to say something; not to save her ass, but to take away that dreadful, closed-up look of disappointment he’s getting with every answer she doesn’t give, but shit, that doesn’t go down well.

“And that’s earned you two strokes,” he hisses. “Try again, Faith; has Lilah been in contact with you, or distressed you in any way?”

And if he’d just left off the last bit, she could’ve nailed it with a ‘no’ but she can’t. And if she says ‘yes’, she’s fucked, so she’s silent and he rolls his eyes and stands up.

“Are you refusing to tell me what I need to know for a reason, Faith?” It’s his gentle voice again and it’s the hardest choice she’s had to make but she stares up at the ceiling, with the hot, salt tears leaking out of her eyes and doesn’t move.

He doesn’t ask her again. Her wrists are untied, her ankles freed and he points silently to a chair he’s placed in the center of the room. She walks to it, avoiding his eyes, stiff, small steps because she’s close to collapsing, and grips the back of it, bending over and spreading her legs a little.

Then she sees that he’s placed it in front of a mirror and she twists around to look at him, horrified. “Wes, please.”

“You can earn a blindfold or permission to look away by telling me what it is that I stopped,” he says.

“What?”

It’s a moment before she remembers what she’d said to him earlier and she thinks, yeah, she can answer this, so she does. “You stopped doing stuff to me. Stopped...” and fuck, she’s blushing. “Stopped spanking me. Stopped teasing me. Stopped...”

“Hurting you,” he murmurs. “Did you not want me to stop, Faith?”

“No. Fuck, Wes, you know I didn’t. I liked it.”

She’s almost indignant that he’s being so fucking stupid. What, the way she used to come screaming his name wasn’t enough of a clue? And he hadn’t been hurting her the way he meant.

“Did you?” He sounds almost interested in a detached, chilly way. “I don’t think you’ll like this so much.”

The cane slashes against her skin and she screams, watching her pale reflection scream back at her. Wes is right. She doesn’t like this at all. It hurts so much that she can’t breathe and she’s got, what a dozen more?

She thinks she can bear it though, because the next stroke’s lighter, but then her eyes move away from the peeled-back lips and wide, anguished eyes of mirror-Faith and see Wesley.

And he’s crying. Set face, tight lips, wet eyes, and she’s screaming out a word she never thought she’d say and turning to him in an agony of self-loathing that doesn’t leave her, even when he’s rocking her in his arms and smoothing her hair back from her face over and over again.
“It’s nothing, Wes, nothing. No, shh.” She’s pounding at his chest, his arm, fists clenched, not trying to hurt him just trying to reach him. “Let me tell you, let me just say it my way. Please? Please, Wes? It’s killing me the way you’ve pulled back, pulled away, that’s all. I want it to be like it was. I’ll say it, I’ll say that fucking word, I promise I will, just stop treating me like you’re scared you’re gonna break me. I need it, Wes. Fuck, you know that. You made me need it, no, no, not like that. You showed me I needed it and you can’t stop, you just fucking can’t.”

“You deserve better,” he says and it’s like he’s talking to himself, not her. “Deserve something different.”

“I don’t fucking want anyone but you,” she howls. “Why can’t you see that?”

She squirms off his knee and starts to unzip him.

“Faith, no,” he says, pushing her hands away. “That’s not—”

“Fine,” she says petulantly, standing up and walking over to the bed, throwing in a wiggle of her ass and knowing she’s got his attention. “You know what, Wes, when you’re done being an asshole, you can get over here and fuck mine.”

“Faith!”

He’s managing to sound outraged and turned-on at the same time, but he’s standing up now and taking a step toward her.

“Thought you liked the truth, Wes,” she says. “Thought you wanted to know how I felt.” She feels like a momma bird luring a hunter away from her nest, but there’s more to this than distracting Wes. Her ass is burning from the two strokes he gave her and it’s starting to feel good now. If he doesn’t fuck her, she’ll explode into a million pieces—and if he does, she probably will too.

“And how do you feel, Faith?”

He’s drawling it out slowly, circling her and she smiles. “Touch me and find out.”

That gets her a real smile and a finger dragged across a tight, hard nipple. “Aroused?” he says, with a lift of his eyebrow. The finger darts between her legs and dips into wetness. “Ready?” He rubs against her clit and she moans, hands clutching at his shoulders.

“Fuck, yes, Wes.”

He studies her thoughtfully. “You won’t get to come for an hour at least,” he tells her. “And I’m still very annoyed with you.”

She nods. “I know. But you’re still going to fuck me, right?”

“Impossibly demanding,” he whispers against her mouth as he kisses her, but he doesn’t sound all that annoyed to her, and she doesn’t fool herself she’s won, but she’s bought herself some time and she’s got Wes back, for a night at least.

It’s almost enough to let her sleep without nightmares.

Chapter Forty-Seven

There’s an ache in her lower back when the sunlight streaming through the windows pries her eyes open, not to mention the individual dull throbs of the weals on her ass. She’s just fucking grateful that
it's Saturday and she won't need to sit up straight all day at the reception desk, typing endless memos and requests for documents.

A few moments have passed before she realizes that Wes is sitting at her feet, watching her sleep. Or, more accurately, he's watching her rub the sleep out of the corners of her eyes and stretch, testing her still-taut muscles carefully.

“How long have you been sitting there?” she asks groggily, squinting in the too-bright light. He looks like he hasn't slept at all—though he had been lightly snoring by the time she'd drifted off—still tingling and wound tight from their frantic fucking, even after he'd bathed her, and applied arnica cream to her tenderized ass.

“No too long.” He snakes his hand under the blanket, stroking the inside of her thigh absentmindedly. “How...” He pauses, clearly deciding against whatever he was planning to say, then clearing his throat. “Did you sleep well?”

She realizes she doesn't have to lie to answer this one. She smiles blearily. “I did actually, thanks. Guess you kind of wore me out.”

_Shit._ That wasn't the right thing to say at all. His face clouds over and she's stumbling out apology. “That's not what I meant. Fuck. I'm sorry. That isn't...”

He waves dismissively, and she can see him trying to smile again. “I've made you breakfast. I decided you might like to have it in bed this morning. As you said last night—a peace offering?”

And it's like a replay of the night before, 'cept it's his turn to play this hand and he's got the advantage because the sun's out and she's starving. Plus, she can't remember how long it's been since she's had breakfast in bed; maybe when she had the chicken pox, aged six. That sounded about right, and Darla had begrudged her every bowl of Marshmallow Mateys, every glass of watery Tang.

There's something so achingly bittersweet when he tries to make things up to her with his cooking, as if making sure she's got enough physical nourishment will fix her tattered psyche as well. If only his prowess in the kitchen could pack that much mojo for the both of them, her problems would be solved.

“That would be great, Wes. Thanks,” she says without a trace of guile. She knows she doesn't deserve it, but maybe that's the distraction she needs to keep her mind from replaying the endless loop of sense memories in her brain: the switch flicking through the air, his cock in her ass and her knuckles white as she clung to the bed sheets, his husky whisper ordering her to come again and again after more than an hour of waiting, until she was delirious and screaming and pushing him away, overwhelmed.

He slips away without a word, and returns in five minutes bearing a large tray full of fruit and a prosciutto and gruyere omelet and perfectly brown buttered triangles of toast in a little rack. Not to mention the coffee and the freshly-squeezed OJ.

Sliding up into a sitting position carefully, she winces a little at the friction, but finds it's not as bad as she'd expected.

“I've also brought the crossword,” he says, settling the tray over her outstretched legs, draping a crisp white napkin over her hastily-donned tank top. “There are a few thorny clues that seem to be heavily imbued with recent pop culture references.” She can't help but snicker at that; he really is hopelessly stumped by clues she solves without a second thought. “And this.” He brandishes _Mansfield Park_ with a little grin. “I'll read some to you, in case the crossword is an utter failure—because it appears
to be heading that way.”

There’s a pleased grin plastered on her face, and it’s not until after the first sip of coffee that she stops to take stock of the depth of their masquerade, especially of the new veneer of his denial. She chews thoughtfully on the eggs, wondering if this is what they’re supposed to do the morning after a night like that, instead of sinking into bottles of cheap booze and plate-throwing and name-calling? Laughing over stupid crossword puzzle clues and making plans to visit the farmer's market?

“This really is hopeless,” he says, finally tossing the puzzle aside, two clues remaining stubbornly unsolvable despite her best suggestions. “Shall I read to you instead?”

“Yes, please. Chapter thirty-two's where I stopped last.”

“I can see that.” His fingers slide over the tipped edge of the page she's folded over to mark her place. “Faith, am I remiss in recalling that I asked you to use a bookmark, and not turn down the pages when you read my books?” His forehead’s creased in mock consternation and she has to laugh because his snotty notes in the margins are a little more destructive than her folded pages.

His voice caresses Jane Austen's words and he's doing all the voices, his Fanny particularly peevish and flustered. For a precious thirty minutes, she can almost pretend that they're a normal couple, that there's nothing more pressing on her mind than reminding him again how much she really doesn't like that stinky old cheese, even in his omelets.

Chapter Forty-Eight

It’s a perfect weekend. The kind of weekend they show in a montage in the movies when the sun makes everything look dappled and you know the hero and heroine are crazy in love with each other.

It’s the first really hot day of the year and she dresses accordingly even though Wes is more than forthcoming with his view that four hundred-dollar Marc Jacobs tops shouldn't be accessorized with battered jeans and flip-flops but she just pokes her tongue out at him.

“I'm kicking it freestyle, Wes,” she smirks and he scoops up his car keys from the kitchen table and stares at her in bemusement.

“Well, in that case, I stand corrected,” he says finally, shaking his head like he just can't understand the vagaries of fashion.

They drive to the nearby farmer's market and wander from stall to stall, holding hands and discussing each pound of cherries or peaches like the fate of the world depends on their decision.

He buys stinky cheese and ignores her face-pulling. She buys home-made fudge and ignores his dire warnings about ruining her appetite as she eats it straight out of the bag and licks her sticky fingers.

Then they take their spoils to the lake, two towns across, and eat bread so fresh it's soft in their mouths, fresh, sun-ripened fruit, and wine from a bottle Wes put in the water to cool.

Afterward they lie in the long grass, his head resting on her belly, her fingers winding through his hair and talk about nothing.

“Your hair's really soft, Wes,” she sighs dreamily.

“And so's your tummy,” he murmurs, turning his head so he can blow a raspberry against the chiffon and make her giggle.
It's so secluded up there that she can pretend that they're the only two people left in existence, no one lurking with a telephoto lens because they don't let rat bastard low lives into Paradise, and when he tells her to take her clothes off, she carefully slips the top off and wriggles out of her jeans and lies back down, her legs spread so he can see her all naked and glistening in the glorious sunshine.

“You look enchanting,” he breathes, plucking daisies from the ground and stroking them over her breasts, down the almost concave slope of her stomach and across the slick groove of her pussy. “Like a goddess. I'd very much like to see you come.”

And her hand is already there, stroking languorously across her clit and when he tells her to, she pushes two fingers into her cunt, her hips rising lazily in this slow rhythm because it feels, for once, like they have all the time in the world.

Afterward, he licks the juices that are clinging to her fingers and laughs softly when she pushes him back down in the grass and takes his cock in her mouth. Licking around the head softly so she can taste the salt tang of him, then sucking him down, caressing his balls and then taking him as deep as she can, until he comes in her mouth with a startled cry that chases the birds away.

When they get home, he has work to do but she sits on the floor, at his feet, back resting against the desk and reads Mansfield Park, all quiet as a mouse until she feels his hand stroking her hair.

She looks up and he's smiling down at her like he'd forgotten she was there and her presence is a lovely surprise.

“I have this dreadful urge,” he says, like he's about to make some terrible confession, which is going to lead to restraints and his hand on her ass and her coming so hard that she passes out.

She arches an eyebrow, which she's gotten really good at in the last couple of months. Go figure. “Oh, yeah?” she drawls.

“Yes,” he nods. “I have this sudden need for a Douglas Sirk double feature and then lots of cheap Chinese food positively laden with monosodium glutamate.”

That's Saturday night taken care of. And she's doing such a good job of making do with what she's got while she still has it, and anyway her cellphone is switched off, that she falls asleep in the car on the way home, lulled by the quiet purr of the engine and his hand resting heavy on her knee, and barely even stirs when he carries her inside.

On Sunday he lets her lie in, then spanks her fifty-five times for every minute that he had to wait for her to wake up. Leaves her gasping and desperate to come, while he finishes reading through his depositions and then fucks her up against the refrigerator, the steel door cold against her back while his cock spurts hotly inside her.

All of it is just perfect. And she's learning to live in the moment, because that's the only way to keep sane. Especially when his suitcase is open on the bed and he's packing to go to New York in the morning.

He's in the bathroom getting his stuff and she's staring at the neatly folded shirts and rolled up pairs of socks and trying really hard to resist the urge to take them out and hide them so he can't leave her.

“Faith, you look like a little girl who's just been told that Father Christmas doesn't exist,” he says teasingly from the door and she scoots around on the bed so she can glare at him.

“I'm fine,” she says automatically and his face tightens. “Well, I'm pissed that you have to go away but it's only for two days this time and I'm not going to freak out about house stuff.”
Because she has a nasty feeling that the minute she turns her cell back on, there's going to be a whole heap of much uglier stuff to freak out about.

“I don't enjoy having to leave you, but all of this is necessary,” he tells her, walking back into the room and placing his wash bag in the case. He frowns, takes it out and makes a little pile out of his socks so it can rest on that.

“Yeah, yeah,” she sing-songs. “I know. Gotta play the hotshot lawyer and you know, you're not even to think about buying me presents.”

“Oh, not even a little one?”

She scoops up a pair of socks and throws them at him, which makes him tut and go back to rearranging the little sock mountain.

“I mean it, Wes,” she repeats, more forcefully than she intended so he looks at her warily. “If you want to get me a present, then you have to promise that you won't spend more than ten dollars.”

“Faith!” He's getting this really pissy look now, like she's force-fed him vinegar but she can't handle any more expensive bags with ribbon handles. Not after seeing them spread out on the chairs in the back of those photographs.

“Promise!”

He stuffs the wash bag into the suitcase with great force and then nods sharply. “Very well. But you're being utterly ridiculous about this.”

She leans over so she can still the jerky motion of his hands. “Look, Wes, you don't have to keep buying me stuff. When you get home, I'll be so psyched to see you, that I don't need any presents.”

And just like, she's somehow managed to find the magic combination that chases his bad mood and frown away. “I can’t wait to show you New York,” he says and he sounds slightly cautious. “I rather think you'll fall in love with it.”

“I always wanted to go,” she says, piling up pillows behind her so she can sink down on them and watch him get completely anal about putting his suits into this weird bag thing. “When I was little, I always wondered why they called it the Big Apple, like maybe there was one in the middle of it or something.”

He smirks, like he can't help himself. “Well, when I take you we can go on a quest to see if we can find it.”

“So you're serious about this vacation thing?” He's fussing over his suit like it's a sickly child and for a moment she thinks he hasn't heard her.

Then he looks up and she's pinned to the bed by the intensity of his stare. “It wouldn't really be a vacation,” he says quietly and her heart sinks because she thought she could trust him not to make promises that he can't keep. “It would be more of a relocation.”

And just like that, it’s going to be over. And if she can hold off her father for a few more weeks, Wes'll be out of her life forever. Maybe she'll get to visit him a couple of times before he finds his feet, and she'll just be another girl bruised by all those things that weren't meant to be.

“Oh,” she says in this tiny voice, so small because there's this big lump in her throat that she's having to maneuver around to get sound out. “Oh.”
“Of course if I take the job, then really they'd expect me to have an assistant with some legal training…”

He won't look at her, just keeps folding ties and handkerchiefs like they're going out of fucking fashion and anyway her eyes are too blurred with tears to really worry that he doesn't need to take like a gazillion handkerchiefs for two days.

“…that you could go to college… there are some wonderful courses…”

“College,” she repeats dully. Like, he's talking about education and she's sure that her heart's just broken. Couldn't even have wined and dined and fucked her before telling her.

“Parsons has some rather wonderful fashion courses that I thought might suit you, though I would rather like to keep you in a style to which you've become accustomed. I have this rather wonderful vision of you, staying in bed all day in a satin negligee, eating cherries dipped in chocolate…”

It is a rather wonderful vision but her brain just can't process it. “Wes, are you saying what I think you're saying?”

He smiles wolfishly and has the nerve to actually fucking wink at her! “Maybe my mistress fantasy is something we can expand on when I come home.”

She scoops up a discarded single sock and throws at him, with a howl of frustration, which makes him straighten up and stare at her like she's just spewed ectoplasm out of her belly button. “Do you fucking want me to live with you, like in fucking New York?”

If Wes could ever bring himself to say, “well, duh!”, he'd be doing it right about now. But he never would so he's just rolling his eyes and pursing his lips about all the swearing. “Well, I did, until I remembered just how uncouth you can be.”

She lets that one go. Way too busy scrambling to her feet and jumping up and down on the bed. “You mean it?” she shouts over his moan of protest as her bouncing feet get perilously close to his neatly packed case.

“You know I do have rather a packed schedule but I'm sure I can pencil in a little light punishment if you don't stop that,” he hisses like a cat whose fur's been rubbed up the wrong way and she stops it by the simple process of jumping right into his arms.

“You mean it? I can come with you?”

He staggers backward, almost thrown off his feet by the sudden weight of her. “Well, yes, Faith, I do mean it. I realize that you have ties here, your mother, even though you're currently estranged…”

“When can we leave?” she begs, pausing from pressing feverish kisses to his every inch of his face that he hasn't managed to squirm away from the path of her greedy lips.

“Not for a month or so. I need to get the house listed and the auditors…”

“So a month? Like, four weeks?”

“Won't you miss anything?” he asks curiously, sitting down on the edge of the bed, so they don't both topple over from the wriggling weight of her.

She wraps her arms and legs tight round him because soon she won't ever have to let him go and she wants to get used to how it feels. How he feels. “Not a fucking thing,” she says fiercely. “Only you
and you'll be with me, won't you?”

He's got that fucking beautiful smile on his face. It lights him up like Hollywood's greatest cinematographer is following him around. “Not even Xander?”

“Fuck Xander!” she snarls, trying to get to the prize of his pretty mouth, which he's twisting away from her. “He can come visit us.”

“I haven't even found us somewhere to live,” he protests but then pow! She's got him and she's mashing her mouth against his, coiling round him sinuously and one second later she knows he's not thinking about house guests or much of anything but tightening his grip on her hips so he can shift her against his hardening cock.

Chapter Forty-Nine

He drops her off at the office and drives away, after a kiss that leaves her clinging to him and he’s not struggling to peel her off, but he’s got a plane to catch and for Wes that’s like a holy fucking quest or something. She bets he’s first in line to check in, first on the plane.

When he’s gone, driving way too fast as if he’s making up for that thirty seconds he spent making sure she’d spend the next hour aching for a touch she’s not going to get for days, she turns and shuffles sadly to her desk. It’s not until lunchtime that she remembers she can’t stand to spend the night alone and she really needs to hook up with Xander.

She flips on the phone and as if someone was waiting just for that, it starts to ring. Might be Xander, might be Wes, even.

“Hi.”

“Where’ve you been, you little bitch?”

Might be a drunken, angry bastard of a father.

“Look, you shouldn’t call me here,” she hisses. “I’m at work for fuck’s sake.”

“Whoring isn’t work,” he says, sounding smug and self-righteous.

“I’m not a whore,” she says, stabbing a pencil against the pristine whiteness of a writing pad and watching the lead bend and the pencil begin to splinter, watching the paper tear and wishing it was his skin she was piercing.

“Giving it away for free? Just makes you a stupid whore, Faith, that’s all.” He laughs at his joke, a beery, endless chuckle that’s as friendly as a kick in the ribs. “But no daughter of mine’s that dumb. Bet you’re dipping your hands into his pockets as well as his pants. Shame not to share with your old da, now isn’t it?”

“You got it all,” she says dully, knowing he won’t listen.

“I got nothing,” he says. “Just some scraps while you’re living high. Fed you, clothed you all these years, Faith.”

She doesn’t even bother answering that piece of delusional crap. One month. She keeps him quiet for one month and then she’s gone with Wes and he won’t follow them. He’s so small-town it isn’t funny. He’s got his favorite bars, all in a ten-mile radius, and beyond that he’d be lost.
“He’s gone, hasn’t he?”

She picks up another pencil and draws on the paper, blackening it with a dense, dirty scribble, an endless looping scrawl. He knows Wes has gone. He knows she’s alone. Fuck. *Fuck.* She’s not gonna be able to sleep, she’s not going to be able to fucking breathe in that house alone, knowing her dad’s prowling around out there.

“Why are you doing this?” she asks. “Why are you trying to spoil this for me? Why are you such an evil, fucking bastard?”

Her voice rises and she hurls the pencil away, getting up and pacing around the office, jamming the heel of her hand against her eyes to force back the tears.

“That’s gonna cost you, Faith.” His voice has that edge to it she remembers. The one it had the Christmas Eve Darla spent in emergency getting stitches because he’d split open her skull for telling him he couldn’t go to Midnight Mass because he was so drunk he’d pissed down his pants, and he couldn’t stand. She half wished Darla had let him go, let him throw up down Father Gilroy’s front. Maybe God would’ve struck him down right then the way she used to pray he would before she found out whichever side God was on it sure as fuck wasn’t hers.

“I told you; I got nothing.”

“Don’t want it from you, Faith.” His voice is sly, full of his cleverness. “Want it from him. He’s gonna pay for what he’s done to my baby.” She wants to spit out the bitterness that floods her at that but he’s not done. “Been talking. Been taking advice.” Lilah. Fucking *bitch.* “Damages. I’m owed it, Faith, you know I am. You saw what he did to me.”

*You were hurting me,* she wants to scream. *You knocked me down, you hit me.*

“My friend,” he pauses to appreciate his discretion, “she says——” Lilah. Oh, torture’s too kind for that one, “you can make the payments for him.”

“What? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Do you kiss his cock with that mouth?” he sneers and she shudders with repulsion, knowing she’ll hear that in her head the next time she does. “Get me some blank checks, Faith. And something with his signature on. Got a friend who can do the rest and I swear it’s the last time I’ll be bothering you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Now, the way I see it, Faith my darlin’ you’ve got no fucking choice, have you now?” The fake cheer vanishes. “Bring them to Paddy’s bar tonight. Eight sharp. And don’t be coming on to my friends; don’t want the world knowing I raised a slut, do I now?”

The click in her ear is soft and the silence of the office wraps around her, smothering the scream she wants to make, so that all that escapes are these little piteous whimpers and she’s broken. She’s broken and she’s alone and she’s going to stay that way, because she can’t get away with this and hope to keep Wes from finding out.

But her dad’s right. She’s got no fucking choice.

***

Paddy’s is a dank joint past the intersection of Third and Main, bordered by a pawn shop and a rundown mom-and-pop convenience store. Its entrance empties into a dank alley that reeks of rotting
garbage and urine. A sputtering neon sign advertising Killian's Red buzzes in the lone grubby front window, and from the street Faith could hear the boisterous drunken laughter of large, cruel men inside. They comprised the clientele of the bar; no women were ever around except the hardened barmaids who were so beaten down they were just empty, silent shells who'd learned not to smart-mouth the patrons and risk a drink thrown in their faces, or worse.

Faith picks her way across some questionable puddles in the rutted asphalt of the alley, her purse mashed under her arm in a way she knows makes her look vulnerable. Ten feet from Paddy's battered entryway, she makes a misstep and splashes muddy water up one leg of her formerly pristine jeans, shuddering at the thought of having to wash them as soon as she returns to the house; scrubbing the grime out, scrubbing away the evidence of her betrayal.

Tucked inside the aromatic leather of her large black purse is a manila envelope. Inside that, two pages of three checks each that she'd cut out from the middle of the ledger, and the most benign document she could spirit out of the files, Wes' bold signature scratched across a faint line in the brown ink from his broad-nibbed fountain pen, the one he only used for committing his hand to legal documents.

She's regained her footing and is stepping out of the brackish puddle when a heavy hand claps on her shoulder, sending her crashing back into the muck. She mutters a curse under her breath, knowing whose hand has sent her there.

“There, now, daughter o' mine—is that any way to greet your da?” Liam's curled around her before she can squirm from his grasp, planting a wet, whiskey-doused kiss on her cheek. He's practically jovial—no doubt due to the dollar signs dancing in front of his eyes.

“Look, let's just get this over with, okay?” She wrenches away from him, hopping clear of that damned puddle, and that small victory gives her just enough strength to stare him down. “Don't want this to take longer than necessary.”

“Oh, now, Faithy, would it kill ya to come inside, say hello to some of my friends?”

Yes, she thinks, it probably would. Still, judging by the 80 proof reek of his breath, it's best not to argue. “Sure, Dad,” she says and sighs, the last of her strength slipping away into the dark alley. She'd cried all afternoon, screaming and throwing staplers, tape dispensers into the dumpster, burning every stray scrap of paper in the office, and now she's just cold and brittle and exhausted.

“That's the spirit, my girl. Maybe if you're good, I'll even spring for a beer for ya. I'm sure the girls will turn a blind eye to the fact that you ain't twenty-one yet.” He winks at her, and grabs her elbow, steering her through the creaking front door and into the bar.

It's dim and smoky inside; the ancient jukebox is playing a shitty country song. Heads turn to acknowledge their entrance, and there's more than a few stunned faces at the sight of her, but they quickly turn back to their beers after seeing it's Liam that's got her by the arm.

He keeps pushing her right to the back of the bar, where a sullen young man with rumpled hair and a sketchy beard is waiting, slumped in the farthest booth.

“Look alive, there, Peter,” Liam barks at him. “This here's my daughter, Faith.” She smiles nervously. Peter. He's not much older than she is, and has a wild-eyed look to him that's even more disturbing than Liam's, if such a thing is possible. She tries to take a tentative step backward, but her father is a step ahead and hustles her into the empty half of the booth, waving for the barmaid.

“Well, you're the one in a hurry, Faith. Show him what you've brought, girl. See if it'll serve his
needs.” He holds up three fingers to the waitress. “And light a fire under that useless ass of yours, Nora. We're dying of thirst over here!”

Hands shaking, Faith pulls the manila envelope out of her handbag and slides it across the table to Peter. He opens it, runs his fingers over the paper, and traces over Wes' signature muttering to himself. “Yeah, yeah. Need brown ink. Probably European. Pelikan. Have a pen that will do just fine, though. Hm. Hm. Hm. Educated abroad, but has lived stateside. Ten years. Fifteen? No, ten.”

She has to fight the urge not to rip the papers out of his hands and run—she doesn't care where, just anywhere to escape being sandwiched between a grimy wall and the puffy bulk of her father. Which is exactly where he wants her, of course. Precisely so she wouldn't try anything like that. Tears prick her eyes, and she's going to take a long hot bath as soon as she gets home; get the smoky smell out of her already-reeking hair, scour clean every inch of skin her father's hands and lips have touched.

Liam elbows her sharply out of her reverie, and mutters in her ear “The kid's a goddamn genius for this stuff, some kind of...” He pauses. “What do you call yourself, Peter?”


“Yeah, whatever, you say, kid. Anyway, Faith, Peter here has a right good hand for mimicking signatures, to a T. Useful skill, that.” The waitress plunks down three beers on the table, and Peter skittishly sweeps everything back into the envelope. “Hey, there, Nora, watch yourself. We've got important business going on here.”

Nora mutters something noncommittal and stalks away. “There went your tip, my dear,” Liam bellows cheerily after her.

“Okay, Dad. Are we done here? I need to go.” Her cheeks are burning and she's lightheaded, but she keeps her voice as toneless and flat as she can, swallowing the quaver that's rising up in her throat.

He claps his arm around her shoulder again, pulling her close, and she fights the wave of nausea that washes over her. “Now, Faithy, that we've got business out of the way, have a beer with your da—that's a good girl.” With his free arm, he slides one of the three beers in front of her. “You got any cigarettes in that fancy purse of yours?”

“I want the photographs,” she says. “You said this was it, this was all. Give them to me.”

“Nah, nah. Not until I know this is going to do the trick.” He taps the side of his nose and looks cunning. “Don’t want you thinking you can run to him and spoil this, now do I?”

A cold hardness is creeping around her, walling her off from the panic. You hit bottom and there's a tiny bounce back up before you settle into the filth. This was hers.

“You've had over a thousand dollars already,” she says, making her voice level and cool, imagining how Wes—how he would speak. “You had, what, eight of those photographs?”

“Gave you one,” he points out with a leer.

She flashes on that photograph and the way Wes was kissing her and the noise in the room swells and slaps at her for a moment as if she's stripped of every defense.

“Yeah, you did. Only I want more than one. I want—” She thinks fast. “Another six. Leaves you one. It's all you need. You can choose which one you keep.” She knows he won't agree to that many, but it's a start.
“Well, don’t you sound all business-like.”

Yeah. She does.

“Might let you have a couple,” he says, fumbling at his pocket.

Too easy. Too fucking easy. She drops her eyes so he won’t see the defeat in them but she’s realizing he’s got copies. And Lilah might have a set too. Fucking bitch probably has them framed.

She waits until he’s tossed over three, picking the ones where it’s not so easy to see their faces and says casually as she shoves them into her bag. “Never figured you for a fool, Dad. Letting that Morgan bitch jerk you around like this.”

“What?” An ugly snarl twists his face and she smiles.

“You do know she’s his ex, right? Yeah, course you do. But you’ve got it all wrong about why he kicked her out. She was one of those career women; you know; the ones you say ruin it for everyone. Wouldn’t give up work, kept insisting she could handle the difficult cases better than him, then got mad when he tried to teach her a lesson.” She watches his eyes darken.

“You wouldn’t be trying to play your dad, now would you?” he asks softly, one large fist thumping the table in a slow beat. “Because I’ve known you all your life and I can see right through your little tricks. Picked ’em up off your mother, didn’t you?”

She shrugs. “Just thought you should know both sides of it. Won’t pretend I don’t hate the bitch, but hey, like you said; we’re family. She’s not helping you for nothing, now is she? Just surprised you’re helping her get revenge on a man who put a ring on her finger, and gave her a nice house. If he expected something in return, well, a man’s entitled to his fun, isn’t he?”

Every phrase is one he’s used to justify beating Darla and by the time she gets to the end of her attempt to sow some seeds of distrust her fingers have curled around the bottle of beer he gave her and she’s clutching it hard.

“Something in that,” he says with a nod, “but the man laid his hands on me, Faith. Got my pride, you know.”

No, you fucking don’t, she thinks, suffocating in the reek of his breath as he leans in close. You’ve got a beer gut, dead dreams, a family who hates you and a life expectancy of zero if I owned a gun and thought I could get away with it.

“I have to go,” she says, staring him down, letting the rage she gets from him leak out a little. He clenches his fist and she slants her eyes over to Peter, lost in contemplation of Wes’ signature again and tilts the bottle so that a few drops of beer spill out and run over to the envelope with the blank checks. It’s a standoff and she wins it, keeping the triumph off her face as her dad backs out to let her pass. She sets the bottle down and walks past him.

“Dad? You better be careful how much you take,” she warns. This is total bullshit, but she makes it sound convincing. “That account’s set up with a limit of a thousand dollars a check. Strictly petty cash. He’s got the other check books locked up; that was all I could get.”

He does the math. “Six thousand? Not enough.”

Greedy fucking— ”It’s going to be enough,” she snarls, stabbing a finger into his chest. “Do you fucking hear me? Because you’ve fucking shot the goose with this clever idea. Wes is going find out, kick me out and then what? Think you’ll have any leverage then?”
“Kick out my little Faith?” He looks almost outraged at the idea. “He’ll not do that. You’ll twist him around your little finger. That woman says he’s mad for you.”

“She’s lying,” she says tiredly. “Fuck, she’s only doing this to hurt him and she knows what he’ll do to me. Knows it’ll end it.”

The tears start to spill out and she’s losing it. “She wants to fucking spoil it for him,” she grits out. “And she’s using you to do it because she wants to get at me too.”

She reaches out blindly and grabs her father’s bottle of beer—empty of course—and smashes it against the side of the table, bringing up the jagged remnants and thrusting it at Liam until he backs away. “And you’re helping her fuck up the one good thing I’ve ever had. I could kill you for this.”

She could too. She really could and he sees it and backs off, first time ever. One step but it’s enough to cool her anger.

“I’m going. I stay near you a minute longer and I’ll throw up.”

He lets her leave and there’s a puzzled look in his face, as if he really doesn’t fucking get why she’s so mad at him.

Chapter Fifty

Somehow—she doesn’t even quite know how—she stumbles out of there, out into the nearly empty street, without breaking down completely. She flags down a cab and gives the guy her last ten dollars to get her out of town. Get her home.

Home. Huh. Except it’s not really, is it? Not now that she’s so fucking eaten up by guilt and with every betrayal she’s committed. Everything good that Wes has ever done for her is tainted. He’s only ever tried to do right by her and this is how she repays him.

The house is dark when she walks in, and she can’t bear it. It’s fucking cavernous, really, and she feels a stab of fear. It’s not welcoming when Wes isn’t there. It’s big and cold and creaky.

Even though she can walk into pretty much any room in the house and remember something profoundly intimate Wes had said or done to her there—a touch, a whisper, a terse command, or his long fingers brushing slowly over her nipples, her clit—without his mitigating presence it’s as though the whole house is throwing the memories back at her with cruel glee, mocking her. And the voice running through her head sounds a whole hell of a lot like her dad’s: You stupid little girl, you thought it was going to be forever? Thought you were better than just a couple of fucks? That your white knight was going to take you away from this fucking shithole middle-of-nowhere town, like in some fairy-tale? This isn’t even a pulp dime-store novel, so you can just fucking forget about it.

She doesn’t want to think. Because then she might start to believe it, all of it. That she’s just worthless—always has been and always will be. She can’t even cry. It’s all dried up. She’s numb, save for this wrenching, tight ache in her gut. She wants to curl into a fetal ball and wish it all away.

She does the next best thing. She goes on a search and annihilate mission for Wes’ stash of Macallan. She knows he would totally fucking disapprove, and she can’t even get a mild thrill out of imagining the eventual punishment because it’s not going to matter in the long run. It’s totally inconsequential.

She’s trying so hard not to scream and just fucking break something, because, God, does she want to. She just wants to fucking let it out. And if she were in her mother’s house, in her tiny, girlish room with the leak and the stupid posters everywhere, she would. But she’s in his house, and so she puts on some of his classical music (she’s developed this taste for Satie, despite herself) and sits alone
in the dark, sipping the Macallan and trying desperately to remain calm. She smokes cigarette after cigarette, letting them burn down to ash between her fingertips, and sips the slightly noxious liquor as slowly and deliberately as she can. She doesn’t yet have a taste for it yet, but that really doesn’t matter—not when it’s starting to work its way into her bloodstream and giving the world this gauzy little haze.

By the time she’s smoked the last cigarette and has worked her way through a good quarter of the bottle she can’t keep her eyes open any longer. The Satie is still playing, the slow, plangent notes of the piano finally soothing her in to sleep.

That’s where the lull ends. Her dreams are fitful, broken and disjointed. It’s only when she finds herself taking that smashed bottle and twisting it forcefully into her father’s soft gut, and he’s got this look of utter surprise and shock on his face—a strange sort of pride?—that she jolts awake, shaken to the core and chilled with this awful, clammy sweat. She reaches for the bottle again, but she stops herself.

Eventually she pops two of Wes’ forbidden sleeping pills and curls up in his bed, clutching his pillow to her chest and sprawling out across the entire bed.

When she falls asleep for the second time, she doesn’t dream. She just floats in a sea of darkness.

***

She wakes up to find the sun shining brightly through the open drapes, which just makes her snap her eyes tightly shut again.

Feels like something crawled into her mouth during the night and died and her head and her heart are pounding in tandem.

As she stands in the shower, letting the water wash her away, she wonders for the millionth time why she didn't just tell Wes what was going on as soon as her shithead of a father called the first time. Let him sort it out like he's sorted every single one of her other messes. Too late now and she bangs her head against the shower stall, like if she does it hard enough she won't have to think at all. Then the thought pops into her head and she can't just unpop it. There's another option that she hasn't thought about. Hasn't wanted to think about.

She can go.

She can stop stalling, waiting around for the inevitable, and just get the fuck out of town. All she needs is enough for a bus ticket and, well, New York isn't up for grabs anymore but she can go to Chicago or Boston or Dallas; a big city that she can get lost in. And she has marketable skills. Not like she's going to go hungry if she can one hundred and twenty words per minute her way to a steady job.

And if she had any kind of guts, she'd be doing it now not trudging down the road to catch the bus into town.

The phone's ringing as she opens the door and she hurries over to her desk to answer it, trying to ignore the sweat breaking out on her forehead, which is her usual reaction to a ringing phone these days.

“Faith?”

He says her name like he's savoring the feel of it in his mouth and she knows instantly that she's not going anywhere. Just gonna stick around and ride it through, every moment that she still has with
him now, stolen and precious. And she's smiling despite everything.

“Hey, Wes.” She perches on the edge of the desk and shrugs out of her jacket.

“And how are you this morning, my sweet girl?”

Oh God, if he only knew. “I'm fine,” she whispers into the mouthpiece. “I miss you.”

She can hear the rustle of papers. “I have good news and what I think will be bad news as far as you're concerned,” he says and she can hear the wariness in his voice and she has to clutch the edge of the desk because she's had enough bad news to last her five fucking lifetimes.

“What is it?” She's shrill, verging into Darla-in-a-drunken-snit territory. “What's the bad news?”

“I'm afraid that I've been unavoidably detained. I won't be home until Thursday now.”

It should be the worst news in the world. As it is, she lets out a shaky breath. “Okay,” she says unsteadily. “Guess I can invite my biker friends round for a party after all.”

He gives a gasp of what has to be mock outrage. “I expected a little more protest.”

“Well, I guess I could have a hissy fit and hang up. But you haven't told me what the good news is, so I'll wait until after that.”

She's impressed at how normal she's managing to sound. Maybe she can go to L.A. and sign up for acting classes.

“Very well. I've been officially offered a partnership at a very prestigious law firm so…”

“Wes! That's fucking amazing! Wow!” It feels so good not to have to lie to him about how proud she is. “You pretty much rock.”

“I do rather, don't I?” He's laughing now and she wishes she could reach into the phone, grab his tie and pull him out the other end. “But I have something important to ask you. I've been in touch with a realtor and I need to know where you want to live.”

“We're really going? You really want me to come with you?” She's falling over the words and letting herself get sucked into that big bubble of hope that she thought she'd burst.

“We've been through all this,” he says a mite tetchily. “It seems that the more frequently I have to go away, the more I wish you were here with me. I suppose it's a necessary side effect of being in love with you.”

Just like that, she's crying. Because he doesn't say it very often, weighs it up before he does, so it hits her like a fucking truck every time. “I love you too,” she Chokes out, trying to bite back a sob. “Wes, I want… I just… like, couldn't I come there now? You're there and I'm not and I hate this fucking town. I could call the realtor and the movers…”

He talks her down because that's what he does. Using his calmest, most reasonable voice and pointing out all the reasons why it's the stupidest, more hare brained scheme in the world. “Two months,” he promises at the end of it. “Two months and then you'll be a genuine New Yorker.”

And two months isn't very long and if her Dad can go ten days between cashing those checks, then she could be home and dry. “I guess,” she says. “Two months isn't that long.”

“So I still need to know where you'd like to live? I was thinking of somewhere overlooking the park
but I thought you might prefer an area a little more bohemian. Greenwich Village, Soho?"

Those are places she’s only read about in magazines or seen in movies and none of it seems real. “I
don’t care, just as long as there’s a big bed,” she murmurs and he chuckles.

“One big bed, check.”

“And a fire escape and we can sit out on it in summer and you can read to me,” she says fiercely,
because it doesn't hurt to have dreams. Sometimes they come true.

“I think that sounds wonderful. I have to go now but I need you to do one thing for me.”

“Okay. Let me get my pad.” Not that there are any pads left because she's burned them all but she
can use the back of an envelope or something.

“No, Faith! You don't need a pad.” He's laughing again. “When you get home tonight, I want you in
bed, naked by nine o'clock, waiting for me to call you. And I want you to have something that you
can fuck yourself with as I talk to you. Is that clear?”

“Jesus, Wes…”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I mean, yes, sir.”

The rest of the day passes in a blur. Time she should spend plotting and scheming and trying to sort
out all the chaos. Instead, she sits at her desk, fingers clacking over the keys, and all the time she's
watching the second hand of the clock and willing it to speed up.

Chapter Fifty-One

She gets ready for Wes to fuck her over the phone with as much care as she would if it was a real
date. She soaks in the bath, eyes closed, feeling her body drift and bump gently against the cool
sides; shaves herself to mirror smoothness when her questing fingers test the swell of her mound and
catch on the emergent hairs, stiff and sharp. She wonders if Wes will ever change his mind about her
staying smooth and hopes he won’t. It’s a pain sometimes, but she’s used to it now.

She sits in front of the mirror, remembering him whipping her, fucking her on this seat, making her
come while she watched her face in the mirror—and grins and blows herself a kiss as she brushes her
hair to ordered waves and then rumples them up again; paints lips that won’t touch his body for real
for way too long, and spritzes perfume in a cloud to walk through, just for the hell of it, because he
doesn’t usually like her using much. Nothing like a small rebellion to get her wet these days, just
picturing what he’ll do to punish it, and even though he’ll never know about the perfume, the effect’s
the same.

It’s ten minutes to nine when she realizes she’s got nothing but her fingers to fuck herself with.

She thinks of the hairbrush, but though he’s used it on her, it’s not really made for that and she kinda
wants to come up with something different. She bites down on her lip, standing in the center of his
bedroom, starting to panic. Shit, she even contemplates a trip to the kitchen to raid the fridge but
she’s so not wanting to reopen that can of worms.

Finally, teeth gritted, face flaming, she runs to her room and digs through a drawer to uncover nine
inches of vibrator in midnight purple. Elegant, Xander had assured her, lips twitching in a grin as she
unwrapped it and then shrieked as he flicked it on right in the middle of the coffee shop. He’d said it
was to help her out, as she’d bent his ear one too many times about a non-existent sex life, but she’d been fairly certain he just wanted to see her squirm.

Three nights later, when she’d finally got up the nerve to try it, she’d obliged, but she’d felt weird using it and the thought of Darla hearing it through the paper-thin walls had been enough to make her stick to the tried and true of her hand so it’s practically a virgin.

Scampering back to the bed, she makes it just as her phone starts to ring.

“Good evening, Faith,” Wes says, drawling out the words.

“Hey, Wes,” she says, voice soft and yeah, a little shaky. God, just hearing him talk and her toes are curling and she’s wiggling her ass against the cool sheets.

“You’re in bed, I trust?”

“Yeah. Naked and wishing you were here.”

“Really?” He sounds amused. “I don’t know why. Due to the exorbitant cost of long distance calls, you’ll get to come a lot sooner than normal.”

She makes a little scoffing noise at the idea Wes’d let a few dollars stand in the way of making her wait and gets a soft laugh in return.

“So what about you?” she asks. “I want to know what you’re dressed like. Or not.”

“Why does it matter?” he counters.

Suspicion stirs. “Hey, you just know when I get off I’m going to be thinking of you, right? Makes sense I’ve got an accurate picture in my head.” She smirks at that last bit.

“How would you prefer I were dressed?” he says.

“Mmm, let’s see.” She snuggles down and thinks about it. There’s a brief flash of him naked except for black leather pants, zipper down, cock out but that’s not really his style. Though if she thought there was a cat in hell’s chance of getting him to wear them she’d start saving up right now. “What would be totally hot, is me naked and you all dressed up,” she decides. “Suit, tie, the works. And you’d really be suffering when your cock got hard but you wouldn’t get to unzip, or even loosen off your tie. And you’d look frosty cool, you know, but underneath you’d just be aching.”

“That verged on poetic,” he says dryly, “not to mention uncannily accurate.”

“Huh? You’re not bare ass, too?” Because she might’ve gotten worked up over her little fantasy, but deep down she’d been assuming he was naked and she didn’t think she’d ever complain about that.

“I rather think I could get away—just—with loosening my tie, or even, were I feeling very daring, taking off my jacket, but anything more and I’d be asked to leave.”

“Wes, where the fuck are you?” she demands.

“In the hotel lobby,” he says. “I’ve just finished a rather unimaginative but adequate dinner with someone from the law firm and I’ve refused to go to what I’m certain will be a very tedious club on the grounds of work. Which gets me brownie points, so it’s a win/win situation all around.”

“Wes, you can’t do—this—in a lobby,” she hisses, blushing at the idea. “Why don’t you go upstairs?”
“Why do I need to?” he asks, sounding maddeningly reasonable. “I’m not the one who’s going to get noisy.”

She tries again. “Isn’t this, like illegal?”

“Hmm. Not yet, but possibly later. I know a very good lawyer though. A dozen or so, in fact.”

“Wesley, are you drunk?”

He chuckles. “No. I assure you I was most careful not to match my host’s consumption of cocktails, wine, and brandy, without giving the impression that I wasn’t man enough to hold my liquor of course. He’s rather old school, you see.”

She sighs. “Wes, you sound...”

“I’m missing you,” he says softly. “And I’m sitting here with all evidence of how much hidden behind a table, a deep and remarkably comfortable chair and a conveniently placed fern.”

She can’t help giggling at that image and he lets her finish before saying, “Have I allayed your fears?”

“Well, I wanted you to come, too, Wes.”

“I think I’ve explained why that’s not possible.”

“No,” she says a little tartly, “you’ve explained why you’ve deliberately made it impossible.”

“It’s really that important to you that this be a shared experience?” he says.

“Yes!”

“Then make it imperative that I go to my room,” he says.

“What? How can I do that?” She’s lost and confused. Just like normal.

“Oh, Faith, you underestimate yourself. Suppose, instead of me supplying instructions, you take whatever you’ve equipped yourself with and give me a running commentary as you use it?”

A tingle runs through her as she pictures him hardening with every word she whispers, biting his lip, squirming in his chair—well, no. He’s got enough control that he wouldn’t squirm, but she knows she’d get a kick out of making him walk really fast to the elevator.

“You close to the stairs, Wes?”

“They’re directly to my left. And my room’s one floor up.”

She flicks the tiny switch and runs her finger over an interesting assortment of knobs and ridges.

“Get ready to make tracks for it, Wes,” she says.

“You sound very sure of yourself, Faith,” he says and she can hear him smiling.

“It’s not going to be any fun if you don’t play too, so I’m gonna make you.” And she’s more than a little surprised to hear the growl in her voice as she lies back on the mound of pillows and wriggles round until she gets comfortable. “So, right, okay, I’m gonna start now.”
“I can hardly wait.”

“Well, I'm really wet, Wes.” She doesn't need to fake the dreamy sigh, doesn't need to feel embarrassed by her want because she's pretty damn sure it's okay with him. “Been thinking about you all day; about your voice telling me to touch myself over the phone. And how much I love it when you tell me exactly what you want me to do.”

He sighs too, like he just can't help himself. “But we've already agreed that circumstance dictates that you'll be using your voice instead.”

“Yeah, I know that,” she says calmly because that is one challenge that she isn't going to back down from. “Just wanted to tell you that I've been thinking about you. Your hands, your tongue, your fucking pretty cock.”

“Faith… Illuminating though this is and fairly worthy of getting your pretty arse spanked when I get home…”

“Hey, Wes, don't be so impatient. Wanna know what I'm doing?”

“Yes, very much.”

“I'm licking the tips of my fingers.” She stops talking so she can do just that. “And now I'm touching my breasts, rubbing my thumbs over them and wishing it was you.”

With the phone tucked against her ear, she sucks her fingers into her mouth loudly. “Do you hear that, Wes?”

“Yes.” And would it kill him to show a bit more emotion than if she was asking him if he wanted lemon in his tea?

“That was my fingers again but I really wanted them to be your cock.”

“And what would you do if it they were?” Still all calm and collected.

“I wouldn't do any of that teasy weasy shit, Wes. Not tonight. Just take you in my mouth, feel you on my tongue. And you taste so good that I want to make you come really hard so I can taste that too.”

She can't believe how much she's getting into this. She's idly stroking her nipples but the vibrator's been left neglected on the bed and she's arching her back, like he's looming over her and feeding her his cock inch by inch.

“Just want to get as much of your pretty cock as possible. I love it when you fuck my mouth…”

“You're going off message Faith,” he reminds her smoothly. “I do believe the plan was that you were going to facilitate your, er, crisis…”

“Huh? Man, Wes, sometimes I don't understand a freaking word you say.”

He mutters something that's too quiet for her to hear. “What?”

“I said that you were going to fuck yourself.”

She can hear him perfectly well even though the last two words are whispered fiercely but even though he's not here to see it, she shakes her head. “Nah, still can't hear you, Wes. Maybe… Well, if you went up to your room, we wouldn't be having this problem.”
“Indeed,” he says and sniffs, but there's a rustle and she knows he's standing up. “Don't imagine for one second that your flagrant lack of regard for the rules I set up…”

“You wanna spank me when you get home, Wes? Because just thinking about that has got me even wetter.” It's so easy when he's not there. Doesn't mean she likes it. But by now she'd have been reduced to nothing else but frenzied panting and moaning and she never gets to tell him how he makes her feel.

She can hear his breathing become labored. “You moving your pretty ass up those stairs, Wesley?”

“When I get home, my sweet, you're not going to be able to sit down for a…”

“Guess, I'd better entertain myself while I'm waiting for you to get to your room,” she bursts out, knowing that he'll just add the interruption to her rapidly growing list of crimes. She runs her hand down her body, not bothering to linger, and rubs two fingers against her clit. “I've got my hand between my legs, Wes. Just touching my clit really lightly so I don't come too soon and it's so hard, it almost hurts to touch it and I'm so wet now, God, I wish you were here…”

“Stop that right now,” he barks over the slamming of a door. “I believe I asked you to find something to fuck yourself with. Did you at least manage to do that?”

“Um, yeah…” Her fingers are sliding over her clit, barely grazing it.

“Take your hand away now, Faith and pick it up. What is it?”

She rolls on to her side and eyes the big purple Rabbit, to give it its full title, with distaste. “Wish it was your cock.”

“Faith…” Oh man, he's doing the voice now. All clipped and precise, like her name is a bullet from a gun he's just fired.

“I want you naked first, Wes,” she husks because she's lost in the picture now. “Want you jacking yourself off while I'm fucking myself.”

There's this long silence and she strains her ears for the sound of something and hopes it won't be a click, then silence. There are two thuds and some muffled cursing and then because it's imprinted on her brain, she recognizes the sound of his belt unbuckling and then the rasp of his zipper. Disco!

“What are you going to use to fuck yourself with, Faith?” he asks impatiently, without missing a beat.

She picks up the vibe and tests the weight of it. “I have this thing, this vibrator.” She lowers her voice on the last word and would bet money on his eyebrows having shot up.

“Really? What a pity that you've kept it hidden away. I'd have welcomed the opportunity to use it on you.”

“It's purple,” she blurts out, which is so not what she wanted to say. “And it has all these ripply things.” And God, why the fuck is she still talking? “Okay, it's pretty big, not like you have anything to worry about…”

“That's very sweet of you.”

“But I'm so wet and I need to get fucked so I'm just going to slide it in.” And she is and she does and it feels so good to have something to fill up the ache that she can't help the little moan that escapes
her and the one that follows it when he makes a pleased noise.

She pulls it out slowly, then pushes it back in. It makes this squelching sound which should be gross but is kinda sexy and she wants to hold the phone to her snatch so he can hear it too.

“I’m fucking myself with it now, Wes, gonna switch it on, just low to start off with.”

“And what does it do when you switch it on?” he asks curiously, as she flicks the switch and grits her teeth as it starts moving inside her and it never felt like this before.

“Well, the cock part sort of twists and it has these ear things that go against my clit and they kinda…sorta…hmm…vibrate.”

And over the buzzing and her gasps, she hears him start to laugh.

“What?” She loses it with him, yanking the vibrator out, all those purple, quivering inches slicked up and shining, and pouting even though he can’t see her to be melted. “Fuck, Wes, way to kill a mood!”

“I’m sorry.” He’s sounding penitent, but he’s still smiling, she can tell. “It’s just...ears? I’m trying to picture it and—¬” There’s this gulp that tells her Wes is doing his best to hold back a snicker and then he loses it completely and he’s howling with laughter.

She stares at the phone, mouth open, and shakes her head. “You know you said you weren’t drunk? Want to reconsider that?”

Hard to be mad with him, though. She just wishes he’d ever been this relaxed when she was there to see him, because she’s guessing Wes with the giggles? Cutest thing ever.

“I assure you I’m sober. Relatively so. Give me a moment.”

He doesn’t wait for her to answer and she hears him walk away and pour a drink of something that had better be water. The phone’s picked up again and he’s back to business. “I think this procrastination has gone on quite long enough, don’t you? And as I’m now in an empty room and half-naked—”

“Which half?” She knows, but she wants to make him say it.

“I’m still wearing my shirt and tie,” he says, “and, as you were in such a hurry, my socks, but other than that...”

Now that should be enough to make it her turn to start laughing, but it doesn’t. Sighing or whimpering maybe. There’s this image in her head so clear she’d think it was an out of body experience if she wasn’t wide awake; Wes in one of those crisp, white shirts, with the sleeves rolled up, the tie loosened, top button undone so his throat’s there to be kissed and stroked, every other button done up so his cock’s hidden under it, just waiting for her to uncover it, button by button.

“Fuck, I wish I had a camera,” she blurts out unthinkingly and then she realizes what she’s said and she shoves a fist hard against her mouth, feeling the skin tear as her teeth cut in.

“Well, I don’t think I’m particularly photogenic,” he says wryly, “but a photograph of you would be __”

The tears well up and she can’t keep them from soaking into her voice as she says, “Wes, no. Please.”
“Faith?” There’s a world of concern in his voice and she’s crying for real now, phone dropping from her hand, face down against the bed and shaking, seeing a blur of grainy black and white in front of her eyes, hearing her father’s leering, threatening voice. “Faith!”

Wesley sounds pissed now and it works better than worried. She reaches out and grabs the phone and wails an apology he ignores completely.

“Would you please enlighten me as to what I said to make you cry?”


His voice softens a fraction. “That’s an unfortunate side effect of falling in love,” he says and her heart stutters.

“Wes? You miss me too?”

It’s blatant and he sighs patiently, but she’s distracting him from that fucking stupid crying jag and—which she totally doesn’t deserve—she’s getting rewarded for fucking up, because he’s murmuring stuff to her he’d never say face to face.

“Miss waking up with you wrapped around me and I miss seeing you, or knowing you’re just outside my room should I want you for anything—”

And, yeah, the tinges are back. Because she sits there typing just waiting for him to call her into his room and even though they don’t get up to as much as they used to at work, there’s still the chance that this time he’ll want more than a letter taking down and she can’t walk down that corridor without getting wet. Ever.

“Wes, that’s so fucking sweet.” She wriggles back against the headboard. “Are you still hard?”

“Moderately so,” he says cautiously. “You crying when I’m not there to know exactly what caused it isn’t something that appeals to me.”

“But you’d like, totally get off on it, if it was because you’d spanked me or something?” she asks, half-indignant.

“Oh, very much so,” he assures her.

“You...”

“And am I to take it that you wouldn’t?” he says.

She wriggles her ass, haunted by the ghosts of a dozen spankings, and grins. “Gets me hot, too,” she confesses, “but that’s something you can’t do over the phone, I guess.”

There’s a chuckle in his voice. “I wouldn’t count on it, but I think I’d prefer to be the one inflicting any richly deserved punishment—and Faith? You really have earned the spanking you’ll be getting, you know.”

She gives him a whimper that turns genuine halfway through and waits.

“I think you should be punished a little though, don’t you? For making me wait all this time?”

That’s so unfair coming from him that she gasps, but she does it quietly. “Maybe a little, Wes.”

“It’s always so pleasant when we’re in agreement,” he drawls. “If only for the novelty value. Very
well. I’d like you to replace that device inside you and let’s hope you haven’t thrown it across the room? No? Good. Switch it on as high as it goes—I really must see it when I return, you’ve got me quite intrigued, I assure you—and place the phone beside your head so that both hands are free. One, you’ll need to hold it in place, the other I think should be pinching your nipple, quite hard, please.”

“And where does the punishment come in?” she says, her voice breathy and catching in her throat as she obeys him.

“When you think you’re about to come, you’re to tell me.”

“Yeah? I can do that.”

Knowing he’s listening to the low hum of Mr. fucking Bunny and her gasps and moans is enough to get her halfway there, even without the sounds from the phone that tell her his hand’s wrapped around his cock and he’s jerking himself off nice and slowly.

“And then you’ll stop.”

“Huh?”

“And wait.”

“Wes! Fuck, I’m nearly there already.” she whines, hips lifting off the bed slightly, heels digging into the mattress.

“Then I suggest you stop right now,” he says pleasantly. “And make me come, the way you promised.”

“That is so not fair. You like, get me to the edge of coming and then expect me to put a complete sentence together?”

“Well, you seem to be able to do that now.”

She groans with frustration. “Wes, please. Just let me come now, and I promise. I promise, I'll totally get you off after that.”

Her pleas are met with little more than his enigmatic chuckle. “What? Why are you laughing at me now?”

“What makes you think you'd be in a more fit mental condition after I let you come?”

She has no immediate answer to that, considering that his logic is pretty sound on that point.

“Damn it, Wes! Why do you have to be right all the freakin’ time?”

“Because I am.” She can picture that shit-eating grin on his face just as clearly as if he were right there with her. “You’d better get started, Faith, or your rhetorical skills will have to be incredibly keen to make up for all this time you’ve wasted. Your stalling really has risen to the level I can only describe as unconscionable.”

“I can't do this now!”

“And why not?”

“Because you've killed the mood again, that's why not!”
“I did not 'kill the mood' this time, Faith. I think that dubious honor belongs to you.”

“You're the one who made me stop.”

“Generally, that seems to enhance the mood, not kill it.”

“How do you know? It enhances the mood for you maybe, but not for me!”

“Stop and think about that for a moment, Faith. You don't really mean that.”

There he was, being all frustratingly right. Again. “Okay, okay. I don't mean it. It sucks to wait, but it's always worth it.”

“That's right. You should know by now not to argue with me.” His voice drops to that spine-tingling note. “You'll wait now, and you'll like it.”

Her mouth's completely dry, and the protest she tries to stutter out just won't come. Instead, it's just a breathy “Yeah.” and she's lost in the half-drunk burr of his command. She hangs there for a moment before she remembers it's her turn. “You'd better take off the rest of your clothes, then, Wes, because the thought of you half dressed—”

“Is killing the mood?” If he'd said that any other way, she'd probably have hung up on him. But he whispers it, like his lips are pressed against her ear and the sound isn't traveling through a bunch of very mood-killing fiber optic cables to reach her.

“Um, yeah.” She's puzzled as to how to continue. Is she allowed to tell him what to do? She can't not, though, or this is gonna be one really boring session of phone sex. “Take off your tie. Slowly.” He's very quiet; she can just hear his shallow breathing until there's a slight whooshing sound as he pulls the tie out in one fluid motion from under his collar. She'd never thought that could sound sexy over the phone. Not missing a beat, she continues. “Now your shirt.”

She almost wished she hadn't said that, as the sound of his perfectly pressed and lightly starched shirt rustling over his skin as he slides it off is making her insistent clit actually twitch in anticipation.

Then there are these words forming in the back of her mind, and she's said them before she can confirm that they're coming out of her mouth. “So, how many times have you thought of me and jacked off since you've been on this trip?”

She's immediately pleased by his sharp gasp at that question, like she's found a way to cut right through that facade of his in ways she can't possibly when they're in the same room together. When he doesn't answer, she lowers her voice too, prods him with her words. “Wesley? How many times? C’mon, I’m waiting.” She’s really pushing it now but she doesn’t care. “You once told me you never approximated. So, out with it.” She hopes her satisfied smirk isn’t somehow audible.

In the intervening silence she’s got this nice little image of him in her mind: somewhat discomfited and turned on and wondering how long he's going to let her wrest the game away from him. Weighing out how much he’s going to admit to or allow.

Yeah, she’d like a photo of that. She lolls back on the bed, fingers idly circling her clit, just waiting for his answer.

“Five times.”

“I want to know where and when.”
“Faith—” He sounds exasperated and undecided. It’s not something she’s treated to often and she’s going to savor the moment.

“Wes. You’re never gonna get a show-and-tell with Mr. Bunny-ears if you don’t talk, right the fuck now.” Curiously emboldened now, she lowers her voice, whispering huskily into the phone: “I want to know which hand you used, Wes. I want to know what first set you off. And I want to know what was running through your mind when you finally came.”

He starts telling her, a little haltingly at first, but then he warms to it. “Monday… That was a long day. Meeting after meeting, all very dull and depressingly lengthy. After that there was an overlong dinner in Union Square East with a small group of the partners. If you’d have been there with me it would have been bearable—you’d have charmed all of them.”

Her heart leaps a little at that but she recovers quickly enough to admonish him: “Wes. Topic?”

If he’s annoyed, he doesn’t show it, just takes a sip of whatever it is he’s drinking and picks up where he’d left off. “It must have been late when I got back to the hotel. I don’t even remember how late, I just remember stumbling blindly up to the room. I’d had a bit to drink. And somehow in my mild delirium I imagined that you’d be waiting for me, naked in the bed—my little Olympia, wet and ready as always. But when I flicked on the light, all I had to greet me were two sub-par and quite possibly stale mints on my pillow.

“That was disheartening. But the mental image was inspiring, to say the least, and, still clothed, I sat down in the chair, unzipped. Fantasy time. You slid off the bed and straddled my lap, making this delicious and terrible mess of my new trousers. Didn’t want anything complicated, just you on top, fucking me with this delicious intent look on your face because it’s been a day, practically, that you’ve had to wait. Couldn’t just bring yourself off, now could you? No, of course not. Express instructions after all. So you’re just so ready. Breath coming in small ragged gasps and those are just as important as the weight of you upon me, your muscles clamped around the base of my cock, your hands roaming all over my body—”

She’s getting off on the sound of his voice as much as what he’s actually saying. She’s forgotten about the vibe for a moment, just using her fingers—not enough to make her come, just enough to keep her wet and attentive.

His breathing sounds shallow now, and she closes her eyes for a moment so she can picture him, jerking himself off with one hand, face set nearly in a frown as he nears…

When she speaks, her voice surprises her, it’s so assured and calm and a little dark.

“I want to fuck you like that right now, Wes, in that chair by the window. Want you to fucking scream my name when you come, want you to whisper it in my ear. Just come for me—”

“Faith…”

Then silence. Did he drop the phone? No, she can hear him breathing.

She waits for a minute before she says anything else.

“So that made six, right? My turn now, Wes. So. What are you gonna do for me?” It’s rather difficult to imagine the ridiculous vibe as his cock but she’ll make do. She switches it on and awaits instructions.

In the minutes that follow, as his voice steadies and begins to instruct her, she gets a glimpse of the payoff of all that time he’s spent teasing her. Because he knows her body now, as well as anyone
who isn’t her ever will and he’s, fuck, he’s trained it to obey and yeah, that’s scary, but rollercoaster scary, not dead body jumping up to throttle you terrifying.

Even drunk—and he is and she’s so going to rub it in when she sees him next—even lying back all relaxed and buzzed, cock half-hard still, come lying in a thick trail over his stomach—no, he’d have cleaned that up by now—he’s still able to make every word hit home.

“—deep inside you. Does it go as far as I do, Faith? Does it make you arch up off the bed, with your eyes wild and your lips parted on a moan?”

“No, no, Wes. God, you know it doesn’t.”

“But you’re still going to come when I tell you, aren’t you, Faith?”

It’s drawled out and he’s smiling, she can tell, but she’ll save her glares for later, because her cunt’s greedy around the thick slipperiness she’s thrust up inside it and she can feel her body warming under everything she’s doing to it; her fingers pinching and squeezing at a nipple until it’s swollen and even the lightest touch is enough to make her clit throb in time with it, but she doesn’t ease off so it’s hovering on hurting, mouth dry because she’s panting now, gasping for air.

“Yes.”

Clit exposed now, tender and hard, and she wants the lash of his tongue against it, the insistent, relentless rub of his fingers, not this repetitive, monotonous flicking, but it’s all she’s got and she lets her knees fall apart and that sets off a chain reaction as the muscles in her thighs tug and spread her cunt that little bit wider, open her up a little bit more.

“Tell me now, Wes,” she begs, knowing she needs him to make this work, because she can come without him but not when he’s right there like this, not when he’s told her she can’t until he allows it.

“If you can ask me with words, you’re not ready,” he whispers. “I want you incapable of speech, unless it’s my name you’re whimpering, Faith, want you so desperate, so ready.”

And if she wasn’t before, she is now, because his voice is reaching out to her, and behind her closed eyes she’s seeing everything he’s done to her, feeling his hands on her body, and the lingering taste of his come on her lips, writhing as if his cock’s inside her, filling her.

“When I return, I’m going to keep you in my office all day, Faith,” he says. “Kneeling between my legs, pretty mouth busy, bent over my desk and waiting for my hand—” New images, fresh and bright and they’re making her twist and moan as the heat rises and she’s not going to be able to hold this back much longer. “Remember how I worked with you standing beside me, my fingers deep inside and you forbidden to move? Would you like me to do that again, Faith? For an hour, until you’re trembling and soaking my hand, biting your lip to keep from saying—”

She’s not sure it’s his name she cries out, in an inarticulate scream, but he tells her to come, so he must have understood her.

***

For the first time in what seems like forever, she sleeps well. In fact, she sleeps like the dead. Vibrator in one sticky hand, phone in the other and that welcome soreness between her legs when she wakes up, confuses her so for a second she thinks that Wes is here and she slept in his arms and he’s going to come through the door any minute now with a mug of coffee and the tender smile she always gets when she's rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.
But he doesn't because he's on the other side of the freakin' country and the only thing that's getting her out of bed and into the shower is being able to walk into the kitchen fifteen minutes later, flick the calendar ahead two pages and write “New York!!” with the red Sharpie she carries around in her bag.

He phones her when she gets to the office and apart from a “Good morning, sweetness,” in his burnished drawl, it's back to business.

“And it's imperative that you have all these papers ready for the overnight courier,” he barks at her and she pauses from scribbling it all down on the back of a used envelope. Man, she really needs to order some more steno pads.

“You could say please, you know, it wouldn't kill you,” she grumbles, because just being back at the office is enough to have the feeling of dread slowly squeezing at her internal organs again.

He clears his throat. “Faith, please, I really haven't got the time. I'll call you tonight but I'm about to go into an interminably dreary meeting and I need to know that you'll follow my orders…”

“I always do, don't I?” she yelps indignantly.

“To the letter and don't interrupt.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” She scribbles through the heart she's just drawn because he so doesn't deserve it this morning.

“You're really being incredibly recalcitrant this morning,” he says wearily. “I have to go; I'm being glared at by one of the senior partners. I'll call you tonight.”

“But, Wes…” She's talking to silence and she slams the phone down. Then picks it up and bangs it home again, just for luck.

And now he's gone and she hasn't actually got that much to do, it's all crowding in on her again, until her stomach is clenching in knots and she goes into the basement and digs around in the cabinet for a couple of files worth of dead papers so she can take them in to the back yard to make a bonfire with.

No way is she going to be able to eat lunch but it's a beautiful day and the sun lifts her spirits a couple of inches, as she walks in the direction of downtown.

She pauses to look in the window of the used bookstore and before she knows what she's doing, she turning the handle and walking inside. It's hard to know what to get him because she's not big with the books (Mansfield Park has been abandoned half the way though) but she gets chatting to the owner and walks out with a biography of Baudelaire and The Portable Dorothy Parker which the woman promises her she'll like more than Jane Austen.

There's something really satisfying about the thick brown paper bag and the weight of the books in it that she swings her arm and pretends that she does this all the time; goes to bookshops and gets cool books for her and her… boyfriend… her lover… her Wes to read.

And that's what it's going to be like when they're living in New York. He'll come home from the office all tired and rumpled and she'll be waiting for him with a gin and tonic, even though he doesn't drink gin and tonic, but fuck it, this is her fantasy…

“Faith? Faithy?”

She looks up and into Darla's limpid blue eyes, which are wide and startled. “Oh, um, hey, Mom.”
It probably is Darla, though she's looking kinda spiffy. Actually just being up and dressed before midday is a fucking revelation but she's got makeup on and she's brushed her hair, plus the skirt and blouse she's wearing are buttoned up and not stained.

She's not the only one who's doing inventory. Darla's eyes are running over her and thank the baby Jesus that there's no visible bruises and she can't see the marks on her thighs from where Wes' hands held her legs open as he fucked her into the headboard the night before he left.

“You've lost weight, baby,” Darla says. “You on one of them no carb diets or does he just not feed you?”

Faith's painfully aware of how loose her skirt is. This morning she had to hunt around for a safety pin but she can feel her face settling into a scowl that she hasn't worn for weeks. “No, I haven't. And what's with you? You going to a fancy dress party as a nice girl?”

And the weird thing is that Darla's practically glowing as she straightens up. “I've got a job,” she says, leaning in like it's this big confession. “I'm working on the Reception at that car dealership on Mayfield and Clark. Even thinking about…”

She takes a step back from the sheer force of Darla's sense of self-worth. “Cool. I guess they don't mind you nipping out back to take a few slugs of vodka when the afternoon rush for Cadillacs gets a bit too much for you.”

Darla's face kinda crumples in on itself and she's feeling like the biggest bitch since Buffy Summers won the Miss Bitch Beauty Pageant. “I've been sober for ten days,” Darla says in this tiny voice and she has to bite back a snort of disbelief.

“You are fucking kidding me? You doing that whole twelve steps bullshit?” she splutters, then stops herself and lets the reassuring weight of the book bag bang against her leg. “Mom, I'm sorry, okay? Just stuff… Whatever, hey. That's really good.”

But it's not because where the fuck does Darla get off carving a life out for herself when she's never been good at anything but getting drunk and passing out because her devoted daughter's always been there to drag her sorry ass to bed?

“I'm trying, Faithy. If you came home, things would be different. I'd be different.” And she's clutching her arm, thin fingers curled around the sleeve of Faith's favorite polka dot blouse.

“I can't,” she hisses, shaking her arm free. “We're leaving. He's taking me to New York and I'm never coming back here ever again.”

Then she's walking fast, almost running but Darla's scurrying along beside her. “When? When are you going?”

“In a couple of months,” she bites out, grinding to a halt at the sight of the 'Don't Walk' sign.

“Is this because of your dad and that bitch lawyer?”

And that actually merits turning around and looking Darla in the eye. “What the fuck? Who the fuck told you?” But she already knows the answer.

“I bumped into Xander at the store and he mentioned something and shit, Faith! You don't return my calls, I don't know what the fuck's going on with you and that prissy fuck and I have to hear about it from fricking Xander and that Morgan woman when she phones up for her nightly chat.” Darla trails off and steps back from the righteous fury Faith's pretty sure is painted all over her face. She'd swear
that her eyes just turned into laser beams.

“He had no fucking right to say anything,” she screeches, ignoring the looks from the dumb fucks waiting to cross the road. “I'm going to fucking kill him. And she's calling you every night? What has she said about Wes? What has she said about me?”

Darla's not looking quite so together, her hands out in front of her like she's trying to ward off evil spirits. “You need to calm the fuck down,” she says. “Every night I tell her not to call any more. But she's in good with your dad, and baby, I don't know what shitty little scam he's trying to pull, but you need to get the fuck out of this town and not look back.”

The books make this dull thud on the ground as she drops the bag but it's not important because even though Darla's half a head shorter than her, she wraps Faith up tightly in her arms and she's stroking her back as Faith cries on her shoulder.

“Baby girl,” she coos. “C'mon, Faithy, don't cry.”

They end up in this coffee shop, drinking iced tea and sharing Faith's cigarettes while she spills out all the sad, sorry details. Except she can't tell her what's on the photos. Can't do anything more than choke out the word 'photos', while Darla tilts her head and does a fucking good impression of someone who actually cares about her.

“You have to go to the police, Faith.”

“You need to tell him what's going on.”

“You should call the bank and get the checks canceled before he cashes them.”

Darla's full of helpful tips and suggestions but Faith shakes her head to each one and says, “I can't.” Because there's no way in hell she can tell Darla what's on the photographs and even thinking about the affidavit makes her want to puke the iced tea all over the table. “Two months, Mom, and then we're outta here and it's over.”

Darla shakes her head and stubs out her cigarette in the ashtray. “I've got to get back,” she says almost to herself. “You want to come over tonight, sweetie? I know you don't like being left on your own.”

“Wes is going to call and I have to be there,” she says, pinning her shoulders back and trying to muster up a smile. “Really, it'll all be okay.”

“I can pretty much guess what's got you so rattled up bout those photos,” Darla tells her softly, standing up. “She's been shooting her mouth about your boyfriend and what…”

“Please, don't,” Faith begs, hiding her hands under the table because they're shaking so hard. “Just don't. He'd be fucked up if they got out and I can't do that to him. Two months. I just need to buy us another two months.”

Then Darla's kissing her cheek for the first time in five years. Hasn't happened since she got chucked in 9th grade by Jesse, Xander's bestest bud, and came home in tears and got one lousy kiss on the cheek and the talk about how all men were lousy rat bastards. Which she'd pretty much figured out already.

“Faith, baby, you call me,” Darla's saying. “We'll figure something out.”

Then she's gone, feet tripping over themselves as she looks at her watch and realizes she's going to
be late back to her bigass important job at the car dealership.

Chapter Fifty-Two

The house is achingly empty when she gets back to it and she stands in the middle of the kitchen, biting down hard on her lip to stop from crying. She lets herself dream that she’s an orphan and that the horizon’s cloudless; tries to think one day it will be—but she can still feel her mom’s kiss on her face and nothing’s going to make her dad disappear.

She tries to think how she could’ve handled this better and finds her fingers stroking the place on her wrist where her watch should be. Talking to her mom’s put all these doubts in her head and she really doesn’t think the worry needs company. It’s busy enough getting fucked over by the guilt.

She wanders around the house, letting her hands drift across chairs and touch some of the weird ornaments, staring at the pictures he’s hung here and there. But these rooms aren’t really him, and she ends up in what she thinks of as the inner library, surrounded by all those books Wes pretends are an investment. Yeah. Like he’d ever sell them.

There’s no way she’d have snooped through his stuff; she might be so far down the social ladder she’s in the basement, but she’s been taught better than that. Kinda funny to think of learning anything from Darla apart from how vodka is a basic food group, but yeah, watching her dad cower, for the first and last time, as Darla threw one hell of a righteous rage after catching him reading her diary; that drove the message home.

Some stuff’s private and unless you’re pond scum, you don’t poke and pry into it.

But books; they’re for everyone, and Wes showed her this room and never said she couldn’t go in it alone, so she retreats to it, safe and surrounded by reminders of him, and browses through the books, taking care to replace them exactly, smiling over the gaudy covers and old-fashioned kids playing cricket or sailing boats or discovering lost cities in the jungle or whatever.

The letter that falls out of an Arthur Ransome book isn’t in an envelope; it isn’t even folded. It’s just a sheet of paper, lined paper torn from an exercise book, navy ink fresh, written in the same careful script as the bookplate she saw last time she was in this room. And as she picks it up, she sees it’s not really a letter, but one sentence written over and over on both sides of the paper.

*I must not be a disappointment to my parents and an ungrateful son.*

At the end, in a black scribble, are the initials ‘RWP’.

Carefully, gently, she slips the paper back inside the book; slides the book onto the shelf. Then, once her hands are empty she clenches them into fists and stands there shaking with a sick anger. Oh, she knows about him; good old Roger, Wes Senior. Wes has shared enough to make her realize that when it comes to shitty fathers there’s not a lot to choose between hers and his, but this just brings it home what he must’ve endured as a kid and right now it’s more than she can stand.

She’s got less than two hours before Wes is due to ring and she’s got to get out of the house, away from the emptiness and the memories. So she tucks her cell phone in her purse and she’s halfway down the drive when she sees there’s someone waiting in the shadows at the end.

*Bad time to come calling, Liam,* she thinks grimly, letting the resentment boil and bubble inside her. *But a really good time for me to think you’re a rapist and smash a rock against your head.*

She’s almost sorry when it’s Xander who steps out and gives her a sheepish smile. “Hey, Faith.”
“Xander, you—” She lets one hand go to a heart she’s just realized is hammering against her ribs and glares at him. “You freaked me out! What the fuck are you doing?”

He walks over to her and shrugs helplessly. “Not a good time to say I’m here to stop you freaking then?”

It lines up in her head; cherry, cherry, fucking cherry. “Darla and you been having another little chat, have you?”

He doesn’t back down like she expects. “Yeah. Pretty amazing the way she’s pulled herself together since you left, huh?”

Now that stings. She gets to thinking that maybe if she’d stayed, giving into Darla’s whines for alcohol because it was easier—and quieter—than enduring the screaming, maybe Darla wouldn’t have the job, wouldn’t have the hope. Sucks to know your absence is the push someone needs to improve.

“I give it a week,” she says spitefully and manages to last through three seconds of Xander’s hurt, reproachful puppy eyes before she caves in. “Oh shit, you know I don’t meant that! Forget it. It’s good that she’s working and off the vodka; sure it is. Still doesn’t explain why you’re hanging around.”

He gives her a sunny side up grin. “Come for a sleepover, Faith.” He pats his pocket. “Didn’t bring my jammies, but I’ve got a toothbrush right here.”

That sends her hair flying as she shakes her head vehemently. “No way, Xander. Wes’d freak; you just can’t.”

“He’s not here though, is he?”

“No, but he’d know.”

Xander snorts. “You can hide the blackmail from him but not me sticking around for the night and keeping the monster in the closet?”

“No.” She’s torn. A few hours with Xander, kicking back and chatting, would really help. Hell, having him sleeping next door and she’d maybe be able to go to bed sober and still get in her eight hours, but Wes wouldn’t like it, she’s sure of that.

“Darla said you were expecting him to call,” Xander says. “How’s this; I come in and you make me a coffee; and if you tell me that’s not allowed I’m going to get seriously worried about you. I mean it. Then, when he calls to check up on you—”

“That’s not why he calls,” she interrupts. “He calls to—” Make me come so hard my eyelids won’t unpeel for five minutes after. “He calls because he misses me. To say ‘hi’. Stop making him sound like a freak.”

“When he calls,” Xander says, “you tell him I’m there, and ask if it’s cool if I stay. He says ‘no’, I’ll leave. Okay?”

It’s not, but Xander’s lip’s jutting out and he’s getting that reluctant hero look that made him face down Mr. Jenson to get Faith’s Barbie back after an ill-fated attempt to put Barbie in orbit ended up with her crash landing in his begonias.

“Fine!” She pouts and throws up her hands theatrically. “But you don’t touch anything, you don’t
wander around, and you ask me once, just *once* where he keeps the dungeon and so help me I’ll—”

“Dungeon? He has a—shutting up now.” Xander gives her a cheerful grin and practically fucking skips up to the house.

It’s kind of fun showing it to him in the end. He’s wide-eyed and appreciative, doesn’t try to show off, or juggle the china, or make rude comments; not even when he comes face to face with one of those ugly bits of modern art that look like someone threw up on the canvas after eating a deluxe pizza with extra peppers. She’d been way frank about it herself and Wes had lectured her on art appreciation for thirty solid minutes before pointing out with a wicked grin that it was in a dark corner for a reason and admitting it was a gift from a client.

She doesn’t let him go anywhere Wes would think of as private, but he’s cool about it and she’s starting to get all these weird hostess-y feelings as she fixes him a coffee, as if it’s really her home she’s showing off, as if she belongs here.

Then the phone rings and she sees him start to smile expectantly, and when she says, “Hi, Wes,” it’s in this croak that has him demanding to know if she’s sick. “No, I’m fine, Wes.” He’s going to say something that really shouldn’t have an audience, she just knows he is, so she cuts in and says, really fast. “I’ve got a visitor, Wes. That’s—that’s okay, right?”

Xander rolls his eyes but she ignores him, hanging onto the phone as if it’s keeping her from falling over, which as it’s not attached to anything, it really isn’t.

“Well, that all depends,” Wesley says, in that crackle of ice voice. “Might I ask whom you’re entertaining?”

“Xander,” she says quickly. “He was worried about me; you remember how I was last time you were away, and he just turned up to keep me company, you know?”

“Did he now?” There’s a pause and then Wes says softly, “Put him on, Faith. I’d rather like to say hello.”

And it’s so not what she would’ve wanted, but fuck, watching Xander go pale, back off and start waving his hands frantically as he mouths, ‘no!’ is worth the sinking feeling she gets as she pushes the phone into Xander’s hands with a smirk.

It’s better than the time that Xander had to rescue her from an accusation of shoplifting by explaining to the security guard that the tampons she’d stashed in her bag were actually for their poor, sick mother who only had three months to live.

She hauls herself up on to the worktop and sticks out her tongue at a red-faced Xander, who glares at her.

“Um, hello? Mr. er… oh, right, Wesley. And you can call me Xander except you pretty much already have.”

Oh yeah! She's biting her fist to stop the giggles exploding out of her mouth as Xander nods vigorously. “Yes, sir. Yeah, I understand.”

Xander's still pinking up and it's kinda hard to work out what the conversation's about from all the nodding and the “yes, sir”-ring. Then Xander's making horrified faces and nodding so hard that she's amazed that his head is still attached to his neck. “No, um, that would be nice. I don't think I've ever… Most times it's just a packet of Hamburger Helper and a shove in the direction of the kitchen.”
Now it's her turn to make 'what the fuck?' faces and hold out her hand imperiously for the phone, but Xander's stammering his way through a whole, “Well, good-bye, Wesley.” Or he is until he gives Faith a malicious grin. “And you take good care of our little Faithy, Wes, or we're going to be having a public flogging on Main Street.”

“You give me the fucking phone right the fuck now, Xand!” she snarls, sliding to her feet and grabbing it. “Wes?”

“Faith, I can hear that you're using your most charming manners for your guest.” She can almost feel his warm breath ghosting against her ear.

“What have you been saying to him?” she demands, turning her back on a smirking Xander and opening the back door so she can get some fucking privacy.

Wes makes a tutting noise and it's hard to tell if he's really pissed at her without the visuals or just doing it for effect. “I was merely inquiring as to whether he'd like to come to dinner when I return from New York,” he says blithely and she's almost dropping the phone in shock.

“Like, why?”

“Because you plan to invite him to stay with us in the charming brownstone I've just rented in the West Village so it seems only proper to make some attempt to…”

“Huh? You just what?”

“Really, Faith, full sentences would be far more helpful. Xander is an important part of your life…”

“Yeah, yeah,” she mutters impatiently. “Just rewind, Wes. You got us a place to live? In the West Village. Where's the West Village? Is it near the East Village? Or, like, Greenwich Village? If you're already renting it now, can we move in right away?” She can't hold on to the words; they're spilling out of her mouth and she can't seem to make them stop. All she can see is the shiny red apple, glistening with dew and tempting her to just take one bite.

And he's laughing now, these soft little ripples of mirth that make her sway on her feet until he says, “Two months, Faith. We'll have the keys in eight weeks, though once we're in Manhattan, I'll have to send you to a charm school so they can teach you not to interrupt.”

Two months seems like the longest time in the world. A fuck of a lot can happen in two months; stuff that should be filed in a big folder marked 'don't go there.' So she doesn't. “I'm still missing you, Wes,” she says softly. “What time are you getting back tomorrow?”

“Oh, you'll be safely tucked up in bed by the time I get in,” he murmurs. “Curl up under the quilt and dreaming of shoes and Twinkies and all the other things I'm sure you dream about.”

Which goes to show how little he knows, but she likes the thought of him caring that her sleeping hours are as easy as her waking hours are hard. “Talking of sleeping,” she says carefully. “Is it okay if Xander stays over tonight to keep me company?”

“He makes this soft sound like he's touched or something. “These business trips are interminable,” he says heavily, like the confession has been forced out of him under duress. “I'm really most anxious to
come home to my little Olympia.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” she asks curiously and she knows he's smiling.

“I'll tell you when I next see you,” he promises. “And Xander can stay, I suppose. He seems very servile. I quite like him.”

“I'll tell him that, shall I?” she asks with a giggle and he tuts down the phone.

“You'll do no such thing. I think you're in quite enough trouble after your escapades last night.” His voice lowers and that dark velvet feeling in the pit of her stomach kicks in. “I've thought of a marvelous way for both of us to enjoy your little device that seemed to bring you so much pleasure.”

“Yeah?” she manages to squeeze out of her throat.

“Oh yes,” he purrs. “But that, like so much else, will just have to wait a day or so.”

And there's so much she wants to tell him; that she misses him even more now and that she loves him and she's bought him a present. The important stuff. And then she wishes she could whiz back in a time machine to, like, two weeks ago, and tell him the really, really important stuff but he's already saying good-bye.

She holds the phone to her ear for a few more seconds after he hangs up, just to make sure. She hates the dead silence that follows. But his voice lingers in her mind, and her pulse races more than a little bit when she thinks about what he might have planned for her when he gets back.

She doesn’t let herself think about the apartment, or the city. She can’t. It has to stay in the realm of the unreal, or else—

“Faith? Are you out here?”

The light floods the porch and she can hear the creak of the French doors. She half expects Wes to be coming through them, but Xander’s standing there, silhouetted against the bright light.

“Oh, hey, Xand. Yeah, I’m here. I was just coming in.”

She pads quietly across the slate toward the house. When she goes to walk past him he just stops her, quietly. Wraps his arms around her and holds her tightly.

“You're really okay, here, Faith? You'd tell me, wouldn't you? Because I just don’t know anymore.”

She nods weakly, just lets him envelop her. She doesn’t want to start crying. Jesus, she’s done enough of that to last several lifetimes. But God, she just wants to let it out, let something out…

“And I’m sorry I was so fucking uptight about … you and Wes. I just, y’know, it’s a… Well, it’s a ___”

She can’t help it, but she starts to laugh. “Cliché? That the word you were looking for, Xander?”

“You gonna hold that against me in a court of law?” Now Xander’s laughing too.

“You’d better believe it.” She chucks him on the shoulder. “C’mon, I think it’s high time we got really fucking drunk.”

“That a good idea? Don’t you have to work tomorrow?”
“Oh yeah. So maybe not *quite* that drunk, but still… I know where he keeps the good stuff.”

“Again with the not-so-good ideas.”

She peers into his eyes. “Xander, is that really you, or have you been taken over by aliens? Because excess is your fucking middle name.”

He rolls his eyes. “Well, yeah, usually. Just for tonight it’s been replaced with ‘I’m really fucking concerned because you’ve practically disappeared and your father is pulling some seriously illegal bullshit.’” He pauses. “Yeah, that about covers it.”

“Shit, Xander, I know.” Faith sighs heavily and slumps back on the sofa. Xander sits down next to her.

“You should go to the police, Faith.”

“I can’t, Xander. He’s my—”

“I think he forfeited that right when he decided to take pictures of you having sex.”

The tears well up again. “Don’t, just don’t. Please. I need to handle this in my own way. Wes can’t know, not ever. I’ve got to figure this out by myself.”

Xander squeezes her shoulder. His voice is quiet but dead serious. “But you don’t, sweetie, that’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

She fixes him with a cold stare. “You’re not listening to me, Xander. I’m *handling* it. Did you want a fucking drink or not? Because I’m having one.”

Her hand shakes as she pours the single malt with a lavish hand.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Two glasses later, both wrinkling their noses and sticking their tongues out as it goes down, and Xander has just about got over his shock.

“I mean, what kind of guy doesn't have a TV?” he asks her for the gazillionth time, his face furrowed with the enormity of such a terrible state of affairs. “Is that, like, a British thing?”

“It's mostly a Wes thing,” she tells him. “He likes to listen to classical music and read and hey, I read this Jane Austen book…”

Xander gives her this look like she's just farted. “That's it? That's his sinister attraction? He likes no music or books made after 1875 and it gets you hot?”

The whiskey's given her the warm fuzzies and she leans against Xander's shoulder, inhaling the toasty, familiar smell of him. “Yeah and he dresses me up in a fucking crinoline while he's at it.”

The bug-eyes he gives her makes her realize he doesn't know whether she's joking or not so she has to punch him on the shoulder. “As fucking if, Xand! He's cool, okay? We do the crossword together and he cooks me these amazing meals and on Sundays we go to the Farmer's Market and he… I just… I like the person that I am with him.”

And it's like the person she is with him and the person she is with Xander don't quite meet in the middle and just one sideways glance at Xander is enough to know that it makes him feel just as sad about it as she does.
“You gonna keep in touch when you move to New York?” he asks softly.

“Damn straight I am! And you're coming to visit. First thing I said to Wes, when he told me.”

Xander slumps down on the couch, legs sprawled untidily in front of him. “Not gonna be the same as having you fifteen minutes away though.”

“I know.”

“And that kinda sucks.”

“Yeah, it pretty much does,” she says and sighs, threading her fingers through his. He untangles himself so he can reach into his shirt pocket.

“Just as well I got the cure, right here,” he says, holding up a little plastic bag, which she has to squint at.

“Skunk?”

Xander wags his finger at her. “Au contraire, my dear Faith. *Hydroponic* skunk. Do you want to do the honors, or shall I?”

One hour, another glass of single malt and three joints later, they're feeling no pain. Too baked to do anything other than lie on the rug, holding hands and listening to Eric Satie. And eventually they fall asleep, like they've done on countless other nights after bar hopping their way across town and coming home empty-handed and broken-hearted because no one would look at them twice.

The insistent ringing of her cellphone wakes her up and she gives a groan of pain at the crick in her neck as she raises her head from its not-so-comfy position on Xander's shoulder.

“What the fuck?” he whimpers.

“We fell asleep and where the hell is my phone?” She finds it wedged down the side of the couch and wills herself to sound like the winner of a Miss Congeniality pageant as she hits the green button.

“Hi,” she trills, trying to ignore the sandpaper feel of her mouth.

“Well, you sound pretty fucking chipper, sweetheart. Guess someone got her brains fucked out last night.” He sounds drunk on his smugness. Well, that and the beer he's probably been knocking back all night. The only reason he's up at seven is because he's managed to find some skeevy dive that stays open all night.

“What do you want?” she hisses. “How about one of my fucking kidneys this time?”

Liam barks with laughter. “I'll let you know when it comes to that, Faithy. Just wanted to let my darling daughter know that the checks are ready.”

Xander's sitting up and looking at her worriedly. Which is absolutely no fucking help whatsoever. Doesn't stop him from listening in like she's the Quiz of the Day on WAZN.

“You can only cash one a week,” she says fiercely, tucking the phone under her ear and scooping up the dirty glasses. “One thousand dollars for each one and I want the photos back.”

“Seems to me that you're not in a position to start busting my balls,” he says equably.

She takes a deep breath, ignores Xander's stupid faces, and continues: “I could have those checks
canceled. You cash one a week and then you call me to arrange where we're gonna meet so I can get those photos back.”

“You get the photos once I've had the whole six thou,” Liam insists. “And I'd watch your tone. You're not too big to put you over my knee but then again, that'd probably get you off, wouldn't it, baby?”

“But…” she starts and then realizes that she doesn't know where she's headed. “Look, I want two of them back after you've cashed half the checks. That's fucking fair.”

But it isn't. None of it is. And reasoning with her dad is like trying to talk about algebra with a three-year-old.

Liam breathes heavily down the phone and she squinches up her face at the sound. “Okay,” he says finally. “I'll think about it and let you know.”

“Dad…” And she hates that she has to call him that, like he's been there to take her on fucking fishing trips and pin up her gold starred report cards (not like she ever got many of them) on the refrigerator and rub her back when she used to get night terrors. “I am fucking begging you, please, please, please don’t do this to us. To me. You're fucking everything up…”

But she's already talking to the dial tone.

Xander doesn’t say a word. Not one. And that’s worse than him nagging somehow. He just waits until he’s sure she’s not going to do anything but scrunch herself into a tight little ball and glare at the silent phone and then he shrugs and goes off to pee—and, as she finds out later—go to town with every fancy soap, gel and spray he can, so that when they meet up in the kitchen twenty minutes later, he smells like Wes and it nearly kills her.

He chatters over the coffee and toast she makes, crunching away at whole wheat goodness without complaining because it’s not Wonder bread, moaning happily when he gets a hit of the coffee she’s gotten used to; the perfect house guest. He even offers to help with the dishes until she points silently at the dishwasher and rolls her eyes, holding back the giggles.

It’s not until they’re both in the taxi he insisted on calling, taking him home and Faith to work that he finally cracks.

“Faith—it’s got to be the first time in living memory I’ve ever agreed with Darla, but you know, she’s right. Tell him. He’ll chew Liam up and spit him out. Jerk won’t have the chance to do anything before his ass is in jail and no one’ll be listening to word one.”

“Going to put her in jail too? Lilah? The one who’s hassling my mom every night?” Faith shakes her head. “Dad doesn’t like her much but if it was the only way to do it, he’s work with her—and she’d love the chance to drag it all out in the open. I’ve got to just keep him quiet, one way or another for two months and we’re gone.”

“So’s six thou of Wes’ money,” Xander points out acidly. “Or is he rich enough that’s pocket change?”

She shakes her head. “He won’t care about how much if he finds out,” she whispers because the cab drivers starting to get interested. “That’s not going to matter at all.”

“Then why—oh, forget it.” He tosses some bills at her as the cab slows down and gives her a kiss. “Faith, you’re a stubborn bitch, you know that?”
She grins. “But you still love me, right?”

“With all my might,” he says solemnly, the way he always has since they were six and he went through three months of not saying anything unless it rhymed.

She’s smiling when she walks into the office but it’s wiped off her face when she sees the message light flashing on the phone. Shit. The detour to drop Xander off means she’s all of seven minutes late and she’s missed Wesley’s phone call. Stabbing her finger against the ‘play’ button and grabbing a pencil and—fuck, she’s going to have to go out at lunch and buy some paper to write on—a scrap of paper, just in case he’s got anything he wants her to do, she waits to hear him get creatively pissed off.

“Faith? I can only trust that you’re planning on working late to make up for your unaccountable tardiness. Or do I have Xander to thank for it?” For one traitorous, treacherous moment she wants to say ‘yes’ when he quizzes her later, but she can’t do that to Xander and Wes’ll take one look at her and know she’s lying anyway. “I’m leaving for the airport shortly and I don’t anticipate any delays. Please make sure you’ve completed the tasks I set you yesterday and follow the instructions I’ll be leaving on the telephone in the study.” There’s a pause and then the cool, bored voice sharpens. “I hope they won’t be beyond your capabilities in the same way that being at your desk at 8.30 sharp is.”

He hangs up then and she’s left with nothing to do but play the message over and over just to hear him drawl out her name in that honey-sweet voice.

She’s so giddy with the thought that he’ll be with her in four or five hours that she practically fucking floats home—after carefully sitting at her desk for seven extra minutes, doing nothing, because there’s nothing to do, just doing what he said and getting a real kick out of it. The house still smells faintly of coffee—oh, she'd forgotten to switch the coffee maker off, that’s why—and Wes’ soap. She takes in an enthusiastic sniff and heads for the study.

The study is filled with the half-light of dusk and she's sort of expecting him to be waiting there for her as a surprise and she's a little crushed that he's not. She's just greeted by the solemn blinking of the answering machine for his private phone line—the one she doesn't even know the number to—so she's pretty sure she won't be greeted with any frightening messages from Liam or Lilah.

After clicking on the desk lamp, she hits the play button on the machine, drumming her fingers against the plastic, waiting for the little tape to rewind. It finally starts to play and just like the earlier message, the smooth plumminess of his voice makes her a little weak in the knees.

“Good evening, Faith. I hope it's evening when you hear this, at least. I'm sure you're just hovering over the desk, so please, have a seat.”

Smiling, she settles into his desk chair and resists the temptation to put her feet up.

“My flight arrives, as you may recall, at seven-thirty, so I should arrive an hour after that, if everything goes smoothly at the airport.”

“God, you'd so better not be late.” she mutters at his disembodied voice. The residual THC chasing through her bloodstream and the anticipation of his arrival have made her twitchingly horny all day. She's pretty sure that might send her on a murderous rampage leaving baggage handlers and ticket desk clerks in her wake when she storms the airport, demanding to know why his flight hasn't arrived yet.

“We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow, and no doubt we'll both be quite tired.”
She lets out a little whimper of disgust at that.

“But rest assured that we'll discuss your transgressions tomorrow in an early meeting at the office.”

“Mmm. Yes sir!” She giggles.

“In the meantime, since we can't go out for a little celebratory dinner tonight and I'll no doubt have choked down some abysmal sandwich for lunch during my layover in St. Louis, you're to ring up Thyme's and order us a light dinner. Two medium-rare fillets mignon with asparagus salad and pilaf. And ginger cake with lemon sauce for dessert. Roger will deliver within an hour of your call; he's always quite prompt, so be prepared. With any luck, the food and my cab will arrive at the same time.”

She's scribbling this all down now, intent not to forget any detail. She'll call right at seven-thirty then, don't want him to wait on dinner.

“After you call, go down to the wine cellar and open the bottle of '95 Mouton Rothschild.” He pauses, and she knows he's running through the mental list of the cellar for the perfect match with rare steak and asparagus. “No, make that the 2000 Pavie Decesse St. Emilion. Leave it to breathe and set the table in the kitchen with the dishes in the third cabinet to the left of the sink, the cutlery from the drawer nearest the oven, and the linens that are in the hall closet.” He pauses, and her notes are a muddle that she hopes will be legible later, when she's faced with the expanse of the kitchen. “After you've done that draw yourself a bath. Relax a little, but don't take too long.”

That command would sound ridiculous from someone else, but she knows exactly how long he means—the amount of time it takes for the water to get slightly tepid.

“When you're done, comb out your hair and put on your black silk robe—and nothing else.” He sighs heavily, and she can't help but smile at his obvious frustration that endearingly matches hers. “I believe that covers everything, and this message has gone on long enough as it is. I'll be so very glad to see you, Faith and I hope to find you poring over Mansfield Park on the sofa with dinner waiting when I arrive.”

The message clicks off and rewinds and she resists listening to it again and wasting time.

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She should have known better than to expect the airlines to get him home to her according to plan. Following each of his directives to the letter leaves her keyed up and wet and even more impatient. She sets the table with the same deliberateness she would save for a perfectly typed letter: folding the linens, lighting the candles, placing the china and silverware just so.

Well, she's followed nearly all the directives. She's curled up on the sofa with her new Dorothy Parker book in hand and the Baudelaire biography wrapped in tissue and raffia on the coffee table, watching the minute hand on the clock tick past eight forty-five. She calls the airport twice and is told the flight's delayed, but is in range—whatever the hell that means. Nine. She finally caves and starts drinking the wine. At least dinner arrived in insulated boxes, so it won't be totally ruined. Maybe.

By ten thirty, she's already cried and drunk half the wine and is staring blankly at the clock when she drifts off to sleep.

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His lips brush the inside of her thigh. She's dozed off splayed on the sofa, of course. But she must be
dreaming, right? “Hello,” she mumbles, not even half-awake.

His warm hands push her still-damp hair away from her face when she blearily opens her eyes to find him kneeling next to the sofa, his eyes impossibly tender in a way she's never seen before now.

“What happened to Jane Austen?” he says and smiles, pulling the book from her grip and putting it aside.

“Boring. Too prissy.”

“I see.” He's amused. “I admit, there were times I wanted to throw her aside in disgust...”

“No you didn't, you love that shit. Everyone's all proper.”

“Oh, believe me, I did. There were times I would have preferred flying missions alongside Biggles in his Sopwith Camel.” He's softly sardonic, and she can't quite believe that he's really there. Maybe she's dreaming? His hand has moved under front of her robe, stroking her breasts, teasing a nipple.

“Still, I must admit, Mrs. Parker will be a better fit for you, Faith.”

“That's what the clerk at the bookstore said,” she says, finally sitting up and squinting at him.

“I see; my recommendations weren't good enough for you.”

“No, I just... I wanted a book of my own, y'know?”

“I do.” He takes a few sips of her abandoned glass of wine. “I'm sorry I was delayed. I nearly killed everyone on that tiresome flight, but then I realized I didn't know how to fly a plane.”

“It's all right, I was just miserable and driven to drink.”

He leans in and kisses her, swirling his tongue over hers. “I see that,” he says as he breaks away.

“Still, you're here now.”

“I am.”

“What time is it? Can we still eat?” She's not really hungry anymore, but maybe he is.

“I was thinking maybe it was best we got to bed.”

She yawns hugely, thinking of curling up in his arms and going back to sleep and forgetting that their pretty romantic evening hadn't worked out. Waking up to his coffee and his breakfast and being bent over his desk an hour after that, maybe. She feels a little bit like a kid trying to get to bed early on Christmas Eve so the presents will be there sooner.

“Maybe sleep would be best,” she sighs and doesn't complain one bit when he scoops her up and carries her upstairs.

Chapter Fifty-Four

She's in this warm, fuzzy space between sleep and waking as he shoulders open the door to his room and she clings tighter to him.

“The house smells strange,” he comments, as he places her gently on the bed and she turns on to her side and snuggles up against the pillows.
“Left the coffee maker on,” she mumbles and doesn't even have enough strength to open her eyes, though she vaguely registers undressing sounds.

“So it would be nothing to do with the fact that you've been smoking in the house and something rather more exotic that your usual Marlboros if I'm not mistaken.”

“The spliff was Xander's,” she grunts rather uncharitably and pulls the covers tighter round her. She's almost asleep and he shouldn't ask her stuff when her brain seems to have taken a vacation.

Now the sneaky bastard's sat on the edge of the bed and is stroking her hair, smoothing down the wild tumble of curls in a way that's far more effective than electrodes or water torture.

“Anything else I should know about? No, don't open your eyes, Faith, just tell me the awful truth and then you can go to sleep.”

And she's fighting this huge wave of tiredness that's threatening to pull her under but even so she's not far gone enough to tell him the awfulest of the awful truths. “I drank about half a bottle of your good Scotch and I filched four of your sleeping tablets,” she yawns. “You pissed at me?”

“Oh yes, terribly,” he murmurs, like he couldn't give a fuck about any of it, especially if the way he's smoothing the back of his hand against her flushed cheek is anything to go by. “But it can wait until the morning.”

“Steno pads.” She's almost there, lulled by the soothing motions of his hands on her face and hair. “Burned them all.”

“All of them? That seems rather excessive.” His lips brush her forehead and she's sinking away from him, rolling onto her tummy and clinging onto the nearest pillow.

“Sorry, Wes. Bad week,” she vaguely hears herself say and then she's drifting on this cloud and she thinks she hears the patter of raindrops but it's probably just the shower and when she wakes up halfway through the night, he's sprawled out on the other side of the bed, covers kicked off but his hand is holding hers tightly and she smooshes against him, hitches her leg across his and goes back to sleep.

When she wakes up properly, her eyes snapping open and after ten hours of the best sleep she's had in weeks, all her phasers set to stun, the first thing she remembers is that he's finally fucking home. All's right in her world. It takes another five seconds to dimly recall her little confession session from the night before and she tugs off the quilt and jumps out of bed.

Even though she breaks all world showering records, it's another fifteen minutes before she's tiptoeing down the stairs and heading for the kitchen where the smell of freshly brewed coffee tells her that at least she might get to repent for her sins after a couple of hits of caffeine.

He's got his back to her, gazing out of the window but he turns at the sound her heels on the parquet flooring.

“Ah Faith,” he says smoothly, smiling like he means it. “I trust you slept well. Coffee?”

“Like the dead and yeah, thanks.” She's already getting a mug out of the cupboard but she turns to look at him because she can't not. Her eyes scan every inch of his pretty face, the angular lines of his cheekbones, that pouting quiver of a mouth, his twinkling blue eyes and the next thing she knows is she's taking a step and another and he's holding out his arms so she can hurl herself at him.
“I fucking missed you,” she hisses into his ear before she winds her arms round his neck and tugs him down, because even with her heels he's still got half a head of height on her, so she can kiss him.

It's a pretty hot and steamy kiss for 7.47 A.M.. She doesn’t bother with the niceties but goes straight for the prize of his tongue sliding into her mouth. They taste of toothpaste and he's doing that thing he does; that thing where she feels that she's safe and nothing and no one will ever be able to get to her. Makes her wrap her arms even tighter around him until he makes a slight noise of protest and pulls his mouth away from her clinging lips.

“Not that I mind such an enthusiastic homecoming,” he says and smiles against her mouth. “But I do rather like my head attached to my neck.”

“I missed you so much,” she says again, pressing tiny kisses across the smooth surface of his cheeks. “Next time I'm going to stow away in your cabin bag.”

He pushes her away from him and holds at her arm's length. “Well, if you lose any more weight that might become a distinct possibility.”

Sometimes she hates how well he knows her. “Jeez,” she blurts out. “That's exactly what my mom said 'cept she was ruder about it.”

A frown glances across his face. “You saw your mother?”

She shrugs out of his grasp and picks up the coffee mug. “Well, yeah. Bumped into her the other day.”

“I see. Well, that would certainly explain your rather alarming lapses in behavior while I've been away. And how is Darla?”

This is not a conversation that she wants to have. Not this morning. Not now. But he's not going to let it slip until she's answered satisfactorily. “She's fine,” she says hurriedly. “Got a job, off the booze, she's all new and improved. Maybe we should invite her to dinner too.”

“Faith.” He must take lessons in saying her name like that so it's all echo-y with reproach and warning.

“I don't want to talk about her,” she bites out, taking a cautious sip of her coffee. “Look, Wes, can we just not? You've only been home for a few hours and I just want this to be about us, okay?”

“Very well,” he agrees, but his voice is edged with irritation and that frosty look is icing up his eyes. “There are a few other things we need to discuss, aren’t there?”

Which is not what she meant at all and he fucking knows it. “I'm sorry about all that. I'm eighteen. Booze and dope and a couple of pills pretty much go with the territory.”

“As does burning steno pads by the dozen, I'm sure.”

And what's she meant to say? There aren’t any explanations in the world, apart from the truth, which so not going there. So she settles for distraction instead. Makes her eyes go big and pouts her lips. “That wasn't all I did while you were in New York,” she whines. “I bought you a present too.”

He smiles, looking as indulgent as if he’s the one giving her something, frost melting like magic. “Really? That’s very kind of you. I trust it cost no more than ten dollars, though. If my present giving is to be severely restricted—”
She pokes him sharply in the ribs. “Hey! Even I know it’s rude to ask how much a present cost, Wes.”

“I stand corrected,” he murmurs, heavy on the sarcasm but with enough of a smile still lurking to reassure her. “Thank you, Faith. May I have it now?”

She leans in and gives him another kiss, just because he’s there to be kissed and that’s something she never wants to get used to. “Sure. Unless you’re just dying to get behind your desk again.”

There’s a world of meaning behind that and he acknowledges it by letting his smile widen slightly as his hand slides down her back. “I think perhaps you’d prefer me in a good mood when I do that, Faith. I don’t know exactly how many errors you’ve made that will require correction—”

That gets him a snort. “I’ll bet my ass, you do.”

“Interesting, almost prophetic choice of words,” he says smoothly. “Perhaps you’re correct. I did have an awfully long time on the plane with nothing to do but think of you, after all.” He sighs. “And then I had to revise the total when I came home, in light of your confessions. You really do put me to a good deal of trouble sometimes.”

“Sorry,” she says, totally failing to look penitent. “Guess you’ll have to just stick around; stop me going off the rails.”

“I was rather hoping you could do that by yourself, because by now you’ve learned what pleases me and what makes me less pleased.”

She has to think about that. Wes wouldn’t like it if she didn’t do anything wrong, because so far he’s always wanted a reason before he turned her ass scarlet and stinging—but yeah, there’s times she’s gotten him really annoyed and that’s not so much fun.

“Well, I try,” she says and it must sound really fucking doubtful and pathetic because he starts to laugh and doesn’t stop until she swings on her heel and stalks off, returning and pushing the book into his hands with a scowl.

“Faith—” he says, hands busy but in a careful, patient way, not ripping and tearing into it the way she would’ve. “You really—oh.” He holds the book up and there’s this faint flush on his face. “I haven’t read this,” he says, as if he’s confessing to something sinful. “Thank you, Faith; that was very thoughtful of you.”

He’s almost flustered, eyes fixed on the book, long fingers touching the cover with a delicate pressure that doesn’t linger; soft, wondering touches.

“It’s just a book, Wes,” she says, feeling awkward herself in the face of his muted delight. “You’ve got thousands.”

“And I bought them all myself,” he says, turning so she gets to see his blue eyes again and the pleased look on his face. “I really don’t recall the last time someone gave me a present.”

She takes a deep breath. Way too much emotion for this early in the morning. “I was late back from lunch. That’s your second one.”

He frowns and she watches him work that one out. Then he gets it and he tilts up her chin with a barely there push of his fingers. “Thank you,” he says. “I’ll be sure to remember that.” There’s a glimmer of amusement in his eyes as he gives her one of those kisses that last a second but leave her tingling, and turns to stare out of the window. “The lilac’s out,” he says. “It’s a shame it doesn’t last
longer, but perhaps it means we appreciate it more.”

Before she’s got chance to feel depressed, because, yes, she can make even gardening chitchat about her at the moment, he shakes off the softer side and he’s back to business again. “Hurry up, Faith. We’ll be leaving in fifteen minutes.” He purses his lips and studies her. “I think I’d like you to wear something new today.”

“Don’t think I’ve got anything you haven’t seen, Wes,” she says, going through her wardrobe in her head and coming up blank.

“Try the closet in your room,” he says.

“You weren’t supposed to be buying me presents,” she says but without much conviction.

He turns away and rinses out his cup. “I think something I want you to wear at work is more of a business expense, wouldn’t you agree? Not that I intend to claim it as such.” His voice sounds far away as if he’s almost forgotten she’s there. “Off you go. And Faith? It comes to seven individual acts that I feel I can’t allow to pass unrebuked. I can provide you with a list if you wish.”

“I trust you, Wes,” she says without thinking about it, because she’s totally focused on whatever he’s got planned for her.

“I hope you do. Now please hurry.”

There’s a curiously expectant tone to his voice and maybe even a little bit of apprehension. It takes her as long to figure out as it takes to walk to her room and open the closet door. The clothes have been pushed to one side and hanging there, clearly separate from everything else, is one of her usual work dresses with a narrow strip of leather wound around the hanger.

She takes the hanger off the rail and tosses the dress to the bed before unwinding the leather. It’s not a collar, as she’d first thought; too long for that. Not a—a harness or something either and she’s losing the blush and the tremble of arousal and panic because she’s getting curious now. There’s a flat silver buckle, small and smooth and she goes with the obvious in the end; it’s a belt. But that’s somehow too easy and when Wesley taps impatiently on the open door she spins around and holds it out to him looking puzzled.

“Why do you want me to wear this, Wesley? It doesn’t go with the dress, you know.”

It didn’t. Both were black, but the belt was uncompromisingly sexual in a way that the dress, clinging as it did, was not. The belt looked as if it was part of a set that included matching collar, cuffs and whip though she really couldn’t see Wes bothering with anything that fancy. He seemed to get off on improvising or just using his hand and that was fine with her.

“Well, no,” he says, “but as no one will be able to see it, I don’t think they’ll be likely to criticize your ability to accessorize.”

He takes it from her and gives her a flick of the finger that has her slipping out of her robe and standing in front of him naked. “You see,” he says in a conversational voice as he cinches it tightly around her waist, fastening the buckle in the small of her back, “it’s what I’m going to use on you later but by the time I do, you’ll have had hours of wearing it, feeling it cut into you—oh, it’s not tight enough to hurt and if it does start to, you’re to come to me immediately and ask for it to be loosened—but you’ll be unable to forget that you’re wearing it and what its intended purpose is.” He sighs. “It’s eight-fifteen. I had hoped that you’d only have to wear it a few hours, but now, well, I’m sure the time will just fly by until two-fifteen.”
“You’re not going to do anything to me until then?” she blurts out, too horrified by the idea to care that after seven seconds the belt’s forcing her spine straight and making her breathe in slow, careful sips of air.

He gives her a little frown. “I told you on the phone what I wanted to do to you on my first day back, Faith,” he reminds her. “I hope you’ve not been so forgetful when it comes to work.”

It takes her a full thirty seconds to recall that particular bit of the conversation and when she does she whimpers. “You said you were gonna keep me on my knees,” she says, “or make me stand there while you—oh fuck, Wes!”

She can already feel his fingers stirring inside her, tweaking and pinching at her clit as he teases her for hours, his other hand busy writing.

“We’ll have to see,” he says with a pat on her shoulder as he heads for the door. “It’s such a beautiful day that I might improvise. One wouldn’t want to get predictable after all.”

Chapter Fifty-Five

It is a really beautiful day. Blue, uninterrupted sky and wispy clouds as far as the eye can see. In spite of everything, something that simple still has the power to put a big grin on Faith’s face.

“Wes?”

He doesn’t take his eyes off the road, just flicks his gaze briefly in her direction. “Mmm?”

“You wanna play hooky today? You’ve worked really hard this week, you totally deserve it.”

‘Hooky’? This isn’t a concept I’m familiar with, Faith. You’ll have to educate me.”

She rolls her eyes. “I suppose you’re going to tell me you never did that when you were in school. I bet you had fucking perfect attendance.”

“As a matter of fact, I did.”

“Shouldn’t go through life like that, Wes. It’s not right.”

“What do you suggest, Faith?”

“I don’t know. We could, like, go somewhere, take a drive…” This was a better idea before she opened her mouth. Now she feels vaguely ridiculous for having suggested it. But the thought of being in town makes her skin crawl.

“I do actually have some work to do today, Faith.”

And that’s that. She goes back to looking out the window, watching the trees pass.

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When they get to the office the machine is blinking angrily, the water cooler is out of water and it seems there are a million little things to tend to. She’s about to take down the messages when Wes’ fingers ghost lightly over hers. “I think we can take a few moments after all, don’t you?”

He lowers the ringer on the phone and then turns to her. “Need I even say it?”

She looks up at him, coy little smile on her lips. “I think you do. Sir.”
“Step into my office, Faith—” He pauses and she finds herself anticipating that little twist in his voice, the dark velvety tone he wrings out of a word as deceptively simple as—“now.” He doesn’t make her wait long.

That will come later.

“Sir.” But he’s already ahead of her, and she doesn’t catch up, just takes her time, swaying her hips languidly as she walks down the hall, momentarily feeling as though she hasn’t a care in the world. It’s weird how insulated she feels in the office. How safe. And she knows full well that the games they play, the very fact of them, and of his regard for her, is what makes it so. What makes this a haven. A strange one, to be sure, but still.

When she reaches the heavy door at the end of the hall it’s shut tight. A little puzzled, she gives a tentative knock and she can hear Wes’ muffled “Come in.”

She steps over the threshold to find Wes standing there with a certain black scarf across his palm.

She’s a little surprised to see it. “You want me to put it on?”

“No this time.”

Her eyebrows practically shoot skyward in cartoonish surprise at that one. “Then what?” Because I sure as hell don’t see anyone else here, she thinks.

He gives her one of his glacial little smiles that never fucking cease to melt her down. “Well, you did say you wanted to play a little hooky, as you put it. And, despite your many transgressions this past week, I suppose I’m feeling somewhat indulgent.”

“But, what do you want me to—”

“Put it on me.”

She almost laughs. “You’re not—you are serious?”

“Faith.” Ah, that’s the all-too familiar timbre that brooks no argument. That gets her so fucking wet. Or, wetter at any rate.

“Okay. Um, I just, didn’t think… I mean, after I mentioned the tying-you-up idea I kinda gave up…”

“I’m waiting. And if I have to wait any longer, this curious streak of indulgence I’m having could disappear awfully quickly.”

She scrambles behind him, reaching up to place the fabric across his brow and tying it securely behind his head. “There. No peeking.” She knows he wouldn’t—he’d never cheat, he’s too principled—but she has to say it anyway. It’s, like, a contractual obligation or something. He nods.

Her mouth goes a little dry at the thought of what he might have planned. She doesn’t have the first idea, and that’s the best gift he could possibly give her, really…

“I’m going to undress you, Faith, and you get to tell me when and how and what you’d like me to do. How slow, how quick, where you’d like my hands…”

And now she has a new kind of anxiety; that she won’t be up to the task. She’s not a talker like he is, not even close, and she always starts talking faster when she’s nervous and that won’t fucking do at all and…
“I await your instruction, Faith. So tell me—where shall I begin?”

She gulps loudly and it sounds like a cannon firing in the quiet of the room.

“Um…why don't you er…start with unzipping the back of my dress,” she says hesitantly. And when his hands turn her round, it suddenly hits her what he's really giving her. And she can take it. He's put himself at her command.

Bout fucking time too.

“Nuh-huh, Wes,” she snaps. “You're not allowed to use your hands.”

She can't help but smirk as he makes a tutting noise. “And no whining either.”

“Am I allowed to speak?” he inquires with a little too much attitude for her liking but she's feeling all kinds of gracious so she decides to let it go. Just this once.

“Course you are, Wes,” she coos. “You know I love the sound of your pretty voice.”

And he might take her sass out on her ass later. In fact, she's pretty much counting on it but for now, he just contents himself with another sharp intake of breath and she feels his lips warm on the back of her neck.

She stretches up to make it easier for him and revels in the sun hitting her face through the window. The window. The fucking window.

She wrenches away from him. “Hang on!” she yelps, thanking every available God there is that he's got the blindfold on because she knows that she's wearing panic on her face, like it's her favorite lipstick.

“I'm sure I'm never this quixotic with you,” he huffs as she races to the window and pulls the heavy drapes tight shut so the room is plunged into darkness and she bangs her knee on the edge of the desk because her eyes haven't got used to the gloom.

“Fuck! Fucking fuck!” she growls, bending down to rub her palm against the blossoming pain in her leg and gasps as the belt cuts into her. “Oh, fuck!” she hisses again as she straightens up.

“Is that something you'd like me to do to you, Faith?” he asks mildly. “Or just the heat of the moment?”

It's just like him to have complete control of the situation, even give it some snark, when she's meant to be all bitch goddess-y and barking out orders.

“Come here,” she snaps sulkily. “I'm standing by the desk.”

He manages it with apparent ease, doesn’t even have to stretch his arms out in front of him like an extra from a zombie movie.

And when he's standing next to her, calm and relaxed she turns round. “Unzip me,” she says far more breathily, than she intended. “And I'm going to let you use your hands because I want you to talk to me while you're doing it.”

He brushes her hair back from her collar, smoothing it over her shoulders and then his fingers are unclasping the hook and eye that always gives her so much trouble and slowly easing down the zipper.
“Your skin’s so soft,” he remarks casually, stroking every inch that he uncovers with the pads of his fingers so she's shivering into his touch. “I wish I could see it. You have this beautiful honey-glow, which I expect will deepen as summer comes.

“And although I'm blindfolded, when I feel these, how prominent they've become,” his fingers walk along the knobs of her spine, causing a rash of goose-bumps to follow in their wake. “I know that you've lost weight.”

“Off message, Wes.”

His hands reach the thin leather of the belt, which is starting to cut into her flesh so it's less about the anticipation of what it will bring and more about the here and now of him binding her.

“Is this too tight, Faith?” he asks, as his finger traces the leather edge.

She hesitates. And he curls his finger under the thin strap and yanks it slightly so she grits her teeth as it rubs against already chafed flesh. “It's too tight,” she admits hastily. “I guess you need to loosen it.”

“Very well. And, later, if I see any marks that suggest that you’ve been remiss in not telling me sooner, I'm going to make those seven misdemeanors that we need to take into account up to an even eight.”

“Hey! Hey! I'm in charge,” she reminds him, but really she's not because his hands are working the clasp of the belt and easing it slightly and she arches back against his hard body, his hard cock and before he's even finished, she's biting back a moan. “I want you to take my bra off next,” she whispers, trying to slip her arms out of the sleeves off the dress, but his teeth nip the back of her neck.

“I believe that I was very explicit in my wish to undress you.” His voice tickles her ear, trickling into her brain, even as he nibbles her lobe. “I'm fairly certain that you were to do nothing else but give me the necessary instructions.”

“I didn't think you'd be this bossy,” she grumbles and his hands fall away and she's doing this all wrong. It's not how they play this and she doesn't know what to do. All she knows is that he has to keep touching her.

He's not saying anything. Not moving and it's she who's stepping back so she can lean against him again. “I want you to finish taking off my dress,” she says and his hands begin this slow glide down her arms, gently pulling the dress away from her. “And you can go faster than that, Wes. I want this fucking dress off now. Want to feel you against my skin.”

“So impatient,” he mutters like it's causing him great pain, but his touch is greedy as his hands delve into the dress where it's stuck on her hips and yanks it off her.

“Now my bra. And you're meant to be talking to me,” she reminds him, almost surprised by the petulant bite to her voice.

He makes her bra disappear like it's magic and she tugs his unresisting hands to her breasts. “Touch them,” she says with a moan of pleasure at the thought of how it'll feel.

“How would you like me to touch them?” he asks. “Would you like me to stroke them?” He cups the swollen weight of her breasts in his palms. “Or would you like me to pinch your pretty nipples until you're making those frantic little whimpers that I like so much?”

Her brain's become mush and she couldn't even tell him her name. His fingers circle her areolas and
then he surprises her by tugging her nipples between finger and thumb so she squeaks.

“Faith, really,” his voice is tinged with regret. “I offered you an exceedingly rare opportunity to get exactly what you want and I feel that you're squandering it. Maybe we should…”

“I'm going to go and sit in your chair,” she choking out and she sounds so fucking dark and desperate that she hardly recognizes herself. “And you're going to stand in front of me and then you're going to get on your knees and you're going to... to suck on my tits for as long as I want and then you're going to take... you're going to rip off my panties and you're going to go down on me until I come.”

And there was no rhythm to this before. Just a constant stop/start but now it's like they're breathing in unison. Ragged gasps in and out and the air in the room has got so heavy that she feels like she's wading through syrup as she straightens up, fleetingly brushes the back of her hand against his rigid cock and then sidesteps in front of his sun-warmed leather chair.

She sits down, wiggles back on it and even though he can't see it, she beckons him with a finger. “Well, Wes, what the fuck are you waiting for?”

He doesn't say anything, just drops to his knees before her and just that one simple move makes her whimper in anticipation.

“Come closer. Here.” She's hooked him with her dark purring words, and he leans in, his breath hot on her belly. His hands slide up her torso, cupping her breasts again, pulling her forward.

She can't stop the escaping hiss of pleasure when he draws his tongue slowly over each nipple in turn, making them painfully erect, each one pleading for more sensation, more stimulation.

“She's pliant and obedient, suckling and then swirling his tongue over and over the little hard nub and she's pushing herself to remain focused, fighting not to get too lost in the feeling and shatter her control. And that makes everything all the more intense; her eyes are screwed tightly shut in concentration and all she can see is blinding yellow and white flashes of color under her eyelids.

“No, you need to stay right where you are. Right here.” She slips one of her free hands down past the edge of the seat, just reaching his cock and awkwardly rubbing it openhanded, delighting at the wet patch soaking through the rough wool.

And there's no concept of time now, just an interval of blurred minutes marked by her command for him to switch: to suck and tease and bite her already sensitive nipple freed from his pinching fingers, to barely run his fingers over the puckered and wet one his mouth just abandoned. Her moans are...
coming from low in her throat, almost growls, every time his teeth graze her flesh.

She's almost getting the hang of this now, her brain running on two intertwined tracks, the coherent thoughts and the incoherent ones. She can appreciate what he goes through when he's spitting out orders to her, the sheer amount of control he must need every time he's ministering a spanking.

She finally pulls his head away, holds it between her hands. She wants to rip the blindfold off, stare him down, but resists. “I need that tongue of yours on my clit now. And remember what I said, Wesley. Rip 'em off.”

No sooner has she said that than his hands slip down, finding one of the side seams of her panties and with one sharp tug, the delicate silk splits. Fingers spidering over her pussy now, he rips apart the tiny strip of fabric that formerly rested between her legs, wet with her juices.

Sliding one hand under her ass cheeks and tilting her up off the chair, he pulls the whole torn thing away and tosses it aside. She's been silent the whole time, sipping air in tiny gasps and she's getting lightheaded. Now she realizes he's waiting; waiting there, still holding her up off the chair.

“Tease me first.”

Her words hang there heavily for a few moments until his lips curl into a devilish little smile and his fingers trace idly around the damp heat of her hole. “I thought you'd never ask.”

“I'm not asking, Wesley. I'm telling you. Tease me with your fingers. Then your tongue.”

He lavishes delicate care over every square centimeter of her pink wet lips; slips his tongue inside at intervals, lapping up every bit of moisture spilling out.

Finally he reaches her clit, flicking his tongue over it rhythmically, and it's all she can do to sputter out, “Put your fingers inside me. Now. Fucking hell, Wesley. Do it now!”

He does, just on first, then two, curling them around lightly as she tightens 'round them. “Yes, that's it,” she sighs heavily. “Now slide one in my ass.”

After a few moments she's so close to coming, but doesn't want it, not yet. “Slow down. Slower. Slower.” He's barely twitching his fingers inside her now, barely running his tongue across her clit, until he finally pulls away completely. The blindfold's been knocked askew a bit, and that grin is back as he greedily runs his tongue over his lower lip. She counts slowly to five in her head.

“Now, Wesley. Make me come now.” And after another count of five that neither of them keeps track of, she's screaming his name and pulling him up and away, leaning in to slip the blindfold away from his eyes and kiss his salty, moist lips.

She'll never take this for granted; tasting her salt-sea tang in his mouth, her throbbing naked flesh pressed up against the starched cotton and scratchy wool of his clothed body.

He's still on his knees in front of her, unusually biddable as she curls her fingers into his hair so she can delve her tongue between his lips.

But he's gently pulling away from her, sitting back on his haunches. “Did you enjoy that, Faith?” he asks with a mischievous grin that makes him look twenty years younger.

“Yeah, fuck yeah.” She sighs, stroking her hand against his cheek. “Could get used to it, you know?”
“Oh, I doubt that,” he says, eyes glinting in the dim light, fingers trailing across her thighs. “It's unlikely to happen again.”

And she's pretty cool with that. It was fun. Serious, big-time fun but the whole barking out orders and being in control thing? He's so much better at it. Even so…

“What if I'd been extra good?”

“Oh, Faith, I'm sure when that far-off event actually happens, I'll be able to think of a suitable way to reward you that involves a little less audience participation,” he drawls. “And why on earth did you close the curtains?”

She glances over at the heavy, velvet drapes and tries a casual shrug. “Don't know. Just seemed more intimate like this.”

And he's frowning so she distracts him the best way she knows how, which is to lean forward so her breasts are in his face and reach down to touch the trembling length of his rigid cock.

“I'd really like to suck you off,” she tells him and it's not a lie.

He looks doubtful, even as he's leaning into her hand and biting his lip. “Really? I'm afraid that won't be possible.”

She rubs her thumb against the wet material, just about where the head of his cock is. “But Wes, we had that whole talk about how it's not good for you to…”

“It won’t be possible because I'm going to fuck you,” he growls. “Right… about… now.”

His hands grasp her hips, pulling her off the chair so she's squealing and squirming on his lap even as he's pushing her back so she's on the floor, under the desk and he's on top of her, thrusting against her soaking wet pussy.

“Wait… wait…” she mumbles, struggling to get her hands between them so she can unbuckle his belt and pull down the zipper of his ruined trousers.

He's hot and hard and wet in her waiting hands, bucking up against the teasing, tickling movements that she uses to torment him. “I don't know, Wes,” she murmurs in her ear. “I'm starting to get this whole delayed pleasure thing.”

His eyes flash at her, lips pulled back in a grimace, before he grabs her hands and pins them above her head. “Spread your legs,” he orders in this harsh bite that has her parting her thighs so wide that she can feel the muscles quiver.

He raises himself away from her ever so slightly and she doesn't even have to be told to tilt her hips because she's doing it and the head of his cock is nudging at her swollen clt, before he traces a careful path along her dripping snatch and then slams into her.

“Wrap your legs round me,” he snarls against her open mouth. “And then you're absolutely not to move.”

She doesn't have to. She just winds her legs around his waist, arching up to make sure the base of his cock grinds against her clt and then clings on for dear life as he surges into her again and against, with these deep, sweet thrusts that keep the tip of his cock in constant contact with that little spot inside her that makes her see God.
It's like they're hidden away from the rest of the world, in their little cave under his desk. And the rug rubbing furiously against her back is just more sensation, the bruising grip of his fingers around her wrists another dollop of feeling that echoes the burn of his cock deep within her cunt.

His mouth is buried against her neck, sucking at the skin behind her ear and she feels like she's drowning in him. His hips are moving faster now, short jabbing motions and she's squeezing around him.

“So tight,” he hisses. “My perfect… pretty… little… Olympia.”

She's beyond words, biting out “oh fucks” and “Wes's” in this high pitched chant that becomes an airless scream as he rams into her one last, fast, furious time and her head's banging against the floor and she's arching her back and clenching her cunt, holding him inside her as he comes in hot waves and she thinks that this time he really has fucked her into the floor.

Fifteen minutes later she’s dressed again, Wesley’s tie is as straight as a Roman road, and he’s dictating to her in a voice so studiously cool she wants to pinch herself, because it’s impossible that the fingers curled around the pen he’s tapping against the blotter as he decides whether Mr. Salton’s problem is ‘urgent’ or just ‘pressing’—in the end he goes with ‘imminent’—are the same ones that were deep inside her cunt not twenty minutes earlier.

“And before you start typing my reports, could you bring me a coffee, please?”

He gives her a charming smile but his hand’s already reaching eagerly for a folder and she’s left wondering how he can switch it all off like that when she’s still weak-kneed and glowing like a Christmas light.

She’s been at her desk for half an hour, getting back into the routine, everything all bright and beautiful because God’s in his heaven and Wes is in his office, when the door opens and a delivery boy walks in, face hidden behind a bouquet of roses; white flushed with pink, open flowers, not buds.

“Uh, I was told to give these to the secretary,” he says in a mumble. “That’d be you, I guess?”

She by his side reaching out for them before he’s had time to finish talking. “Yes, that’s me. Thanks.”

He smiles at her in a shy sort of a way and she’s got a feeling he looks familiar—wasn’t his brother in her year at school?—but she doesn’t give him chance to catch up on the good old days of eight months ago, just waits for him to back away slowly, still smiling, and then she’s laying the flowers down on the desk almost reverently and rummaging through stiff layers of furled wrapping paper to find the gift card.

Red would be too predictable it says, and if the writing’s unfamiliar it really doesn’t matter, because she can hear Wes saying it to her in that husky drawl of his. Arrange them, dispose of the wrapping neatly, and finish your letters. I'll be working through lunch. I expect to see you at 2.15.

She grins at the thought of the florist obediently copying all that down and then runs her finger over the petals, smiling at the scent rises to meet her, sweet and summery. It’s not until she’s arranging them that she realizes there’re seven of them and he must have ordered them after she gave him his coffee and got barely a nod of thanks.

She finds a vase that Wes tells her later is nineteenth century Chinese, and fills it with water, plunging the roses into it one at a time and leaving it at that. She doesn’t fold napkins into fucking
swans and she doesn’t arrange flowers. She’s got her standards. She puts the vase where she can see it as she works and doesn’t stop smiling until two-thirteen when she stands to go to the office and realizes that a Wes-free lunch where she went to town on a sundae means the belt’s been cutting into her for the last hour without her really noticing. Fuck.

Trying to suck in her stomach to ease the pressure, she taps on the door and gets told to come in. The curtains have been drawn back again and she can’t help darting a quick, scared glance at the windows.

“Faith, is something wrong?” Wesley says, craning his head around and staring at the window, sounding halfway to annoyed.

“No!” she yelps. “Just, well, anyone could walk by, you know?”

It looks out onto the parking lot and it’s not like they get a lot of people using it but after glaring at her for a moment, he shrugs. “If it really bothers you…”

He stands up, twitches them closed, and walks over to her. “Turn around,” he says.

She starts to, and then remembers her manners. “Wes, the flowers—”

He looks at her incredulously as if he can’t believe she’s interrupting whatever he’s got planned for something as trivial as thanking him for a romantic gesture that made her feel loved. “If I have to repeat every order I give you, Faith, I might decide ten is an even better number than seven.” She spins around and feels his fingers ease the zipper of her dress down deftly. There’s a long moment when she can feel his gaze run from the nape of her neck to her waist and she squeezes her eyes shut, waiting. “Or eight,” he says finally, voice chilly. “Faith—perhaps it’s my jet lag making me forgetful, but did I not give precise instructions that were this belt to become uncomfortable you were to inform me immediately?” He taps his fingers against it. “It was supposed to be in the nature of a reminder; not a punishment, although it’s certainly earned you one.”

“You said not to come in here until now. In your note,” she blurts out. It’s a fucking pathetic excuse and she’s not surprised it doesn’t work.

“I think you know that this—” He unbuckles the belt, and she gasps with relief as she gulps in a shuddering breath, feeling his fingers trace the marks it’s left on her skin. “This would merit interrupting me, even had I not already given those orders. And you could have picked up the phone and called me.”

“I didn’t think,” she whispers, shame-faced, and no, she’s not going to confess that she’d stuffed herself like a pig at lunch because he kept going on about her being skinny.

“Then perhaps it’s time you learned,” he hisses and he has her dress zipped up again before she can say she’s sorry. She’s about to turn around to face him but his hand clamps around the back of her neck and that makes her bite her lip to stop from whimpering because his thumb’s caressing the hollow behind her ear and his palm’s warm and strong against her skin and she’s caught, held, helpless.

“Pull up your dress,” he says, not moving his hand.

She reached down and gathers the dress, tugging it up.

“Higher,” he says, in a voice so impossibly assured that she’s grinding her teeth in a sudden rebellion. Maybe he shouldn’t have given her a turn at being in charge, she thinks. Makes it difficult to go back to this. Then she remembers how little control he’d actually relinquished and realizes
nothing’s really changed.

It’s almost a relief.

When her bare ass is uncovered and her dress is bunched up around her waist, he steps back.

“Bend over the desk, please, Faith.”

He’s cleared it so that her hands lie flat against polished wood and as she exhales her breath mists it briefly. She’s torn between a need for this that surprises her and a regret that he’s not going to use his hand.

The belt hurts even more this way but she counts off each stroke obediently, wondering if this time he’s matching her ass to the pink of the roses.

Red might’ve been the better choice after all.

Her knees are shaking and her feet feel so far away when she finally chokes out “Eight” after the belt cracks across her red-hot ass cheeks for the last time. Thin, involuntary tears run down her face and she can't move; just rests her forehead against the desk, which is clammy from the fog of her hot, panting breaths. The belt slips out of his hand to the floor with a muffled thud and she's limp and shaking when he peels her off the desk and helps her balance on wobbling ankles.

“Let go of your dress, Faith,” he murmurs, eyes full of dark concern and whisking his thumb over her damp cheek. In the end, he's prying the dress from her clenched fingers, smoothing it tenderly over her hips, fingers whispering across her belly and down between her legs.

“Can I thank you for the roses now?” she says, grasping his forearm for balance when he suddenly pulls out his handkerchief and dabs the rest of her tears away.

His arms curl around her, and she's so very safe there. “You're welcome.” He plants a kiss atop her head and holds her, silently, for a few minutes that are so, so close to telescoping into forever.

But no. Because she's so close to spilling everything then, all of it, the whole sordid tale of every lie she's told and every promise she's breached in the past few weeks. That last lash from the belt had nearly cracked her resolute silence, but she swallows it all down, down into the pit of her stomach.

“Tell me about our apartment, in New York.” she whispers, but he just clucks at her tenderly, stroking her hair.

“Later, Faith. Later.” He leads her to the puffy olive green sofa in the back half of his office. “I think that desk chair may be a bit much for you this afternoon. If you lie on your side it may not be...”

She's already kicking off her shoes and slipping gently on to the velveteen cushions. He gives her a little nod, smoothing his rumpled shirtsleeves back down to his wrists and buttoning the cuffs.

He's about to turn away when she realizes that there is one thing she can say, even if it seems redundant at this point. “That wasn’t... I didn't...” It's harder to say than the clanging voices in her head led her to believe. “I don't want to do that again.”

“I know,” he says, with an inscrutable expression on his face and walks over to the curtains, pulling them apart and flooding the room with light.

Chapter Fifty-Six

She lies on the sofa with her back to him. Keeping up the pretense that her ass is too sore to be
nestled against the plump cushions of the sofa. Instead she feels the sun warm on her through her
clothes, listens to the scratch of his pen and the muted sound of his voice on the phone, which seems
like it's coming from a long way away.

But she feels like she's skiving off, hiding in the nurse's office because there's a trig test and she
hasn't bothered to do the homework. So when she hears the hand on his clock reach the hour with
the discordant tick it always makes, she rolls over and swings her legs over the edge of the couch.

“I'm okay now,” she croaks, standing up on feet that are still slightly unsteady. “And I have some
stuff that needs to be sent off by five.”

He barely looks up from his papers. “Well, if you're sure,” he says vaguely. “Maybe we'll close up
early tonight.”

And that'll happen the day Hell fucking freezes over, she thinks as she shuts his door behind him.

In the end, she's glad to lose herself in work. There's something so satisfying about the neat stack of
typed A4, that she collates and then staples in precisely the same place; half an inch from the top,
left-hand corner.

She's just licking the edge of the envelope and handing it to the courier, when her cellphone starts to
ring and her heart begins to pound exactly one second later. She gives the guy a sickly smile, waits
until he's out of the door and then rushes to answer the private number flashing up on her cell
display.

“Faithy, sweetheart, my darling girl,” Liam's shouting down the phone, from what sounds like the
rowdiest bar in the Western Hemisphere. “Worked like a fucking charm.”

She steadies herself on the edge of the desk. “I can't talk right now,” she hisses.


“Hey don't get your panties in a bunch. A thousand, just like you told me. Walked up to the desk,
gave them the check and my driver's license and made them count it out in the prettiest fifty-dollar
bills.”

“Jesus. It's going to have to last you, like, ten days. You can't go wild.”

Liam gives a short bark of laughter that threatens to perforate her eardrum. “You know me, Faithy.
Moderation in all things, except booze and loose women.”

“What,” She's straining to see down the corridor to make sure Wes' door is closed. “Promise me,
you'll wait another ten days. And I want the photos back next week. Monday or Tuesday. You'll
have to call me.”

“Aw, don't be such a fucking nag. It's Friday night, gonna get me good and sauced.”

“It's got to last you ten days, don't piss it all away.” She's kinda scared by the dull, flat tone of her
voice. How fucking tired she sounds.

“Yeah, yeah. Gotta go, baby. And I guess that fuck of a boyfriend of yours will probably want to
bend you over his desk to get the weekend started,” Liam laughs like he's the funniest thing in the
world.
“Oh, fuck you!” she snarls, just working up to some really blistering invective when she looks up and sees Wes standing there, jacket on, briefcase in hand. And she's jabbing at the off-button and wondering what would happen if she threw up right here, right on his pretty Oriental rug.

“I do hope that wasn't the DA's office,” he says sternly and she stares at him, knowing her mouth and eyes are three perfect circles of surprise.

“Xander. It was Xander,” she backtracks furiously, wondering how long he was standing there; how much he heard. “Being an asshole for a change.” She might be a lousy, cheating, stealing girlfriend but she's one fuck of a good liar.

Wes just raises his eyebrows at her. “Are you ready to leave?”

She raises her hands to her burning cheeks. “Yeah. Just give me a second.”

He stands there, watching her every move as she performs the little rituals that she does at the end of every working day. Switching on the answerphone, lining up her Sharpies so they're in a straight line, putting the cover on the Selectric, then she turns to him. “Okay, I'm good to go.”

They drive home in this deafening silence that she can't work out. Like, whether she's not speaking to him or he's not speaking to her. If he's biding his time before he gets to what he thinks is the heart of the matter. How she's going to get through the weekend when everything is so scratchy and weird.

As they pull into the driveway, she's already scrabbling at the door handle, one hand in her bag searching frantically for her packet of cigarettes.

“Faith.” Her name sounds measured and calm on his lips.

She can't bring herself to look at him, but stares at her open purse. “Yeah?”

His hand, warm and sure, tips up her chin so she has no option but to gaze into the deep blue of his narrowed eyes. “It occurs to me that you've picked up some rather unpleasant habits since I've been away.”

“Wes…”

He taps her lightly on the nose. “This weekend I expect you to obey me without question,” he states firmly. “Whatever I ask you to do, no matter where we are. You're to do absolutely nothing but what I tell you.”

She frowns because he sounds so fucking serious. Like, he's planned something, strategized and theorized. When it comes down to it, thinking always gets her into trouble. Gets her into these fucking messes that she can't climb out of.

“Okay,” she says, even though he never asked for her agreement. “Sure, I can do that. I want to do that.”

And she does. She can't trust herself to be in control so it's going to be better if he does it for her.

“Very well. You're to go into the house,” he orders. “You're to take a quick shower, no longer than five minutes. Then you're to wait for me, in your towel. I don't want you to sit down, I don't want you to dry your hair. I just want you to wait for me.”

It's simple really. Takes the screaming straight out of her head as easily as if someone, somewhere
has flicked the off-switch.

She glides into the house, up the stairs and into the bathroom.

When she emerges exactly five minutes later, scrubbed and pink, she stands in the middle of her room and waits for him. She watched the second hand on her clock hit the twelve fifteen times and then he's knocking on the door.

“Come in, Wes,” she says throatily and he walks in with this toothpaste commercial smile on his face because she's doing exactly what he wanted.

He's changed into jeans and a black shirt, which throws her slightly but then he's taking her hand and leading her over to the chest of drawers. He rubs moisturizer into every inch of her, dresses her, dries her hair.

She does nothing but let him.

“Wait here.”

She stands in the middle of the room again, taking deep breaths like she's finally worked out the meaning of life and gives him a serene smile as he walks back in with a black leather holdall in his hand.

He marches over to the wardrobe and run his hands over the clothes hanging up, choosing a dress here, a skirt there, a couple of the tops he brought her from his last trip.

“Go into the bathroom and pack your wash bag and anything you think you might need this weekend,” he orders her, eyes unsmiling.

“Are we going away?” she blurts out and his whole face tightens.

“Are you incapable of following the simplest of instructions?” he inquires tersely.

She shakes her head. “No! I just… I'm doing it, okay?”

Her reflection in the mirror is pale and her hair's gone frizzy the way it always does when he insists on towel drying it. But she's on a clock so she doesn't waste any more time on the Faith gazing back at her, just grabs her toothbrush, toothpaste, the little tub of arnica and a few more pots and potions and hurries back to him.

He takes the bag out of her hands and places it carefully in the holdall, where she can just see a flash of pink, which means he's packed the shoes.

“I think we're ready to go,” he says, his hand taking her shoulder and guiding her to the door. Then he stops. “I almost forgot. Your vibrator.” He drawls the word out, like he wants it to last for an hour. “Go and get it.”

Her cheeks are stained with red, which is getting to be a really old look for her. She hurries over to her bedside table, yanks open the drawer and pulls out the Rabbit in all its plastic, purple glory.

“Does it need batteries?” Wes asks silkily and she's so tempted to bash him over the head with it.

“I put fresh ones in that night,” she mutters and doesn't he just love that if the annoying smirk on his face is anything to go by. But he merely holds the bag open so she can shove Mr. Bunny into it, which she does with great force.
Once they're in the car, the mood evaporates. And he's telling her about the brownstone in the West Village that he's signed a lease for. How it looks out onto a pretty garden square and in the early morning, the rooms are flooded with light. How it's two blocks from the subway and this famous burger bar called Bistro, which she'll love.

That they can choose furniture and paint together and that he's going to teach her to cook and she's asking him a million questions and it's not until they cross the state line that she realizes they've been driving for two hours.

“I haven't been out of state for, like, five years,” she exclaims, peering out of the window at the billboards in the coming dusk.

He shoots her an incredulous glance. “You're not serious, surely?”

“Oh yeah. Last time was a dumb school trip to this sadass zoo. Man, it was depressing. All these fleabitten animals locked up in cages. I fucking hated it,” she finishes with such venom that he's arching an eyebrow and pursing his lips. “I mean, I didn't like it that much.”

“So, would you like to know where we're going?”

“Only if you want to tell me,” she answers back, without even thinking about it and he gives her a quirky little smile.

“Well, inspired by your wish to play hooky, I suddenly recalled this charming little beach resort I visited on a business trip last year.”

She turns to him, her eyes as wide as her smile. “We're going to the beach?”

“We are indeed.” He's smiling back at her. “I've managed to procure us a small cottage. I can't promise that it will be anything approaching luxurious but it should be enough for our needs. Are you hungry, Faith?”

And for the first time in forever, she's ravenous. Getting the fuck out of Dodge is exactly what she needs. “I'm starving.”
Part Seven

Chapter Summary

Wesley and Faith head off for a weekend away, but it ends in an unexpected way.

Part Seven

Chapter Fifty-Seven

The first glimpse of the ocean comes just as the sun’s setting, and it’s a shifting mass of dark green and purple, stretching out forever. Two seagulls appear on cue, wings spread wide, floating above the waves, endlessly circling and calling to each other, and even with the windows up, she’s sure she can smell salt and sand.

“It’s beautiful,” she says, waving a hand at it all just as Wesley turns off the road and the car begins to bump down a track. He’s too busy cursing under his breath about the suspension on the car to do more than murmur, ‘mmm’ but it’s a relaxed kind of cursing she thinks.

“Wes?” she asks abruptly. “This not doing anything but what you tell me to?”

That rates a ‘yes?’ and he sounds a little cautious somehow.

“Tell me not to—” She swallows, trying to think how to put it. “Tell me not to think about anything but you—us—all weekend. Will you?”

He doesn’t answer until he’s parked in front of the cottage and then he gives her a really strange look. “Very well. Consider it said.”

Something else occurs to her and she scrabbles through her bag.

“What on earth are you looking for?” he asks.

She holds up her phone and gives him a pleading, expectant look.

Humoring her, he nods gravely. “Switch it off. Leave it in the car.”

She sighs as she does just that, feeling it all slip away from her, as if that’s all it takes to calm her, make it right. Liam and his tacky viciousness don’t exist here and no one knows where they are. “Thanks.”

“And,” he says, sounding less indulgent, “you’re to stay here, seat belt fastened, eyes facing forward, until I’ve unpacked.”

The cottage stands alone, set back from the edge of the dunes and surrounded by trees. Wooden steps lead down to the beach and there’s a porch she can sit on and watch the sun disappear as the earth tilts up; made to sit in the car the way he’s parked it, she’s left with nothing to look at but the woods and they’re not that interesting. Even the squirrels seem to have gone to bed for the night.

“I can’t get out and look around?”
Wesley gives her a regretful, disappointed look, and shakes his head slowly. “Faith, I really think sometimes we speak different languages. Please repeat your instructions and then, if you feel it’s needed, ask for clarification on anything that seems obscure.”

She feels enamel flake from her teeth as she grinds them but she repeats his instructions sulkily and gets an approving pat on the knee.

“Better. I shan’t be long.” He presses a button and her window slides down. “Show me how you’ll wait,” he says, turning the key so the engine noise dies away.

She settles herself and stares glumly out at green leaves. His chuckle sounds heartless but it’s all she gets.

He makes three trips back and forth, whistling under his breath—Wes whistles? Who knew?—then slams the trunk so hard that her head jerks, and wanders off into the cottage. Without turning her head she can’t see what he’s doing but a spill of light to her right tells her that the place has electricity at least. She wonders if it has a television and if Wesley will let her watch it if it does. Yeah, that’s so very likely. She occupies three minutes by dreaming up increasingly desperate—and perverse—inducements she can offer in exchange for say an episode of ‘Survivor’ and then gives up. He’s much better at that kind of thing than she is, and she’s not sure he’s bribable.

Wes is showing no signs of coming to fetch her and the woods are vanishing in the dusk, disappearing into the dark and becoming a denser, deeper patch of shadow. She realizes how utterly peaceful it is here. Not silent; no. The waves are hushing against the shore, rushing forward and sinking back; there’s a breeze stirring the trees, carrying a spicy, rich smell toward her, full of green things growing, and something’s skittering around in there that had fucking better be a chipmunk and not anything spooky.

She can feel her body give up the fight to stay tense, fretted and fearful, as muscle after muscle waves a white flag and relaxes.

Then she smells food cooking and moans. How much longer?

It’s another six minutes. She knows because she starts to count: one elephant, two elephants, threefucking elephants...

He trots jauntily down the steps and over to the car, opening the door and beaming approval—well, he better fucking had be—because she keeps her head and eyes steadfastly still. “All ready, Faith,” he says, as if he hasn’t left her out here for hours while he, well, okay. He’s unpacked, laid the table, set out food and lit a fire. She supposes she can’t really complain. There’re some familiar looking take out boxes in the trash and she realizes they’ve driven the whole way with the same meal he’d ordered the night he got back late keeping warm in the trunk, or waiting to be reheated, or something. He might be planning to teach her to cook, but he hasn’t yet and she's hazy on the details.

“How have you spent all day planning this?” she asks. Roses, cottage, food...

He frowns. “You make it sound as if I’d organized an invasion,” he says lightly. “A few phone calls; it required little more than that. Nothing, really.”

“It is,” she tells him, not prepared to let him get away with being all British and modest. “Wes, you do stuff and you won’t let me thank you. I want to. Please.”

His hand rises as if he’s going to touch her, maybe push back her hair, or rest his fingers against her face, then falls to his side. “I don’t require thanks,” he says, sounding stiff and formal.
“Well, that’s just too bad,” she says hotly. “Because I want to give them. You can’t always be the one giving, Wes. You have to learn to take too.”

There’s a small smile on his lips but his voice is cool. “That will do, Faith. There’s no need to be strident. I suggest you go and freshen up. We eat in five minutes.” He nods at the back of the cabin. “Through there. Only a shower, I’m afraid.”

She gives him a stern look that only serves to broaden his smile and flounces off, glancing around her as she walks to the bathroom.

The cottage is bigger than she expected, but still just a cottage, not a luxury home. Downstairs is all one room, apart from the bathroom; couch and chairs around an open fire, wide planks polished by generations of feet on the floor, a sturdy table and a fairly well equipped kitchen with a fridge humming away. Upstairs is a loft with what looks like a bed, a dresser and a bedside table and not much else. It’s rustic but it’s not exactly primitive; it’s well-maintained, perfectly clean, and it’s shabby in the way that good old stuff gets, not the way new cheap crap does.

She pauses with a hand on the bathroom door. “Wes? Is there a T.V.?”

He’s squinting at a wineglass and polishing it to within an inch of its life. “What? Certainly not.”

“There goes your chance to lick whipped cream off my ass, and put the cherry on top,” she mutters. And when he said that she had to do exactly what he told her, she wasn’t joking. Not like she ever thought he was.

First he feeds her dinner, ignoring her squinched up face and gagging noises as she gets her first taste of asparagus and decides that it sucks.

As her hand creeps toward the single, solitary glass of wine to try and wash the taste of ick out of her mouth, he slaps it away.

“Did I tell you to take a sip?” he enquires icily, still holding the fork with the rest of the evil green stuff in front of her face.

“No, but Wes…” she protests, turning her head away.

The fork follows her movement. “I want you to eat the rest of it, Faith. I really must insist.”

And she's agreed to this. Not that she realized that asparagus was going to be part of the deal. And it tastes so vile that she's almost tempted to use her safeword. But she wants to obey him, wants to please him, if only to make up for all the ways that she's displeased him that he doesn't even know about.

So she forces down three of the asparagus stems, choking on every mouthful and trying hard not to glare at him or spit it back up.

Finally he puts the fork down, picks up the glass and holds it to her mouth, keeping it tilted so she can chug down the Sauvignon Blanc like it's Dr Pepper.

She manages half of the steak, and a couple of mouthfuls of the pilaf before she has to admit defeat. Still ain't no way in hell she can tell him that she's full so she takes her time chewing, looks pleadingly as the glass of wine and in the end she holds her hand in front of her.

“Wes, I can't manage any more. I had a big lunch and I'm trying really hard here but I'm gonna throw
up if you make me eat the rest of it,” she says, trying to keep her voice steady without that fatal
whining note that always pisses him off.

“Very well,” he sighs like her lack of appetite is right up there on his list of concerns along with
global warming and the appalling standard of literacy in the US school system. “You'll just have to
sit there while I have my meal. Hands on the table, please.”

She sits there for an hour while he eats the main course and the dessert, which smells yummy enough
to make her nostrils twitch but he doesn't offer her so much as a spoonful. There has to be some
endgame to this but she's not quite sure what it is. He's goes to sit in one of the chairs in front of the
fire and this really isn't much fun.

It's not until she feels the first warm drop splash against the back of her hand, that she realizes that
she's crying. Which is going to piss him off even more.

Another ten minutes pass and she's silent as a mouse, content to just sit there and feel the tears spill
down her cheeks. Like, they're going to wash everything dirty out of her so she can feel fresh and
new again.

“Why are you crying, Faith?”

She doesn't look at him because he hasn't told her he can, just stares in front of her. “I don't know,”
she admits.

“Well, stop it immediately,” he snaps but though he's trained the rest of her body so perfectly that it
seems like all her molecules are in this constant state of Wesdom, he's got less control over her tear
ducts. “Look at me, Faith. I want you to stop crying this instant.”

She peers over her shoulder at him, then leans her head back and blinks her eyes rapidly. “I'm trying
to,” she mumbles. “Not having much luck.”

“Come here and stand in front of me.”

She scrapes her chair back and edges over to the fire, shuffling her feet as he pins her with a glare.
“In order for this weekend to be successful, I expect you to maintain some semblance of control, to
exercise self-discipline and, really, Faith, you haven't got off to a flying start.”

Even though he hasn't told her she can, she scrubs her disobedient eyes with the back of her hand,
then takes a couple of deep breaths. “I'm sorry,” she whispers, searching the granite cast of his face
for some sign that he's softening. “I want us to have a nice weekend too.”

“I suppose you imagine that because I let you come twice in quick succession this morning that the
appalling way you behaved while I was in New York has been forgotten. But it hasn't, Faith,” he
tells her harshly. “Did you think I'd let you pour whiskey and pills down your throat, smoke drugs in
my house, burn half the papers in the office and that it would just be forgotten? Forgiven with eight
strokes of a belt? This is about trust. It's about realizing that when you hurt yourself with your self-
destructive tendencies, you hurt me too.”

This is getting too real. Too close to a whole mess of stuff that feels like it's crushing her down into a
little pile of ashes that used to be Faith. “I'm sorry. I just…” she starts and there's no way to explain
this and it's just making her so sick of all of it. So fucking exhausted to try and live up to the
standards that he expects from her.

If he even tries that tone of soft concern and the head tilt, she's finished. That's it, she's telling him
every fucking thing. Every last sordid detail. She'll make him choke on her words, on all the things
she's done to keep him safe. But he doesn't. She gets an abrupt nod and a cool, assessing glance. “Of course, there is one punishment that I think you'll appreciate,” he informs her with the merest hint of challenge. “I'm not going to let you come the entire time we're here.”

He shifts back slightly in his chair, like he's expecting the mother of all temper tantrums, but it's not like she has that option either. What it boils down to is payback. She owes him big time and if this how he expects her to work off the debt she's accrued, then, man, she's going to go along with it.

“Fine,” she snaps and yeah, she sounds pretty fucking riled up about it. Because it doesn't mean she has to like it. “Whatever, Wes. I said I'd do what you want and if you don't want me to come, then I won't.”

His mouth snaps open and he's staring her down like she's some really tricky crossword clue that he can't work out. Then he lets out a breath that she doesn't even know he's been holding. “Well, I'm pleased to finally have your co-operation.” He smiles at her, like she's just climbed Mount Everest in bare feet simply because he's asked her to. “Why don't you go outside and have a cigarette?”

She shuts the door quietly behind her, walks to the edge of the porch, hurries down the steps onto the dunes and when she's far enough away from the house, she sinks into the soft sand, clutching great, greedy handfuls of it, and gives way to the howls of rage that have been twisting her up inside for the last hour.

By the time she's finished crying and screaming, her throat is sore but her eyes are dry and the calmness is back. She hauls herself into a sitting position and digs out her crumpled packet of cigarettes from the back pocket of her jeans.

The salt breeze lifts her hair away from her face and she listens to the sound of the ocean crashing against the shore. Maybe she can stay out here forever.

Two cigarettes later and she hears his footsteps crunching over the sand. When he puts his hand on her shoulder and sits down next to her, it's not really a surprise.

But when he pulls her toward him, kisses the soft, damp skin under her eyes gently and says, “I really am an unutterable bastard sometimes,” she's more or less shocked to the core. “I'm not perfect, Faith. Sometimes I show a horrendous lack of judgment, but I'm sure you already know that.”

“Can I hug you, Wes?”

He gives her a grave smile. “Yes. That would be rather welcome, I think.”

She raises herself up on her knees and flings her arms round him so tightly that she can link both her hands behind his back and just not let go. Ever.

“I'm sorry that I pulled all that crazy shit while you were away,” she whispers fiercely in his ear, over the rush of the wind. “But if you knew how fucking much I love you, what I'd do for you… I hate that I've made you so pissed off.”

“Shh,” he murmurs into her hair, cupping her face in his hands. “These enforced separations are stressful for both of us.”

“But you have to know, Wes that I just get crazy sometimes and…”

He shuts her up by the simple act of placing his lips on hers and kissing her so what she might have said gets carried away over the water.
As they walk back across the dunes, arms entwined, he gives a sudden snort of laughter. “Really, my
dramatic plans for chastisement were ill thought out.”

She bumps him with her hip. “So what? You're gonna let me come then?”

His hand ghosts the curve of her ass in a soft promise. “Well, it really wouldn't be much fun if you
didn't, Faith. I believe I’d rather miss the tantalizing show I get when you do. But I do expect you to
obey me without question for the duration of our stay. Can you do that?”

Her hand tightens round his fingers. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Chapter Fifty-Eight

An hour later she’s thinking that they were both a little optimistic. She hadn’t expected him to start
off by tickling her, face solemn, fingers dancing lightly over her body as she giggles and squirms
wildly.

“I really don’t think this qualifies as remaining perfectly still,” he murmurs sadly, as she curls up,
batting weakly at the hands that have reduced her to a quivering mass of nerve endings.

“S-sorry,” she gasps, blinking away the tears of pained laughter, “but, Wes, I just can’t, okay?
Anything else but not this.”

“Stand up,” he says.

She scrambles off the bed eagerly and stands in front of him, naked and still out of breath. He leans
back on an elbow, still fully dressed because Wes doesn’t see any reason to give her something nice
to look at while she’s being tortured, and studies her.

“I want you to link your hands behind your neck,” he says, not moving off the bed. “Perfect. Keep
them there until I tell you that you can move them.”

She laces her fingers together, feeling wind-roughened hair against her palms and a slight tug on her
shoulder muscles. She’s not sure what he’s doing here, but this pose lifts her breasts and maybe that’s
all he wants; to play with his very own life-size Barbie. Oh, fuck, that’s such a sick thought and she’s
sick too because that really turns her on.

“Our nipples just got hard,” Wesley says, sounding all thoughtful and interested. “Why?”

“Chilly,” she improvises, though it isn’t really. The heat from the fire has made the cottage cozy and
she doesn’t have a single goose bump.

His eyes narrow. “Faith, would you care to amend that answer?”

There’s a crackle in the air like there is before a storm hits, when you can touch a cat and see the
sparks fly. Stumbling over the words, she tells him what he wanted to know and watches his lips
curve.

“Well, now. That’s something to consider, certainly. Tell me what excites you about that, Faith.
What in that particular scenario appeals to you?”

And this is fucking impossible. The loft’s lit by the light from the room below so there are shadows
and flickers, but it’s too light to hide the fact that she’s blushing.

His fingers tap against his leg impatiently and she starts to babble. “Well, you kinda do it already the
way you choose what I wear, and brush my hair,” she says with a small smile, remembering hours trying to force her Barbie doll into evening gowns that were skin tight, and tiny plastic shoes that used to fall off all over the place and get vacuumed up by a muttering Darla. “That’s not it though, it’s just—oh, just not having to think.” She wants to be honest here, give him that in as many ways as she can when there’s so much else that she’s got to lie about. It helps that he’s getting turned on listening to her; she can tell—his eyes are darkening and there’s that slight flush along his cheekbones. “Giving up thinking—no, not thinking—giving up worrying and having you take care of me.” It’s still not right and she pauses a little uncertainly. “I like you telling me what to do,” she says quietly. “I trust you to know what the right thing is and even when you get it wrong, you’re still better at it all than me.”

“Which still doesn’t quite answer my question, but never mind,” he says. “Faith, I’m not always—” There’s a silence and then he stands in a smooth, fast movement and takes a step toward her. “I had you stand like this for an entirely different reason, as it happens.”

“What?” she says, feeling her head spin slightly from the wine and the tears and his blue, blue eyes.

“Remember,” he warns. “Perfectly still.”

It’s just as well he reminded her, because it’s all that keeps her in place as he runs his finger from her waist up to the exposed hollow of her armpit, never touching the skin, but so close she can’t help flinching. That’s where he’d determined she was the most ticklish and even as he murmurs to her soothingly, “I’m not going to tickle you, I promise,” there’s a voice in her head screaming at her to move, step back, bring her arms down to protect her vulnerable sides.

He smiles sympathetically. “This is hard for you, isn’t it?”

She’s beyond speech, teeth driving into her lip, trembling as she holds position. She answers him with a nod and a keening moan as he does it again, this time with his hands, skimming them over her skin with a light, sure touch that isn’t in the least a tickle but which her overwrought body interprets as a threat.

“Fuck!” she screams, stepping back and lashing out at him. “Don’t!”

Horrified, she stares at him, waiting for him to lose his temper, lecture her, or even, God forbid, change his mind about letting her come, but he just stands there and if anything, he looks amused.

“Poor Faith,” he drawls. “Instincts are so difficult to control, aren’t they? I’ll overlook that lapse, and give you a chance to redeem yourself, if you hug me.”

“What?”

He glares at her, a cold front sweeping in. “No, Faith. No ‘whats’. Just do it. I really am getting bored with your failure to comprehend what I want.”

If she wasn’t feeling so desperately eager to please him she might’ve given him a hard time over that, but she is, so she doesn’t.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, going to him.

Her arms are around his waist and she’s about to relax against him when he snaps out, “No. Around my neck, please.”

She’s puzzled but it doesn’t seem a problem, so she starts to lift them and then freezes. She just fucking can’t. Can’t lift her arms while he’s this close. Can’t risk him touching her again on
sensitive, shrinking skin.

“T’m not going to tickle you,” he says.

She lifts her arms hesitantly and his hands lift too and she dances back a skittish step, breathing quickly. “You said—”

He hold up his hands, palm toward her. “I won’t. I’m going to place my hands where yours just were on me.”

He’s being really patient with her but there’s a muscle jumping in his cheek and she can’t count on it lasting.

“Ohkay,” she says shakily. “Wes, I’m gonna do it, but I’m telling you that this is fucking hard and you’ve got me so freaked out here, and—”

“Faith!” he says, sounding well and truly pissed. “I could quite easily tell you to be silent, you know. Don’t make me do that.”

She wails softly and practically throws herself at him, lifting her arms, locking her hands around his neck and squirming against him in an agony of expectation.

His hands come up, grip her waist hard and slide up a fraction of an inch before he gathers her to him, hands patting her back in a way that’s probably meant to be comforting, but just makes her writhe more. She’s panting as if she’s just run a mile, climbed a mountain, jumped out of a plane, and she’s whimpering his name.

“I did it, Wes, I did it,” she chants triumphantly, giddy with the victory.

“Shh, yes you did,” he says gently. “There’s a pause. “Eventually.”

“It was hard,” she whines, twisting her head around so that she can kiss him. “I deserve, like a reward. A medal.”

“I’m not sure there’s anywhere I could pin one,” he says gravely, bringing up his hand to cup her bare breast. “And I’m not at all sure you’ve earned a reward, but I am pleased that you obeyed me and, more importantly, trusted me.”

That’s not as good to hear as he probably thinks it is and she only keeps her face from puckering up by remembering he told her not to think about anything but them. So she gives him another kiss, smooching her lips against his hard, and feels his lips part under her assault. They stand there kissing for a blissful eternity, with Wesley’s tongue flicking against hers and making her shiver. He slows it all down and makes it feel so good she wants to swoon, like the heroine in a book, but that’d mean missing this little nip of his teeth, that swirl of his tongue, and that just isn’t going to happen.

He steps back, looking just a little bit tempted to fling her to the bed and fuck her.

Well, a girl can dream.

He nods over to the small bedside table. “Open the drawer, Faith. Put everything onto the bed, just here, at the foot of it.”

She hurries over to the table, telling herself that no matter what he wants, she’s going to do it just right, not mess up again. She holds onto that thought as she lifts out the black softness of the scarves he must have brought from home and the clear bottle of lube.
And she doesn’t start to panic until her fingers close around the vibrator.

Laid out along the bed, it’s hard to look at anything else but that and she nibbles at her lip nervously. Wes clears his throat. “Good. Now get onto the bed and push the pillows up behind you so that you’re comfortable. Yes, that’s fine. Hands by your side.”

He gets onto the bed and she frowns. “Aren’t you ever going to get undressed?” she asks without thinking.

“You’re always so very keen on that,” he says. “Does it bother you so much when you’re naked, and I’m not?”

“No. Yes.” She’s left feeling frustrated. “It makes us different,” she says, “but I can handle it -”

“I think when we get home, I’ll keep you naked for a day,” he muses. “No matter where we are in the house or garden. That would be rather instructive, I think.”

She refuses to even think about that, just gulps and carries on bravely, because she hadn’t fucking finished, thank you. “It’s just that I like to look at you. You should be able to get that; you like looking at me, don’t you?”

There’s no hesitation at all. “Very much so. You’re beautiful, Faith. All of you, which is probably why you do spend so much time naked. Because I love to look at you.”

She can’t help preening herself just slightly at that. Beautiful. Her. And he’d know. Give the bitch her due, Lilah’s pretty stunning and she’s probably not the prettiest he’s ever dated, though she’s never asked for details.

“So why don’t you get undressed then?” she asks, really craving the sight of him. She knows he’s hard, doesn’t even have to look, but she gets a kick out of seeing his cock rigid and aching and knowing it’s all because of her.

“Because I don’t choose to,” he says. “And I think for the time being, I’d prefer it if you answered my questions but refrained from comments. Is that clear?”

“Yeah,” she says a little sulkily. His lips tighten and she swallows. “Yes, Wesley.”

He smiles approvingly, which is like the equivalent of getting a sucker from the doctor after a shot, and picks up the vibrator, studying it with a fascinated, absorbed look that makes her want to giggle because it’s so incongruous in his hands and so very fucking purple.

“You don’t seem fond of this,” he says, flicking it on and tilting his head as it starts to move and hum. “Why did you keep it?”

“Xander gave it to me expecting me to freak,” she says, as if that explains everything.

“And you didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing it had? I can understand that reaction.” For a moment his eyes have a distant look in them but it fades as the Rabbit gives an enthusiastic hop and he actually snickers. “Lively, isn’t it?” he comments, switching it off and tossing it aside. She hopes it’s going to stay out of reach, but that’s probably too much to expect.

“Well,” he says and miracles do happen because his fingers are slowly unbuttoning the black shirt and there’s all this Wes skin to look at. She hums with appreciation, just can’t help it, and he makes this sharp sound of annoyance and stops.
“Let me help you with the not speaking, Faith,” he says icily. “Remove some distractions.”

The blindfold’s knotted firmly and she’s lying on her stomach before he continues to undress. She can imagine—hell, she can remember—every inch of his body, but it’s not the same as looking at it and she’d sob with frustration but he’d only count it as speaking and do something else to her.

There’s a pause after the last soft thud of clothing against the wooden floor, then he gets back on the bed, straddling her hips and leaning forward so that she can feel the weight of his cock against her back. His hands are planted on either side of her and she bites back a moan as he presses kisses against her spine, warm, wet kisses that send tingles through her and make her toes clench and wriggle with pleasure.

When he can’t reach any farther down her back he slides backward and brings his hands to curve around her hips, holding her in place as he carries on kissing her, one, two, three, down the cleft of her ass, with his tongue darting out so she gasps soundlessly, remembering what it feels like there. He moves on though, working his way down her legs, taking his time, exploring her body with his lips and tongue, until she’s relaxed and energized at the same time.

Finally he kneels back, gripping her ankles in his hands, with his thumbs rubbing along the tendon and sending little shivers of lust chasing each other up and down her body. Slowly, but firmly, he parts her legs and she knows just where he’s looking, knows that he’s seeing what she can only feel; the slick wet folds of her cunt, parted and open and waiting. He slips his hands along to the back of her knees, takes hold, and pushes her so that she’s resting on her forearms, ass in the air.

She should feel ridiculously exposed, but she doesn’t, and if anything she widens her knees, waiting in perfect silence for whatever he wants to do to her.

And it’s slow, and then it’s not, and she’s always amazed at his ability to stretch out these small moments—be they tactile, or aural, or some lovely combination thereof. How a whisper in her ear holds as much weight as the unhurried glide of his tongue over her clit, or the brush of his fingertips against her nipples, or along her back.

Everything is fluid, connected by his whispered commands—“Spread your legs, Faith, that’s a good girl,” “You’re to touch yourself, but you’re not to come,” “It’s not time for that yet,”—and the repetition of her name, over and over, said each time with such a tone of reverence and care that she almost can’t believe it.

It’s even more exciting when she can’t see what he’s going to do next. She’s in the dark and everything is heightened: the shift of her body against the cool sheets, the shallow sound of his breathing, his every touch galvanizing her flesh. And when he’s not touching her she’s still expectant.

She can’t imagine going back to the way it was before—to the quick, furtive, clumsy fucks where everything was rushed and mostly unspoken. Unsatisfied and unsatisfying.

When she didn’t understand how good it could be.

There’s another long, appraising silence. Just when she’s starting to feel vaguely uneasy—like this is going turn into another test of her resolve—she feels Wes’ hands brushing against her back, gently turning her around again. “I’m feeling a bit quixotic this evening after all,” he murmurs and she can’t help but smile at that.

But she doesn’t say a word. Just lies back against the pillows and opens her thighs.
Of course she always wants him to fuck her, but she’s been conditioned to love the wait. Even if she gets impatient sometimes.

Still, she can’t help but gasp when she feels the cool slide of the vibrator into her cunt. While it’s not unexpected, exactly, she’s still a little disappointed—she wants his cock, not this imitation. But all is forgiven when he whispers in her ear, his voice low and so ridiculously, endearingly formal that she just about melts: “I’m not going to turn it on just yet, Faith. I don’t want its rather odious soundtrack to compete with your lovely vocalizations.” But yeah, it feels good as he starts fucking her with it, and even better when he pulls her close for a kiss. At last.

He's lying on his side, pressed up against her while he steals kisses from her clinging lips and slowly pushes the vibrator into her again and again. If she didn't have other things on her mind, she'd be thanking God that Wes has such highly developed co-ordination skills.

The slow slide of his tongue in her mouth echoes the movements of the thick plastic shaft in her cunt and she's giving him the whimpers and the moans that he wants.

When he shifts away from her, she growls in protest but he soothes her by running his hand up her thigh. The mattress dips and she's pretty sure he's kneeling between her splayed legs with a courtside view of the main action if his sudden gasp is anything to go by.

“How does this delightful device work?” he asks, throwing in a sneaky little twist to the constant in and out motion that makes her bite her lips.

“God… one of the buttons makes it twist,” she says on a groan, as he presses the appropriate switch and it starts rotating.

“And what do the bottom two do?”

It's not just the cock-screwing vibrator that's he's now pushing into her with this steady, smooth rhythm that makes her face flare red.

“Wes, you're such a bastard,” she spits out but he just chuckles because even to her ears she sounds like she's pretty down with that. “They make the fucking ears vibrate and go faster and… fuck!”

Her hips jerk at the sudden, relentless pressure against her clit as he switches it on.

“You're not to come, Faith,” he warns. “Not for quite some time. Now shall we see exactly how fast this contraption can go?”

Only his hand on her hip keeps her steady as he slams the vibrator into her, varying the depth and speed of the thrusts and keeping up a running commentary as he goes, which cranks the heat up so far that she's arching her back off the bed, toes and fingers curled into the sheets and making these high pitched yelps every time the ears come in contact with her clit.

“How can you hear the hungry sounds your cunt makes when I take it out, Faith?” he asks. “I wish you could see how pink and wet and beautiful you are. How does it feel?”

“G-good,” she stammers. “Feels good.”

“Only good?”

“Better when it's you,” she offers shakily and grits her teeth as he slows it down, keeps it wedged inside her so the pressure in her cunt and on her clit is constant.
“Why is it better when it's my cock inside you?”

“Not just your cock,” she mumbles, pushing her hips up so she can grind against the plastic. “Your fingers and your tongue too. Not so… so…”

“Mechanical? Monotonous?”

“Yeah. Gets me off but it's not real,” she manages to choke out though the oxygen to her brain seems to be stuck in a bottle neck somewhere.

His lips press against her inner thigh. “You're being such a good girl, Faith. I'm afraid I still can't let you come but I can give you a reward.”

“Are you going to kiss me?” she asks hopefully because she wants Mr. Fucking Bunny out of her any time soon before she comes. Which is going to be in the next five seconds if he doesn't stop the sly little twists he's giving the base of the vibrator.

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” he drawls and she feels the soft brush of his hair against her legs, which pales into insignificance against the wet drag of his tongue against her clit, in tandem with those goddamn vibrating ears.

“Wes, no!” she screams. “I'll come, if you do that.”

He doesn't answer her, just prods at the tender flesh which has already been pummeled into submission, with the tip of his tongue and she tries frantically to edge away from the overload of sensation.

“Please, Wes… please…” she begs. And she doesn't know if it's because she wants him to stop or she wants him to let her come.

It's when she shuts up and concentrates on pushing her pussy into his face, on to the vibrator, that he finally stops. She's already halfway up the long climb to orgasm and all she can do is lie there, spread out on the sheets and shake with frustration.

“Can't take any more.” She moans, arching her hips against thin air.

“I know,” he says in this unsoothing voice. “But you've done so well, Faith. I'm so proud of you.”

If she wasn't trembling with unfulfilled lust, she's sure that she'd be smiling prettily and glowing from his praise; as it is, all she can focus on is her empty, aching cunt.

“Proud enough to let me come?” she asks sulkily.

He leans over her, so she can feel the leaking head of his cock kissing her belly. “I'm going to make you come harder than you ever have,” he promises darkly and he sounds so intent and sure about it, that it's a little scary. But then his lips are fastening around one of her swollen nipples and his fingers are skittering across her stomach and delving between her legs.

She's entirely in the mood for one of his fast, furious finger fucks as a preshow before the main event but his idly circling hand is just keeping her up there without ever letting her fall over the edge. “I don't think you've ever been quite so wet,” he breathes against her ear and he sounds so turned on by the thought that she knows she's just soaked his lazy fingers a little bit more.

“Wes…” She's never sounded so needy before either. “For God's sake, will you just fuck me? It hurts.”
That gets her nipples more torturous attention from his mouth. The tip of his finger brushes against her clit, like a feather in the breeze and she hisses and spits like an angry cat.

About two seconds before she's thinking that spontaneous combustion is the only way this is going to end, he moves away from her.

"On your hands and knees, please, Faith," he orders in that dark, treacly voice.

She's falling over herself to obey, raising herself up on shaky limbs and pushing her ass out. She can feel him moving behind her. There's a small click and then his finger cold and wet, tracing the line between her buttocks.

"I'm going to fuck you here, I think," he says conversationally, tracing the edge of her puckered hole. "Is that acceptable, Faith?"

She wiggles her hips in anticipation. "Fine by me," she husks and prays that he's going to give her poor cunt some attention while he's at it.

But then she feels the smooth blunt head of the vibrator nudge against her clit before sliding downwards and coming to rest just inside her cunt. "And this is going to fuck you here," he decides but his voice is shaky and rough. "Is that acceptable, Faith?"

She doesn't answer. She doesn't have to. The buck of her hips as she tries to get something inside her and the moan that's drawn out of her mouth from some place deep and dark down kinda says it for her.

And that seals the deal, as if there was any question that she wouldn't want this.

"Good. Very good." In an instant, he's more assured. "One thing at a time, I think," he muses, slipping the vibrator back out of her pussy and ignoring her whimper of protest, he slides his finger in her ass, swirling the lube 'round, the friction alleviating its cold stickiness. Her whimper turns to a moan, clit burning and pussy clenching at nothing.

His other hand's stroking the small of her back—any other time this would have tickled like hell and she'd be screaming for him to stop, but now it's like the secret key that finishes the job of fully opening her up to him; every muscle below her waist is suddenly even more hot and pliable.

And when he doesn't ask and just tells her in a throaty whisper that she's ready and that she's relaxed enough, she can barely hear him for the blood rushing in her ears and her dry mouth can't even make a sound, so she just nods, digging her clammy palms into the cool sheets.

There's no question that she's more than ready for him and so relaxed she'd tumble into a heap if it weren't for his hand on the back of her knee, lightly pressing it into the mattress, anchoring her in the now. For a few seconds that slip by as slow and sweet as molasses, that's all she's aware of. The insistent throbbing of her achingly wet pussy is overruled by the hot pressure of his fingers resting in a place that's hardly ever touched, except maybe when the hemlines of the skirts and dresses he's bought her gently graze against it as she walks around the office.

When he lets go of her knee and is positioning her hips just so, time rushes past normal speed and everything is sudden and jarring and too fast, too rushed. The prickly pressure as the head of his cock slips into her slick asshole is over before it begins and he's slid halfway inside before she's moaning plaintively, head spinning with a delirious vertigo. "Slow down," she manages to rasp out. "Please."

"I'm not hurting you." Again, not a question.
“No. No, it just feels like I’m on fast forward and you’re not.”

He lets out a little gravelly laugh at that, the vibration traveling through both of them. “How inconsiderate of me, I should have noticed you were lost in your head. Perhaps this will put us back in sync.” One of his hands slides over her ass and curls around to stroke her pussy teasingly, one finger flicking idly over her clit as his cock finishes sliding inside her. He doesn't give her the time to revel in that feeling; he's already slipping back a few centimeters. He gives the tiniest thrust and the scream that comes out of her isn't anything she's ever heard before. It's dark and desperate and pained with need.

“All better now, isn't it?” he says, giving another tiny thrust, fingers swirling over her clit teasingly one last time before pulling his hand away. And letting out another needy whimper, she knows exactly where it's gone.

“Wes, put it inside me, please! Now.” Half of her brain is screaming at the other half to shut up but the ferocious, hungry side wins and she swivels her hips around for emphasis.

He's clucks his tongue in response, rubbing the unnaturally smooth tip of the vibrator against her slick pussy lips, unnecessarily stoking the already blazing fire.

“A minute ago, things were too fast and you were begging me to slow down,” Every other word is punctuated with a slight nudge of the vibrator against her clit. “And now you can't wait to have your greedy little cunt filled as well.” He slides it down to rest gently against her hole, slicking it up with her juices and twisting it around but never quite pushing it in. “Which is it, Faith? Too much?” He emphasizes this with two quick thrusts inside her ass. “Or not enough?” he asks over her throaty moans, pulling the vibrator away, letting it drop to the mattress and drawing a shriek of frustration from her. “Be honest, now. I confess your capriciousness has left me confused.”

His free hand travels up her back, stroking the little patch of flesh where her hairline meets her neck, then he splays his fingers over her scalp, tangling in her hair. She's pretty sure that he's fried her brain completely because all she can think of are her fingertips and how when she drags them against the sheet, it sends a tingle up her arms and down her back and straight down to her insistent clit. This is momentarily fascinating, and she forgets that he's asked her a question.

“Faith, I asked you a question.” Her brain's like an echo chamber, now—her thoughts chasing his words around in a pathetic attempt to strings a coherent thought together.

“Faith.” He sends her rocketing back into focus, fingers on the sheets forgotten, with another thrust of his cock and forceful yank on her hair.

“Capriciousness,” she whispers back.

“Mmm. Yes, Faith. We were discussing yours.” Every hair on her body is standing on end and she wonders if maybe her body's decided to come without her brain, because her throbbing cunt's grasping desperately at nothing but that ensures that the little white hot spot inside's being rubbed from the other side, and suddenly he's giving a gravelly growl. “Stop that, I haven't told you to come.”

“Can't...” She breathes out. “Can't help it, Wes, really.”

“Yes, you can. Stop it now.”

It takes every ounce of concentration to stop that rhythmic throbbing, and there's sweat pooling in the backs of her knees. She almost slows it down, and just when she thinks she's home free, another
involuntary spasm throws her off.

“You’re so close, Faith. If I can count to ten, slowly, without an interruption,” he drawls at her, clearly pleased. “Then I’ll let you come. But only then.”

She makes it to six the first time, and then eight. But only to five when he brings the vibrator back up to rest against her pussy lips again. “Incentive,” he whispers.

She nods and pulls in a deep breath as he starts to count off again. She holds the air in, lungs bursting and every other muscle in her body quivering with the effort of counteracting the insistent pull of her cunt.

And his “Ten” is still hanging in the air when he rams the vibrator inside her and gives a sharp thrust in her ass at the same time.

And when he says, “Come now, Faith” it's like he's given himself permission too. There's a flurry of thrusts and grasps and her fingers grasp the sheet so firmly it pops off the mattress. Their entangled moans hang in the air long after the vibrator's slipped out of her quivering, dripping cunt and she's only still on her knees and not face down on the mattress because of his steadying hands holding her aloft while his cock twitches, tentative and spent, inside her.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

She’s drifting, fighting to keep her heavy eyelids open, when she feels him start to shift, to slide slowly out of her. “Don’t… go…” she whispers—a little desperately—before her exhausted, sated brain has had a chance to catch up with the movements of her mouth. She’s answered by his whisper in her ear: “I’m right here. I’m here.” He slips his arms through hers and curls his body around hers and as simply as that, she’s content again.

Coherent thought is gradually becoming a possibility.

“Jesus, Wes. Have you ever not delivered on a promise?”

He doesn’t answer, just smiles against the nape of her neck. Draws her hair to one side and kisses her there.

“Hey, Wes?” She’s sleepy, and her voice is just a little slurred. “You never answered my question.”

“Your question?”

“You never told me who Olympia is.” She rolls over onto her back so she can look up at him, and he’s frowning at her.

“What? You don’t want to tell me? It a trade secret or something?” She tries not to sound hurt. But he’d said he’d tell her, and she’s dying to know, so she keeps pressing.

“Olympia was—no, is—a painting. One of the most scandalous paintings in the world, actually.”

That piques her curiosity. “Oh, yeah?”

“When it was exhibited for the first time in the Paris salons it had to be hung out of reach so that patrons didn’t attack it.”

“What’s so freaky about one painting?”

“Well, Olympia is nude, but that wasn’t it, really. Well, it was part of it. You see, she was a real
person, not an exalted goddess or a creature of myth but one of flesh and blood. A real woman looking right at the viewer, unashamed of her nakedness. People in Paris just didn’t know what to make of it. It was shocking to them. They actually tried attacking the painting with their umbrellas.”

She tries to picture that—chaos breaking out in some stuffy old museum. Someplace Wes would feel right at home, she figures. “I still don’t see the big deal.” She can’t figure out exactly where this is going. “So I, like, remind you of her?” she asks querulously.

“It’s her quiet air of self-possession, you see. But it’s not haughty, quite the opposite in fact. She’s charmingly direct, not coy. A little wistful perhaps.” He cups Faith’s chin in his hands and gives her an appraising look. He smiles. “You don’t see it, do you? You have no idea how special you are. Which is just another one of your many charms.”

She’s gotten so few compliments in her life that she sure as hell doesn’t know how to respond to this one. He’s given her a gift she’s unsure how to repay. And maybe she doesn’t even need to. She tries not to blush under his regard and employs a diversionary tactic to steer attention away from her. “So, is there a male equivalent of this pretty picture?”

He shakes his head, no, looking bemused. She realizes that there are certain things she’ll never be able to share with him and it makes her a little uncomfortable. She doesn’t know all this fancy art stuff—all that knowledge he carries around with him so effortlessly. She knows he’d share it willingly if she could swallow her pride and ask.

It’s as though he’s read her mind, because he says, very quietly, “When we get to New York I must take you to the Met. We’ll spend an idle Sunday there. They have Manets there. And Fragonards, Goyas, Picassos…”

“The Met?” She’s heard of it, she must have. But she wants him to tell her about it. She wants him to keep talking.

“It’s the most incredible museum. When I was a child in England it seemed so exotic and wonderful. I couldn’t even imagine it, this place filled top to bottom with ancient treasures. I had this fantasy—quite an elaborate one, all things considered—of camping out in the Egyptian wing, studying the great pharaonic hieroglyphs by flashlight, evading the night watchman and sneaking sandwiches from the kitchen after hours…” He makes a little dismissive gesture. “Very juvenile, of course.”

“You were a kid, Wes. It’s allowed. So, did they ever find you, in this fantasy?”

He looks a little wistful when he admits, “Never.”

She knows how he feels. She’s got that fantasy too.

But she doesn’t tell him that, she just smiles and whispers, “Thank you for telling me.” Then she lets herself sleep.

Chapter Sixty

It’s still dark when she wakes up. The fire downstairs must have sputtered out, which is one of the reasons why she’s cold.

The other is because Wes is hogging the duvet, leaving her hunched into a ball on a tangled sheet and yay, she's lying in the mother of all damp spots.

The weight of his arm rests heavy around her waist as she wriggles uncomfortably.
“Stop fidgeting,” he mumbles thickly and she tries to keep still but she's painfully aware of every
wrinkle in the sheet, which is half off the bed anyway. Not to mention the cloying stickiness between
her legs.

And it's Wes' rules this weekend, which makes everything simple, even though she feels gross and
tacky. So she tries to get back to sleep, edging closer to his side of the bed and doing her best to
ignore the icky feeling of his spunk trickling out of her ass.

She could have sworn that she was doing a good impersonation of a statue as she lies there counting
sheep but he gives an exasperated groan, rolls over and fumbles for the bedside lamp.

“What's the matter, Faith?” he asks tiredly.

The dim light hurts her eyes and she shields her hand in front of her face as he squints down at her.
“Nothing just… I can't sleep and I'm all messy…” she tails off as he stares at the wreck they've made
of the bed.

“How on earth did you manage to pull the sheet clean off the mattress?”

She throws him a pained look. “When you were fucking my ass and everything's damp and the sheet
was itchy anyway and I'm wicked uncomfortable and you've been bogarting the covers.”

“I've been whatting the covers?” Even rumpled with post-fucking sleep, Wes manages to look
affronted.

She sits up, ignoring the twinge in her ass, pulling her legs up to her chest and wrapping her arms
round her knees. “You stole all the blankets,” she mutters accusingly.

“I see,” he intones precisely, shaking off sleep and slipping on his proper voice. “Would you like a
shower?”

She nods frantically. “I so, so would.”

He opens his mouth to say something and then gets distracted by a mammoth yawn. “Very well. I'll
give you five minutes to start things off and then I'll join you.”

She doesn't need to be told twice. She's scrambles off the bed, trying desperately to keep her legs
clamped together and trips down the stairs to the bathroom.

It takes her a foggy moment to work out how to get the shower gushing out a heavenly stream of hot
water and it's not until she's got the head aimed between her legs and is scrubbing furiously that she
can appreciate the delicate way he's dealt with what she was too embarrassed to tell him.

By the time he walks in, she's standing under the spray, eyes tight shut and content to let the water
rain down on her.

There's a sudden blast of cold air as he opens the door to the cubicle so he can step in.

“Is that better?” he asks and she's already leaning back against his chest.

“You have no idea,” she replies fervently. “Wish we had a bath though.”

“I daresay we'll manage.”

And they manage very well, as he soaps her up with steady, soft strokes; kneading his way along her
tired limbs, planting kisses in the hollows of her arms, the curve of her neck and every other place
that he cleans. Rubbing a soapy hand between her legs and telling her that she's absolutely not to get wet because they're both far too sleep-deprived to stay awake much longer.

Her eyelids are drooping as she's wrapped in one of the cloud-soft towels from home and scooped up into his arms for the slow climb back to bed.

“You take such good care of me, Wes,” she whispers into his neck. “I love you so much.”

And she knows it doesn’t come as easy to him but he kisses the top of her head and tightens his hold on her.

He's re-made the bed with fresh linen and when she sprawls out on the mattress, it's softer and warmer than before. She can't help but grunt happily as she burrows against him, arms and legs entwining with his.

“I took the liberty of putting a bath sheet over the mattress to counteract the effects of scratchy sheets,” he breathes into her ear, placing a gentle kiss in the hollow of her throat.

She gives a gurgle of laughter. “Damn scratchy sheets.”

“Indeed. Now you're to go to sleep and I think we've both earned a long lie-in tomorrow.”

His fingers sweep down the length of her back and settle on the curve of her ass. “You never lie in, Wes,” she protests, pressing closer to him.

“Well, it’s been a long week,” he says heavily and she can feel the sudden tension in him.

She reaches up to kiss the little furrows that have appeared on each side of his mouth. All this time, she's been freaking out about her sorry little life and wishing he was here to make everything better and she never gave a moment's thought to what he was actually doing in New York, apart from not being with her.

“Are you looking forward to starting your new job?”

He doesn't say anything but the furrows deepen and her hands creep up to tangle in his hair so she can rub her fingers against his scalp. “Stuff that we say when it's dark doesn't count,” she tells him quietly. “It's just you and me and no one else will ever know.”

And there's a sudden, inestimable shifting in the bed so she's holding him and not the other way round. “This partnership is everything I've worked for,” he says softly. “But I'm sure you'll appreciate my concerns about the changes it's going to wrought in my life.”

For Wes this is as big as eating dinner with his fingers in front of a T.V. that he doesn't have. Hearing him admit that his peculiar flaws, his need for control, his clinging to routine and ritual are so important to him, makes her heart do this weird little flip in her chest.

“You'll be fine,” she tells him fiercely. “You're fucking amazing, Wes. I'm going to have it printed on a T-shirt and wear it every day so you finally get the message.”

That gets her a slow, sweet kiss, which is tenderer than anything they've shared before. She can feel his lips curving into a smile. “While I appreciate the sentiment, I absolutely forbid you to ever wear a T-shirt with the words, 'You're fucking amazing, Wes' emblazoned on it. Do I make myself clear, Faith?”

She rubs her head into the comfy crook between his shoulder and neck. “What about if it said, 'Wes
Is Da Man’?"

He gives a sudden snort of laughter and softly pinches her ass. “Go to sleep, Faith,” he hisses. “Or we'll finish this conversation with several hard slaps to your beautiful little arse.”

Chapter Sixty-One

She thinks Wes does wake up at some ungodly hour of the morning, but she wraps herself around him in her dreams and clings, and after a while he relaxes into sleep again and in the end, it’s she who wakes first when it feels like an unbelievable nine or ten o’clock at least.

Wesley’s lying on his back, head turned and resting on his hand so she can admire his profile, all clean and sharp against the dark green pillow. It’s warm up here under the roof and they’ve both kicked off the covers during the night, so she’s got quite the view. His other hand is resting on his thigh, fingers bent in a relaxed curve, like his cock, which is where her gaze travels to next. Not used to seeing it like this, but it doesn’t look ridiculous and it doesn’t look sweet or cute either. It looks challenging, and she grins.

She leans up on an elbow and takes a long look at him, top to toe. Elegant, strong, and fuck, she’s getting wet just from this, a sharp throb of desire that’s less about sex and more about wanting to be as close to him as she can get. There’s a tender—and that means painful too, she thinks—feeling choking her up, as if it’s a special moment, one of the ones you remember years later, and it seems wrong to feel that way when he’s not awake to share it, so she decides to wake him up.

Never had the chance to do this before; he’s always the one rising and shining with the birds while she snuggles back under the covers, and she’s spoiled for choice as to how to do it but she wants it to be romantic and sexy and special.

In the end, she wriggles down the bed, being really careful not to touch him, and strokes her finger lightly along the line of dark hair on his stomach, following it down to where his cock’s already stirring, just from that fleeting contact. She tilts back her head, and wonders if she’s imagining that he’s smiling faintly. Must be; he’d be snapping out orders right now if he was awake.

With a satisfied purr, she carries on playing with him. His cock, she doesn’t touch. It’s filling and swelling and yeah, that’s kinda interesting, but it’s not doing it because it’s getting any attention. She’s just brushing her hair across his thighs, breathing kisses against the hollows of his hipbones, touching the tip of her tongue to every faint freckle she can find, but she’s not going near his cock. Nope.

By the time she covered as much of him as she can reach without moving from her position by his side, she knows he’s awake, but every time she sneaks a glance from under her lashes, his eyes are closed, his chest is still rising and falling with unhurried, regular breaths, and the smile’s no wider than it was before.

It’s only when she looks up after drawing a finger nail down the line between hip and stomach, that she sees the tension around his lips, as if he’s squeezing them closed to stop himself from speaking.

She decides if she gets a ‘Good morning’ before a fervently gasped ‘Faith!’ she’s going to bite him. Girl’s got her pride and this is some seriously intense teasing she’s doing here. She does the fingernail trick on the other side and watches curiously as his foreskin peels back as his cock gets just too hard to stay sheathed inside it. Score.

His cock’s quivering now with every breath, and she looks at it, almost forgetting that she’s supposed to be driving him crazy. Though pausing like this is probably doing just as good a job as all
the licks and kisses did. She moves until she’s hovering over it and breathes out slowly through pursed lips, doing it again and again until his balls are tight and the head of his cock’s dark and wet.

If this was her, she’d be moaning and writhing and fucking begging by now, she knows she would. Either Wes knows some freaky yoga meditation shit or something, or she gets worked up way too easy. She pouts at the thought of it and she’s so close that her lips miss kissing him by a fraction of a decimal point. Her head jerks back and she grits her teeth. No way. No touching until he whimpers and begs. Or orders her to. Yeah. She’s promised to do what he tells her, so if he drawls out ‘Faith, suck my cock’ or some polite English version, she’ll have to do it, but he’s not showing any signs of that.

It’s a game, played in silence, with rules she’s making up as she goes along and she knows Wes well enough that he’s gonna play to win, but she’s not lacking in a competitive streak herself.

His hand’s still there on his thigh and as she tries to think of how she’s going to increase the pressure, a memory of the first time she went to his house jumps up and down, waving a flag and whistling. Grinning, she shifts over and swirls the tip of her tongue around his middle finger—and feels his thigh go hard as he clenches every muscle to keep from making a sound.

It’s just a matter of time after that. And the fact that her hair falls down across his cock and her head bobs up and down as she captures his finger between her teeth and sucks on it, well, that doesn’t count as touching. Not really. Not cheating.

She wants to taste him more than she’d ever imagined possible. Been a while since she’s done this and there’s always something so satisfying about it because it’s him losing control while she’s just that little bit detached and it’s nice for him to get to come all on his own, it really is. She feels positively saintly, she’s so fucking unselfish.

The final stage, and, yeah, if this doesn’t work, she’s going to be sulking all day is stretching the rules just a little and moving so that she’s kneeling between his legs, her hands pushing his thighs apart. Still no touching—and man, his cock looks as if it’s got to be hurting him but he’s being a brave soldier—but he’s got to be wondering if this means she’s about to and he’s got to be thinking if he holds out just a little while longer she’ll relent and—

“Want me to do that to your cock, Wes? Lick it clean, because it’s all wet and messy? Oh, I bet you do, and I will, you know I will. Just got to tell me, Wes. Open up those lips, just like I will real soon, when I take you in as deep as I can, and tell me to do it. Order me.”

His eyes remain shut but his head moves finally, and if they were open, they’d be staring right at her. She shivers, imagining all that blue ice, and turns to kiss his thigh, high up, and biting down gently. His cock’s off limits but what about his balls? She frowns, trying to decide and, regretfully, thinks they are too.

Talking hasn’t worked and she’s left with one final move.

The lube’s cool and oddly light against her fingers, silky rather than oily. She spends a few moments rubbing her fingers together and playing with the sensation of near frictionless contact until a barely there flicker tells her Wes blinked at her, then closed his eyes quickly. Oh, she’s going to make him pay for that.

Dousing her fingers again, she places them with the utmost care just behind his balls and lets them skate and slide backward. She’s flushed and dizzy with daring and her thighs are clamped together because her cunt’s throbbing by now, demanding a touch she’s denied herself out of fairness, and the sure and certain knowledge that Wes’d lose it totally if she tried to come before him. Without letting
herself even think about what she’s doing, because all she’s going on here is a drunken, spaced-out conversation with Xander who’d told her way more than she really wanted to know about assholes when he’d found out—and fuck knows why she’d told him, but she had—that Wes’d popped that particular cherry, she slips one fingertip inside Wes’ ass and waits. He doesn’t stop her and he doesn’t whimper—fuck, he’s just not human, and she’s getting discouraged, she really is—but there’s this sudden change in what they’re doing.

She’s the one who moans, as her finger pushes in farther and retreats, fucking him slowly and feeling him do more than accept it; he’s tilting his hips just slightly and fucking encouraging her, but he’s not making a sound and she wants that from him. A sound. A whimper. A moan. God, a fucking sigh would do.

Her finger slides deeper and she crooks it slightly and yeah, thank you, Xander. Wes goes from silent to a panting, gasping groan that’s so pained she just knows it’s killing him to make it. She casts up her eyes in pure thankful relief and then wraps her free hand around the base of his cock, loving the feel of it as it smacks against her palm. His eyes are open now, wild and blank and fucking scary he looks so desperate, but she stares into them without flinching, lowers her head, and lets the tip of her tongue trace a light circle around the head of his cock. He moans again, as if he’s given up trying to win, and she rewards him—or maybe her—by sliding him into her mouth and sucking fiercely. Not for long though—and the whimper she gets as she eases him out and kisses the tip softly is heartfelt and gratifying. She wonders if he gets this big a kick out of coaxing those sounds from her and decides he must. She lets her finger slip out of his ass and wipes it surreptitiously against the duvet before showing him what he could’ve been enjoying like, twenty minutes ago, if he hadn’t been so stubborn, really going to town on him, using her teeth and her tongue and her—

“Good morning, Faith.”

He’s lucky he doesn’t fucking lose his dick because it’s a close call between howling and biting at that point. She kneels back, hands on her hips and says, “Wesley, you’re two sucks away from shooting and you’re being all formal with me?”

“I’m not, and I see no reason to be impolite in any circumstances,” he says, as cool as if his cock hadn’t been wedged against her tonsils thirty seconds earlier. “I just thought I’d better call a halt to the proceedings before you really got into trouble.”

“What trouble?”

He gives her one of those long-suffering sighs. “Do you really think your actions this morning are likely to meet with my approval?”

“Well, most men would probably be pleased.” He lifts one eyebrow but it doesn’t take that to remind her that, yeah, he’s not most men and never fucking will be. She pouts and waits.

“You were told that this weekend you were to do nothing but what I tell you to do. And my last instructions to you were that we were to enjoy a lie-in. To sleep uninterrupted.” He widens his eyes in reproach. “I really don’t think you’ve followed either of those commands, do you?”

He waits until she’s shaken her head, face burning, then chuckles. “Oh, don’t look so downcast, Faith. I’m impressed by your determination and your ingenuity, but I simply can’t have you forgetting what really were very simple rules.” He settles himself against the pillows, sitting up, his cock still hard, and beckons to her. “Over my knee, Faith. I’ll make it short, but I’m afraid I can’t let something this flagrant go unchecked.”
He gives her six slaps, hard ones, but fast, leaving her mewling and wriggling because she hadn’t realized just how much of a state she’d gotten herself into when she thought all she was doing was teasing him. He talks to her as he delivers the brisk spanks, telling her how disobedient she’s been and how he’s going to make sure she doesn’t get a chance to misbehave again. As soon as he’s finished, his hand dives between her legs, dipping into the soaking heat, and his words change. He tells her how he really was asleep at first and how it felt to wake with her mouth and hair soft and warm against him and he holds out the hand that had been cupping his face and shows her the deep gouges where his nails had driven into the skin as he tried to stay quiet.

She tries to kiss them but he won’t let her and in the end he lies back and tells her to finish what she started and she straddles him and kisses him as his cock pushes into her and she starts to come just from that, tearing her mouth away to gasp and shudder as they begin to move together, with her hands grabbing onto his shoulders as she surrounds him, as he fills her.

She watches him come and he lets her, hiding nothing and somehow managing to say her name, just as she’d wanted him to.

Chapter Sixty-Two

When they step out the front door half an hour later into a chalk bright morning, she’s feeling as boneless and content as a cosseted kitten.

She’s been pampered to within an inch of her tender, young life. Felt his hands on her as he washed and dressed her in one of her oldest, but favorite, faded cotton, vintage dresses. Saw the lazy, soft way he looked at her. Heard his voice murmur wonderingly as he brushes her hair, “You really are quite extraordinarily beautiful, Faith.”

And now she feels worshipped. She feels loved. She feels cherished. A girl could get used to this, which isn’t gonna help much when…

“You’re frowning,” Wes points out sternly, sliding her sunglasses on and pushing them up the bridge of her nose with a playful finger. “I absolutely forbid you to think anything but happy thoughts for the rest of the weekend.”

She leans against the porch railing and breathes in the salt scent of the ocean and revels in the warm breeze lifting up her hair. “Only happy thoughts, check,” she agrees. Because that’s what he wants, so she wants that too. Isn’t that always the truth?

His arm curves round her shoulders. “This is a very secluded beach. I was most particular about that when I made the booking,” he comments conversationally and she can’t help but smirk and bump his hip.

“That a fact is it, Wes?”

‘Oh yes,” he drawls, rubbing the back of her hand as she rests it on the rail. “It’s only accessible by that pitiful dirt track that we had to navigate last night. Or by boat. It’s a very warm day, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it really is,” she says with a nod, then shoots him a look from under her lashes, which is kinda ruined by her Jackie O sunglasses. “Seems like a pity to be wearing clothes at all.”

He gifts her with this carefree grin that makes her want to hold him like that, frozen in the moment so she never forgets how happy, how fucking joyous he looks. “Oh, my plans for the afternoon mostly consist of you not wearing any clothes at all, Faith,” he says. Then he’s giving her a prim look that she knows he’s totally faking. “Not that there’ll be any funny business, young lady, just some post-
lunch skinny dipping.”

And she’s faking the sulky pout. “Not even a teeny bit of funny business?”

His mouth tightens into a thin, stern line, which is only slightly ruined by the upward quirk of his lips. “Funny business is strictly and utterly out of the question.”

“Okay, just so I know.”

And this light, flirtatious patter that they’ve had to work so fucking hard for lasts all the time it takes to make the short drive into the pretty harbor town with its shingled houses and picture postcard store fronts.

Then it melts away into this comfortable silence as they sit bumping knees under a table in a diner. He orders breakfast, stroking the underside of her arm and generally gazing at her like she’s some kind of goddess who’s been sent down to earth just to make him happy.

When he finishes ordering her a plate of bacon, sausage and eggs with a side of pancakes and maple syrup that she prays she’s going to be able to finish, he gathers up her knife and fork and hands them to the waitress. “We won’t be needing these,” he says firmly, ignoring her sudden intake of breath and the waitress’ what the fuck? look.

“Is there a problem, Faith?” He’s cool as a chiller cabinet of cucumbers.

She has to think about it for a moment and then she stops. Doesn’t want to think about this. Nope, she’s just going to follow orders and think happy thought about them.

She throws everything she is into the smile she gives him as she shakes her head. “No problem, Wes,” she says and beams. “Just you and me and those happy thoughts.”

He raises her hand to his mouth so he can press a hot kiss to her knuckles and she’s practically simpering and aw shucksing because it’s just so goddamn sweet and he looks so pleased.

And it makes everything easier because she does it. Really does it. Clears her head of all the shit and just enjoys the simple pleasure of him feeding her breakfast, leaning across the table to kiss the maple syrup off her lips and so what if the dumb fucks sitting by the window are staring at them like they’re a special on the Discovery Channel? Not like she’s ever going to see their ugly faces again. And how could they even begin to imagine how it feels to have someone like him taking care of her?

Afterward they wander arm in arm through the little town and she becomes more and more obsessed about catching sight of their reflection in shop windows.

She doesn't realize that she's spaced out until he nudges her. “Shall we go inside?”

She's so caught up with the feel of her hand in his and how pretty they look together that it's not until he opens the door for her that she realizes they're in a record shop. And not one that sells anything Beethoven-y.

“Um, Wes, what are we doing in here? Or, like, what are you doing in here?” she asks him, taking in the cluttered walls adorned with record sleeves and Guitarist Wanted ads.

Wes looks around carefully, edging closer to her like he's expecting to catch something infectious from the grimy shelves. “It occurs to me that I've been rather selfish.” She knows she's frowning again and he clears his throat and runs a careful finger along the edge of the Industrial Techno shelf.

“You've been very open-minded about my cultural preferences, and I thought it was about time that I returned the favor.”
It takes her a little while to stop her eyes bugging out, then she's reaching up to plant a line of little
kisses along his jaw. “I fucking love you, Wes,” she chokes out.

“I know,” he says rather smugly and she's really tempted to make him buy a copy of Metal Machine
Music by Lou Reed and force him to listen to it all the way through.

By the time they head back to the cottage, it's early afternoon and they have a bewildering array of
brown paper bags on the backseat containing everything from Rocky Road ice cream and White
Stripes CDs to a bottle of vodka and a carton of Nesquik Chocolate Milkshake mix.

Surrounded by grocery sacks, Wes shoos her out of the tiny kitchen and tells her to wait on the patio
for him while he puts everything away. She doesn't argue, just slips a White Stripes CD in the stereo
and has to stifle a giggle when he starts to bob a little off time with the ragged beat.

He flashes her a bright grin and slides the ice cream into the freezer. “You are pretty goo- looking,
Faith—for a girl,” he teases, quoting the song's lyric at her. She rolls her eyes—like Xander'd never
used that joke on her before. “Now, outside with you.” He circles around to the tiny living area and
directs her to the door. “Or no sugar-spiked vodka for you later.” She just sniffs at that and
practically skips outside into the perfect afternoon sunlight.

The black slate floor on the patio is cool under her bare feet and the sun is blindingly bright. She
lights a cigarette and squints, peering up and down the length of the beach. It is indeed, perfectly
empty, with bits of seaweed tossed up by the tide littered across the sand and not a soul in sight.

When he joins her outside, there's a decidedly mischievous look on his face and he's got towels,
sunblock, and a collapsible chair in tow. She begins to appreciate what she'd realized last night,
when she coaxed his secrets out in the dark—that maybe he needs this weekend away as much as
she does. Certainly not more...but maybe as much. She shoves the thought from her mind and warily
eyes his overladen arms.

“Are we camping out or what? I thought you said we were skinny dipping.”

“There was no ‘we’ in the earlier conversation, Faith. I believe I said that you'd be impersonating a
sea nymph, not me.”

“And you're just going to slather yourself in sunscreen and keep your nose in a book,” she teases,
secretly pleased to see that he's got her gift tucked under his arm.

He tries so hard to look offended, but fails miserably, a sly smile sneaking across his pursed lips.
“Something like that. And perhaps if you're good, when you're done swimming I'll tell you the tale
of Calypso and Odysseus.”

She wrinkles her nose and turns on the brattiness, even if she is relishing the prospect of wasting the
afternoon sunbathing next to him, his hand idly twisting in her hair and his smooth voice washing
over her. “Sounds more like a punishment to me! A dusty old myth instead of you talkin' dirty to
me?”

“Really, Faith, your memory is deplorable. I believe I also mentioned no funny business, if you'll
recall?”

“Oh, right, Wes. We'll see how long that lasts!” She laughs and takes off running down the path to
the beach, hair flying as she unbuttons the dress, pausing midway to the water to slip it off over her
head and abandon her panties too.

He's still making his way to the sand by the time she's splashing in the chilly waves, and it takes her
that long to realize that she's gonna be so busted for taking off like that. He probably had some plan to get her down to the sand and spend twenty minutes unbuttoning her dress and another fifteen taking off her little boy-cut underpants before he finally let her into the water. Whatever—it had seemed like the right thing to do, and he had looked kind of ridiculous and completely darling standing there hands full of the towels and the chair and the sunblock and the book.

Even if it nets her a round of spanking or other exquisite torture later, it's worth it to watch him carefully plant his chair in the sand and attempt to read while not-so-surreptitiously watching her strike goofy poses and slam into the incoming waves.

She frolics about in the water until her fingers are prunes, bobbing in the buoyant salt water, letting the current pull her to and fro. When she collapses on the giant beach towel he's spread out for her, he's brandishing a bottle of sunblock and tsing at her. “You should have put this on before you went into the water.”

“Oh Wes, whatever. I've never had a sunburn in my life—I tan! Can't you tell?”

“Which is precisely why you should have put this on; I'd much rather prefer you stay—”

“White as a fishbelly?” She giggles, rolling over on her stomach and peering up at him through her eyelashes.

“Well, I would have chosen a more flattering phrase, but yes. Pale, unblemished.” His gaze wanders over her flesh, and it's all she can do to keep from preening. “At any rate, you shouldn't have run off into the water before letting me make sure you were fully prepared.” He gives her bottom four full-palmed, sound smacks, but instead of cranking up her libido, it sends her into another fit of giggles.

“Hey, hey! No funny business, Wes, remember?” His hands haven't been away from her skin but a second when a cold glob of sunscreen lands on her back and she shrieks again. “Wes! Would it kill you to warm it up in your hands first?”

“Yes, definitely. It would be completely fatal.” His hands slip over her back, slathering the lotion over her tingling ass, sending her back into the giggles. “Oh, for heaven's sake, Faith. Stop laughing and hold still!”

There's a subtle shift in his voice, that gorgeous slide from teasing to commanding, and she swallows her last giggle and stops kicking her feet in the sand, lying as still as a statue until he orders her to flip over.

But his touch is business-like, perfunctory even, as he rubs the cream into her belly and down her legs.

When she parts her thighs and wriggles back on the towel like she’s just trying to get an all-over tan, he snorts faintly. “Stop being such a minx.”

“I don’t know what you’re on, Wes. Just trying to catch some rays, y’know.”

He doesn’t bother to reply but his slippery grip tightens on her ankle and he can’t resist lowering his head and nipping at her big toe so she squeals and tries to yank her foot away.

“Now you’re to lie completely still,” he orders her again. “I don’t want to see you so much as twitch an eyelash.”

The bastard squeezes more lotion into his hands and with the firmest of touches, so every inch of her skin is tingling, he sun-proofs her breasts.
“We wouldn’t want you getting burned here,” he says with that little half smile that he seems to have worn for most of the day, brushing her right nipple with his slick fingertip and watching with interest as it tightens up into a hard, little bud. “Or here.” Its twin gets the same treatment, then he leans back in his chair.

“Are you sure you didn’t miss a spot?” she asks, looking down at her glistening skin.

He’s actually dipping his handkerchief into the bottle of cold water he’s produced from somewhere so he can wipe his hands and every inch of her melts in fondness at his annoying, adorable, anal little ways.

“I’m quite certain, Faith. I do believe that if something’s worth doing, it’s worth doing properly.”

Yup and ain’t that the truth. She gives a happy sigh as she recalls a handful of heart-stopping moments when he’s done things properly. Then she rolls onto her tummy and glances at him from under her lashes as his attention goes back to the book and she’s completely forgotten.

In the absence of anything else to do, watching Wes read from behind her shades is gripping stuff. He starts off with his eyes scanning back and forth across the page at superspeed but somewhere around the third page, he settles back into the chair with a contented little sigh and loses himself.

It’s quite a revelation to see the emotions flickering across his face in full on 3D like she’s hopping channel on a plasma screen TV. He smiles faintly or frowns as he reads, he even bites his lip at one point and, Jesus fucking wept… Just under the splash of the waves as they crest against the shore, she can hear him muttering and she realizes that he’s half reading out loud. It’s so fucking cute that she can’t help the little “aw” noise that escapes her but he doesn’t even look up.

She spends the rest of the afternoon alternating between the Wes show and this long, involved fantasy about them living in New York and it’s snowing and they spend the weekends going to flea markets and these cozy little restaurants that only they know about. And also she grows a few inches in the first month she’s there so that when they walk down the street together, all huddled up against each other because it’s freezing, they look a little bit like the cover of The Freewheeling Bob Dylan, which is yet another of the delights she’s discovered in Wes’ record collection.

“You’re looking very pleased with yourself.”

The amused sound of his voice cuts into her little snowbound Manhattan fantasy and she blinks her eyes dopily as she realizes she’s been half-dozing. “Just thinking about New York and stuff,” she mumbles sleepily and stretches lazily, not missing the appreciative glance he gives her gently undulating body as she shifts on the towel. “Hey, Wes?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think I’m done growing?”

He folds his arms and uses her question as another excuse to sweep his glinting eyes over her body. “It depends in which direction, Faith.”

“Upward, Wes,” she says just a little bit tartly because she ate all of that bigass brunch he fed her.

“Well, in that case, I very much doubt it,” he states gravely, slowly uncoiling himself from the deckchair in that fluid motion that she never tires of. “Not that I mind. You’re what? A head shorter than me? That seems entirely suitable. Though maybe when we get to New York, if it’s still bothering you, we can make enquiries about having you stretched.”
“No! Wes! You’d better not!” she squeaks in warning and gets a sharp slap to her wriggling ass.

“You’re forgetting the fundamental tenet of our weekend once again, Faith,” he shouts over the roar of the ocean. “You do what I want you to do, and right now I think you need to cool down.”

She’s squirming and yelping in his arms because the water’s splashing round her toes and it seems colder than before. And then she has the fucking mindwipe to deal with that's a fully-clothed Wes up to his waist in the ocean, preparing to drop her.

“Oh my God!” she giggles, clinging on to his shoulders, despite his determined efforts to dislodge her. “I think you’ve had too much sun.”

He gives an outraged growl and slaps her ass again, using the surprise of his attack against her so next thing she knows his hands are wedged under her armpits and he's tossing her gently in to the water.

She never thought she'd live long enough to see Wes frolic. But once he's peeled off his soaking wet shirt and jeans and thrown them on the sand, he's definitely frolicking; diving back into the waves so he can grab her legs while she's shrieking and yelling and not trying very hard to get away from him.

And every time she splashes him or launches herself out of the water so she can jump on his back and try to push him over, he's issuing dire warnings about the consequences of her appalling behavior but he's not trying very hard to get away from her either. Just keeps pulling her in for salty kisses before ducking her under the water and then swimming away before she can exact her revenge.

The water isn't so much cold as fucking freezing by the time they trip up the beach hand in hand, pausing to retrieve the stuff they've left on the beach. Faith is pretty sure she's got goose bumps on her goose bumps which accessorize nicely with her chattering teeth.

She stands patiently, shivering slightly, as Wes wraps the sandy beach towel round her and then they're heading over the sand dunes back to the cottage.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Showered, fed, and dry, they settle in for the evening. It’s Saturday night and she’s stuck in a cottage in the middle of nowhere but there’s no restlessness waking in her, making her tense, sending her fingers tapping and making her frown herself into a headache; she’s with Wesley and they could be in a freakin’ cardboard box and he’d make it feel safe.

With him watching her like she’s some kind of alien, she mixes up the perfect vodka milkshake, ignoring his protests, and giggling when he covers his eyes dramatically as she tips up the vodka bottle and glugs in some of the Gray Goose he said was wasted on anything but a martini.

“Wes, live a little,” she says coming close and wrapping one arm around his neck as she gives him a chocolate flavored kiss. “It’s green eggs and ham time.”

He gives her a stern look—which he’s totally mastered—and shakes his head a tiny bit. “I think not. I packed tonic and a lime. I’ll—”

She tries to snap out his name and fix him with a commanding glare but it fails miserably and he lifts
one eyebrow—damn, does he spend hours practicing this stuff or what?—and looks smug. “Chicken,” she says finally, when she’s held the glass to his lips and he’s kept them so firmly closed you couldn’t pry them open with anything, not even a kiss (she tried that one first of all). She gives him a few clucks and a disappointed look and sighs heavily.

“I’m not,” he says, when she’s stepped back. “I simply have more respect for decent alcohol than you do, and I don’t have a sweet tooth.”

“Whatever,” she says airily, twirling away and taking a dainty sip. “Still think you’re denying yourself a potentially taste bud enhancing experience through stubbornness and—hey!”

“Was that supposed to be an imitation of me?” he says, his voice grating in her ear, his arms holding her tightly against him. He’d moved when her back was turned and her drink’s in danger of spilling because once he’s done whispering he bites down on her earlobe and the small fierce pain makes her jump and quiver in his arms.

“Maybe you’re rubbing off on me, Wes,” she says huskily, grinding her ass gently against him and feeling him harden. She dips a finger in the shake and reaches up over her shoulder. “Try it, and I’ll wake you up that way for the next week if you like.”

“I don’t like the predictable,” he says, easing back so there’s space between his cock and her ass which takes all the fun away from it. She pops her dripping finger between her lips, making sure her head’s turned so he gets an eyeful, and moans the way she does when his tongue’s flickering against her clit, all appreciative and gaspy.

He rolls his eyes and she guesses he recognized it because he sounds vaguely insulted when he says, “It can’t be that good.”

“Well, you’ll never know, will you?”

She’s about to give up and let him have his boring vodka tonic, when he removes the glass from her hand deftly and steps back, holding up a warning hand as she follows him. Entranced, she watches him take a sniff and wrinkle up his nose the way her granny’s cat used to when his food had been left out for too long. She expects him to take the teeniest of tiny sips but instead he raises the glass to his lips and downs a good third of it with grim determination. He pauses for breath, stares down at the glass as if he can’t believe he’s holding it and shudders as if it was neat brandy or something.

She saunters over and smiles up at him. “Wes, you hero,” she purrs admiringly. “That took balls. Want to finish it off?”

He closes his eyes in mute agony and shakes his head and she chuckles and leans in close, wiping away the milk mustache with delicate dabs of her fingertips until he’s all cleaned up.

“Thank you,” he says, lemon-sour, “for teaching me that confirming certainties is a waste of time.” He burps. “And making me feel rather unwell.”

“If you throw up, you’re not going to blame me are you?” she says.

He shakes his head. “I, ah, took your dare. Any consequences are my fault.” He eyes her. “You won’t get punished for that.”

“Oh.” She can’t help letting a bit of disappointment creep in. Not that she wants Wes hurling his cookies, or—

“Why, Faith,” he drawls. “Can it be that you did that expecting reprisals?” He strokes his finger
down her cheek and pinches her chin as an encore. “Did you want me to punish you?” he asks softly with that disquieting gleam in his eyes that makes her toes curl and her breath quicken.

“No-o,” she says hesitantly and fuck, she still doesn’t really know the answer to that one. Does she, or doesn’t she? Only thing she’s sure about is that she likes what follows, when she’s mewing and crying and seeing stars because he’s fucked her into heaven and back.

“No? You don’t sound too sure about that,” he comments. A brisk slap lands on her ass. “As it happens, I do plan to thrash you soundly tonight.” While she’s still gaping at the casual words that seem just a little bit fucking extreme, he nods toward a wooden chest over by the wall. “Go and fetch what I’ll need, please.”

“Wes...”

He turns away. “I really don’t think I should be made to repeat myself, do you?” he asks the air.

She walks slowly to the chest, peering at him to see if he’s smiling, and giving him a cold look when she sees he’s absorbed in cracking cubes into a crystal glass, slicing a lime so juicy sweet when he licks his fingers clean he smiles instead of wincing, and generally looking like a man with nothing on his mind but mixing a drink.

Muttering to herself about people who can’t take a joke, she kneels and lifts up the lid, wondering what the hell he’s planning to use on her defenseless ass. It’s full of boxes, dusty and battered through use and she sighs and lifts them out until the chest is empty, without finding anything but more jigsaws than Toys R Us have.

“Oh, Wes, I can’t find—whatever it was you wanted,” she calls.

He cat foots up behind her and pushes one of the boxes with a bare foot. “That one. Unless you really want to tackle the Matterhorn at sunset. Looks a bit tricky to me; too much snow.”

“Scrabble?” She picks up the jigsaws and games invented when a computer was a man who counted stuff, and packs them away. “You want to play Scrabble?” She’s trying to guess what he’s got in mind because he can’t just want to rack up a high score and gloat. Way too simple.

“Do you know how to play?” he asks. “The rules are very easy.”

Yeah, she’s played it. In juvie, when there was fuck all else to do. Played it until that memorable afternoon when Sheila—who, considering what she was in for, really should’ve been able to spell ‘whore’ shoved the ‘X’ so far up Marcie’s nose when she challenged her that it had to get removed with forceps and somehow it never got put back in the box after that.

“Faith, you might sound a little less like a woman who sees defeat staring her in the face,” he says jovially, practically rubbing his hands together as he sets up the board. There’s a dictionary tucked inside the box and he pats it. “We’ll be a little limited when it comes to challenges as this is hardly the O.E.D, but I promise you I won’t play any word that’s not allowed.”

Well, isn’t he so fucking generous? She bares her teeth at him in a snarl and gives the dark green cloth bag a vicious shake. “If it’s not in that, Wes,” she says firmly, pointing to the dictionary, “it doesn’t get on that. She taps her finger against the board and meets Wesley’s narrowed eyes without flinching. “Oh, look,” she says, delving into the bag. “I got an ‘A’. Looks like I’ll be going first.”
As Wes pulls a lousy ‘T’, turns out she’s right.

It’s all going along fairly well for a bit. Wes chortles like he’s won the lottery when he gets to play ‘jack’ with the ‘J’ on a triple letter and she’s stuck with a rack of one pointers that means she’s trailing by thirty odd points. Part of the problem is that she can’t concentrate because she’s waiting for the fucking twist.

“So what’s it gonna be, Wes?’ she says casually, running her foot up his leg and giving him an innocent look. “A spank for every point I’m behind when we’re done?”

“I beg your pardon?” he says, barely lifting his head as he frowns at the rack of letters and rearranges them solemnly. “What did you—oh! Don’t be ridiculous; it could be as many as a hundred.” He gives her an indulgent twinkle before returning to contemplate the ivory squares that are so fucking fascinating he can’t spare her a kiss. “My hand would get dreadfully sore. Ah, now how about that?”

He places his letters in one of those clever, make three words by shoving letters in the middle and tying up the whole fucking corner of the board, ways and adds up his score in a mumble he makes sure is loud enough to be annoying and inescapable. “Twenty-three, oops, forgot the ‘D’ is on a double letter. Twenty-five. Not bad.”

He beams, pulls out some replacement letters, and she watches his smile dim a bit. It’s the faintest trace of blood in the water and she takes a long, reflective sip of her shake and gets in the game for the first time.

“Want to make this interesting, Wes?” she coos. “Little bet, prize for the winner, that sort of thing?”

He’s not so rapt in contemplation of the board that he lets that one slide by. “And just what did you have in mind, Faith?”

She’s got just the thing. “If I win,” she says slowly, watching his face, “I get an ‘I get to come’ card.”

Wes leans back and taps his fingers against each other, waiting in silence for her to carry on. She rolls her eyes. “Work it out, Wes; all those times I’m begging to come and you’ve tied a knot in it or something and figure you can wait all night.”

“Faith!” he says, spluttering with outrage. “That’s hardly a—”

“Well, just once, I’ll get to tell you to stop making me wait and you’ll have to listen,” she says, getting dreamy eyed just thinking about it. “Have to make me come in, oh, I guess you’ve got a minute. Maybe two. I’ll be so ready to come by the time I use it, shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Oh, very well.” Sucker. “And if I win,” he pauses to think about it and she keeps a calm smile pinned to her face, “you’ll have to go without smoking until we get home.”

What? Oh, he’s got to be kidding her!

“Oh we can just make this a friendly game,” he says condescendingly, patting her hand.
“Too late, Wes,” she says. “Stakes accepted.” The jumble of letters in front of her provide inspiration and she reaches out a trembling hand and adds ‘acomb’ to ‘cat’—he’d barely been able to hold back a smile when she posted that earlier—and snags a triple word score and a handy fifty-seven points.

Game on, Wes. Game fucking on.

When she pulls out a ‘U’, ‘Q’ and ‘Z’ a few minutes later she nearly comes right there. It takes her twenty minutes to win and she’s really fucking gracious in victory—‘It’s only sixty-three points, Wes; that’s like so close. Practically a tie’—and he’s a total gentleman about it, giving her a tight, congratulatory smile and tidying the board away while she mixes herself a victory drink, but she’s waiting for him to do something to even the score and expecting it to be pretty fiendish.

Instead he walks over to her and hands her a sheet of paper. On it he’s written her an I.O.U for an instant orgasm. She touches her fingers to it and looks up at him and even though, yeah, he’d been a smug bastard, she loves him too much not to soothe his ruffled feathers and she says softly, “Wes, did you let me win? Because, swear to God, that was just so freaky.”

He frowns. “I wouldn’t do that. Ever.” The frown deepens. “Faith, that’s a shocking thing to say; you won fair and square and I’m very proud of you.” He gives her a swift kiss. “There. Now, what would you like to do for the rest of the evening?”

She folds the note and tucks it into his shirt pocket. “Don’t know. But you’ve got two minutes to make me come, Wes.”

He hesitates for just a second and she’s about to call him on it. In fact, she’s totally about to call him on it when he gently seizes her wrists and strokes his thumbs over her pulse points, which immediately start thundering away like the hounds of hell are after her.

“Are you sure about that, Faith?” he asks carefully. And it’s the same question he kept asking her when they started playing Scrabble and she was putting down her ‘cats’ and ‘pins’ in all the wrong places so he could blaze his way to a triple word score on the next go.

“Am I sure that I want to come in the next two minutes?” she splutters incredulously but she can’t help the note of uncertainty that’s creeping into her voice. And she shakes free of his stroking thumbs so she can wind her arms round his neck and smoosh her breasts against his chest. “Sounds like all kinds of fun to me, Wes.”

He nods in deference to the fact that she owns his ass for the next two minutes and kisses the sensitive patch of skin behind her ear, which makes her shiver like she’s cold. “Very well, Faith,” he murmurs, sliding his hands down to cup her ass. “I just thought that you’d prefer not to fritter away such a rare opportunity.”

She’s still not sure how or why he’s trying to call her bluff and for a moment she’s distracted by his fingers smoothing down the skirt of her dress, then rucking it up on the journey back home. “I’ll let you have an extra minute on the clock if you think you need it,” she offers with a smug, little smirk, squirming against the start of a really promising erection as the tips of his fingers tickle the backs of her thighs.

He’s planting a tiny line of butterfly sweet kisses across her jawline. “It’s your choice, Faith, but I would have thought you’d have preferred to play your card when you really need it.”

“Like when?”

“Oh, like after I’ve spanked your arse until it’s a fetching shade of deep pink,” he drawls, all honey
and treacle and other sticky things, his nails lightly scratching her smooth skin. “Then fucked you with my fingers and my tongue and my cock for an hour or so and still not let you come, but if you're adamant that you want your orgasm in the next three minutes, I'm sure I can come up with something.”

There isn’t a fucking reason on earth that she should still be in his arms, especially as she's pouting and huffing, “You're such a bastard sometimes, Wes.”

He gives her a completely evil grin and actually has the nerve to pinch her ass. “I'm well aware of that, Faith, but it seems to get you awfully hot and bothered so I forbear.”

She twists away from him and picks up her empty glass. “But you are going to fuck me tonight, aren't you?” she calls over her shoulder as she heads for the kitchen and the jug of pre-mixed chocolate milkshake in the fridge. “And I'm going to get to come?”

“For someone who's meant to be following my orders to the letter, you're getting terribly demanding, Faith,” he says, slouching nonchalantly against the doorjamb and wincing as she licks a stray drop of milkshake from her arm.

“I'm not demanding, Wes. I'm clarifying, just like you told me,” she says sweetly, unscrewing the top of the vodka bottle.

He sighs but she can tell his heart isn't really in it, especially when he smiles faintly. “I can see I've created a monster.”

“But a pretty monster, right?”

She looks up at him and it might be the way he's half standing in the shadows but the angularity of his face seems softened as he looks at her. “A very pretty monster,” he concedes with this serious note that's kinda at odds with the tender way he's gazing at her. “But one who steals people's hearts.”

It's a really bad fucking choice of verb or whatever and she's not exactly sure what he means either because whether it's good or bad to steal people's hearts really depends on your politics. Then again, he doesn't seem like he minds and she shakes her head to clear it of anything but him, and his heart because it sounds like it belongs to her now and she wants to take really good care of it.

“You're thinking again, Faith.” He laughs and it breaks the mood so she blinks twice and snaps out of it. “I won't have it. Come back into the lounge and talk me through our next musical selection.”

He can't dance for shit. But it doesn't matter because what they're doing isn't so much dancing as holding each other tight, while they shuffle round the dimly lit living room listening to the sweet soul music from the compilation CD she made him buy.

Didn't even need to beg or pout, he just took her glass from her and put it down on the sideboard so he could hold her hands and begin to move. Coaxed her pliant body into his arms and sometime during the third song, he lifted her up so she could wrap her legs round his waist and they've been swaying together ever since.

And this music, this song, it's like someone's singing her life and she makes an inarticulate noise of agreement and brushes her cheek against his.

“Do you ever have those moments that are so fucking perfect, you wish you could, like, record them and play them back whenever you feel sad?” she whispers into his ear.

He doesn't answer at first because he's kissing her sweetly, but there's a frantic edge to it that makes
her cling tighter to him. Then he's pulling away. “No,” he breathes, warm against her open mouth. “Not until I met you. And now I have those moments every day.”

She cups his cheeks between her warm hands and rests her forehead against his, mesmerized by the dizzy blue of his eyes this close up, of him holding nothing back from her. “I think you need to make love to me now, Wes,” she tells him in a voice as soft as feathers.

And the look on his face then, just then, it's one she's definitely filing away for the darkest of dark days. She could be mistaken, but the angular planes of his face have softened in the past twenty-four hours and despite all that fuss over the sunscreen, he's got a touch of color and he's looking decidedly more warm. And his eyes, oh God, his eyes—they're so unblinkingly serene and she could just watch him watching her like that for pretty much the rest of time really and relish the way he's making her stomach flip and her fingertips tingle. Because that's all she'd need to get by, really.

Without a word, he takes a hesitant step forward but she stops him with a kiss, as sweet and frantic as his had been. She hopes that says everything, maybe—she doesn't need him to carry her tonight. And it appears he's reading her loud and clear when he lets her slowly slide out of his arms, and as soon as her toes hit the floor, she's curling her warm, shaking hand around his, leading the way up the creaky stairs to the loft.

The moon's high and full and there's a hazy green-white light angling through the windows, and everything looks like she feels, kind of blurred and unreal but utterly solid.

Too solid, maybe, because her thoughts aren't too coherent as she's trying to work out what to do next. She's initiated this, but she still wants, no needs him to lead the way, and before she can think of an ingenious way to signal this, he's undoing the buttons of her dress—slowly, of course—kissing her lightly each time he slides one out of a buttonhole.

He steps back and leaves her standing there, and she can tell by the way he's looking at her that he's memorizing the way the moonlight gives her skin a silvery glow—and she knows this since she's doing the same to him. A heavy dreamy sigh slides out of her and she's mortified because it sounds a little more impatient than content and his wandering eyes snap to meet hers. She stumbles out an apology that never quite makes it out her mouth as a fully-formed sentence.

Mercifully, he cuts through her stammering with another kiss. The top of her dress is now open just enough that he can slide his hands over her breasts, his palms coming to rest with a feather light touch over her hard nipples.

She thought maybe she knew all his kisses, memorized and cataloged each little variation over the past few months, but these are unlike any that have come before. Their skin is vibrating and taut with mutual need and each light touch of his lips on hers is electric and leaves her increasingly dreamy and lightheaded.

Amazingly, she's not unfocused enough to snatch an open opportunity to play the same unbuttoning game with his shirt—instead of ripping it right off him, finding she doesn't really have to rein herself in too strictly to follow his lead and play this savor-every-moment thing.

She's not sure when it happens, but he pulls his hands away from her breasts and slips them up and under her skirt instead. With every button she unfastens and every delicate kiss she plants on his lips, his cool fingertips skim over her ass and hips—but he always slides them away from her pussy at the last possible second, sending them skittering down her thighs or over her hipbones.

Panting raggedly now, she manages to undo the final button and she hasn't uttered a word of complaint until he finally dips a finger in her wet cunt and pulls it away just as quickly. A little
whimpery moan works its way into the silence hanging between them and he places that moist glistening finger over her lip. She gently swirls her tongue over it, lapping so greedily at her juices that a little wayward, throaty growl thwarts his attempt at silence.

It's all she can do not to shove him back on the bed and finish ripping the rest of his clothes off, but instead she can't help but giggle and put on her best stage whisper as she pulls him over to the bed. “Why are we being so quiet?”

“I'm not exactly sure,” he murmurs, squinting at her. “I think you started it.”

“Sounds like something you'd think up, Wes.” Her hands are busy undoing his jeans. She dutifully slides them down past his knees and he kicks them off the rest of the way.

“Faith, why are we standing here discussing this?” His hands slither up under her arms, and before she can shriek in protest, he lifts the dress over her head and she wriggles free of it gratefully.

“Okay, okay. I'll take responsibility for that, at least,” she says, brushing her tangled, sea-salt roughened hair away from her eyes as she flashes him a sly grin and slips a hand down to stroke his straining cock. “Now, where were we?”

His sidelong glance tells her everything she needs to know—it's a warning, an indulgence, and an endearment all in one—as he pulls her down on to the bed.

He's deliberately tender—each stroke of his warm fingertips over her skin isn't meant to drive her to the edge, begging for a release—instead, she's practically purring as he slowly drags his tongue over her hard little nipples while his hand strokes her still-smooth pussy, coaxing her legs open. He doesn't tease her clit or slip his finger inside just enough to make her scream and buck her hips in frustration, but nudges her hip instead, whispering, “Roll over.”

And this is how he makes her wait this time, with the near-obsessive attention to every square inch of her flesh. Runs kisses from the base of her neck to the cleft of her ass and smoothes his fingers over the back of her legs. She's given up trying to stay quiet and is whimpering faintly in to the pillow as he rakes a finger through her thoroughly wet cunt again and snakes it up, lightly teasing the puckered flesh of her asshole, and just when she's certain he's about to slip his finger in, he's pulled his hands away and he's flipping her boneless, moaning body back over again.

He's lapping at her clit before she can really register that his head's between her legs and she sighs gratefully, resting her feet on his shoulders and thrusting herself up to meet the two fingers he's sliding inside her wet and ready cunt.

It seems an eternity, as he builds her up so sweetly and backs off ever so slightly just as she's about to come—over and over again. She doesn't fight the wait, just puts herself at the mercy of his tender ministrations, not focusing on any thought or any feeling, but the whole mess of them. There are hot tears leaking from the corners of her eyes and she's whispering his name as he slowly pulls away, sliding his chest over her belly and kissing her hotly and greedily. He slips his cock inside her and she tightens around him so hard and fast it's like an electric shock. They're left gasping and wordless and each small movement sets her spine tingling. Their skin is so hot she feels like she might be melting into him. She swivels her hips finally, and he can only get in a few hard thrusts before he's whimpering and slumped against her and there's a little white-hot explosion inside as he comes, taking her with him.

They can hardly touch after; just his fingertip running along her shoulder nearly makes her scream with delight and when her toe runs along the top of his foot, he lets out a sharp breath as if she's taken his cock in her mouth instead.
So instead, they lie side by side—still panting, but very still—index fingers hooked together until the threat of possible spontaneous combustion passes.

She's the first to speak. Words feel clunky and foreign inside her mouth. “That was incredible.”

He just smiles, incredibly pleased with himself and scoots closer, gathering her up in his arms and runs his lips up to her earlobe and flicks his tongue over it, making her shiver. His breath is hot on her neck and he whispers, “I have a surprise.”

“Wesley, if you give me another surprise this weekend, I'm totally gonna think the pod people got to you and I'm totally gonna find 'em and demand that they give me back the real Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, Esquire, because I kind of miss his prissy ass.” She giggles as two worried creases spring up between his eyebrows. “Oh come on, Wes! You know I'm kidding.”

And he can't keep up the sham of consternation and he laughs too, springing off the bed to rummage in the back of the top dresser drawer. She's charmed that even though they're only staying for a few days, he's managed to transplant his orderly habits into the sock drawer of a rented cottage by the ocean, while her jeans and shoes and old favorite dresses are strewn all over her half of the room.

“Aha. Here we are.” She's expecting...well, she's not sure what she's expecting him to have, but it surely isn't the remains of that dimebag of weed she and Xander'd smoked a few weeks back—it must have slipped under the sofa or something.

“Ok, yeah. Pod person. You're not Wes, you're a fucking pod person.”

“Really, Faith. I resent that you think I'm too 'prissy' for this kind of thing.”

“Well, yeah. You kind of are.”

“I'll have you know that I went to college and law school.” He clears his throat in what can only be called mock-prissiness. “You can't possibly think I didn't partake there?”

“Well, you didn't know what bogart meant.”

“Get off that bed, Faith and into some clothes. It's probably a little too chilly for a late-night nude sortie to the beach.”

She eyes him suspiciously as she slips into the bathroom with her dress and a cardigan in tow. “Pod person,” she mutters as she slips inside, and she can hear him laughing heartily in her wake.

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She had the presence of mind to bring her Zippo lighter with her and not some cheap plastic thing—the wind's gusting in over the tide, and she's glad she doesn't have to worry about keeping the joint lit. She's still getting over the shock of watching him deftly roll it up with those goddamn pretty fingers of his, and she's only ever see one other person work with that kind of precision. “Don't tell me, you used to roll your own cigarettes too?”

“For a while, yes.” He doesn't explain or elaborate and leaves it at that.

She just blinks in disbelief. “Do you have anything else you wanna spill, Wes? Because I'm in such a state of shock right now.”

“No, I think that's everything. Now, hurry along and don't bogart the spliff, there, Faith.”
If he weren't being so damn cute, she's pretty sure she'd be throwing a handful of sand in his face right about now. She sparks up the lighter and takes a sizable hit, letting it wisp out her nostrils, relishing the thick bitter taste it leaves on her tongue.

She hands it to him without meeting his eyes. She's not quite ready to dissolve into a pile of useless giggles quite yet. Still, she watches out of the corner of her eye to make sure he's not faking just to appease her, and when he coughs faintly after his first hit she realizes she should have known better than to think he'd do anything half-assedly, up to and including rolling immaculate joints and getting blitzed off them.

They sit side by side in the sand, hands clasped and looking at the gray, choppy waves illuminated by the high, clear moon, and silently pass the joint between them until she flops on her back, deciding to count the stars.

“Faith, really. You shouldn't lie in the sand. You'll get it everywhere.”

“You can't possibly still be worried about that kind of shit now, Wes. Incredible. Must be engraved on your DNA or something.”

“My what?”

“Your neat-freakyness. Must be.”

“Mitochondrial DNA, you mean.”

Oh God. Here come the giggles. She snorts, trying to keep them in. She wave her hand lamely in his direction. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever, you big show off.”

“What's so funny?” He peers down at her, and she can see his train of thought completely derail as a goofy grin slides over his face. “Goodness, it feels like someone's grabbing my face and squashing it. I'd forgotten about that.”

She can't help it now; she's rolling around in the sand full of giggles. “I can't believe it. Well, no—that's not right. I can believe it. You're totally the most uptight stoned person I've ever seen!”

“I am not.”

“Yes you are! You are! Come on, just lie down and look at the stars with me.” She tugs on his arm, but he won't budge. “Come on, Wesley,” she drawls at him. “Be a good little stoner and look at the stars with me.”

He finally does, except he becomes transfixed with stroking her hair and her cheek. He whispers how beautiful she is and she knows that no matter how fun it is to get blitzed with Xander, it's about ten thousand times more fun to do it with Wes.

Especially when he sits up suddenly after about what seems to her like an hour, or maybe just thirty minutes, and says, “We have ice cream!” and drags her back to the cottage to find it.

It's when he starts scrabbling round in the ice box and making these fucking hilarious moaning noises of anticipation that she realizes she's going to have to be the designated adult.

He emerges from the freezer with little droplets of ice clinging to his hair (and he did not just fucking stick his head in there, did he?) and a triumphant expression on his face like he went all the way to the North Pole just to get the Rocky Road.
“I found it!” he exclaims gleefully, holding up the ice cream and looking at as if he can't quite believe that something so wonderful comes in tubs. “Bowls. Spoons. Faith, we need bowls and spoons or possibly spoons and bowls. I'm not sure which would be the appropriate order.”

“Dude, you are totally baked,” she announces smugly and he giggles again. If he doesn't stop being so frickin' cute she's going to hit him.

“I've never been called a dude before,” he whispers conspiratorially and then wrinkles up his brow in consternation. “I'm not entirely sure I like it. Now there was something with bowls and spoons that you were…”

She doesn't want to take her eyes off him for one minute with the whole so cute he's gonna die thing and also he's probably likely to electrocute himself, but she turns round and rummages in the drawer. “Okay, Wes, I'm calling a time out,” she says decisively. “We've got, like, stoner rules that have to be observed. One spoon, one tub of ice cream is how we're gonna play this.”

He has the nerve to pout at her. “I want my own spoon.”

“What? Like, I have girl cooties?” she splutters, wagging the spoon at him. “We're gonna share the ice cream and you're gonna roll us a couple of joints. Now go into the living room before I get really pissed.”

As he walks out of the kitchen he has this shit-eating grin on his face which widens as he purposely bumps her with his hip and momentarily presses the tub of ice cream against her back, making her yelp and glare at him.

By the time she's mixed them up a vodka milkshake and a vodka tonic apiece and walked back into the lounge, he's just lighting up another joint, all snuggly wuggly under a blanket, his eyes glued to the television that's appeared out of nowhere. Or, like, was in a big cupboard that she hasn't got round to investigating.

“There's a T.V.? There's a fucking T.V. and you didn't tell me?” she snarls at him and he looks up and blinks at her.

“I've only just realized it was here,” he protests without one fucking ounce of credibility. “Oh, stop frowning at me, Faith. I've found this absolutely bizarre program and I need you to explain the finer points to me.”

He's watching… sweet fucking baby Jesus… a Queer Eye For The Straight Guy marathon and his attention is so goddamn rapt that she has to physically budge him along the sofa so she can sit down.

“Incredible,” he breathes as he watches some poor slob get his back waxed. “We really must get a television when we're in New York.” Then his gaze swivels round to her. “Ice cream, please.”

She takes her sweet time peeling the lid off and then holds the spoon over the open tub, aware that he's watching her every move with unwavering focus. She digs in with the spoon and comes out with a mound of ice cream, which she carefully moves to his mouth.

“A spoonful for you,” she coos and he opens his mouth obediently, closing his eyes in ecstasy and moaning because she was way generous with the chocolate.

She scoops up more ice cream with the spoon. “And an even bigger spoonful for me because you totally lied about the TV and you're bogarting the joint.”

He looks at the joint clasped between his fingers like he's not sure how it got there. “Oh.” He tried to
go for stern but he can't quite get the intonation right. “You do realize, Faith, that when I have proper
control of my cognitive thought processes, I fully intend to give your arse a good, hard spanking.”

The look she gives him is a pretty fucking good one. Not many people could stand to me on the other end of it. “Whatever, Wes. Swap?”

As Saturday nights go, she's never had a better one. There's the hydroponic skunk and the overloaded joints that Wes has rolled. Vodka milkshakes and Rocky Road, though she has to keep taking tips of his vodka tonic to kinda counteract the sugar overload and there's him. Wes. Watching Queer Eye and shortling. And when neither of them can eat, drink or smoke anymore because they're heading for Pukesville, they start making out.

And it's kinda sweet because he pulls the blanket over their heads so it's like they're in this little woolly cave and then he starts kissing her. It's everything she never had in high school; the cute guy who keeps saying, “I love you”, in between these kisses which suck the soul right out of her.

Her lips are tingling and her head is swimming and it's so fucking romantic that she almost can't bear it. When he starts unbuttoning her dress, it's a relief because she's coming undone.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs, placing a reverent kiss on the tip of each breast and she wriggles under him, opening her legs so can grind his denim-covered cock against her.

And they don't so much get naked as keep pulling at each other's clothing until they're skin on skin and sharing these little whimpers at the sensitized slide of their flesh rubbing and writhing.

The damp head of his cock nudges against the smooth skin of her inner thigh and she scoots down on the cushions trying to get him inside her. “Need you to put it in, Wes,” she whispers in his ear.

His hand glides down the barely there curve of her belly, then his fingers flicker against her clit with these tiny, delicate movements. “You're always so wet for me, Faith. So delicious and glistening, aren't you?”

Their knuckles brush, as she wraps her hand round his cock so she can guide it home. “It's because of this,” she says and moans as she enters her inch by sweet inch.

“I only have to look at you and I'm hard. It's never been like this with anyone else. Just you, my darling Faith,” he says so tenderly that he has to start kissing the tears that begin trickling out of her eyes. “No, don't cry. You're not to cry. Not now.”

She can feel the twitching length of him deep inside her, rubbing against all those sweet spots, but he's not thrusting and she's not shimmying; they just stay locked together, hands in each other's hair as they share these slow, languid kisses that seem to last for hours.

She's not sure when she falls asleep. She vaguely recalls him carrying her up the stairs to bed. But the next thing she remembers is his arms around her and she's half-awake enough to know that he's still hard and she's still wet and wanting him so badly that she rubs her ass against him and he's lifting her leg and sliding inside her and fucking her with these slow, lazy strokes as his thumb gently works her clit. She comes, not with starbursts and fireworks like she usually does, but with these steady little waves like she's a pebble being lifted up and carried along with the current.

When she wakes up for the second time, the sun is streaming in through the chinks in the drapes and she rolls over and stretches luxuriously. His side of the bed is still warm and she burrows against the pillow, which still smells of him. The paper is rough against her cheek and she sits up and yawns as she unfolds the note.
Darling girl

You looked so wonderfully comfortable that I didn’t have the heart to wake you. I’ve gone into town to get the Sunday paper and some nutritious food to counteract the indulgences of last night. But one last surprise: I’ve declared Monday a mental health day so you can have a little longer to work on your tan.

See you soon

Love Wes

PS: Stoner rules are officially over.

She gives a contented groan and with the note still clutched in her hand, goes back to sleep.

Chapter Sixty-Four

She’s awake when the car pulls up in front of the house; curled up on a wicker chair on the porch, with a blanket wrapped around her; showered but still dressed in her robe. Her eyes can’t seem to decide if they want to stay open or not. When Wesley walks up to the cottage with a spring in his step, a grin on his face and two bags of groceries, she goes for closed. It’s just not natural looking that cheerful when her head’s throbbing as if the marching band had walked through it wearing hob-nailed boots.

“Good morning, Faith,” he says, dropping a kiss on her head and yanking at the blanket she’s pulled up over her face. “I hope you slept well.”

“Wes, some sympathy here? I’m dying.”

She feels like it too. Not been sick—not quite—but thank God Wes had tidied up the leftovers, and she’s totally gone off chocolate in any shape or form.

“A hangover isn’t immediately fatal,” he informs her. “You just wish you’d die. As I have plans for you that require you to be breathing, I’d appreciate it if you’d recover from last night’s indulgences as quickly as possible.”

She opens one eye and squints up at him. “Sorry. Wish I could but these things take time, y’know?”

“Then I’ll have to speed them up, won’t I?”

He saunters inside, after tapping a reproving finger against her lips when she pouts, and starts doing stuff that’s way too noisy but she forgives him because he emerges with a tray and sits beside her. Glaring at her when she clings to the blanket, he gets her to swallow something fizzy and nibble on toast, juice and coffee until her stomach settles and her headache eases off.

“Poor Faith,” he murmurs. “I imagine you hate me now, don’t you?”

She takes a sip of the water bottle he’s handed her and nods. “You should feel worse than me,” she says accusingly. “You’re out of practice!”

“Not really,” he says and she remembers how he used to look in the early days and winces. Guess maybe he’s had time to work on getting used to hangovers.

“We’ll spend a quiet morning—what’s left of it—lazing around,” he says, as if he does that all the time, “and then, as it’s such a beautiful day—”
“Too sunny,” she grumps.

“I thought we’d take a hike, and if you don’t behave, I’ll put you in the car and drive you home.”

Penitent and apologetic, she crawls into his lap and kisses him before she realizes he’s teasing her. In revenge, she lets him stew over nineteen down for twenty minutes before solving the anagram for him. All this time in the US of A and he’s still not gotten used to spelling without a ‘U’ and with a ‘Z’.

The hike’s something she’d happily have swapped for crawling back into bed with him and letting the last of the hangover melt away in a post-orgasmic glow, but no, seems Wes wants to look at the ocean. It’s right there, and it’s blue and wet and fucking big, but there’s a lookout point a few miles away and somehow that’s got Wesley’s eyes gleaming and he’s two seconds away from pulling out a compass, she swears he is.

He loads a rucksack with supplies, which makes her wonder just how far this place really is, and they set off into the woods, along a track that has delusions of being a trail. Getting to stare at Wes’ ass in jeans is kinda nice, but it goes out of focus as she drops back, and when he notices, he tuts and makes her walk in front and he isn’t above giving her a slap if he thinks she’s lally-fucking-gagging.

Slowly, though, she starts to get it. Maybe it’s the air; clear and salty, so every breath’s like biting into a chip, or the fact that they’re so totally alone and tomorrow’s going to be the same. Maybe it’s because Wes’ hand lingered the last time he urged her on and she’s fairly sure there’s a blanket in the supplies. She turns, just as the path widens so they can walk beside each other, and slips her hand into Wes’, smiling at him.

“Never pictured you as the outdoor type,” she says.

Wesley pauses. “I’m not really. Just used to the countryside.”

“Going to bother you being in a city then?” she asks.

“Not really.” He glances at her and shakes his head as she looks unconvinced. “I’m not Tarzan, Faith!”

It’s his exasperated voice, but it’s lost all its sting recently, so she just grins and yodels out her best imitation of Tarzan calling the animals. Wesley lifts an eyebrow. “I think that might have attracted a mouse, but it wasn’t exactly awe-inspiring, now was it, and no, I’m not going to show you how it’s done.”

“Oh, go on,” she says, and she bets he would’ve, but right then they get to the lookout point and Wes is as proud as if he discovered Africa. She has to admit it’s a good view. The ocean’s still blue and wet though.

They end up on the blanket, after Wes has doled out some snacks and water, telling her not to eat too much as he plans to take her out for dinner, with their backs against a rock, warm from the sun and smoothed flat enough by the wind to be comfortable. There’s an odd intimacy about being alone up here, high above the world. Wesley puts his arm around her shoulders and she snuggles in close.

“Last night,” she says. “It was all wrong, you know.”

“Be specific,” Wesley says lazily. “I have some fond memories of it myself.”

“Ice cream late at night is for when you’re sad and you want to dish the dirt on your boyfriend to
“your best friend,” she tells him. “It’s traditional.”

“Oh, really,” he murmurs. “And do you do that often?”

She wiggles her hand. “So-so. Don’t really have a girlfriend. Sometimes, with Darla—” She’s silent a moment. Yeah. Sometimes, when it’d just been the two of them and Darla had been drunk enough to be mellow, not mean… “But she’s my mom; can’t talk to her about sex without it being majorly creepy. So it’s usually Xander, and being gay doesn’t make him a girl.”

“So, just out of interest,” he says, brushing a kiss against her hair. “What would you have told Xander last night? What sins of mine would you relate to get his sympathetic agreement that I’m a lowlife?”

She snickers quietly. “Can’t think of any, Wes; I’m more likely to tell you if you do something I don’t like; I’m not the brooding sort.”

“Very true. You tend to lash out instead or throw things. I have the bruises to prove it.”

“What? Get out!” She snuggles closer. “I’m the one with the bruises,” she says drowsily and it’s a weird conversation to be having in the bright sunlight, sober, but it fits somehow. “Wes? Can I ask you something?”

His arm tightens and then relaxes. “You may ask, or tell me, anything, Faith,” he says. “I can’t promise I’ll always answer, or react the way you want or expect, but don’t let that stop you.”

There’s a faint warning bell sounding, but she closes her ears to it and watches the gulls dip and soar on the breezes that are ruffling Wesley’s hair just enough to make her have to lift a hand to smooth it into place.

“This—what we do,” she says. “It’s a lot of work, isn’t it?”

“I beg your pardon?”

He sounds bewildered and she starts to talk fast, stumbling over the words, the way she always does when she’s trying to explain, but most people never let her finish the way he does. “You could just fuck me, Wes. You could just have me, and it’d take fifteen minutes, tops, and even if you did it a couple of times a day, we’re not talking much, and you’d still get to come, and I would most times and—and you’re so busy”

“I’m not sure I see—” he begins, and she puts a hand over his mouth, pressing the words back with her fingers.

“And it’s not just the sex, not just the way you spend fucking hours over it, making it perfect, making it special, it’s everything else you do. Bringing me here. All the stuff you get me.”

His eyes flicker to her wrist, and she doesn’t know why that should matter until she sees the band of paler skin where a watch should be, and she forces herself not to snatch her hand away and carries on babbling. “I’m not—Wes, I’m not—”

“What?” he says, moving to his knees beside her, blocking the sun so that for a moment, as she blinks up at him, his face is in darkness. “That’s simply not true.”

Only Wes could pack a speech into four words.

“You could have anyone,” she argues weakly, because his thumb is stroking along her collar bone
and the light touch is all it takes to make her want him.

“Even if that were the case, which it isn’t, I prefer to have you,” he says, adding gently, “I love you.”

And that brings it all crashing back down on her, everything that’s waiting, everything that hasn’t gone away just because they have, and her eyes fill with tears. “Wes—tell me again.”

“That I love you?” he says, a faint frown creasing his forehead.

“No—yes—but no, I want you to tell me what you said when we got here. Tell me not to think about anything but us. Make me do it.”

She’s plucking at his shirt now, with frantic fingers, and she can feel her throat closing up with tears. His hands close around hers and he stills their movement.

“Faith.”

“Tell me,” she begs. “Just fucking tell me.”

He sighs. “I really shouldn’t have to,” he says, with just enough sternness to make him sound like he means it. “Once should be enough.”

“I know,” she murmurs, dropping her eyes so he can’t see how fucking scared she is that she’s going to spoil this the way she has everything else in her life. “I’m sorry.”

“Look at me,” he orders, getting her head to tilt up without laying a finger on her. “Good. Faith, as I don’t seem to have made myself clear—or you’re being deliberately obtuse—you’re to obey me unquestioningly this weekend as a way of making up for your appalling behavior while I was away, and one of my orders was that you think of nothing but us. Now is there anything about that that you want me to go over?”

“No, Wesley,” she says meekly, relaxing again.

He sighs. “I think I’m going to invite Xander over and eat ice cream with him,” he mutters.

She gives a little shriek of laughter, feeling, what did he call her once? Mercurial. Yeah. “What? Wes, you’re fucking kidding me! Why?”

“I have a feeling he could be useful at interpreting you when you’re being rather more incomprehensible than usual,” he says dryly. “And haven’t I told you not to swear?”

She shakes her head. “No one gets me the way you do,” she says, meaning it. “And yeah, you have. Sorry.”

“That’s twice you’ve said that, and somehow I don’t feel you were entirely sincere either time.” He purses his mouth and considers her. “We’re going back now,” he says, standing and holding out his hand to haul her to her feet.

“We just got here,” she protests, feeling her leg muscles twinge at the thought of the trek back. It might be downhill, but somehow she doesn’t think it’ll make it that much easier.

“I think you meant to say, ‘Yes, Wesley’, didn’t you?” he says, folding his arms. “Followed, perhaps, by another apology?”

*Obey me unquestioningly.*
“Yes, Wes,” she says. He does that thing where his eyes get cold and she swallows. “Sorry.”

“Now I’ve got you back on track,” he says, with an approving nod, “fold the blanket neatly and put it back in the rucksack.”

She picks it up, shakes off the pine needles and dirt, and folds it. Once it’s stowed away she glances over at Wesley who’s looking thoughtful.

“I’m going to give you a five-minute start,” he says, reaching out for the rucksack. “That should be sufficient.”

“Forty what?” she asks.

“You’re going to be first back at the cottage,” he says. “When I arrive, I want you waiting, naked, on the bed. On your back, arms by your side, I think.” He unbucks his watch and fastens it around her wrist. “Keep this on. When you’re in position, make a note of the time.”

“Okay,” she says, feeling the weight of the metal strap tug down at her wrist, warm from his body. She risks a question. “Why?”

He smiles. “Because I’m going to want to know how long you’ve been waiting for me, Faith. And before you ask ‘why’ again, perhaps I should tell you that it’s in your best interests to make the wait as long as possible, that as far as I’m concerned the five minutes began as soon as I gave you my watch and—”

She doesn’t know what he’s got planned, but she’ll think about that later. She runs, pebbles scattering under her feet, heart hammering because fuck, she’s sure she can hear him behind her already, and if he beats her back to the cottage she’ll lose whatever reward he’s dreamed up and she wants it.

Wants everything Wes gives her, and these days he’s giving her so much she can’t hold onto it all, and it’s slipping through her fingers.

By the time she's clear out of the woods, her lungs are bursting and are heart is pounding so hard that she's sure it's about to make its own bid for freedom and shoot straight out of her chest.

But still she keeps on running, a little dust cloud and possibly Wes hot on her heels. She can feel tiny stones pinging up and hitting her bare legs as she races over the dirt path, her hair's streaming out in the slight breeze and all of a sudden she's so very aware of this moment, of how alive she is, how pleased she is to be in her body, to be her. Just another thing that he's done for her, but maybe it's the most precious gift of all.

The cottage is in sight now and even though she thinks that she's gonna freakin' die in the next couple of minutes, unbelievably she's finding one last little spurt of energy and speeding up as she skids over the dunes and jumps up the porch steps.

She's through the front door and kicking off her sneakers. Stumbling up the stairs as she tugs her dress over her head, and already wriggling out of her underwear as she crashes into the bedroom.

Flopping down on the bed, she looks at the time. It's seven minutes past three and twelve, no, thirteen seconds. And there's no way he's racing down the trail like he's got the hounds of hells snapping at his toes. Wes is way too cool for that.

Her breathing is returning to normal but she's still panting slightly and listening to the frantic thud of her pulse as her body decides not to go into cardiac arrest. It'll probably wait until Wes has done
what the fuck ever he's planned, she thinks happily, stretching out and reveling in the glow of the sun streaming in through the window.

She's just debating whether having another peek at the time would mean that she's broken the rules when she hears the front door close with a quiet click and, just like that, her heart is thudding. There's a pause and then his slow, measured tread on the stairs and her nipples are peaking, her cunt's moistening and all the little hairs on her arms are standing up to say hello.

Then he's there, standing in the doorway. “Hey you,” she murmurs throatily.

He stoops down to gather up her bra and panties so he can add them to her dress and sneakers which are already in his hands and arranges them in a neat pile on the chair. “Really, Faith,” he fusses. “You should take more care over your things.”

And now is really not the time for a lecture about her lack of housekeeping skills so she tries to arrange her face in to something that resembles an apology. “Sorry, Wes.”

He gives her this bone-meltingly soft smile. “But really, seeing you arranged so alluringly, I find myself in rather a forgiving mood. What's the time, Faith?”

She holds her wrist in front of her face. “Three-fifteen and twenty-one seconds,” she announces triumphantly and she sounds so fucking smug about it that he chuckles.

“And what time was it when you first looked?”

“Three-seven and thirteen seconds, so that's…”

“Eight minutes and eight seconds,” he finishes for her. “You must have broken the three-minute mile getting back.”

“Didn't I tell you that I used to be on the school track team? In my pre-cigarette days. County champion two years in a row.” Oh yeah, Wes. You've been messing with the wrong girl.

He's looking a little frayed around the edges now. “Somehow, it hasn't come up,” he huffs. “Well, I can see that I've been hoist by my own petard.”

“So?” she prompts because he'd better make the almost heart attack worth her while. “You said it was in my best interests to make the wait as long as possible. I was just following orders, Wes.”

“Eight minutes and eight seconds,” he muses, walking toward the bed, his eyes running up and down her naked flesh. “There's a certain pleasing symmetry in that.”

He sits down on the edge of the bed and traces an idle finger up her sweat-dampened thigh and she's already clenching her fingers into the sheet.

“What are you gonna do?” she asks breathily, her voice hitching on the last word as his questing finger snakes decisively toward her throbbing pussy.

“Well, the possibilities are endless,” he drawls, bending his head to press a hot kiss against her knee. “I could spank you for eight minutes or I could let you tie me up and have your wicked way with me…”

She's already opening her mouth to beg him to let her but he's smoothing his fingers over her lips, his eyes gleaming with amusement.
“Surely you should have all the relevant information before you make a decision, Faith,” he says primly.

She gives in to the temptation to poke her tongue out at him. “Doesn’t matter what other stuff you say,” she pouts. “Eight minutes and eight seconds of you all bound and naked and at my mercy? Guess Christmas just came early.”

His finger drifts between her legs and gently circles her clit before he drags a sticky trail up her belly. “Were you quite that wet before we started this conversation?”

She wants to ask him if she can move because she really wants to yank him down, haul off his clothes, tie him up, and fuck him into the middle of next week. But there's the whole obeying him unquestioningly thing so she tries to answer the question.

“Been thinking about what you've got planned ever since I got back and, yeah, it got me wet,” she admits, feeling her cheeks burn as he regards her keenly, his tongue slipping out to wet that pretty bottom lip. “But, Wes, you know I've always wanted to…”

“I could go down on you for eight minutes and eight seconds,” he drawls thickly, toeing off his shoes and socks, his voice is slightly muffled. “I could fuck you with that vibrator for eight minutes and eight seconds. I'm pretty sure I could give you eight orgasms in that time if I put my mind to it. Or I could just sit here admiring your beautiful body and make you do all the work.”

If she wasn't wet before, then now she's dripping with desire, lust curdling in the pit of her stomach so she's only vaguely aware that her hips are rising off the bed. “Do I get to choose?” she demands, stretching out her hand so she can curl it around his thigh. “Please, Wes.”

“Oh, I think I’ve been indulgent enough all things considered,” he says, peeling her hand off his leg and bringing it to his lips to plant one tongue-flickering kiss against her palm. “In fact, when I look back, I’m marveling at all you’ve got away with recently.” His lips move to her wrist and rest, warmly, briefly, against the pulse that’s throbbing steadily there.

“Wes,” she says, in what has to qualify as the neediest whimper she’s capable of, “please.”

“‘Please,’” he says. “Do you know what would please me right now, Faith?”

She might do, might be able to tell him, but his fingers are back between her legs, pinching delicately at her clit, and she’s gone beyond speech. He squeezes her hand with a gentle, reassuring pressure and then releases it to fall, dream-motion slowly, back to the bed.

“Eight minutes of you like this,” he whispers. “On the edge, waiting, needing—and you are, aren’t you, Faith?”

He doesn’t wait for the gasp that’s all she can manage in reply, just drifts the back of his hand down the tender skin of her inner thigh and doesn’t go near her cunt again. Every now and then he strips off another item of his clothing, managing somehow to keep touching her, with mouth, fingers, voice, so that she barely notices that he’s naked until he moves over her, dropping kisses like rain on her stomach, his voice murmuring against her skin, against her quivering body, taut as she fights to stay still, telling her that she’s beautiful and he loves her like this, that she’s not to come, or move and absolutely forbidden to speak, because he can’t get enough of the frantic sounds slipping past her parted lips; sounds that aren’t words and never will be because she’s fragments of a whole as his hands break her down.

He slides into her without spreading her open with fingers or tongue first, knowing she’s ready, and
she’s wet and tight and the slow thrust of his cock is unbearable when she can’t curl up and around
him with arms and legs and her teeth tasting his skin. He keeps her in place for eight deliberate
strokes, weight held on straight arms so that all she can feel is his cock and the press of his legs
against hers. He never takes his eyes off her face and he watches her with curious eyes as if he
doesn’t know why she’s panting, face screwed up, eyes wild and lips trembling, as if the rocking of
his hips as he plunges into her again and again is irrelevant, distant, remote.

Then on the ninth stroke he pauses and frees her with a nod and she’s surging up against him, hands
hammering at him as she waits, past patience, for him to start fucking her again. His head turns and
he kisses her throat, sucking hard at the skin, slipping his arm around her shoulders and gathering her
to him as he fucks her hard; swift, fierce jabs that drive her toward a climax that makes her whole
and breaks her all over again.

They fall back against the bed, side by side and breathing fast. She doesn’t bother looking at her
watch. Somehow she knows it’s going to have taken him just over eight minutes.

“Well,” Wesley says, sounding a little beat. “That was...” His voice dies away.

“Yeah,” she says, snuggling up against him. “Perfect description. You’ve got a real way with words,
Wes. Anyone ever tell you that?”

He moves to face her. “Now that was just asking for trouble,” he murmurs, letting his fingers dance
across her ribs and finding at least three new places to tickle. When she’s squeaking as energetically
as she can, given that she’s still a melted puddle of mush, he finishes off with a brisk slap on her ass
and looks smug.

“I think we should shower,” he says, as if it’s escaped her notice that they’re both grubby, sticky, and
damp.

She tries to sit up and he smiles as she moans, muscles complaining already. “Poor Faith. If we were
at home, I’d run you a hot bath and keep you in there for an hour.”

“If we were at home, I wouldn’t have been running a marathon,” she says tartly, pulling a leaf out of
her hair and studying it in disbelief. “God, I must look a total mess.”

“Not at all,” he assures her. “Disheveled, perhaps, and you do seem to be wearing most of a bush,
but it adds to the dryad-look. I like it.”

“Just call me Jane,” she mutters. “But don’t ask me to swing on a vine.”

“I think I can promise that I won’t,” he says, lips twitching in a smile.

He whisks her in and out of the shower so fast she barely has time to get wet; frowning at her when
she takes advantage of a kiss to send soap-slicked hands roaming over his ass, though the way his
eyes darken isn’t all that discouraging.

“What; has this got to last eight minutes and eight seconds, too?” she teases him.

“Don’t be silly,” he says, towelling her hair dry, with a much smaller one hooked tantalizingly low
around his hips. “You have to be back in position within that time.” He lifts an eyebrow. “I
think...yes. You’ve got approximately forty-five seconds.”

“How is that approximate?” she hisses, already moving. “And how do you know? Your watch is still
upstairs!”
“Really Faith, you’re most argumentative. I can’t say that I approve.” He follows her, still wearing the towel, and waits, arms folded across his chest, until she’s back on the bed. “I thought I’d made it perfectly clear that I didn’t want that from you.”

“Don’t always get what you want, Wes.” she says, and it’s not pert, or challenging; it’s just the sober truth, so he doesn’t get mad at her.

“I’m going to brush your hair,” is all he says, getting out the hairbrush. “Sit up, please.”

That’s nice; kneeling on the bed with Wes behind her, drawing the brush through thick, wet, tangled strands and making them smooth. He doesn’t stop until every knot’s been vanquished and she knows this isn’t on the clock. The gentle tugs on her hair, and the satisfying prickle of the brush as it rakes gently across her head are relaxing, and she sighs, feeling cherished.

“I’m going to spank you with this next,” Wesley says, not really making her lose the feeling. “In fact I might do most of the things I offered you as choices before we have to get ready for dinner.”

“’Most’ meaning ‘all but letting Faith tie me up’?” she demands.

“You seem so eager to have me at your mercy that, not surprisingly, I’m getting quite nervous about it,” he tells her.

She snorts. “Nervous. Right.”

“Over my knee, Faith,” he snaps, moving to sit on the edge of the bed.

She tucks still-damp hair behind her ears and smiles at him. “Kiss me first?” she says in her best cajoling voice.

“Faith...”

There’s a warning she can’t ignore in it, and she pouts and wriggles into place. The towel he was wearing is long gone and the heat of his body meets hers as he positions her, spreading his knees wider and resting one hand in the small of her back. He doesn’t press down, but it feels heavy; anchoring her, locking her in place. She can’t imagine moving once he’s done that.

She waits, knowing he’s staring at her ass, at the bow of her back, the hair tumbling to hide her face, for now, while she’s still. Later, when he’s hurting her, when she’s breathing through clenched teeth or panting, openmouthed and silent because she can’t spare the effort to moan, he’ll brush it back and watch her face, but for now it’s hidden.

She waits—and he shifts, unexpectedly, and bends, kissing her ass with lips that she can tell are smiling.

Then the faint feeling of warmth is drowned and lost in the heat of the first flat slap of the brush.

He keeps the blows slow and measured to start off with so it doesn't really hurt, just warms her ass and starts off this deep burn which makes her arch her buttocks against the unrelenting wood.

She gasps in time with each stroke, arms wrapped round his leg and fingers clutching at nothing as he starts to hit her harder and faster.

“Such a disobedient girl,” he clucks reprovingly, smoothing his free hand over her rapidly reddening flesh. “Willful, impetuous, headstrong...”
She gets a fierce blow for every adjective and the way he drawls each one out, his voice low and caressing, is exactly the same tender tone he uses when he tells her she's beautiful.

By the time he places the brush on the bed, her ass feels like it's on fire; this dry, itchy heat that makes her want to scream, but instead she grits her teeth and wriggles against the hard length of his cock twitching against her belly.

“Wes…” Her moan is so deep and low that it feels like it's being plucked straight out of her cunt as she hails her off his lap and sits her down on the edge of the bed.

She winces as the cotton makes contact with her throbbing ass and his eyes darken. “Even though it's such a pity not to see your pretty pink arse, I want you to lie back on the bed, Faith,” he says calmly, but his hand tightens on her knee. She scrambles backward, levering herself up the bed and yelping as her skin drags against the sheet.

“Hurts,” she whimpers and it's an observation, not a complaint and he's following her, crawling up the bed and parting her legs. She thinks she must look halfway to deranged; her hair's falling into her eyes and she can't stop biting her lips because he won't kiss her. “Wes, please…”

His hands slide up her thighs, thumbs resting on either side of her splayed lips and he smiles so fucking sweetly. “You keep saying that, Faith. It's getting rather repetitive so I think I'd like you silent for the time being.”

She can feel her eyebrows shooting up in protest and he places a soft, sucking kiss on her smooth mound, tongue swiping out to lick a sizzling line down to where she's sticky with wanting him. “Apart from those delicious sounds that you make,” he adds as she groans pleadingly.

She closes her eyes tight shut because the world is spinning and it's making her head swim. And he's still pressing these tiny kisses against her labia, tongue darting out to taste her every now and again.

When she presses her heels down on the mattress and tilts her hips up though he stops and she glares at him. If looks could kill, he'd be six feet fucking under.

“Give me your hand,” he orders. She moves her arm, his fingers entwine round hers, and she lets him guide her toward her wet pussy.

He uncoils her fingers and grabs her index finger, resting it against her clit. “You've got eight minutes and eight seconds to make yourself come,” he says, kneeling back on the bed. “And I'm sure I don't need to tell you that I'll be most displeased if you have an orgasm before the time's up.”

She starts slowly, just circling her clit with a shaking finger, playing for time, but she's so wet that soon she's slipping and sliding over the tender nub of flesh, trying to ease off because it feels so good and it's even better because he's watching her.

And she can't tear her eyes away from his face because he's looking dumbstruck; lips parted, cheeks flushed like it's his birthday and Christmas and Easter all rolled into one Faith-shaped package. She's not making any sounds now because he's doing it for her. When she teases around her damp entrance with the tip of one finger, he hisses quietly. And then she pushes two fingers inside, spreads her legs farther apart so he can see how her cunt is clamping down on them as she twists them deeper and he lets out this tiny little moan that sounds like it's been wrenched out of him.

If feels like she's been doing this for hours. Or maybe even seconds. But for once she's not fighting this terrible battle with her body not to come, instead she settles back on the pillows and continues to lazily fuck herself with two fingers, staring at him all the while.
Her cunt is so wet now that every time she pushes her fingers in there're these damp, sucking sounds which should be embarrassing but he's licking his lips and leaning forward, inching closer and closer toward her pussy and she's pretty damn sure that he's gonna move the whole eating her out thing up on the menu, when he leans across her, the leaking head of his cock leaving a sticky trail across her stomach and opens the bedside drawer.

“This… you…” He can't seem to get the words out. Stammering Wes hasn't put in an appearance for quite some time and she's so touched that he's here now that she edges forward so she can rub her cheek against his shoulder. “You look enchanting,” he tells her, his voice clipped like he has to make it that way so he can actually speak. “But this is taking far too long, so I think you need some assistance.”

She sees a flash of purple plastic and the “But, Wes!” bursts out of her mouth before she can hold it back.

“No talking,” he spits out. “I thought I'd made that perfectly clear.”

And not telling him that he's a fucking bastard is harder than all the time she's had to force back an orgasm when he's been fucking her into the mattress for what feels like days. She has to make do with narrowing her eyes, thinning her lips, and speeding up the movements of her hand so she's arching back on the pillows, rubbing her thumb hard into her clit…

“Stop that!” he barks, seizing her wrist but then he pulls her hand toward his mouth so he can suck voraciously at her fingers, tongue swirling fast around her knuckles and even that is making her whimper and clench the muscles of her cunt around thin air. When he deems her hand to be squeaky clean again, he shoves the vibrator at her.

“I want to see you fuck yourself with your little friend until you come,” he says and if there's a little quaver at the end of the sentence then it's not like she's allowed to call him on it. “I'm feeling generous, so I'll give you three minutes.”

And if he wants a show, she'll give him one, she thinks, feeling cucumber-cool in comparison because he’s about to, oh explode, melt, anything that means he loses control. All because of her, because she’s let him do, well just about anything he wants to. There’s a question in her mind about who’s really in control here, but she decides, in a split-second of clarity before the arousal fogs her brain, that it’s both of them. She likes that idea; that they’re a team, and if she’s fooling herself, it’s just too bad.

She can’t speak, but he’s said she can moan, so she does just that, forming the sound deep in her throat and parting her lips so he can hear it. His gaze flickers up to her face and she closes her eyes a little, watching him through the dark fringe of her eyelashes. She holds his look and slides the vibrator home, giving him everything she feels as it gets swallowed up by her hungry, needy cunt, letting it all show on her face; the first wave of sensation; the fight to keep from coming because his eyes—fuck, she could come just from watching his face and it looks like he could return the favor.

She shapes his name with her lips, not breathing, so not a whisper of sound goes with it, and gets a tightening of his mouth as applause as he smothered a smile...then she’s driving the toy deep and her eyes open as wide as her legs as she starts to come, hips jerking and her free hand stretching out to grab at his arm frantically.

It’s not often he loses control but he does then, and the growl he gives as he pulls the vibrator out in one impatient tug is lost in the cry she gives as he sheathes his cock in her and fucks her through one orgasm and into the next, his hands hard on her body, his mouth on her lips, her neck, kisses and stammered, incoherent words spilling from it as he tells her he loves her over and over in a dozen
different ways.

Afterward, they lie in silence, tangled together and content. She’s coming to look forward to those moments when there’s nothing to listen to but his heart, thudding against her hand, nothing to say and spoil by putting into imperfect words that don’t come close to telling him how he makes her feel.

But they can’t stay like that forever and it’s almost a relief when he sighs and stretches out, dislodging her hand and bringing everything back into focus after it had turned hazy and soft.

“You’re allowed to speak now,” he says wryly, kissing her forehead. “Feel free to tell me everything I could see hovering on your lips.”

She grins and prods him in the ribs. “If I did, you’d want to spank me again, Wes, and I’m not sure I’m up for that any time soon.”

Just mentioning it makes her realize how sore her ass is and she shifts so that she’s lying mostly on her stomach. His hand comes down and hovers over the bruised skin and she sneaks a peek to see if he looks upset or sorry. Not this time. There’s a satisfied smile tugging at his lips as he stares at what he’s created with a brush, like it’s some freaky bit of modern art or something, and she presses hers together to hold back a comment.

“You’re very brave,” he says eventually. “Don’t be too brave, Faith. I don’t ever want to hurt you.”

As her ass is deep-down throbbing and she bets the back of the brush is still holding the heat of a thousand suns just from touching it in a minute’s-worth of split second contacts, that should’ve made her roll her eyes, but it doesn’t. She gets what he means and she snuggles up against him, groping for his hand.

“Didn’t. But I prefer it when you use your hand.”

“Why?” he says curiously, shifting so that she’s in his arms but her ass isn’t against the covers. “Does it hurt less?”

She’s not, even after all they’ve done, comfortable discussing it. He gets off on it; she’s learned to like it—or he’s shown her she always did but didn’t know it—whatever—but it doesn’t mean she wants to get earnest and meaningful about it. But he’s asked and she’s guessing the ‘do as I say’ is still in effect so she does her best to answer.

“No. Well, maybe. It’s just more personal. It’s you touching me, there’s nothing in the way. It’s why I’d always want your fingers in me, sooner than that thing.” She looks around for the Rabbit, but it must’ve rolled onto the floor. Maybe they can ‘forget’ to pack it. “Even if they can’t buzz, or vibrate, and they’re not a snazzy shade of purple.”

“Thankfully,” he murmurs, lifting his hand up and wiggling his fingers in a way that makes them both snicker quietly. “Well, you must tell me—you promise?—if I ever—”

“Ssh,” she says, frowning at him. “I will, just stop worrying.” She arches up in a stretch and moves—carefully—to kneel beside him. “Guess there’s no point in tying you up right now,” she decides, running her finger down his stomach to his cock, reduced without being diminished. “Eight minutes. I’d need longer than that; you’re not Superman.”

“You’re really being a little obvious there, Faith,” he tells her kindly. “I think you’ll find I’m not so easily manipulated.”

“Want to rephrase that, Wes?” she says, widening her eyes and giving him her best wicked grin—
and a gentle stroke along his cock just to rub it in.

He groans at the pun she's pointed out. “Possibly, but I think I’ll just admit it was—Faith, no, I’m really not—”

“Up to it?” she murmurs, making the stroke more of a caress. “Yeah, I feel that way sometimes, when you’re making me come again and again. Sucks, huh?”

His hand reaches up and closes around the back of her neck. “Well, you could try that,” he says pleasantly, with the lightest of pushes down. “But I think, as I said ‘no’, we’ll postpone it, don’t you?” He sits up and looks at her with a glimmer of amusement lighting up his eyes. “Pout, and I won’t let you choose what you like from the menu tonight,” he warns.

It’s been a long time since she ate something that wasn’t a slightly squashed granola bar so that works way better than most of his threats but she’s still feeling adventurous.

“Can’t kiss you if I don’t pucker up,” she whispers, wriggling into his lap and cupping the side of his face in her hand, feeling the prickle of stubble against her palm.

“Suppose I said I didn’t want you to kiss me?” he asks, resting his hands lightly on her shoulders.

“I’d do it anyway. Even if you fed me green stuff all night.”

“I’m flattered,” he says, but she gets the feeling he really doesn’t know how much she craves his kisses.

“Want to know what I’d do if you were tied up for eight minutes?” she says, holding his face in both hands now, so he can’t look away.

“Enlighten me.”

There’s a spark of curiosity in there and she knows he’s going to let her do it—not tonight maybe, but some time. “I’d spend, oh, I don’t know, maybe three—no, two of them, looking at you. Just looking. And the rest of the time...”

“Yes?” he says, making the word last twice as long as it needs to.

“I’d kiss you, six straight minutes of smooching, and cry if you didn’t kiss me back.”

“I don’t think that’s ever going to happen,” he says seriously and before she can work out which bit he means, he’s kissing the question out of her head.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Sometimes she thinks she spends more time in the shower than anywhere else since her and Wes got together, fell in love, started fucking each other's brains right out of their tiny heads. She guesses it's all of the above but then he flicks water at her and the thoughts are chased out of her head by the feeling of his soapy hands sliding down her back, intent on getting her squeaky clean and not much else.

Her entire body feels lethargic and heavy and she stands docilely, happy to lean into his touch as he slides a black dress over her head and down her naked body. She's about to ask him why he's nixed the whole underwear thing, even though she's got a damn good idea, but his hands are edging along the deep V of the bodice, cupping her breasts, rubbing his thumbs over her nipples until the hard tips are pressing against the black satin and he steps away with a satisfied smile.
“That's perfect,” he tells her softly. “You look perfect. Are your legs too sore for the pink shoes?”

They kinda are even though she's got used to walking in heels so high they used to give her a nosebleed, but the way he's looking at her, with that reverent, tender gaze that she can never get completely used to, has her shaking her head. “I can do heels,” she assures him. “What do you want me to do with my hair?”

She's told him a million times that she needs serum and a hairdryer and him leaving it alone while it's still damp to put her hair into any kind of order and it's currently a motley collection of messy curls that she self-consciously runs her fingers through.

“Leave it as it is,” he says, scooping up his wallet from the nightstand. “Just a little bit of lipstick, the red one, then we really should get going.”

And even though the whole weekend has been special, days out of time, when it's just him and her, she can't help the uncoiling feeling of excitement in her tummy at the thought of getting all dressed up to go out, or that might be the lurching of the car as Wes navigates it carefully along the track.

When they pull out on to the main road, his hand comes to rest warm on her knee and she sinks back into the seat with a contented little sigh.

“I hope this isn't all too sedate for you, Faith,” he comments with a sidelong glance at her and she wriggles on the seat and winces delicately at the slight throbbing of her buttocks.

“Hardly, Wes.” She grins. “We've skinny-dipped and got loaded on pot and vodka and you've fucked me six ways to Sunday, or like six ways on Sunday.”

He pinches her thigh and chuckles. “I meant now. Me taking you out to dinner. Are you sure you wouldn't rather be in the city with Xander, going to clubs?”

She shudders as she remembers that other life. Those nights of sticky dance floors and sticky bodies pressed up against her. How she'd feel all alone in a crowded club, searching the hungry faces for something she couldn't even put into words.

“No,” she says fiercely, thinking hard about what she really wants to say. “Sure I miss giving it some on the dance floor but man, I'd come home every night and I'd just feel so fucking unwanted. Like, no one could see the real me.”

He doesn't say anything for a while and she's just trying to work out whether the silence could be called comfortable when he clears his throat. “I used to see you in those clubs, spinning round like some kind of Dionysian goddess… you know that, though when it came up during that unpleasant disagreement in my office after, well…”

Her mind's flickering back and she's slotting the pieces together: “I'm not some drunken fool you've picked up at a club in the city. Start again.”

She remembers the floor hard on her knees, the first taste of him on her tongue and then him yanking her head back and she remembers particularly well what happened after that, the surge of rage which sent him toppling back on the desk, her hitting him, wanting to fucking kill him for having seen her like that, seen how desperate and lonely she used to be. And then she recalls being spread out on his desk, while he worshipped her with his tongue and she never had to feel desperate and lonely again.

She covers his hand and strokes his knuckles with her fingers. “Wish you'd come and found me then, Wes,” she murmurs. “Anyway, can't imagine that any of the clubs I used to go to were really your scene.”
He slows the car down as he squints at a street sign and then takes a right. “They weren't.”

She slants a curious glance at him. “So, did you, like, go there to pick up girls?” And they've never talked about this before, though she's remembering a whole bunch of stuff now. The “contrived scenarios” he vaguely mentioned and she's dying to know, fit in a few more pieces of the puzzle that he always seems to be, just when she thinks she's got him figured out.

“Occasionally,” he admits quietly. “I've never claimed to have lived like a monk before I met you, Faith.” He sounds more than a little tart and she has to snort at the thought of Wes being at all monk-like. They'd have totally kicked him out of the monastery.

“What did you do with them?”

There's a little muscle quivering away in his cheek and she thinks she's pushed him too hard. “I fucked them,” he bites out, voice impossibly, impeccably rigid. “And then I couldn't wait to get home.”

“Oh,” she says uncertainly, hand gripping his tightly. “That's kinda cold.”

“And I'd see you,” he continued, like she hasn't even spoken. “Watch you dancing and laughing and you seemed so free, abandoned, like you didn't have a care in the world. I'd watch you disappear into back rooms and alleys with these grubby youths and I wondered about you, Faith. I think I kept going back just to look at you, to try and pluck up the courage to talk to you but you'd have just… well, I'm sure you'd have been horrified…”

“I wouldn't,” she protests hotly and it's cool that he knew her before, wanted her before. Slightly creepy too that when she felt so broken and lost, he was hiding in corners thinking that she was some kind of good time had by everyone. “I didn't fuck them,” she bursts out. “It's not like I was this big ho. Yeah, I was, like, the blowjob queen or some shit but I didn't… I mean, I just wanted them to want me, y'know?”

He's pulling into the parking lot of a little restaurant on the waterfront; candles glowing in the windows and there is no fucking way she's getting out of the car right now. “Please, Wes, I couldn't bear it if you thought I fucked a different guy in the bathroom every Saturday night, because I didn't.” Her voice is getting shrill now and he's looking at her but it's dark in the car and she can't make out the expression on his face, just the warmth of his hand still on her knee. “I was really fucked-up then,” she tries to explain, like she's not really fucked up now in a completely different way. “I just needed…”

“Ssh, ssh,” he soothes, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. “None of it is important. Though I think it's fair to say that I'm quite well aware of just how untried you were.” He seems to like that notion. She can feel him smiling. “What's important is that you suddenly appeared in my office, completely waterlogged, in a ridiculous raincoat and I was unable to believe my good fortune.”

“Really?”

“Really. I was instantly smitten,” he whispers in her ear and she nudges him smartly in the side.

“Man, you didn't act instantly smitten,” she says snottily.

He draws back from her and takes his key out of the ignition. “Well, I was keen to establish an appropriate working relationship,” he remarks, opening the door so she can see the smirk on his face.

“Oh, whatever, Wes!” And then she has to sit there and wait for him to walk round to her side and open the door, offer her his hand so she can clamber out with all the grace of a baby elephant. “I'm
surprised you didn't have me over your desk before I'd even made it to lunch on my first day.”

He rests a casual hand in the small of her back to guide her to the entrance. “I did think about it,” he says teasingly. “But I had rather a heavy caseload as I recall.”

She's grateful for the strong grip of his fingers against hers as they're led to a small table at the back of the room, by some penguin-suited waiter. The restaurant is seriously fancy and even two months ago she'd have been freaking out about using the wrong knife or sipping water out of her wineglass but now she smiles demurely and says thank you when the waiter pulls out a chair for her and fusses with a napkin as she sits down.

And she doesn't even get embarrassed when Wes insists on having his chair moved so he can sit next to her, rather than opposite her or makes the waiter take her setting away. The weird thing is that now she'd be upset if he wanted this to just be a normal meal like normal couples have.

She leans up against him, as he opens the menu. “So, I can have anything I want, huh?”

“Within reason. I won't tolerate you ordering three desserts. One starter, one entrée, and a pudding, I think. And at least two servings of vegetables.”

Her stomach makes an agreeable rumbling noise and he gives it an amused but exasperated glance before turning his attention back to the menu, which is in French.

“That's just un-American,” she grumbles as she scans the unfamiliar words. “What's escargots? Do I like them?”

“The t is silent,” he gently corrects her. “And I don't think you'll be overly keen on eating snails.”

She manages not to make a disgusted face, but instead forces the stiff card into his hands. “You order for me, Wes. But no slugs or, like frogs legs.”

“Or asparagus?”

“God, no! I'm trusting you, man,” she splutters and he gives her a sudden, swift smile like she's done something wonderful.

But before she can put a disclaimer on it, the waiter's back with a bottle of wine that he's cradling in his hands as if it's a newborn baby.

Tucked away from the other diners, she lets Wes feed her forkfuls of goat's cheese salad. Then there's tender pieces of lamb. The wine tastes of fruit and sunshine and she doesn't do anything but nudge her chair closer and closer toward his, so he can't not brush against her, their shoulders bumping as he eats his dinner.

The silence that follows after the waiter's cleared their plates and he's ordered her a crème brulee for pudding is comfortable and she knows she has this sappy smile on her face but she can't seem to find the off button.

He's utterly relaxed in a way that he never usually is in public, arm curled loosely round the back of her chair, a lazy smile quirking at his lips as he takes in her dazed happiness.

“I almost forgot,” he says eventually when it seems like they've been staring into each other's eyes forever and reaches into his jacket pocket for a tiny, wrapped package.

She blinks at the pink tissue paper. “What's this?”
“A little something I picked up for you in New York. I was at a loss for something to buy you that cost less than ten dollars but then I was suddenly inspired.”

She picks up the small parcel and turns it over in her hand, but she can't resist and he gives an indulgent chuckle as she tears into the tissue with frantic fingers. Finally she unearths a key fob with a green enamel apple attached to it and beams at him.

“It's an apple!”

“Yes, yes it is.”

“Like, the Big Apple and I can put my keys in it for our place in New York,” she tells him with a pout. But then she's beaming, holding it up to the candle light and testing the weight of it. “I love it. It's perfect. You always know what to give me. You're, like a present-buying genius.”

He bends his head in a sudden, swift move and presses a hard kiss against her open mouth and then just as quickly lets her go before she can even return the promise of his tongue snaking into her mouth. “You're a very strange girl, Faith,” he drawls. “I can lavish you with designer dresses and jewelry but you seem far more delighted with an eight-dollar key fob that I bought off a stall.”

She curls her fingers round the cool enamel like he's about to snatch it away from her. “Just this is…well, it's not what it is, it's what it means, y'know?”

“I know,” he murmurs, straightening up as the waiter approaches with her dessert. “Now eat your dessert like a good little girl.”

The crème brûlée isn't as much fun as watching Wes crack the caramelized sugar crust with the back of the spoon but then he hands it to her and she wonders why his eyes are suddenly all pupil even as she licks the crumbs of sugar from around her mouth.

“You'll have to feed yourself,” he hisses. “I need my hands free.”

And she doesn't have to ask why because she can already feel the hot glide of his hand smoothing up her thigh.

“But there are people, waiters…” she whispers at him, careful not to make it sound like a protest when she's already wriggling back in her chair so he can rub at the soft skin of her inner thigh.

“Well it’s rather fortuitous that the tablecloth conceals your pretty little cunt, isn't it?” he says conversationally. “Please, Faith, I'd like your legs a little farther apart.”

She's dimly aware of lifting her spoon and taking tiny mouthfuls that taste like vanilla but all she can concentrate on is the tip of his index finger pressing lightly against her clit, traveling toward her soaking wet cunt so he can glide back to that swollen nub of flesh again.

“Would you like me to fuck you with my fingers?”

She puts down the spoon with a heavy clatter and squirms as he teases around her damp hole. “God, Wes…”

“We're not leaving until you come, Faith, so I suggest you answer the question.”

“Yes,” she grits out and is instantly rewarded by the slow slide of his finger inside her. “Two.”

“You want me to fuck you with two fingers? Please, be specific and kindly finish your crème
brulee.”

She swallows the rest of the pudding without tasting it and then throws down her spoon so she can grip the edge of the table with her hands as he fucks her furiously with his fingers, thumb rubbing against her clit while his face remains impassive.

Her head hangs down and she's trying to breathe through her nose because all that she can manage to do with her mouth is release these airless gasps as she clenches around him.

“That's very good, Faith,” he purrs and she can't even look at him. “Squeeze around my fingers a little tighter. You're almost there, aren't you?”

“Would you like some coffee, sir?”

Her head shoots up and she manages an agonized little squeal as she sees the fucking waiter hovering for the gazillionth time. And those wicked, sneaky fingers are pistoning inside her at twice the speed of light so her knuckles are white and she's curling up her toes and if it wasn't for the plinky, plonky piano music the waiter would be able to hear...

“No thank you,” Wes says calmly. “Just the bill, please.”

“Certainly sir. Is Madam all right?”

No, Madam is not fucking all right. Madam has sir's fingers up her snatch and is trying not to come so just go the fuck away.

Wes gives her a concerned look even as his thumb presses harder against her clit. “You do seem a little flushed, darling.”

“I've had too much to eat,” she practically snarls. “I'm fine, just need some fresh air.”

“If you could just bring the bill as quickly as possible,” Wes says pointedly and with another curious look at her flared nostrils and quivering lips, the waiter's hurrying back to his station to tell his little waiter buds that there's a crazy girl sitting at table five.

“You are such a bastard,” she spits as soon as he's out of hearing distance and slouches back on the chair, spreading her legs so her knee bumps against his. “Please, Wes, just fucking get me off. Now!”

He's never fucked her with three fingers before but the slight stretch and burn of them in her cunt is just what she needs. He leans against her so he can flick his wrist and then his fingers are catching the little bump inside her with every thrust and she's swaying gently so the ends of her hair brush against the table cloth.

“He's just finished printing off the bill,” Wes tells her helpfully. “You really need to come before he heads back. Maybe if I do this…”

He pinches her nipple hard through the satin and presses deep inside her with the tips of his fingers and she feels her muscles locking into place, her cunt gushing all over his hand, as she throws her head back and tries to gulp in air.

Before the room has even stopped spinning, Wes is getting to his feet and throwing a clutch of bills onto the table. “Yes, yes, everything was lovely,” he's assuring the waiter, as he hauls her up with his sticky hand. “I'm afraid my companion feels rather unwell…”
She stumbles across the room on shaky legs, sure that there's a puddle of juices spilling out of her, letting him guide her through the maze of tables.

The sudden blast of cool air from the open door almost sends her toppling over but his hands are there on her shoulders and when they get to the car, he practically lifts her up on to the seat.

“Jesus, Wes,” she moans when she can speak again, legs akimbo and shivering in tiny shudders of pleasure as the cold bursts from the air conditioner hit her throbbing pussy. “And you need to slow down.”

He's practically got the car floored and she turns to look at him, run a gentle hand down the tense line of his arm. He steps on the brake and the car grinds to a sudden halt.

She peers through the windscreen at the tiny, twinkling lights of the harbor below them. “Where the fuck are we anyway?”

But he doesn't answer, just hauls her into his arms.

It’s one of those moments where the outside world just falls away, utterly inconsequential. This little cul de sac Wes has found is dark and secluded and that’s good enough for Faith—hell, she just came in the middle of a bustling restaurant, so this seems positively private in comparison. And Christ, she really does feel ready to do just about anything he asked of her.

But then Wes pushes her hair off her neck and kisses the exposed skin in that unsettling, reverent way he does—it’s something that she never quite gets used to, never quite feels worthy of—and she wonders if that’s what he’s got in mind after all. He shifts against her, and yeah, he’s hard, but there’s no sense of urgency about any of this. His every movement is drawn-out and languid. It’s just another form of delicious torment in his formidable arsenal.

As he’s kissing slowly along the slope of her shoulder, her curiosity gets the better of her. “Wes? You want me to—”

“Shh, shh.” His fingers are smoothing the satin down her body, seemingly touching everywhere at once; the little kisses he’s trailing down her torso are igniting this agonizing slow burn. Which is lovely and all, but she’s feeling a little frustrated. She finds herself squirming restlessly against him.

“Wes. Stop for a sec. Stop.”

“Hmm?” He barely looks up, just flickers his heavy-lidded eyes in her direction.

“Jesus, do always you have to be so fucking…” She pauses, searching for just the right word. Luckily the American-English-to-Wes dictionary kicks in at just the right moment. “…premeditated about everything? Do something spontaneous for once in your life.”

“I seem to recall, Faith, that I made you come in the middle of a crowded restaurant not thirty minutes ago.”

“Well, yeah, but I bet you’d planned it out to the fucking letter beforehand. Am I right or am I right?” He doesn’t answer. She crosses her arms and gives him her best self-satisfied smirk. “Yeah, I fucking knew it.”

He flashes her this sheepish little smile, and, Stoned Wes aside, goddamn if it isn’t the most adorable thing ever. “Pity I can’t photograph that for posterity, Wes. You’re so fucking cute when you’re chagrined.”
“Chagrined? Did you just say—”

“I surely fucking did. You must be rubbing off on me after all. Now, what say I show you how this is really done?”

And he must be feeling especially indulgent because he just lets her push him back against the seat and straddle his hips.

The steering wheel’s jabbing into her back, and the shift stick’s going to be leaving bruises on her knee, but it doesn’t matter because Wes is hard against her as she does this little shimmy, rubbing herself along the solid evidence that yeah, he wants this too. Her dress is wrinkled and riding up but, gorgeous though it is, slithery-satin smooth, and probably costing more than a week’s wages, she’d rip it to shreds if it got in the way right now.

“You ever done it in a car, Wes?” she whispers, sure of the answer, but just wanting to hear him say it.

There’s enough light from the moon, hanging half-way up the sky, full and shining, for her to be able to see his face, though the shadows that fall across it make it hard to read. “Several times and it’s never been all that satisfactory.” His hand moves from her hip to the door and he opens it with a shove that’s just a little bit harder than necessary. “Too ‘cabined, cribbed, confined’ for my tastes.”

“Huh?”

“It’s from ‘Macbeth’,” he says pleasantly, shifting her off him so that he can climb out of the car, leaving her kneeling awkwardly on his seat. “And I think I’d like you to come here, Faith.”

There’s so much control in his voice that it takes her a moment to realize what it’s holding back; that it’s a warning sign. When she does, she’s held in place by something that’s not fear, but arousal. He’s looking down at her, hands folded behind his back, waiting for her to obey him, and she gets the feeling that if he wasn’t trying very hard to stop it, he’d be shaking right now.

So hard it hurts. Xander had said that to her once, describing his reaction to someone, and she’d laughed, asking him how it could hurt, for God’s sake, when it was supposed to feel good. He hadn’t been able to explain, but she understands it now. Got it a while back in fact. Wes has made her desperate, so ready to come that she could barely speak, too many times for her not to have crossed that line herself—too often not recognize it in Wes right here and now. He’s aching for her, and she doesn’t feel a shred of pity or sympathy because they don’t need that, either of them.

She kicks off her shoes and steps out to meet him, feeling thin grass and gravel under her feet, going to stand in front of him and keeping her hands carefully by her side.

“You didn’t ask questions for once, Faith,” he says, not moving to touch her.

“No.” She swallows, searching his face, wanting to kiss the straight, tight line of his lips until it softens into a smile. At least—fuck, she isn’t sure. She wants to kiss him, yeah, but this mood he’s in, well, it’s making her feel like some dark, seductive temptress, because she’s the one who’s got Wes worked up, and she’s totally getting off on it. Wes is going to touch her and all that control is going to vanish, and she wants to see what happens in a fascinated, poke a wasps’ nest with a stick, kind of way.

Then he smiles and a thread of doubt winds around the slightly smug satisfaction she’s feeling and chokes it off. “That’s good, Faith. I don’t want you to ask questions, not right now.” He brings one hand up and crooks his finger. “Closer. I want to kiss you.”
It’s as if he’s testing his limits, because she’s willing to bet what he really wants is to be deep in her, pushing and thrusting and moving faster and faster in an inexorable race toward a finish line only he can see. But this is Wes and he can never do anything the simple way, so he kisses her instead—and she feels all his hunger as if it’s weeks, months since they kissed, since they fucked, not hours, feels her body respond as eagerly as if it hadn’t had a climax rip through it so recently she’s still wet from it.

She’s never been kissed like this before. His face is flushed and hot against her cheek, and he’s shaking, shivering as his mouth descends on hers. She remembers reading one of Darla’s romance books once and snickering at the idea of kisses that were burning and devouring but whoever wrote it must’ve had Wes in mind. It’s overwhelming, and a little scary, but she’s had a while to get used to that with Wesley, and behind it all there’s the trust she has that he’ll never lose a grip on that control he’s got so much of.

Going to be a close call tonight though.

He lifts his head at last, and stares at her. His hair’s rumpled by her fingers, he’s breathing hard and heavy, lips parted and looking bruised because she kinda got into the devouring kisses herself, and she’s got a taste in her mouth that’s sweeter than the dessert.

“You asked where I’d brought you,” he says unexpectedly. “It doesn’t matter, though, does it?”

It takes her a second to catch her breath. Part of her is screaming, ‘Fuck me, just do it!’ but he’s trained her to be patient and she’s getting better at it. Mostly.

“No,” she says, feeling his shoulder shift under her hand because he might sound calm but he’s breathing hard. “I just wondered that’s all—”

“You just let me make you come in a restaurant,” he says, and his voice is so low and intense right now. “You’d have let me fuck you in the car, wouldn’t you?”

There’s no hesitation as she nods. Way she feels? She’d let him fuck her in the middle of downtown on a Saturday afternoon.

“Or on it. Would you like that, Faith? If I bent you over the car, curved, hot metal against your bare skin, and took you from behind, where anyone driving past could see?”

She’s so caught up in the way his lips move as he shapes the words that they don’t sink in at first, and when they do she sees that he’s waiting for her reply.

“I’d let you,” she whispers.

His hand slips around to cup her ass, still tender from being spanked, and he drags his nails along the bruised skin, making her wince. “That wasn’t what I asked, Faith. Please pay attention. Would you like me to repeat the question?”

She’s practically given up on waiting for him to lose it. He’s got himself back on track now, and if there’s something simmering away under there, it’s got a foot of ice to break through before it surfaces. His fingers dig in and she shakes her head.

“No, no, you don’t. You asked me—”

“Yes?” he says, voice all purry to go with the claws.

“If I’d like it. And—”
He cuts her off before she can answer. “Please be more precise, Faith. I find you very vague when you’re aroused. You are aroused, aren’t you?”

His hand snakes under her dress, stroking the shaved-smooth slickness of her mound, and his fingers do this wandering exploration that has her teeth gritting on a moan. If she wasn’t, she was now, she thinks, getting dizzy as he hisses with approval at how wet she is, like it’s some kind of fucking surprise.

“Like it if you fucked me over the car,” she says, and now it’s her who’s stammering and she’d move onto blushing but his fingers find their way inside her cunt, and she stops caring about anything but getting them replaced by his cock. “Yeah, I would. Really fucking would, Wes. And you know I would, so why aren’t you just doing it?”

She’s feeling so frustrated now that she’s close to howling when he glares at her and punishes her by stopping the gently-insistent thrust of his fingers. His fingers go, his hand disappears, and he’s stepping back, looking all glitter-eyed and fucking scary. “I don’t believe I care for that tone of voice, Faith.”

She shakes her hair back, gives him a look designed to chip off a chunk of that ice he’s encased in, and runs the tip of her tongue across her lip, still warm from his mouth. “Got any good ideas about making me shut up, Wes?”

He smiles slowly. “You’re being vague again, Faith.”

She reaches out and takes a handful of his jacket. “Might want to lean on something. Wes,” she tells him, as she tugs him around so the hood of the car is pressing against his ass. “I’m going to make your knees go weak.”

He slips off his jacket and drops it in front of him. “Still vague,” he says. “Perhaps you’d be happier skipping straight to a practical demonstration of your—”

He never finishes that sentence, because by then she’s on her knees, feeling the gravel against her knees through his coat, and his cock, hot and eager in her mouth.

And she shouldn’t love this so much, especially feeling the tension in his body, the way he’s holding himself. The way his hips tip forward to meet her. The slight exhalation of breath as she takes him in her mouth. All for her. Makes it not matter so much that the gravel is digging into her knees and the beautiful dress is rucked up so it won’t drag on the ground. Or that it’s entirely possible that someone might see them.

None of it ever seems to matter. Not when it’s just the two of them and he’s got that heavy-lidded, faraway look in his eyes. It’s funny how she can be down on her knees in front of him and still feel powerful. Like she’s got the key to making him come undone after all. Slight surprise because it isn’t really all that difficult.

His hands are gripping her shoulders as she swallows him down. She takes a moment to taste the salt tang on her tongue and feel the weight of him against her body. He leans into it, and a slight groan escapes his lips—she thrills to that too. Because most of the time she thinks of him as immutable, unwavering. She’s the one who bends and twists herself to please him—she’s the one who lets go.

She’s happy to find even a small exception.

And Jesus, she never thought she’d get off on this so much either. Each buck of his hips, however minute, puts her in mind of what he could do if she were straddling him. God, she just wants him to
fuck her—right up against the car, she really doesn’t even care at this point…

His voice brings her back to reality. “Yes, that’s it. My girl—” The words are whispered, almost slurred—another rarity as she’s used to his impeccable pronunciation.

The delicate satin of the dress is bunched up in his fingers as she speeds up, one hand splayed against his thigh and the other curled around the base of his cock, just tightly enough to give some leverage. She knows instinctively when he’s about to come and she’s ready for it. She pulls back slightly as he shoots; she swallows it down, every drop, licks him clean.

He pulls away from her, as though her enthusiasm is just a bit much for him. What would he call it? Gauche or something? Whatever. He zips up, all efficient, cold Wes again. She’s hoping it’s just temporary, because she’s incredibly turned on and she’s even kinda getting into the whole *al fresco* thing.

“C’mon, Wes, how about you go down on me under the stars? It’s kinda romantic, don’t you think?” But he’s already sidling into the driver’s seat, buckling his seat belt. “I do believe you’ve had your turn.”

Her mouth hangs open in stunned amazement. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me, Wes,” she says breathlessly. She scrambles to get into the car, smoothing her ruined dress down over her knees. She’ll be damned if she’ll let him get an eyeful now.

“I’m not. Now, put your seat belt on, we’re going.”

She does as she’s told, but she’s building up a heady froth of rage while she does it. Just what the fuck is his game this time?

She keeps silent the whole drive. He’s taking each hairpin curve like a maniac (albeit one with exquisitely honed motor skills) but she just grits her teeth and lets it fuel her righteous indignation.

As they pull in to the drive, she turns to him and fairly spits out, “You’re going to make me come whether you want to or not!”

He crosses his arms. “Now, Faith, this kind of behavior is not to be tolerated. Am I going to have to take you over my knee?”

“Well, that’d be a fucking start.”

“Such language, Faith. Sometimes I despair of—”

“Jesus, Wes, what the fuck is your problem? God help it if I should have a whim that doesn’t fit your fucking plans! I’m so sick of it, you know? And I’ll fucking swear if I fucking want to! So fuck you!” She turns on her heels, secretly pleased that not to have fallen on her fucking ass because nothing would ruin a dramatic exit faster, when she remembers something. “You know what, Wes? I seem to recall a little game of Scrabble. I think you owe me and I’d like to fucking collect. Now.”

Wes finishes locking up the car and looks up at her, a little smile quirking his lips. “Would you, now?”

She crosses her arms against the chill evening breeze, holding back a shiver. “I would. Yeah.”

“Very well. And just how would you like to collect this prize? Be specific. I’m short-tempered enough as it is.”
The chilly breeze has turned to a cutting wind that's blowing her hair in her eyes. She shoves all the stray, annoying tendrils behind her ears and shifts on her feet, planting the heels of her treasured pink shoes into the gravel in a fighting stance. She's immediately reminded of all those double-dog dare playground spats from junior high, when some prissy girl would snottily comment on her thrift store dress or her ratty, plastic Payless shoes, 'cept this time she's got on a way better outfit. The frothing anger that's built up on the ride home is bubbling over now after her outburst. With a deep breath, she realizes that she can't let it continue, not if she wants to do this right, and balls up her fists at her sides, the force pressing her nails into the soft flesh of her palms as a reminder.

Leaning almost insouciantly against the car, Wes is the antithesis of her tightly wound self, staring her down with that light, cruel smile still on his lips. But what he doesn't know is she can kinda see past all that now, after all these months. The high moonlight has lit his face into all sharp planes and angles and his eyes are cold. But that's just the thin veil over the surface, because if she looks hard enough she can see the fervent lust that's simmering just under his veneer of control. And that makes it her turn to smile at him, in the best approximation of wolfish that she can muster.

Don't fuck this up, Faithy. You're playing this card sooner than he expected. Just keep things chill. Her brain's filled with the hissing voices, all chorusing the same concern.

The old rules of the playground brawl are in effect here, rules she learned too soon in life, maybe. It's not about wresting the power or the control from him, because except for those moments when she's got his cock in her mouth, he'll always have the upper hand, and she doesn't want that to change. This current little drama? This is just an extension of when she's down on her knees. He's pushed her here, and for all that professed short-temperedness, a big part of him is enjoying watching her flail, waiting almost gleefully for her stuttered commands. But she's not gonna give him the pleasure of that. No, sir. Not this time, not like in the office, when they'd played that little game where she'd narrated what she wanted. No, she just needed to get him in the house, up the stairs, into the bedroom, out of his clothes. If she played everything right, he could—and would—take care of the rest.

“Follow me.” And she's turning on the vertiginous heels again without a hitch and striding purposefully up the path to the cottage. Surprisingly, he doesn't protest, and the crunching of each step in the gravel confirms he's right behind her.

She steps aside when she reaches the door, letting him go first to unlock it. Her voice is unrecognizably sharp and terse. “Upstairs. Get undressed. And this time, you'll wait for me.” As he slips by, she grabs him by the jacket lapels and gives him one of those greedy, hungry, lip-biting kisses, just in case he's forgotten what's at stake—and the press of his cock against her leg confirms that he hasn't.

When he's crossed the little living area and disappeared up the stairs, her knees are still wobbly from their kiss and she steps shakily to the freezer for a swig from the Gray Goose bottle. The icy hot tingle of the vodka in her stomach crawls down to meet the curling, near-painful lust inside her cunt and pulls everything back into focus. She needs that for the gamble she’s about to take. She climbs the stairs deliberately and slowly, letting each click of her heels echo up through the loft.

She steps over the threshold and finds him sitting on the edge of the bed, perfectly unclothed. Her face is a perfect mask of neutrality as she sidles up to him and straddles his thighs, places his hands on her waist.

“Help me out of this dress,” she leans in to whisper in his ear, and in an instant he's freed her and let the pricey frock slip to the floor next to them and as it hits the ground she's already pressing her hot flesh against his, running her fingers through his hair, tilting his head up for another ravenous kiss,
swirling her cold, vodka steeped tongue 'round his.

And when she pulls away, the words start slipping out of her brain unchecked. “Interesting that you're still hot for me when I'm the one calling the shots.” He tries to look away but she catches his chin and tilts his head up again, this time to meet her gaze. “You're always fucking me, Wesley.” She sighs with mock disappointment and shakes her head. “Maybe to get what I want, I need to fuck you tonight.”

It's like she's pulled the levers on a slot machine and come up cherries and the coins are crashing into the payout tray; in a seamless chain of motion, she pushes him down onto the bed and mounts him and swivels and bucks her hips with her clit rubbing against him and his cock perfectly slipping against that spot where that tight ache burned inside.

She's surprised he lets her stay there as long as she does, riding him like that; her moans are long and low and she's just about to come when his strong, warm hands push against her hips, halting her thrusts and he nearly growls at her, “That's quite enough of that,” before pulling out and slipping from under her grasp and not lightly flipping on her back. And she can't help but smile when he grabs her ankles and folds her in half, opening her wide and sliding down to run his tongue over her clit and circle teasingly around her hot, wet hole before slipping his cock back inside and hammering away with a singular ferocity.

“I'm impressed,” she gasps, in between his thrusts.

Even with his face scrunched and focused on fucking her, he still manages to wrinkle his brow in mock confusion, his eyes sparkling. “You're not impressed every time we fuck?”

But she can only get out “No, that you let me,” before the words melt into incoherent blather and then she's whispering his name over and over and the tightening throb of her cunt pulls him deeper inside as he comes with a heart-wrenching moan like no other she's ever heard.

He stays inside her, on top of her and she likes that. His face is pressed tightly against her neck and she can feel his ragged breaths, warm and wet, against her skin as she raises a lazy hand and brushes down his rumpled, damp hair.

“Just keeps on getting better and better,” she sighs almost to herself and he makes some small, indistinct noise that might be agreement.

When he finally tries to lever himself off her, she squeaks in protest and wraps her arms and legs even tighter around him.

“Faith, I must be squashing you. You can't be comfortable,” he murmurs, kissing her earlobe fleetingly.

She squirms under him, relishing how close they are, skin to skin, so nothing can come between them. “Nah, I'm good. Unless, like, you wanna take a shower?”

He shakes his head but then he wriggles out from under her, one of his arms snaking around her waist when she clings to him all limpet-like and rolls them so she can at least smoosh against his side, snuggling into him because sometimes she thinks the only way she can ever get closer to him is to burrow under his skin.

“That took longer than two minutes,” he remarks, pressing the flat of his hand against the curve of her ass so she can hitch her leg over his. “Loathe as I am to admit it, but I think your 'IOU an instant orgasm' card is good for another transaction. Though if it were me…”
“Huh! If it was you, you’d like be on your deathbed and still wouldn't have used it,” she huffs, then giggles. “And you'd be all dying and stuff, then remember that it was tucked away in your briefcase and you'd make me get on top, really gently, and then I'd fuck you to death.”

Sometimes she talks such a lot of shit. And talking about him dying is kinda gross and a good way to kill the afterglow.

“What a charming image that conjures up,” he says drily, but then he chuckles, his chest rumbling underneath her. “I'm sure that when that delightful day comes, well, you'll be somewhere…”

She lifts herself up so she can stare at him, bug-eyed in horror. “What do you mean? I'd be there! I'd so be there. Where the fuck else would I be?”

He looks at her assessingly, eyes narrowed, opens his mouth to say something and then thinks better of it.

“What, Wes? What were you gonna say?” She struggles away from him, and hauls herself into a sitting position. “You think I don't love you? Jesus! No one will ever love you better than me.”

And it's the honest to God truth. She can't feel this way about him, this complicated mixture of tenderness and want and big, stinky fear and have him think it's not real.

“I know you do,” he says softly, fingers cobwebbing against her knee, his gaze troubled as he keeps skittering away from looking her in the eyes. “I know you do now, Faith, but you're so terribly young and one day you'll wake up and I won't be what you want or need any more. And it will probably break both our hearts a little but it's just the way these things…”

“No!” She's off the bed and vibrating with terror. Not knowing what to do with her body because she has this urge to start throwing herself against the walls. “Fuck that shit, Wes! It's not gonna happen! I love you. Why is that so fucking hard for you to accept? Is this because of what I said outside? Is it? Because I didn't mean it, I was just, like, riled up…”

“Faith, please calm down,” he says, his voice low and urgent. “It wasn't my intention to upset you. But think about it logically. You're so young…”

“Yeah you keep saying that like it's meant to be important,” she snaps, folding her arms so she doesn't do anything stupid. “It's not.”

“You're young, you're beautiful; you have your whole life ahead of you. Why on earth would you choose to spend it with me?” He sounds incredulous and she can't quite believe what she's hearing.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Wesley? Before…before you, I was horrible. I hated everything.” She's choking out the words now, tears and snot getting in her way. “Every day I wake up and I have to fucking pinch myself that this is real, that you’re real and you want me half as much as I want you. And why the fuck are we even having this conversation?”

He's sitting on the edge of the bed and makes a gesture with his arms, this despairing movement of his limbs, which is half an invitation for her to go to him but she shakes her head.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Wesley? Before…before you, I was horrible. I hated myself. I hated everything.” She's choking out the words now, tears and snot getting in her way. “Every day I wake up and I have to fucking pinch myself that this is real, that you're real and you want me half as much as I want you. And why the fuck are we even having this conversation?”

He's sitting on the edge of the bed and makes a gesture with his arms, this despairing movement of his limbs, which is half an invitation for her to go to him but she shakes her head.

“The things I do to you… the things you let me do to you,” he mutters so quietly, that she has to strain her ears to hear him. “I'm not entirely sure that it's healthy. We can't do this every day.”

“I don't care!”

And because there's nothing else to do and if she has to try and reason with him about things that she
can't even articulate, the top of her head might just explode, she yanks out the drawer from the dresser and swings it through the air, her underwear flying in all directions and crashes it against the wall.

It takes a couple of goes before it cracks and breaks with a satisfying smashing sound so she can let what's left of the frame fall at her feet. Then she's sweeping her arm across the bottles and jars arranged on the polished surface and screaming as they land on the wooden floor in a shower of broken glass.

“Faith! Stop it!” He's shouting at her but she can barely hear him, until his arms are tight around her, picking her up as she flails and kicks her legs, tries to lash out at him. He drops her on the bed hard, so she bounces once, then pins her motionless, legs weighing down on her thrashing body, hands holding her wrists above her head.

“If you leave me, I'll fucking die,” she sobs. “I wouldn't want to live if I wasn't with you.”

“I have no intention of leaving you, you silly girl,” he bites out, but his voice is all throaty and throbbing and when he shakes her slightly and she's slowly coming back to herself, she realizes that he's on the verge of tears, his eyes glassine with moisture.

“You promise me, Wes. You have to promise me!”

He clears his throat and when he speaks his voice is calmer, crisper so she's already preparing herself to obey him. “I'm going to let go of you and I want you to lie perfectly still. Can you do that?”

She nods tearfully and bites her lip to stop from bursting into tears again as he takes his hands away. He stands up and pulls on his trousers and she's not sure why but it can't be for any good reason, which becomes clear when he walks out the door. “Perfectly still, Faith,” he calls to her as he walks down the stairs and apart from her shuddering gasps for breath, she follows him to the letter.

If she cranes her neck, which isn't really moving, she can see the mess she's made of one half of the room. It looks like a mini tornado has whistled through and she's fucked up their perfect weekend, like she's fucked up them. And, fuck it, she's crying again just as he walks back into the room, with a glass and the throw rug in his hands.

“I want you to stop that,” he barks, but then he puts down the glass, sits on the edge of the bed and pats his knee. “Come here.”

She crawls over to him, lets him lift her onto his lap and tuck the rug around her and she hadn't realized how cold she was, how she was shivering from it. He's lifting the glass to her mouth so she can drink greedy gulps of water before he takes it away.

“You haven't promised me,” she croaks out and he sighs so heavily that his exhalation of breath lifts her hair, then he's rocking her oh-so-gently.

“I promise that I won't leave you,” he whispers. “I couldn't leave you but it's not a promise that I would ever ask you to make, Faith.”

“But I would,” she insists, burying her face into the curve where his shoulder meets his neck. “I don't ever want to not be with you.”

“Two negatives equals a positive,” he points out and then smiles as she glares at him. “You have no idea of just how besotted I am, do you? Do you really think I could walk away?”

“I don't know.” Her glance keeps coming back to the debris on the floor. “I try to be good but I
always end up doing bad stuff, hurting people and what if I did something to you, something really terrible, even if I didn't mean to?"

He follows her gaze. "It's just a few broken things, Faith. See, there's nothing so very bad about that, is there?"

Her hands are freezing and he flinches slightly when she cups them against his warm cheeks. "Even if I did something really whacked and you were mad at me, I want you to know that I love you and maybe I only did it because being in love with you makes me a little bit crazy."

And it's not what she wants to say. She's trying to force other words out; a confession that she's buried so deep that she'd need a pickaxe to chip it out.

He pushes the hair back from her flushed face and stares deep into her eyes so she can't tear herself away from him. "There's nothing you could do that would ever stop me loving you, Faith. We'll have worse fights than this and say hurtful things to each other and you'll no doubt smash various objects that I'm inordinately fond of but we'll get through it."

"Do you promise?" She's a broken record. She's a fucking broken girl but his hands are smoothing the rug around her, holding her together.

"Yes," he says in that cool, smooth tone that leaves absolutely no room for questions. "Now really this is quite enough sturm und drang, well, for the rest of the month. I want you to lie down and try to get some sleep; we've got a long drive tomorrow."

She lets him arrange her back on the bed, huddling under the covers. "I don't want to go back," she announces piteously. "I hate that town, I feel like there's something pressing down on me all the time, just here." And she places her hand on his heart, as he bends over her and kisses her on the forehead.

"Faith, you have to calm down," he announces tersely but for once his sternest voice isn't having its usual effect. "It's only for a few more weeks."

"Sometimes I feel like I can't breathe when I'm there, like it's going to smother me." And she thought her tear ducts had dried up but that was just wishful thinking because she's curling herself up into a ball and pouring out all the misery that she's been tamping down for the last two days. "If we go back, it's all gonna be shit. Oh, Wes, why can't we go to New York now? Please, can we just not go back?"

She doesn't even realize that he's left until he returns with another glass of water and coaxes her to sit up, his arm around her shaking shoulders.

"I'm going to give you something to help you sleep," he says, showing her the small, white pill resting in his palm and she opens her mouth obediently so he can place it on her tongue and pulls a face at the bitter taste that she washes down with water.

He sweeps up the broken glass and wood, then closes the drapes while she watches him with heavy-lidded eyes. She can feel the waves of sleep licking at the edges but it's not until he climbs into bed and gathers her to him that she starts to give in to the pull.

"Faith? Are you asleep?"

She yawns and curls herself tighter into his embrace. "Almost."

She can feel his lips pressing soft kisses against the back of her neck. "I meant what I said. We can't always live like this."
His hand reaches between her legs, cupping her sticky mound when she makes a faint noise of protest.

“Sssh, listen to me, Faith. I'm not saying that I'm going to leave you. But when we get back, until we go to New York, I want things to be different between us.”

It's weird but the weight of his hand against her is comforting. He's not delving or trying to get his way with sneaky, insidious touches, just holding her. “How different?” she murmurs sleepily.

“No spanking, no making you wait hours to come, no tying you up,” he says and she's sure that he sounds wistful, regretful. “We need to stop playing these games. We should be normal for a while.”

“We're not normal, Wes, isn't that kinda the point?”

And she knows that he's talking and that she should listen but somehow it's easier to go to sleep instead.

Chapter Sixty-Six

When she wakes, he’s standing over her with a mug of coffee and the steam from it is drifting up slowly, the way she’s drifting from dreams to reality.

It doesn’t take a look at the bare dresser, with the gaping hole where the drawer used to be to bring it all back to her. It just takes Wesley’s expression; half hesitant, because he’s not sure what mood she’s in, half determined because he hasn’t changed his mind overnight.

About anything.

“Good morning, Faith,” he says in a voice that’s so neutral it’s fucking beige.

“Hey, Wes,” she says. “That for me or is it the carrot you plan to lure me downstairs with?”

He relaxes, an infinitesimal slackening of his shoulders the only sign that her smiling and joking is a relief. “Oh, it’s yours. I breakfasted a while ago.”

“Yeah? What time is it?”

“Gone ten. We’d best get on the road soon, but there’s no real rush; you can shower if you’d like.”

“Oh, I’d like,” she says with a grimace. She’s in desperate need of hot water sluicing down on her and washing away every scrap of last night that’s still clinging to her skin—and she never wants to wear that dress again, if it’s even salvageable after what it got put through.

“Fine.” He hesitates and steps forward, placing the mug beside the bed. “I meant it, Faith,” he says quietly. “All of it.”

He’s gone before she has chance to reply, gone without a kiss, without a touch. She comes so close to hurling the coffee across the room that it’s almost a surprise to find the taste of it in her mouth as she walks, stark naked, down the stairs and past him to the shower.

He glances up from the paper he’s reading and his lips part but she doesn’t pause, just throws in a wiggle that’s subtle enough to be—barely—natural and feels his gaze linger on her ass where the faint blue bruises show him just what he’s planning on missing.

Two months of no games? She tries to imagine how wound he’d be by the end and fails. He made it, what, two weeks last time, right at the start, and now he can’t do without it. Without her. She \textit{knows}
that. Games, normal; they’re just words, spoken and lost. His hand on her, his eyes burning hot with a conviction and a certainty that melts her from the inside out—that’s real.

She’s not going to lose it.

She walks out of the shower, wet hair clinging to her shoulders, and waits for his gaze to move from what he’s reading to her. Takes no time at all. Casually, she lifts her hands and flips the soaked strands back, knowing he’s looking at her tits because it’s like a law of nature or something and he doesn’t have a fucking choice.

“Aren’t you a little chilly?” he drawls.

She glances down at her nipples, which are as hard as if she’s in the freezer aisle, yes, but for a different reason. “No. Kinda hot actually.”

“Faith...” There’s a warning implicit in every syllable—and Wes can make her name sound like Ana-fucking-stasia when he wants to—but she ignores them all.

“Sorry, Wes. Thought we were just done with all the kinky shit, you know. Didn’t realize you were planning on tying a knot in it.”

His eyes are flint-hard. “I’m not. That doesn’t mean it’s in order for you to flaunt yourself, like—”

“What? What the fuck did you just say?” She’s over beside him and in his face before he’s got time to blink. “You change the rules on me, in a heartbeat, in a fucking heartbeat and then get pissed with me, me who never got asked what she thought, because, guess I don’t get a vote, when I wake up in a whole new world and don’t know what I’m supposed to do?”

She’s spitting out the words in a venomous splutter and his face is tightening with each one.

“Are you done?” he asks quietly.

“No.” She folds her arms under her breasts and stands her ground. “You said we’re not normal. Well, maybe we’re not. Don’t think we’re the only people in the world who play this way, but I don’t give a fuck what anyone else does or don’t. This is about us, what we do. No one else matters.”

“Granted,” he says slowly, “but it wasn’t the way you played, Faith. I—I made you, I—forced you into trying something I seriously doubt you’d ever have sought on your own.”

“You didn’t,” she says, and the anger’s seeping away now, like a receding wave. “Wes, you know I’d never tried it—anything like that before, with anyone. Because there was no one to show me. You saw the men—the boys—I was with. They were as close to virgins as it gets, most of them.” She reaches out a hand and his slips into hers, his fingers curling around in a gentle grip. “What you did that first time, yeah, startled me. Scared me a bit, just a bit. But once you’d started, I didn’t want you to stop. I don’t want you to stop now. I need this.”

“You can get it in other places,” he says, his voice cool. “Even in our small town. I can provide you with a list of numbers, addresses.”

“You bastard,” she whispers, hurt so badly it’s hard to breathe. “Like I’d let anyone but you do that to me. Ever. Wes, you fucking bastard.”

She doesn’t realize she’s crying until he makes an inarticulate sound and pulls her to him. “Faith—”
“You owe me an apology, Wes,” she says with as much dignity as she can dredge up when she’s a hiccupy mess.

“I do,” he says ruefully. “I’ve been thinking about this for a while and forgot that you weren’t privy to my thoughts.”

“And that’s something else you owe me for!” she says accusingly, jabbing a finger at him. “You don’t think about stuff by yourself when it’s both of us. You just don’t do that, Wes!”

He draws her over to the couch and pulls her onto his lap. “I know. I’m just not accustomed to sharing.” The face he pulls at the last word almost makes her smile, but she’s still too pissed off to forgive him that easily. “It’s just...Faith, last night, what we did...in the restaurant, by the road...it was, well, it was indiscreet and reckless, to say the least. Inside our home, even in the office; that’s safe—”

No, no, it isn’t, she wants to scream but she’s silent, watching his face as he talks to her, the words spilling out of him now, too late, at last.

“—but you’re so amenable to anything I suggest that you encourage me to go further than I should.”

He smiles at her and brushes his fingers against her cheek. “You’re a temptation I can’t resist, Faith, but I feel I must. My career can’t withstand what would happen if we’d got caught last night but that’s of secondary importance. I don’t want—I need to know—”

She’s struggling to get free, but his arms are locked around her. “If I’ll stay without the benefits,” she grinds out. “You’ve found out I’ll let you fuck me, spank me, tie me up—found out I get off on it as much as you do, and now you want to find out if that’s all we’ve got. The games. Well, fuck you, sir because you don’t get to be the one to decide that!”

“No, I haven’t,” she says indignantly. “I trust you, Wes. Always. Fine; you want to take a break, fine. We’ll do it for as long as it takes for you to get over this and chill.” He gives him a suspicious look because she’s stopped fighting him and she frowns. “We still get to fuck though, right?”

He chuckles, tightening his arms around her. “Oh, I think so, don’t you?”

She lets him kiss her and then squirms away so she can look at him. “We’re not done, yet, Wes,” she says seriously.

“I’m sorry?”

“New rules, but they don’t start until we get back home. You promised me today, remember? said this was part of the holiday.”

“We have to leave soon,” he reminds her, but there’s a little spark deep down in his blue eyes.

“Yeah and it’s a long drive back.”
“Your point would be?”

“I want something to remember this place by, Wes. I want to spend every minute of that drive with my ass smarting, trying to get comfortable on your fancy leather seats. I want you to be hard the whole time you’re driving because every time I whimper or shift position it’s because you know why. Know you did it.”

“Faith...”

She twists and gets into position across his lap. “Do it, Wes. Or I’ll fucking walk home.”

“You’ll never make it to your desk in time for 8.30, tomorrow morning,” he says mildly, his hand stroking lightly against her ass as if he can’t help touching it.

“So? What’re you going to do to me?” she taunts him. “Can’t spank me.”

“Be silent,” he hisses and there’s that rush of empty noise as his hand comes down and slaps against her ass and then there’s the heat she’s come to know, come to expect, grown to need.

And if, when he finishes and rolls her off his knee, his face unreadable, his breath coming in short, harsh gasps, the tears starring her eyelashes aren’t because he’s left her skin burnished and seared, but because she doesn’t know when he’ll do it again.

But that’s fine. He’s taught her how to wait.
Part Eight

Chapter Summary

Wesley's new regime causes problems and the net's closing around Faith as her blackmailer pushes for more.

Part Eight

Chapter Sixty-Seven

“So, am I still allowed to give you blowjobs? And, like, what about you going down on me?”

“Really, Faith, this is getting very tiresome and if you're trying to goad me into reneging on this decision, then I can tell you now, quite categorically, that it won't work.”

She slants him a look from under her lashes but he keeps his eyes fixed on the road ahead, his jaw locked and if he's this uptight one hour after fucking her so hard over the kitchen table that she's gonna be wearing the imprint of his fingers on her hips for the next week, then she gives it two days before he's upending her and giving her a damn good spanking for doing something really heinous like drinking milk straight from the carton.

Instead she contents herself with wriggling back on the leather seat and letting a tiny whimper escape her as the friction chafes against the tenderized skin of her ass.

“It'd probably hurt even more if I wasn't wearing panties,” she remarks and his fingers are white knuckled as he viciously handles the gear shift. He'd taken her back upstairs after the fucking had left her so weak-kneed and lethargic that she could barely stand and brushed her hair and dressed her for what he said would be the last time until they were in New York. But he'd still packed her bag for her and even when she'd dropped the vibrator in the trash can in the bathroom, he'd retrieved it carefully, glaring at her all the while. “You gonna start actually wearing boxer shorts, Wes? I hear that's what normal guys do.”

“Faith…” It takes him the whole afternoon to sound out her name but she just sticks her tongue out at him.

“I'm just sayin', Wes. Want to be sure that I understand the rules is all. And you know, I'm starting to like this new normal thing because I can get up to all sorts of things that you disapprove of and there ain't jack shit you can do about it.”

He swerves to overtake and swears fluently and frequently at the symphony of beeping horns that follow in their wake. “I'm sure that normal couples don't go out of their way to antagonize each other, Faith,” he snarls. “But then we do have the option of sleeping in separate rooms, don't we?”

And yeah, they do and nothing takes the wind out of her sails than the thought of an empty, Wes-less bed with nothing to cling on to during those dark nights when sleep just won't come.

So she shuts the hell up even though she knows, like she knows that the sun comes up and the sun
comes down and that The Strokes suck, that he's gonna crack within the next forty-eight hours.

But then they're crossing the state line and it's like someone's tripped a switch and the weekend's over and the magic's worn thin and they're going back to a shitty little town and all the shitty little lies she's been trying so hard to forget.

She's sitting so rigid and stiff-backed in her seat that it's not until he touches her gently on the shoulder and murmurs, “You seem awfully tense,” that she realizes that her muscles are aching with the strain of holding them still.

“It's not too late,” she whispers, half to herself. “We could turn the car around, keep on driving until we hit the beach again.”

And the look he gives her is so keen, so perceptive that she's sure he knows but it's just a trick of the light because they go under a tunnel and when she can see his face again, he just looks perturbed, like he's never going to be able to figure her out and it pisses him off.

She leans forward to turn on the radio, more for something to fill the silence, but his hand curls gently round her wrist.

“Actually, I did want to talk to you about something,” he says carefully and she's sure she's just gone a fetching shade of green.

“Yeah?”

“There's a little project I need your help on,” he continues and she can't work anything out from the even tone of his voice. “I'm at a complete loss. I scarcely know where to start.”

She shifts on the seat again, wincing slightly and wondering why the sun beating in through the windshield is doing nothing to warm her up. “Sounds all cryptic,” she says and he smiles.

“Faith, have I mentioned how utterly adorable your increased word power is?”

And she's pouting because all this book reading is making her, like word girl or something and he laughs at the pissed off expression that she's wearing so she guesses that maybe his little project doesn't involve anything to do with making her take a polygraph test.

“What project?”

He makes a little moué of disgust. “I need to buy a computer,” he confesses, his voice lowered like he's being forced to admit that he wants her to slap him around with a wet fish. “And an e-mail address. Does one buy them?”

“Wes? Jesus! How can you not know this stuff?” she snorts. “You need to sign up with an ISP and they give you an e-mail addy.”

“And the difference would be?”

She has a pretty good idea that all this talk about computers and his completely dumb questions about the difference between laptops and palm pilots are just an excuse to take her mind off whatever the fuck is bothering her, but it works.
By the time they're pulling into the parking lot of their local supermarket so they can get a few things before heading home, the only thing she can think about is whether his e-mail address should be wesley.wyndampryce or wesleywyndam.pryce.

“You should ask Xander,” she says, as she yanks a cart free from its moorings. “He's such a total geek about this stuff.”

“Hey! I resent that,” says a familiar voice from behind her and she whirls around, almost crashing into Wes to see Xander standing there with a perplexed expression on his face. Faith’s heart is thumping in her chest before her brain catches up to her other senses and she realizes that it’s just Xander. Not, like, any of the cast of thousands in this shithole town that she doesn’t want to see.

“Xander! Hey. Didn’t expect to see you—”

He looks at her quizzically. “At the supermarket? Well, yeah, I usually have my people do that for me, but I figured I’d try and get out of the house without the entourage for once.”

She laughs, for the first time since she and Wes got in the car, and throws her arms around him. “C’mere, you.”

That’s when Wes steps back from the two of them, tentatively. And the whole time Faith’s got her arms around Xander she’s got one eye on Wes, honestly curious and a little surprised that he’s still so obviously discomfited. She doesn’t want him to feel like he’s on the outside of this, and yet—she appreciates it. This is something of hers and he’s giving it space. She flashes him a warm, appreciative little smile and he sees it, returns it, then turns to wheel the cart toward the store.

“I’ve gotta go, Xan. Will you stop by the office this week? Lunch or something?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” He pauses. “And—you really think I’m a geek? I don’t know whether to be resentful or touched.”

She rolls her eyes. “One word, Xander: *Dungeonmaster*. And I ain’t talking some whack homoerotic S&M fantasy either.”

“Jesus! Keep it down! I have a reputation to uphold. And you should talk, missy.” He swats her ass playfully and before she can stop it she lets out a yelp.

He looks totally mortified. “Shit, I didn’t mean to—”

She tries not to wince. Not entirely successfully. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

She’s about to turn on her heel to catch up with Wes when Xander grabs her arm and leans in close. “He’s still treating you okay, right? Because the second he crosses some kind of line, I want you to promise me—”

“Xander. How many times do I have to tell you—” It’s only when the words are out of her mouth that she hears how sharp she sounds. She doesn’t want to have to justify this, *again*. But she knows that Xander means well. She softens her tone. “I love him, y’know? And he loves me. Doesn’t mean we don’t hurt one another from time to time, but he always makes me feel special. And he’s kind. I’m happy, and I want you to be happy for me—”

He gives her a little squeeze. “I am, sweetie, I am. I just worry, you know? I hardly ever see you anymore and I wonder how you’re doing all the time. I’m always here if you need me. You know that, right?”
“I do. Thank you.” She gives him a kiss on the cheek. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some shopping to do. Wes has promised something mysterious for dinner tonight and I’ve got to keep an eye on him or else we might end up with escargots and asparagus!”

Xander scrunches up his face in distaste. “Jesus, Faith, why didn’t you tell me what kind of freak you were living with?”

“Ha, ha. Very funny. Tomorrow, Xander!”

She waves and jogs back toward the entrance to the market, where Wes has been waiting for her. Xander picks up his groceries and is just about to leave when he looks back one last time, just in time to see how Wes’ face just lights up when he sees her.

They’re halfway around the store when Wesley steers the cart past the end of the aisle with the candy, chips and goodies in it. “Hey! I’ve been living on granola bars,” she protests. “And I’m gonna need something sweet if I don’t have you.” She gives him a flirtatious look but he’s unimpressed.

“You do have me,” he says, “and aren’t you forgetting an inordinate amount of vodka and ice cream?”

“Doesn’t count,” she replies, tugging the cart around and throwing in all the things he hates her buying, hesitating over the Twinkies because of the memories but deciding they might just do the trick and getting two boxes.

At the checkout she fumbles in her purse and drags out a ten dollar bill and offers it to him. He gives her a thoughtful look and slips it into his pocket, then packs her junk food into a separate bag, like it’s got cooties or something.

They’re pulling out of the parking lot when he says, “Hold out your hand, palm up, Faith,”

And, score, she thinks, hiding a grin as she extends her hand, waiting for a smack in lieu of a spanking. Instead, she gets the bill back and the most insincere smile possible.

“What the hell’s this for?” she demands. His gaze drifts up to the mirror and the smile becomes genuine. “I seem to have inadvertently left your purchases behind. I’m so sorry.”

“Stop the car,” she says through gritted teeth, knowing she should’ve helped unpack the cart. “We can go back and—”

“Too late, I’m afraid.”

She twists and gasps in outrage as she sees three kids, already halfway to sugar heaven, rummaging through the bag. Her bag. “Wes, you’re just—oh, you’re so going to pay for that!”

“No, Faith,” he says firmly. “You’re going to cease pushing me, respect my decision and behave yourself.”

“Or?” she says challengingly. His eyes flick to her flushed, angry face and they’re amused now. “Tell me, Faith, have you ever known me not to come up with an ‘or’? Do you really think that the limitations I’ve imposed on myself preclude all forms of...”

“Revenge?”

“A little melodramatic, that, but very well.”
"All I see," she says, "is that you’re a control freak, Wes, and it doesn’t matter if you lay off the kinky stuff; you still haven’t changed, so why bother denying it?"

They drive back without speaking, but once they get home, walking through rooms that echo with the stored silence of three days, it’s better. He unpacks the car and she helps him put away the groceries, then Wesley goes to walk around the garden in case something dared to grow too many fucking leaves while he was away, and she retreats to her room with her cell phone in her hand like a ticking bomb. As soon as she turns it back on, it’s Christmas lights time, flashing, beeping and screaming at her.

She checks the messages and they’re all from Darla, Xander, and Liam. No surprises there, and in a sudden flash of panic, she deletes them without finding out what they said. Ignorance isn’t bliss but it lets her pretend that her problems aren’t breathing down her neck but are distant, remote, somewhere in fucking Timbuktu.

She’s halfway down the stairs when her phone rings. Darla. Could be worse.

"Sweetie! Where’ve you been?"

She sighs and settles down on the step, keeping an eye and ear out for Wesley. "Hi, Mom. Just got back from the beach." A faint pride stirs. "Wes took me out of state. This cottage right on the ocean and—"

"Well, isn’t that nice," Darla snaps. Sober doesn’t always mean she’s a pal. "While you’ve been sunning yourself, I’ve been dealing with that worthless son of a bitch you call your father."

"No, I call him that too," Faith jokes, but it’s half-hearted at best. "What’s he done?"

"Found a barrel of beer by the sounds of it and dove right in. He’s not been sober all weekend.” Darla’s voice sharpens with outrage. “And he turned up on my doorstep at three in the morning wanting to make it up to me.”

Wanting to get laid, Faith thinks sourly. “What did you do?”

Darla snorts. “Called the cops, what else. Bastard threw a brick through the window just for old time’s sake but that was all.”

"I’m sorry,” Faith says.

“How is it your... Oh, shit.” Darla’s silent as it hits her who funded Liam’s bender and then Faith endures a lecture Wes’d be proud of, before she can’t stand it any longer, and stabs a finger to cut off the outraged, steadily rising voice mid-howl.

Shaking, she leans her aching head against the wall and wills the tears to stay inside. Bedtime comes after a wary truce that lets them eat dinner in peace, and chat without mentioning anything important. She even gets to curl up on his lap later, drifting off into a hazy drowse while he drops kisses on her head at intervals, music playing in the background. As normal nights go, it’s not bad, but she misses the sense of certainty she used to have, misses it more than she can put into words. It’s not that she can’t look after herself, and it sure as hell isn’t that she likes being told what to do -Wes is the only one who’s ever gotten away with that. No, she just wants to feel that she’s all he sees, all he’s thinking about and when he’s not doing—stuff—she’s not so sure. She slides naked into the cool smoothness of Wesley’s sheets with a blissful sigh, snuggling down and waiting for him to finish brushing his teeth, wondering if habit will take over once he’s in bed, and already anticipating what he’s going to do to her.
When he comes out wearing shorts and looking like a man who plans to have a sensibly early night she snickers. “Wes, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

His eyes narrow. “Faith, might I remind you that we can always sleep apart if you don’t approve of my choice of attire?”

“Yeah,” she snaps, getting out of bed in a flurry of arms and legs and baring past him, disappointment fueling her temper. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

“Faith...” She waits for him to grovel—well, apologize, she’s not asking for miracles—and all she gets is a level look. “I want to make an early start. We leave the house at 7.45.”

“Whatever.”

“And I took the liberty of calling Xander. He’ll be our guest for dinner tomorrow night.” He smiles as her jaw drops. “You must tell me what he likes to eat.”

“Boys,” she snaps, and slams the door with a satisfying bang.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

It’s not like she expects him to give it half an hour and then appear in the doorway to coax her back to his bed. But fuck, it would be nice. All she can think about are those freakin’ boxer shorts. She didn’t think it was humanly possible to feel practically homicidal over one pair of boxer shorts. And like, what the fuck? She’s not allowed to even see his dick anymore? He doesn’t know normal from anything.

She spends what feels like the entire night grinding her teeth and having these arguments with Wes in her head, where she gets to tie him up in knots (like, that’s ever gonna happen) with her reasoned debating skills that show that she’s completely right and he’s wrong with added bits of wrongness. That if he wants to give up the kink, then he’s gonna have to give up the control freakery because if there ain’t incentives, then no way, no fucking how is she going to toe the Wes party line.

And when she’s done with him, there’s a whole fucking parade of Liam-shaped problems to march into her brain so she’s staring wide-eyed at the shadows on the wall, watching them lengthen and then lighten as a new day begins.

She must have fallen asleep at some point because there's this decisive rap on her door.

“Faith? If you’d like breakfast before we leave, then you need to get up now.”

She rolls her eyes. No law says she has to be in the office at 7.45. Snagging the sheet, because it feels weird to be naked in front of him when they haven’t spent the night curled up together (and she’ll worry about the freaky troll logic of that later), she staggers to the door and opens it.

He’s standing there all crisp-shirted and bright-eyed, the poster boy for the virtues of a good eight hours sleep. And she’s like the poster girl for having rocks in your head. She glares at him for ten seconds, though it’s kinda hard because her eyes are all puffy.

“I trust you slept well, Faith,” he doesn’t so much say as ooze and this time she does manage a full-on glare, wishes she had a fucking laser beam of death to go with it.

“I’m getting the bus this morning,” she hisses. His expression blanks instantaneously, like all of a sudden he’s wearing a Wes face, rather than being Wes. “I don’t start until 8.30,” she points out in a slightly less aggressive tone.
“I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that taking the bus will take just as long, if not longer, than if you leave with me,” he says and she’s sure she isn’t just imagining the self-satisfied note creeping into his voice. And for once, just for fucking once she wishes that he didn’t always get to be right.

There’s this whole stand-off thing, his arms folded, mouth pressed into a tight, thin line and she wishes she could be that calm but instead she’s wriggling under his gaze, elbows clamped to her sides to stop the sheet heading south.

“Fine!” she snaps eventually. “I’m gonna come with you, but I’m going to go to the diner and have breakfast and not be at my desk until 8.30 and…”

“Fine,” he echoes, sounding bored. “I’ll just put the coffee maker on for one then.”

“Fine!” And she’s not quite mad or stupid enough to slam the door in his face for a second time, but it shuts with a click that isn’t so much decisive as fucking furious.

She’s forgotten how long it takes to get ready. Though that’s mostly because she almost falls asleep in the shower, standing slumped against the wall and letting the hot water wash over her as she gives herself a cursory once-over with the bar of soap.

Deciding what to wear takes forever too. He wasn’t too clear about that. And as she stands dithering in front of the rail of clothes, she suddenly realizes that she needs to get the fuck over herself. Like, she has every reason to be mad at him. Last count, she had about three hundred and fifty-seven reasons to be mad at him. But she couldn’t, shouldn’t, wouldn’t take it into work with her because she was still his secretary. What goes on at home, no matter how much she violently disagrees with it, stays at home. About time he realizes that too, so if he thinks she’s still going to gussy herself up like his perfect wet dream of what a secretary should be, then he can fucking think again.

As she ignores the corset and struggles into her bra because it’s been way too long since she wore one that she actually had to put on herself, the clothes seem to taunt her.

“Wear me!”

“No, wear me!”

Even when he’s in New York, he’s always been really particular about what he wants her to put on, even if he’s not there to see the way the tight black dresses hug the curve of her ass, the way those asskicker shoes give her no option but to walk with her tits thrust out. And she turns to a phantom Wes because the real one’s in the kitchen glugging down java and not making her a cup.

But phantom Wes is as pissy as his flesh and blood counterpart. “I believe I was perfectly clear about the need for normality,” he intones pompously. “Normal couples do not tell each other how to dress.”

And even though she remembers plenty of mornings when Darla told Liam that he shouldn’t go out with piss and beer stains down his trousers, she gives a sigh and reaches for a polka dot summer dress, which has got enough buttons to cover her up but is short enough to make a point. And as she slips her feet into flat-as-a-pancake Mary Janes, all of a sudden she’s thankful for his stupid ass new rules. Nothing like trying to find a way round them to take her mind off all the other shit.

She’s grinning as she skips down the stairs and into the kitchen. He gives a start at her manically cheery, “Good morning, Wes!”

“Good morning, Faith,” he says slowly and suspiciously, as she plants a swift kiss on his cheek before plonking herself down opposite him and trying not to stare longingly at his mug of coffee.
When he gives her a slightly shaky smile, she returns it with a mega-wattage one of her own and rests her chin on his hands. “So, we should really talk about menus, what with Xander coming round for dinner and all. I was thinking maybe a cold starter and then some of your delicious roast chicken.”

He’s looking at her like he’s waiting for the punch line and not for her to start banging on about whether Xander rates the really good china or just the second best set.

He wants normal? She’s gonna make him choke on fucking normal.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

It’s not until she slips through the door and sneaks hurriedly to her desk at 8.37—the diner had been busy because one of the waitresses hadn’t shown up—that the weirdness of it all hits her. Back at work. With Wes in his office and her at her desk and no possibility of being called in for a little fun and frolic, nothing to look forward to but work, which, granted, is what he’s paying her for, but still, doesn’t seem right.

She sinks into her chair and sees the piece of paper set squarely in the center of her desk. In Wesley’s dark scrawl are the words, ‘Please come to my office immediately’. She’s trying hard to repress the shit-eating grin of triumph as she saunters along the corridor but it’s a real challenge. When she taps on the door, his voice sounds bored as he tells her to come in. There’s no excitement or tension in it and it’s enough to make the smile slip and slide right off her face.

“You, uh, wanted to see me?” Wesley stares at her for just long enough and hard enough to get her tagging the ‘sir’ quickly onto the end of that sentence.

“I wanted to see you at 8.30, Faith.”

He jerks his hand so that the cuff of his shirt slides up, exposing his watch, and a few inches of his arm, tanned and strong. She remembers reading once in history class that to a Victorian man, the sight of an ankle was shocking, forbidden, and though Mrs. Peters hadn’t gone into details, arousing as hell. She’d giggled along with the rest of the class but she totally got it now. Knowing what lay underneath the wool and cotton made it worse. She realizes that she’s staring, transfixed, at his watch and he’s smiling nastily because he thinks she’s feeling guilty.

“Yes, you are rather late, aren’t you? Eight minutes to be precise.”

Oh, yeah, let’s be precise, Wes. “Sorry about that,” she begins. “See, Mel didn’t show and there was a line out the door, and—”

“I don’t remember asking for excuses, Faith,” he interrupts. “Nor do I care. I told you, as your employer, to be here at 8.30 and you chose to ignore that request.”

“Yeah!” It’s dawning on her that he thinks she did it deliberately; pushing him into punishing her. Which isn’t entirely unjustified considering the way she’s been acting, but since she’d made up her mind to be good at work, she’s feeling righteously pissed off.

“Wes—” “I’d prefer a more formal mode of address at work, Faith.”

He doesn’t even say it coldly; just a drawled reprimand that stings worse than his hand ever did. She flushes hotly and mumbles something that bears a slight resemblance to ‘Yes, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce’, wondering if he moonlights as a school principal.

“Better. Now go back to your desk, and as you’ve now wasted—” He cranes his neck to peek at his
watch. “Eleven minutes, that’s how much I’ll be docking from your lunch break.” His gaze lingers on her face, skimming with cool indifference over her angry eyes and flushed cheeks, before he glances away, his attention returning to the papers in front of him.

She stands there for a moment, waiting, and gets a murmured, “That’s all,” to speed her on her way. She can’t remember walking back down the corridor because there’s nothing in her head but seething anger. It takes a long cigarette break to get her heart rate back to normal, but the worst of it is that Wes like that still turns her on. She’s still not sure that it isn’t a game, still trying to make what he’s doing fit into a pattern, still trying to guess what the payoff will be. And, whether he wants to believe it or not, this isn’t fucking normal.

Normal isn’t locking yourself in the washroom, fingers sliding down inside panties, past smoothly shaved skin, scrabbling at flesh slippery with an arousal spun out of a look, a word and a few square inches of wrist. Normal isn’t finding out that you can’t fucking come in any way that’s remotely satisfying because your body’s not used to anything that simple any more. Normal isn’t wanting to crawl into your boss’s office, all hands and knees and begging eyes, and plead to get spanked, fucked, bent over the desk and teased and tormented and tantalized into coming hard enough that the world goes away for a long, long time.

She sits at her desk and starts to work, blanking out the resentment and the desire, and turns herself into the perfect secretary, fingers dancing smartly over the typewriter keys, crisp white paper marked with lines and curves that say exactly what he wants them to say. Then she delivers them to his desk and she’s so deep in the role that when he asks her, as he signs each letter, what Xander prefers to drink, it’s jarring.

“Anything,” she says. “He’s not fussy.”

Wesley frowns, as if he can’t get his head around that concept at all, then shrugs. “Very well.” He stands up and stretches. “Well, we should get to lunch, I suppose. What are you in the mood for?”

She gives him a cool stare. “Got some errands to run. Think I’ll just grab a burger today.”

“Oh.” Does he sound even a little bit hurt? “I thought—very well. Back here by one, please.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, looking at a point just over his shoulder. She thinks she hears him sigh as she closes the door carefully and it’s music to her fucking ears.

The errands exist; she’s out of lipstick and Darla’s birthday is coming up and she wants to get her something nice, for the first time in forever. She spends half the time window shopping, her heart giving a little skippity-hop every time someone talk and dark walks by, and ten minutes scarfing down a burger that doesn’t taste all that good now it’s not, technically, forbidden. She’s at her desk two minutes before one and she sits there quietly, hands folded in her lap, waiting. When one of the clocks Wes has all over the place strikes the hour, she goes back to work, not turning when Wesley’s door creaks open, not even smiling when it closes again after he’s heard the sound of her typing.

It’s a long, horrible day. At five he appears by her desk and gives her a quizzical smile that she returns half-heartedly. “Ready to go home?”

She tidies her desk in silence and then nods. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, Wesley,” he corrects her quietly. “You’re off the clock now.” He sighs. “Faith, it never used to be difficult for you to combine both roles.”

“Never used to be that I’d go a whole day without you kissing me,” she says, her voice a soft
He steps close and tilts up her chin with a finger; the first time he’s touched her in hours. “Would you like me to kiss you now, Faith?” he says, looking as if he’s sure of her answer.

She jerks her head aside, eyes burning and dry. “Like to go and get ready, Wes. We’re entertaining, remember?” She walks toward the door and stops, giving him a glittering smile. “Wait until you see me fold napkins into cute shapes. It’s, like, a specialty of mine.”

“Yes,” he says, sweeping past her in an epic snit. “I’ve noticed you’re remarkably good with your hands.”

She can’t help finding him adorable when he’s frustrated and she softens enough to grab his arm and, when he turns, kiss him quickly, a fleeting brush of her lips on his that leaves them both staring at each other.

“Xander’s coming at 7.30,” he says thoughtfully.

“Yeah?”

“I think we have time to——”

And she’s not letting him do that; not letting him schedule a quick fuck in between setting the table and basting the chicken.

“We really don’t,” she says shortly.

It doesn’t take long to get home. Not the way Wes is driving. And the whole time she's white-knuckling his impeccable interior because he's driving like a maniac, all she can do is close her eyes and think about what's going to happen when they get home. Because, yeah, a girl can dream, can't she? And she's got some delicious little scenarios unraveling in her fevered brain. She imagines that Wes has got some too. Maybe all this repressed sexual energy is fueling some of his most devious little tableaux yet. She'd like to think so, anyway. She can't help but smirk as she looks over at him, all tight-lipped and staring with single-minded intensity at the road stretching out before them.

Yeah, she'd bet money that one enthusiastic blowjob would end this ridiculous little embargo once and for all. His heart isn't really in it, is it? But she knows the answer before she even asks the question—she knows better than anyone that Wes doesn't do anything by halves.

She sighs dramatically, crossing her arms over her chest and hunkering down in her seat, wondering what the hell Wes might have done with Mr. Bunny. He pretends not to notice her little fit of pique, still staring infuriatingly straight ahead.

She practically jumps out of the car as soon as his foot thumps heavily and finally on the brake as they pull into the garage, but his hand is around her wrist as soon as she reaches for the door handle. His hot, agitated fingers on the tender skin are enough to make her vision swim a bit and ratchet up her pulse in an instant. She knows he can feel the blood thudding away because he smiles a little and she knows she's so busted, the cool-as-a-crocodile act shattered. There's nothing she can do about that, so she just plasters on the innocent smile again, swallowing down the thoughtless words that were just about to pop out of her mouth. His fingers unfurl and her hand falls limply to her lap. Maybe they were on the same page after all.

“Just wanted to let you know, dearest,” he says without a hint of irony or sarcasm or bile or anything. The words flow smoothly out, as if it's perfectly normal for him to apply saccharine endearments to
her. “We'll be in the formal dining room this evening.”

She's seen the room, but has pretty much avoided it. It has an air of untouchability to it, the kind of room where everyone, willfully or not, plays their roles to perfection, getting through polite meals with gritted teeth and stilted platitudes. Which makes it the perfect location for tonight's dinner with Xander.

“Of course. I didn't think otherwise.”

“Everything you need should be in there; the china, silver, and linens are in the sideboard. And it would be really lovely, Faith, if you could have all the candles lit before our guest arrives.”

Of course. She'd nearly forgotten. Instead of having a regular old chintzy candelabra like the rest of the universe, with those flame-shaped light bulbs, Wesley has this contraption that looks like a baby mobile mated with a stainless steel birdcage. The whole thing is an excuse to have about a hundred tiny tea light candles hanging precariously over your guests' heads. In reality, the room is mostly lit by tastefully recessed track lights, but that damn candelabra is the centerpiece of the room and perfectly Wesley.

“Yes, I've always wanted to see it all lit up. It's such a fascinating piece.” She can't believe the things she's saying; where is this coming from? It's like he's somehow handed her a script, the role of the perpetually sunny, Junior League trophy wife circled in red Sharpie.

And then because they're normal and they don't live in 1955, she swings open the door herself and steps out at a tenth of the speed she'd actually had in mind a few minutes before, just in time to see the look of hurt flash across his face as he stops in his tracks, because he didn't get to help her out of the car.

When they do get inside, Wes chucks his keys forcefully onto the side table and marches toward the stairs. “I'm taking a shower. The chicken is trussed and ready to go in the oven. The salad needs assembling, as does the cheese plate. I'll grill the vegetables before we eat.”

“If there's asparagus, I'm not freakin' touching it, Wes.”

“No asparagus.”

When she sighs a sigh of relief, he smiles thinly and adds, “I thought we could move on to Brussels sprouts.”

She bites back the blistering retort that's boiling and almost takes half her tongue with it. Instead she contents herself with a bland smile that she learnt from him.

“Good, I'm glad that's all settled then.” He's practically beaming at her. “I expect you'll want to dress for dinner?”

She nods, smiling again to keep her eyes from staring at him in wide disbelief. No clipped “you'll dress for dinner” but a simple question instead. Just when she thinks she's got the new rules figured out, she's left struggling to process another strange fold in the power dynamic.

“Don't take too long then. You have rather a lot of preparation to do before you have time to start primping. Off you go.” He pats her on the hand and with that he's gone, leaving her spluttering in his wake.

Now she's thinking that she and Mr. Bunny are going to have a very loud, very enthusiastic reunion.
But one second later she's disappointed in her immaturity and berating herself for falling into that role again. She's the hostess for the evening and damn it, she's going to be fucking perfect. Wes is going to be surprised and delighted—hopefully enough that he'll deign to fuck her before the night is out.

As promised, everything is arranged in the fridge with Wes' usual efficiency. The chicken is already cleaned and trussed, legs tied back with white twine. But she really doesn't want to dwell on Wes' superlative rope-tying skills so she starts pulling out the other ingredients. He's made some kind of garlic and herb butter—strong enough that one whiff would drive all the vampires away if it was that sort of town—and there's a cookbook open on the butcher-block table that has little diagrams for basting the bird properly. She preheats the oven and slathers the bird in the herb mash.

Then she remembers the cheeses have to be brought to room temperature—because she’s so turning into Martha fucking Stewart—and takes them out of the fridge. Once again she marvels at Wes' ability to find cheeses that trump one another in sheer stinkiness. One of them is runny in the middle and has this blue-gray ash all around it and it smells like damp earth. Eww. Xander likes that shit, though—he'll be seriously flattered that Wes splurged. By the time she's polished the glasses and the silverware with a cloth so they're positively a shoo-in for a Rinse Aid commercial, it's almost seven and she's starting to vibrate with the injustice of it all. Seems that in Wes' seriously screwed up version of normal, there's no such fucking thing as feminism and she's expected to work all day and then come home and start slaving over a hot stove and lay the freakin' table and how the hell is she meant to get his foofy tea lights into that Addams Family heirloom of a candelabra anyway?

She's no nearer to getting a clue by the time she's retrieved the bag of tea lights from the sideboard and with a deep sigh she pulls out a chair, jumps on it and climbs on to the table. And if she stands on tiptoe and really stretches, she can just about reach the candle holders.

Five minutes later, she hasn't managed to get a single tea light flaming and in position. The smell of singed hair hangs heavy in the room and she wonders whether normal girls ever kill their boyfriends for being useless, selfish bastards. What the fuck is he doing up there anyway?

“Wesley!” she screeches again, and she thinks she's just strained something as she leans up and tries in vain to get just one of the fuckers lit.

“What does it look like I'm doing?” She can't get her volume knob turned down from eleven. “I've put the dinner on and I've taken that gross cheese out and I've polished stuff and where the fuck have you been?”

He has the decency to look ever so slightly embarrassed but it must be a trick of the light because in the next instance he's flaring his nostrils and flashing his eyes at her.

“I absolutely refuse to be spoken to like that, Faith,” he says in his snottiest voice, like she's just taken a dump on the table and won't help clear it up. “And will you kindly get down before you break your
She can feel the fierce prickle of tears start and swallows them down. “You left me to do everything.” Her voice is wobbling alarmingly, much like she is as she steps to the edge of the table and vaults off it. “And Xander’s gonna be here in a minute and I haven’t set the table or even had a shower.” Yeah, there’s a lot of stuff that she still has to do but seems like she’s been able to completely perfect her role as the nagging wife.

Wes strides over to the corner where there’s this weird lever thing that she never got round to asking about and then as if by magic, and a few sharp turns of his wrist, the dumbass candelabra begins a slightly creaky descent.

“Like, you couldn't have told me?”

“I assumed that if you didn't know how it worked, you'd have asked,” he says with a sniff and it's only because he's wearing his black shirt and jeans and she's secretly grateful that he didn't come down wearing a fucking tuxedo which would freak Xander out about a gazillion times more than he's gonna be anyway, that she manages to summon up the insincere smile that she's been wearing for most of the day.

“Let's just get this done, Wes, so I might actually have time to, like put on some lipstick before my best guy gets here.”

“I don't like repeating myself, Faith, and I've already told you that your tone of voice…”

And it's not like she's really throwing them because she makes sure the seal top is closed tight but she chucks the bag of tea lights at him.

“What ever, you can give me a lecture after Xander's had the worst evening of his life,” she snarls. “You do the lights, I'll do the table.”

The icy silence is punctuated by the thud of china as she slams the plates down with enough force to make her point, but not enough to break them. The silver makes a much more satisfying sound as she practically throws spoons on to the snowy white tablecloth.

She's calmed down slightly when it comes to the glasses and by the time Wes has winched the light fitting back into place, she's folding napkins and taking deep breaths.

“Just leave that, Faith,” he barks and she immediately stills her hands, because when he uses that voice she's programmed to obey. “Come here,” he adds, and she can feel the effort it takes for him to soften his vowel sounds.

“What now?” she asks sulkily, but she lets him take her by the shoulder and turn her around.

It's kinda hard to see at first because her eyes are swimming with tears that she's absolutely not going to shed, then she blinks a couple of times and the table comes into focus. It looks like something out of one of those really fancy home magazines in the dentist's waiting room, the place settings gleaming in the soft glow of the candles and she did that.

She digs her nails into her palms, half to hide the feeling of his hands gently kneading the stiff muscles in her neck, but also as a reminder to herself to get back on track. He wants her to be this perfect hostess. He wants normal. Man, she's gonna normal his ass off.

“I need to change,” she says, in this perfectly neutral voice. “If Xander gets here before I come down, I'm sure you'll be able to entertain each other.”
And she's way too soft on him because she wriggles round so she can give him a quick hug, letting out a breath that she didn't even know she'd been holding when his arms wrap round her. She tugs his head down so she can give him a quick kiss on his cheek and inhale the faint whiff of limes and bergamot that always manages to make her feel slightly undone. “Give him a drink and ask him about computers and he'll yap your ear off,” she whispers.

“I'd like you to wear the…” He stops himself and finishes the sentence with a rueful smile. "Old habits die hard.”

She raises her eyebrows so high that she's gonna need a surgeon to remove them from her hairline. “Look, Wes, I'm not a big expert on normal but I'm pretty sure that other couples give each other fashion advice, y'know?”

He takes a while to process that little tidbit of information and then comes to a decision. “You always looks very pretty in the plum dress I bought you in New York,” he says carefully and she's grinning as she opens the door.

“You want me to wear panties with that, darling?” she drawls and doesn't wait to hear what he says after his sharp intake of breath.

The doorknob goes as she's just finishing the world's quickest shower. She creeps into the hall and hangs over the banisters but she can't see shit, just hears Wes stammer out an introduction and Xander talking too fast and too loud about what sounds like cheesecake but knowing Xander it could be anything.

The plum dress is nowhere to be seen and then she remembers that it's hanging in the closet in Wes' room. Or it used to be Wes' room; now it looks like a hurricane has ripped through a menswear department. She has to do a double take at the sight of practically every single piece of clothing that he possesses strung over the bed, the chairs and, sweet Jesus, the floor.

“What did his last slave die of?” she mutters to herself as she picks up three shirts and a couple of ties on her way to the closet and then stops in her tracks.

Actually it's fucking adorable and so the reason why it took him an hour to come downstairs. Wes with wardrobe anxiety because Xander's coming to dinner and he doesn't want to be the guy wearing the stuffed shirt who needs a good queer eyeing. Didn't think it was possible because he's been working her last nerve all day, but she's suddenly hit with an attack of the warm fuzzies so she has to sink down on the edge of the bed and inhale a whiff of Wes' pillow because sometimes he makes her feel like such a fucking girl.

She's expecting to find them staring uncomfortably at each other across the wide expanse of the dining room table but instead she follows the sound of their voices to the kitchen where Wes is peering at the grill and Xander's perched on the worktop next to him, twirling a glass of Sancerre and totally ratting on her.

“So then Faithy's all like, 'That's a nice dress, Buff. Where did you get it? Hookers R Us?' and…”

“No, don't tell me, let me guess.” Wes chuckles. “Buffy was then drenched with a sudden shower of fruit punch. I'm not surprised. I had the unfortunate experience of meeting her and she's an exceedingly unpleasant girl.”

“I leave you alone for, like, five minutes and he's already telling you about the prom?” she hisses from the doorway and they look up, like she's caught them with their hands down each other's pants. Which is so not somewhere she wants to go.
“Well, Wes is practically family,” Xander says with a sly grin and Wes shakes his head, smiling faintly as he flips over a mushroom.

“I did have all these very detailed questions about computers but you’re a far more interesting conversational gambit, Faith,” he says and he looks almost as relaxed as he did at the cottage so she decides to let it go. Just this once. Especially as Xander’s jumping down to give her a hug. Wes comes to stand next to her, his arm round her waist, laughing as Xander begins his stupid story about the time they called the police on his next door neighbor because they thought he was running an illegal bear baiting match from his basement.

Wes’ fingers are warm through the silk of her dress, brushing against the same spot over and over again like he finds it comforting and she can’t help it. She lifts her head up to press a soft kiss against his smile, ignoring Xander’s fascinated gaze.

“Wes? Maybe it’d be cool to eat in here,” she murmurs and he gives her a grateful nod before turning his attention back to the grill.

“Those are for you,” Xander says, nodding at a bunch of flowers on the counter by the door.

She can’t hold back a pleased little squeak of pleasure. “Xander, you shouldn’t have!” Then, because he totally deserves it, she adds, straight-faced and without a glimmer of a smile, “The cemetery’s so far out of your way.”

Wesley drops a roasted to perfection pepper slice onto the floor, where it lands with a flat splat. “Faith! Apologize at—oh.”

And it’s his slightly woebegone look as he glances from her face to Xander’s grin that has her hurrying to him, contrite and ashamed.

“Just kidding, Wes. Old joke.”

“Yes, see there was this time—” Xander begins and then his voice trails off. “You know,” he says ruefully. “I keep wandering down memory lane and you’re going to hate me. Sorry.”

Wesley reaches for some kitchen roll and uses it to mop up the mess. “It’s quite all right, Xander,” he says, straightening and giving Xander an entirely natural smile. “Faith is what we have in common after all and I’m enjoying hearing about her little escapades.”

Xander looks at him a little uncertainly and Wesley’s smile grows teeth. “I even have a few stories of my own I can contribute. There was this one time when she —”

Xander goes slightly pale and he takes a long swallow of his wine. “Y’know, if you’re thinking of getting a computer, you really need to consider—”

The sodden towel gets thrown in the trash and over the rush of water as Wesley rinses his hands with the meticulous care of a man about to perform surgery, Faith listens, heart pounding, as Xander babbles frantically about tech stuff Wes doesn’t get, and Wesley bides his time politely.

Shit. He wouldn’t. No, he wouldn’t. Would he? She’s gripped in a nightmare vision of Wes, chuckling away as he tells Xander all the various ways he used the Rabbit to make her scream, and it’s not helping to remind herself that Wes is a very private person who wouldn’t dream of humiliating her in public. Except there’s the memories of several restaurants to say differently and oh God, he so totally would. Fuck.

She gives Wesley an anxious smile as Xander falls silent and can’t help a relieved moan as he says,
“Darling, you don’t have a drink. Shall I get you some wine while you find a vase for your flowers?”

And they’re back in the strange world of normal. When she gets back with a vase that’s plain glass and hopefully not worth hundreds and never meant to have water anywhere near it, and wedges carnations and ferns into it, Wes and Xander are bonding again and seem—though maybe she’s got some water from the shower in her ear—to be talking about baseball. As this is absofuckinglutely impossible given that the only time Wesley ever mentioned it, he called it ‘American rounders’ with a disdainfully curled lip, it’s got to be some sort of hallucination.

She stares at the tangled mess of greenery in front of her, and pokes it doubtfully.

“Charming, Faith,” Wesley calls over, his voice approving and sugar-sweet. “But do come and join us.”

She goes over and accepts a glass of wine, letting the fresh light wine trickle and spill down her throat, washing away the tension. “To new friends and old,” Wesley says, tipping his glass and tapping it against Xander’s so that a bell-like chime rings out.

“I’ll drink to that,” Xander says, his gaze moving to Faith. “And these days, Faith feels like both.”

“You think she’s changed,” Wesley says slowly.

“I know she has,” Xander says, his voice flat. He takes a sip of his wine. “But I haven’t. And I’m still right here for her.”

There’s a small silence and she’s trying to find the words to make it all fine when Wesley nods and Xander relaxes and it’s all so fucking male she wants to scream. So she fills up her wineglass instead and, when Xander coughs meaningfully, does the same for him and Wes and then Wesley’s ushering them through to the lounge to nibble on a fancy version of chips ’n dip while he sets the kitchen table. The sun’s setting and a clear glow of warm light is making the room look even more spectacular than ever.

Xander sighs and walks over to the windows that form most of one wall. “This place really is something, Faith.”

“And you think I don’t fit in?”

It’s not said with any bitterness; she really wants to know. He turns and looks at her. “No; you do, Faith. You really do. I mean; look at you. That dress, the way you’re so relaxed. When I said you’d changed I didn’t mean it was all bad, you know.”

“None of it’s bad,” she says insistently. “Wish you could see that, Xander.”

“Faith, you’re standing there with a bruised ass” he hisses. “He hurts you for fun and I’m not gonna be getting past that any time soon.”

“Newsflash, Xander; it’s my ass,” she snaps. “And it doesn’t get that way without me wanting it to.”

“Faith—” he begins, but it’s too fucking much. She’s feeling itchy and achy and empty, and as on edge as a lemming with a minute left to live, and as her ass isn’t likely to be getting any attention any time soon, it’s not something she wants to discuss.

“Tell me, Xander, you still have a thing for men with piercings in painful places?” she demands. “Like Greg, the one who fucking clanked when he walked?”
He flushes and shoots a glance in the direction of the kitchen. “Keep your voice down! And that’s not kinky, it’s just—”

“IT’s just your thing, yeah. Have I made my point yet, because trust me, Xander, you bring this up one more freaking time and I’m going to—”

“I think it’s all ready,” Wesley says from the doorway, his eyes wary as he looks at them both. “And, Xander,” he says, his voice dropping into the mild drawl that makes the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, “I appreciate that as Faith’s oldest friend you enjoy the privilege of speaking your mind to her, but I don’t think you and I are quite on that footing, do you?”

“No, I guess—”

“Then perhaps you could refrain from your ill-informed, and frankly rather unwelcome, attempts to dictate my behavior?”

“I’m not going to apologize for caring about her,” Xander says softly, not backing down, though his hands are shaking slightly. She knows he hates confrontations and she feels a pang of pity.

“I don’t believe that was asked for either,” Wesley says. “It’s an emotion I share, after all.”

She realizes she’s gripping the stem of her wineglass so hard it’s about to snap and eases off. “Hello? Standing right here?” They turn and she flashes them a tight-lipped smile. “Xander, butt out. Wesley, chill. And I’m starving, so let’s go eat. Okay?”

There’s a long moment when her imagination goes into warp drive and she sees Xander stalking out in a huff, or trying to hit Wesley, and it’s almost an anticlimax when they murmur versions of ‘sorry’ and head for the kitchen. She feels a warm wave of pride that she’s so totally in charge, rescuing the party like that, and then her stomach growls loudly enough to drown out the entire string section of the background music and she hears them both snicker. Emptying her glass instead of snarling at them is getting to be a habit. Seated all around the cozy table in the kitchen there’s a bit of knee and elbow bumping and someone jostles a table leg before they’re settled in, with Wes on one side of her and Xander on the other. She’s not so sure it’s such a great idea that the two are facing each other across the table, but there’s nothing to be done about that now.

Instead, she concentrates on the food and can’t help but be pleased at the spread that they, yeah they, all perfect couple-y and everything, presented to their guest. The chicken, all shiatsu-massaged with the herbs and butter is crisp and golden and smells heavenly. Blessedly, the pissing contest from the living room’s completely forgotten as they rather unceremoniously—considering the impeccable table manners of two-thirds of the table—dig in.

She’s a little grateful for the momentary silence as they make their way through the salad, and Xander’s chasing a rogue cherry tomato ’round his plate when Wes shoots her a little despairing look. The look that says: *I’m running out of conversational topics. Help!* Or, at least she thinks that’s what it says. She nods slightly, kicking herself for not realizing sooner the whole perfect hostess thing also means keeping up the dinner table chatter. What would Martha say?

When she turns her attention back to Xander, he’s finally speared the tomato and is deliberately munching on it, with a look on his face that matches Wes’. She smiles, and he licks a wayward dribble of vinaigrette off his lower lip. “We’ve seemed to talk a lot about how I’ve been, Xan, but like, how are things with you?”

His fork lands with a forceful clatter on his empty salad plate, and out of the corner of her eye, she can see Wes evaluating Xander with one of his super-serious looks. The one she knows means he’s
interested what’s about to be said, but she knows it can be a little discomfiting at first. One of the reasons he's so good at cracking witnesses on the stand. But this is just a casual dinner between friends, not a deposition meeting, and in a feat of super-hostess multitasking, she gives Xander an encouraging smile while sneakily slipping her hand under the table to pat Wes on the knee, a move she’s hoping telegraphs back off with the steely stare, darling. Resting her hand there for a moment, she knows it's worked because she can feel a little tension roll away as he shifts in his seat, leaning back to give poor Xander some breathing room.

“Yes, Xander. Are you still working at Chez Lisette? I'm sorry I didn't have the chance to meet you the last time Faith and I were there.”

She tenses up at that. The last and only time they were there. She wants to correct him, but doesn’t want to open up an avenue for Xander to let it slip that the whole kitchen staff had seen what Wes’ hand was up to under the table during that unforgettable meeting with that atrocious tweedy guy.

And when she rises back out of her thoughts to focus on the conversation, they're discussing the new sous chef—a mutual friend, it turns out, and there's laughter all around. Small fucking world indeed and even though there's a pleasant grin plastered to her face, she's annoyed at the reminder that she's still stuck in this shithole town where gossip is an extreme sport.

But she can't be bothered to dwell on that for long, because her lover and her best pal have moved on to bitching about the restaurant's wine list and the utterly wretched (Wes' words) and really lame (Xander's) sommelier who only got the job because he was fucking, they chorus, “Randall!” They collapse in wine-fueled laughter. Randall, the pushover manager of Chez Lisette, they breathlessly tell her, is infamous for installing his latest boy toy in the most inappropriate job in the whole restaurant—and that's more often than not the sommelier post.

“The selections are simply atrocious, Faith, you have no idea.” The third and then fourth glass of wine have brought out the bubbly and personable side that hides under Wes' no-nonsense exterior, and she knows that he must be like this with his devoted pro bono clients, watching baseball games and kicking back a few brewskis in a dive bar. “No offense, Xander, but that's why I only ever stop in for business breakfasts.”

“Hey, none taken, friend. None at all. Why do you think I get up at the ass-crack of dawn to do the breakfast shift?” She has to laugh at that along with them at that logic. Xander's party schedule made making the 5:30 A.M. call rough, and most of the time he's still coasting on the previous night's high when he got to work. “I got tired of having to explain to every idiot nouveau riche dot-com billionaire that no, we didn't have the Shiraz that got a good review in the last issue of Wine Spectator and then have 'em turn up their noses at my suggestions! At least the breakfast crowd is a bit more respectable.” He winks at her and she just rolls her eyes and kicks his foot—or what she hopes is his foot—under the table, as a warning, and realizes she's hit the mark when he stomps hers right back.

Eventually, she's able to sit back and watch the two of them, fascinated that they really are kinda bonding now, even if it is over something a little queer like restaurant gossip and methodically works her way through the chicken and the mushrooms and the roasted peppers, letting them natter on about this chef and that waiter and everything starts with “Oh, did you hear about...” or “Faith, I don't think I've told you this story. This is great. There was this one time...” and ends with Xander cackling wickedly and Wes shaking his head in disbelief. She's giggling along too at the absurd tales of collapsed soufflés at the Valentine's Day dinner and the time an impeccably dressed woman, dining alone, ended up stripping off some item of clothing every time a new course was brought to her table until she was stark naked after dessert and had to be escorted out wrapped in a spare tablecloth.
And she's so very pleased with herself when she seamlessly slides out of her chair when at last, after both she and Xander have finished eating, and she whisks the dishes and serving plates away with a minimal clatter.

When she returns to the table, she pauses to lean against Wes, hand ruffling his hair, grinning like a fool at Xander, pleased as punch that the tide's turned and everyone's having such a good time. And she's even more pleased when Wes grazes his hand along the edge of her knee, where the plum dress' hemline slides against her flesh.

“I think it's best we have the cheeses and port now—don't you, Faith?” Her first instinct is to blurt out “What the hell is port?” but luckily her inner Martha takes over and she doesn't miss a beat, she just smiles and heads to the dining room.

Of course, she has no idea which glasses are appropriate for port. And she finds herself facing an entire wall of stemware: squat, wide snifters, heavy crystal, tall flutes—you name it, he's got a set that would make the CEO of Crate & Barrel proud. Just when she’s debating the options Wes sidles up behind her and slips his arm around her waist. Whispers in her ear, “Thought you might like some help.” Normally (there’s that word again—she's getting really fucking sick of it by now) this would be a perfect opportunity for them to get up to some no-good as a bit of a palate cleanser, but hey, Xander’s waiting in the other room and they’ve got these new rules to abide by so she wriggles out of his grip. He looks so adorably disappointed that she almost reneges, but then she remembers her objective and she's all business.

“Wes, someday you’re going to have to explain to me the crucial difference between this”—she holds up a slightly bell-shaped wineglass in one hand and a slightly less bell-shaped glass in the other. “—and this.”

He starts to draw himself up into full-on lecture mode. “Well, it all depends on the wine. The curvature of the glass enhances the—”

She puts her finger to his lips and giggles. “I said someday, Wes. Rain-check, okay? Now, what the hell do we serve the port in?”

He gathers up the appropriate glasses and she's got the plate o' stinky cheese, all perfectly arranged with these little rounds of ciabatta and slices of green apple. She’s quite proud of it, really. She may not be ready for her own show on Style but she's doing all right.

Wes is just about to breeze past her when she stops him and gives him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I'm getting to see quite a bit of Wine Snob Wes this evening. He's rather endearing, you know?” Before he can protest her use of the word “endearing,” she breezes out of the room.

Xander looks a little stunned at the tawny port and the fancy glasses and the array of imported cheeses spread out before him. Faith can read his “all this for l'il old me?” look. But he starts to relax again once Wes pours the port. Wes slathers some triple crème camembert on a cracker, passing to Xander, who takes it appreciatively. Faith’s only taken a few experimental sips of the port but already she’s feeling warm all over and strangely content. She nibbles on a tiny piece of apple but it tastes weird with the heavy, sweet burn of the port and there is absolutely no fucking way she's putting any of the runny, smelly, flaky selection of cheeses in her mouth.

“Just try a little of the Roquefort,” Wes cajoles, having the nerve to wink at Xander who sniggers as she pulls a face.

“Faith's more of a Kraft slices kind of girl,” he says and Wes shudders in mock disgust.
And she'd probably be more pissed off about them treating her like white trash because she doesn't have a sophisticated palate or, like, whatever but she's so relieved that they're bonding over the stinky cheese and she's buzzed from the wine and port, that she lets it go. Jesus, she's getting so mature, she's practically ready for her first cotillion.

Wes cuts a tiny chunk of a pale yellow cheese with a red rind and offers it to her. “Just one bite, Faith, is all I'm asking,” he says. “It's Edam. Very bland, I'm sure you'll like it.”

It's got nothing to do with the smug smirk on Xander's face because he expects her to wimp out but more to do with Wes holding the piece of cheese up so he can feed her that has her opening her mouth and chewing reluctantly.

Actually it tastes a little like the processed cheese slices that Darla used to shove between two slices of bread and call lunch. She swallows it down without making any gagging noises.

She smiles demurely and takes a sip of her port instead of sticking her tongue out at Xander who's more interested in cramming crumbly shards of Brie into his mouth than watching Wes reach out and cup her cheek.

“There, that didn't suck, did it?” he murmurs with a sly grin and she leans forward so she can press a tiny kiss against his smile.

“Maybe I should have another taste just to make sure that I've found a cheese that doesn't make me want to yak?” she suggests and she could have come up with something that sounded more seductive but he's fallen for it.

It's not the cheese she wants to taste but she'll take whatever she can get because it means that Wes is intent on cutting her these perfect cubes of Edam and popping them into her mouth so her tongue can snake out and catch the tip of his fingers, his thumb brushing the curve of her bottom lip as he takes his hand away.

She's so focused on him being focused on her, on the way his eyes darken every time he gets a glimpse of the pink swipe of her tongue that she completely forgets about Xander until he clears his throat and Wes gives a little start as if he's also forgotten that they have a houseguest who's hell-bent on completely decimating his cheeseboard.

“You lost the use of your hands then, Faithy?” Xander asks with this tart tone to his voice, which makes her face flush instantly.

This time it's Wes who gently pats her knee and she forces herself to smile sweetly at Xander. “We're just being romantic, Xand,” she simpers. “Maybe that's something you could try if you ever manage to get laid again.”

“Hey! I get laid all the time. All the fucking time,” Xander protests and then he realizes that he's being a total asshole and flashes her his goofiest grin. “And you can file that in the folder marked TMI.”

And she's had too much to drink because she's turning to Wes who's been watching the back and forth with a slightly dismayed expression, and murmurs conspiratorially, “Xand's going through a dry spell.”

“Dry as in the Sahara Desert,” Xander adds helpfully. “Don't suppose you know any hot lawyer guys looking for fun and friendship, walks in the park, and Kung Fu movie marathons?”

The knee pats have taken on a slightly frantic pace and she can see Wes' brain trying to come up
with a suitable response. He takes a long, slow sip of his port, then gives Xander a sudden wicked twist of his lips. “Not off the top of my head, no but I'll be sure to put the word out at my next Rotary Club dinner. Would you like some coffee?”

But Xander's rubbing his belly and shaking his head. “Man, I'm stuffed. I put anything else inside me and things could get ugly.”

“I'd like some coffee,” she says plaintively and Wes shakes his head firmly at her.

“You know you're not allowed coffee at this time of night, Faith,” he admonishes her. “Not if there's any chance of you actually sleeping.”

She shrugs in defeat, because he has a point and he gets wicked grumpy if she's fidgeting all night with the after effects of too much caffeine, and starts to stand so she can clear the table.

“Jeez, if I ever tried that with her, I'd be on the business end of a hissy fit,” Xander pipes up. “Are you, like, a Jedi master?”

“I'm not entirely sure what that is,” Wes replies a tad sniffily. “But Faith knows I only have her best interests in mind.”

“Riiiiight.” Xander's voice is the dictionary definition of skeptic and Wes is stiffening like an angry cat and all of a sudden it seems like a really good idea to get the table cleared and Xander the hell out of there. “Faith's best interests, that's a really strange way to put it.”

“So you got an early start tomorrow, Xand?” she asks brightly, digging him in the shoulder as she leans over to pick up his plate.

He drains his glass of port like it's Mountain Dew and gives Wes exactly the same look he used to give Buffy Summers when she'd been ragging on Faith for her thrift store clothes, or the bruises on her face or any of the other multitude of things that Buffy Summers used to find to rag on her. “Y'know, this has been nice, the food and stuff and Faith keeps telling me that she's happy but don't you think this is all a little odd?”

Wes looks as cool as a chiller cabinet of cucumbers but there's this little tic banging away in his cheek as he steeples his fingers together and looks at Xander over them. “No, not really. Perhaps you'd care to elucidate.”

It's like she's been frozen in time, standing behind Xander with the plate of leftover chicken held tight in her hand and wishing that somehow she could open her mouth and beg them to stop.

“Well, there's the age difference, which not so much,” Xander says warming to his subject. “You're a spring chicken compared to, oh, Michael Douglas. But you tell Faith what to do all the time and you never listen to her when she says no and I can't help but think if there's other times that she says no and you don't listen. Like, say, when you're beating the crap out of her.”

“Fuuuuuck! How could…”

“That's a very damning choice of words.” Wes cuts right across the beginning of what's going to be a really furious rant with his iciest drawl. “But I fail to see how the things that Faith and I choose to do in the privacy of our own home is any business of yours.”

“Okay, both of you need to calm the fuck down…”

“It's my business because she's my friend and I can't even give her a playful swat on the ass because
you've left some serious bruises, pal,” Xander spits, scraping his chair back so she has no option but to scurry out of the way. “And if it was in the privacy of your own little mansion here, then it'd still be completely wrong but it's not and Faith is the one who's been having to deal with… Fuck, Faith! What the fuck did you do that for?"

She stands there still holding the empty plate and watching as the chicken and gravy slides down Xander's best shirt in slow motion. “I'm sorry,” she gasps and she knows she's not fooling anyone. “My hand slipped. I've had too much to drink. We've all had too much to drink.”

Xander clutches at his shirt, pulling it away from his chest and looking at her in disbelief, but he's a treacherous little shit and she's fucked if she's going to apologize again.

Seems like Wes agrees with her. “I really think it's time for you to go home, Xander. Would you like me to call you a cab? You have had rather a lot to drink.”

“I'm fine. I'm going to walk,” Xander mumbles in this tiny voice and she's not going to argue with him that it's miles back to his apartment on the other side of town. She just wants him to get the fuck out and never come back.

As they walk Xander to the front door, she tries to catch Wes' hand in hers, give him a comforting squeeze and get one in return, but he deliberately evades her grasp and gives her a wintry smile that makes her wonder if he's just put his heart in the deep freeze.

Xander stumbles out the door, grunting something that might be thanks. Might be fuck off and die. It's hard to tell. And she's not really that concerned because Wes slams the door. Really slams it, so it seems as if the whole house shakes with the force of it and turns around to glare at her so furiously that she shrinks back and almost knocks over the coat stand.

“And you still think my need to establish a more conventional relationship between us is another game,” he snarls, lips curled back and tiny dots of red dancing along his cheekbones, like they're already in the middle of the argument.

It's his turn to shrink back when she holds her hands out to him imploringly. “No, Wes. I don't know. I just want things to be…”

“I'm going to bed,” he says flatly, brushing past her as if she's just a phantom presence. “Maybe it would be best if you slept in your room tonight.’”

Chapter Seventy

She watches him go, stunned and bewildered by the speed at which it all went wrong. Though, thinking about it, it's been an endless juggling of eggs ever since Xander arrived and he couldn’t entirely be blamed for the fact that they were both on edge anyway, from Wesley’s fucked-up and totally dumb idea.

It’s ironic that had they been the way they usually were they’d have probably come across as more of a couple and maybe, just maybe, not set Xander off. Or maybe he’d come with his little speech already prepared and he’d have spewed it out no matter what. She can forgive him everything but making Wes look at her like that—anguished shame hiding under anger—and for trying to tell Wes about Liam.

Slowly, kicking off her heels and pushing back her hair, she goes back to the kitchen and cleans up. She’s too drunk for it to be a chore; an hour passes without her really noticing as she wipes dishes, floor, table, and counter. And five minutes are spent in a methodical, vindictive shredding of Xander’s flowers, as petal and leaf are reduced to pulp. She gets herself a glass of water and sips it,
one swallow, two, then she hears Xander’s voice in her head, hears him taint and tarnish what she’d thought was precious, hers, and she’s clammy and hot and throwing up in the sink, retching and dizzy, clinging blindly to the tap she’s managed to turn on, as her world spins and leaves her adrift.

It helps her in the end. After she’s cleaned herself up and managed to swallow some more water, her head’s cleared and the daze of unhappiness has changed to a slow, hot anger. Plans, words, arguments swirl in her head as she goes to the dining room and clears the unused table, destroying the pretty picture she’d made. The candles she blows out, one by one, without troubling to wish.

When she reaches the top of the stairs, Wesley’s door is closed, an uncompromising rejection that thins her lips. She goes to her room and brushes her teeth, scouring them clean until all she tastes is mint. Then she takes out a nightdress, rose-pink and opaque, skimming her ankles; something Wesley chose because he said he loved the color and the silky cool slither of it in his hands, but that she’s never worn. The narrow straps and deep slits at the side save it from being completely demure, but it’s classy not come hither. Which is probably why it’s stayed folded until now.

After rushing her hair until it crackles and putting on enough makeup to rescue her face from pale obscurity against the warm, rich color of the nightie, she leaves her room. She’s ready for everything but the sudden thought that he might have locked his door. It’s enough to make her hand hover, inches away from the handle, as she pictures him lying in bed, smiling coldly as he watches her try to barge in, go where she’s not wanted. Oh, he’s just so fucking impossible!

Ready to spit and curse and hammer it down, like an R rated little piggy, she’s a little disconcerted when it turns easily and swings open. It’s only just past eleven, so she’s not too surprised to see that Wes is reading, not sleeping, the room dark apart from a bedside light, glowing softly.

He doesn’t even look at her. “I think I made it quite plain that I preferred to sleep alone, Faith. Good night.”

She closes the door and that brings his head jerking up. “Yeah, you did. Real plain. What I don’t get is why I’m being punished for you and Xander fucking-up.”

He sighs impatiently. “Punished? Isn’t that a little dramatic, Faith?”

“No. It’s how I feel,” she says, and it’s the truth. Being away from him, with every inch of her body missing his, is a worse punishment than any he’s ever thought up.

“I’m sorry,” he says, meaning the exact opposite, “but I’m really not in the mood for any more of this tonight. If you’d just return to your room—”

“Like last night,” she says, nodding. “Two nights of sleeping alone, of not fucking. You can’t do it, can you?” “What?” He’s looking at her with a glittering tension in his eyes and she fights to stay outwardly calm; even manages a chuckle. “Oh, come on, Wes! Normal doesn’t mean celibate, but since you started this you’ve barely touched me. Want to know what I think?”

“Not in the slightest,” he says, throwing back the covers—and yes, he’s still wearing those fucking shorts like they’re some sort of security blanket.

She swallows dryly as he gets out of bed and comes toward her. “Well, I’m going to tell you anyway,” she screams, losing it because he scares her when he’s got that look in his eyes and she hates that. “I think you can’t fucking do it like this. And you think so too, or you wouldn’t be trying to send me away when I belong in here with you.”

She’s not just got Xander’s voice in her head now; Lilah’s in there too, oozing sympathy as she tells
her that Wesley’s impotent if he’s not playing his games. It’s stopped seeming like a joke and starting
to seem like a prediction. He’s close enough to reach out and touch her, but he doesn’t move and she
sobs once, the noise frantic and panicked, and flings herself at him, arms going around him, clinging
to him.

“Don’t do this to me, Wes,” she says. “Don’t you fucking dare”

He reaches up and tugs her hands away from him, releasing her at once. “Very well, Faith,” he says
and there’s a resignation in his voice that chills her. “Come to bed.”

He turns without waiting for a response, and walks back over to the bed, getting in and propping
himself up on his elbow to watch her follow him, the soft fabric rustling as she takes slow, careful
steps. She shivers as she climbs into bed and he gives her an appraising look before pulling the
covers up over them and switching off the light. There’s an awful moment of waiting and she’s about
to say something—fuck knows what—when his hand finds her breast and strokes her nipple through
the thin covering. She relaxes into the familiar touch, turning eagerly for the kiss she’s expecting. His
hand moves and pushes her to her back.

“Stay still,” he mutters. It’s a command he’s given her so many times before and it’s always signaled
a time of being deliriously aroused and eager and he’s always sounded so perfectly, completely sure
of himself. Now it’s chilling her to hear him say it like that and the shivers increase but he doesn’t
hold her and warm her, just fumbles in the darkness for the hem of her nightdress, pulling it up,
bunched in his hand, until he’s bared her to the hips.

He moves away and the bed rocks as he shoves down his shorts and she wants to say something
about that being about time, but it’s impossible to talk, to push words out into the heavy stillness. His
hand, cool and trembling slightly, brushes against her leg and she shifts so that her legs are split
wider, feeling nothing but panic. She wants to scramble out of the bed and run, wants to take Wes
with her, away from this weirdness but she lies there, her breath harsh and loud in the quiet, as his
fingers fumble gracelessly over skin he’s made his own with a thousand perfect, loving touches.

She’s dry and tight and his fingers push inside her, seeking a response she can’t give him as her rigid
body refuses to obey. She cries out softly as he hurts her with a thrust too deep, and he freezes, a
dark shadow over her. “Wes.” Somehow, she finds the strength to push him away. “Stop it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Fuck that,” she says. “Wesley, if you don’t kiss me, like, now, I’m going to—” She tries to think of
something so awful it’s the ideal threat, and settles for, “Color in the pictures in your Biggles book.”

“Faith, this isn’t—what?”

“You heard me,” she says. It’s good to be able to talk again and to move, and she wriggles around
until she’s wrapped around him, arms and legs tangled in his. She gives him one firm, swift kiss, and
ignores the fact that his face is wet. “Wes, I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but it isn’t
working for me. You want to try making love without the extras, we’ll do that, but give me one good
reason why you have to forget how to kiss me and why I’m supposed to be playing musical fucking
statues.”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Neither do I,” she says, “so why don’t we just not?”

“I’m not sure I can—”
She doesn’t let him finish that, just runs her fingernail down his back and bites down on his shoulder. The quiver that gets her is enough to make her smile into the darkness. “Oh, I am, Wesley. And I’m counting on you to wipe out all the bad memories I’ve got of being fucked by virgins in the dark. Scott, Dan and Larry are hard acts to follow—”

“Who?”

“—but I know you can make me forget them.” She arches up against him and sighs as his mouth comes down on hers in a long, slow kiss. “That’s a good start,” she breathes in his ear after the kiss melts away and she’s grazed her lips across his fiercely pounding jugular.

It may have been just a kiss, but just like that, it brings back an old familiar ache deep inside, made her clit twitch expectantly.

She has a fleeting thought, while he’s tugging the nightgown over her head and it snags in her hair making him sputter out an incoherent and nervous apology, that maybe this what their first fuck would have been like, maybe, if their first fuck hadn't, well, if it had followed a proper third date, maybe a fourth even.

There’s something still cautious and overly careful about the way he touches her after he tossed the slinky gown aside, but now there’s something kinda endearing about it, like he’s lost the map to those possessive boundaries he’s drawn out on her flesh time and again. It doesn’t take him long to find his way again, even if his hands are shaking as his thumb ghosts over her hard, aching nipples. She could be mistaken, since it’s so dark, but she thinks he might have just smiled when a comforting and familiar whimper escaped her throat. Not dark, or begging, or frustrated—just a pure, unregulated response to his hands on her skin.

Her hands are awkward too as she rakes her fingers over his stomach, fumbling a little before taking his cock firmly in hand and coaxing it to attention with a few methodical strokes, pleased when it dribbles over her thumb. His hands have finally made their way down to her pussy, and nuzzles her neck with a little of his old ferocity when he finds that she’s wet and hot and ready now.

“All that from a kiss.” Is that bemusement she hears in his voice?

“Yeah, Wes. Imagine that.” She wishes the lights were on, wishes she could catch his eye or smile encouragingly; make him see in her face and not just her sex that this is working. That it was gonna be okay tonight, and maybe even the rest of the nights that pass until his two-week bullshit moratorium is over. Maybe.

He doesn’t answer, just runs a line of kisses down her neck, pausing to gently suck on her nipples—she has to resist an impulse to beg for him to bite them or suck harder—before making a predictable beeline to her now-throbbing cunt.

She almost laughs with relief when he tosses that last shred of awkwardness aside and goes straight for that little hidden patch of hot flesh instead of teasing her; lightly spreads her open with his fingers instead of ramming two, three inside.

But she’s so maddeningly sensitive after two days of inattention that she’s groaning and thrashing inside a few minutes and then actually wishing for once that he was drawing this out, because even though she’s coming hard, it’s too fast and is gone in an instant and her whimpers of pleasure give way to ones of annoyed frustration. He doesn’t take notice of that, though, and is scrabbling up and shaking a little and can't get his cock inside her fast enough. Yeah, okay, she’s definitely wishing that he’d taken longer.
It doesn't help either that when he's finally inside after a couple of badly-aimed misfires, they're locked in the oldest position in the book, which doesn't manage to hit that nagging ache inside at all. He just keeps ramming right past it over and over and over again and she's arching under him and wriggling around but nothing helps, and dammit, if he would only pin her wrists down or shove her legs up around her ears or something, maybe she could come again with him. But it's too late for that in the end as he finishes with a weak whimper and slumps heavily against her. And she can feel him holding himself away from her, like he's afraid to touch her, and she almost sobbs. She doesn't even know how to soothe him, how to make things right again. There's an insistent ache in her chest that she knows won't go away until she gets him to talk.

The only thing she knows for sure is that they're not meant to be this way.

"Wes." It comes out in a whisper. He's rolled off her, turned away on his side, and her feelings of tenderness give way to anger. She's not going to let him get away with this bullshit any longer. She wants to force him to look at her, to make him face this. It's taken her until this moment to realize that she's an equal partner after all, and it's about time she started acting like one. She tries again, willing some sense of authority into her voice. "Wes. Look at me, please. Goddamnit!" She grabs him by the shoulders and turns him roughly toward her.

"I'm not ashamed of what we do. Not now, not ever. So why the fuck are you? Forget what Xander said. He was drunk, and he's been itching to bait you ever since he walked in the door. No, longer." She props herself up against the headboard and sighs. "But this has been going on since the beginning, hasn't it?" He doesn't answer. "You can’t fucking cut me out, Wes. I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me." Is he crying? Is he asleep? What the fuck? She flicks on the light and he's staring at her, eyes red-rimmed and dry, face drawn. "This isn’t fair, Wes. Please talk to me. I just want—"

There's a tell-tale tightness in his jaw before he spits out a terse, "You don’t know what you want."

She feels like he's hit her. He might as well have. She's been working so hard to keep it together but this sob that's been building and building—something raw and aching and seemingly unquenchable—forces itself out of her and she's can’t hold anything back now. She just wants to fucking hit him—it’s the only thing that would make her feel better.

"You fucking bastard," she manages to hiss in between great hiccupping sobs, "How dare you? How fucking dare you?"

That she’s met with silence is killing her by degrees. It’s more hurtful than anything else he could have said. And she doesn’t know what to do or say because he’s the one who’s always said and done the right things and she’s floundering and heartbroken and so fucking angry. She’s practically shaking, she’s so angry with him.

"I’m going to my room now, Wes. If and when you decide to stop acting like a fucking two-year old and talk to me, please knock first.” She grabs the crumpled, thrown aside chemise and pulls it on over her head. She throws the covers off, swings her legs over the edge of the bed, and he grabs her wrist.

"Let go of me, Wes. I mean it."

His eyes lock with hers, and she can see how shaken he is, how rattled. She wants to help him, but she can’t force it and neither can he. And giving in to pity wouldn’t do any good for either one of them now. She shakes free of his grip and stands up, smoothing out the stupid clingy nightdress as she does. The walk to the door feels like the longest five seconds of her life.
When she gets to her room she throws herself on the bed, her unchecked sobs muffled by the pillow. And they don't stop for a long, long time.

Eventually—after she's cried everything out and aches all over from the effort—she falls into an uneasy, dreamless sleep.

Chapter Seventy-One

When she blearily opens her eyes the next morning, after eight hours of heavy sleep because staying awake would have meant having to think and think until her head explodes, she wonders whether someone's taken out her brain in the middle of the night and replaced it with cotton wool.

She feels headachy and sluggish, like there's a big storm a'brewing. And not just in the figurative sense either. As she spritzes moisturizer onto her just showered body and ruthlessly attacks her hair, scraping it back into a severe knot, she realizes it's the first morning that he's not woken her up.

Okay, it's only the second ever morning that she hasn't slept in his bed, in his arms, but even so, it totally sucks.

Her heels clattering on the stairs seem to echo the frantic pitter-patter of her heart but when she walks into the kitchen, he barely looks up from the paper.

When he does and she gets his blank, pod!Wes face, she kind of wishes he hasn't bothered. Especially as he immediately seeks refuge in the business section again.

“Morning, Wes, you want another cup of coffee?” she sighs, wondering when she suddenly became the grown up.

“No, thank you,” he says after this pause which has her rolling her eyes. “I made you some toast.”

“Thanks.”

Turns out that monosyllables are the only thing on the menu this morning. They clear up after breakfast in this deafening silence, punctuated only by Wes' pointed glances at the clock on the wall.

He listens to Strindberg at ear-perforating volume all the way into town and strides into the Faithless sanctuary of his office the minute they get through the front door. “Hold all my calls,” he barks at her over his shoulder. “I absolutely cannot be disturbed.”

She never got a chance to replace all the steno pads she burned and it does seem pretty stupid to be taking ten dollars out of the petty cash tin so she can walk to the supply store and buy some more so she can burn them but she's all out of other ideas.

It's a glorious early summer's day. Too early yet for the damp humidity, which is the 98th reason why she hates living here. She can feel the sun beating down on her skin through her thin summer dress and she knows she should have a skip in her step and a song in her heart and all that other shit. Because she's young and some days she feels pretty; she's poised on the brink of a new life and she's loved. Or she thinks she's loved. Three days ago she'd have bet money on it, if she had more than sixty dollars to her name, now it feels like the rug's been slowly dragged out from under her feet.

It takes three cigarettes and an amble round the block before she's summoned up enough courage to go back to the claustrophobic offices of Wesley Wyndam-Pryce Esquire. There's a vaguely familiar car parked in the lot out front and she's trying to remember where she's seen it before when she steps into reception and even if she couldn't smell the cloying perfume, she can hear Lilah's voice, sharp and querulous, from the open door of Wes' office.
“You're pathetic, Wesley!” she's screeching. “It would be laughable, if it wasn't so utterly tragic. You manage to get some little teencybopper in under your Egyptian cotton sheets and it's almost enough to convince you that you've grown a pair.”

“My relationship with Faith is not up for discussion.” She doesn't even have to be standing in front of him to know that he's clenching his jaw, forcing the words out through gritted teeth. “Get out, Lilah.”

“Oh, don't worry, Wes, I'm going.” Lilah laughs, this spiteful, spitting noise that has Faith clamping her hands over her ears. “I'm sure you and Faith have lots of... work to be getting on with. Funny really, she's such an intriguing mix of ingénue and tramp but, between you and me, not very bright. Come to think of it, that's probably why she's managed to stick around this long.”


His voice, the utterly frozen fury he can put into three small words, sends goose bumps popping out all over her arms and as she hears Wes' door slam and Lilah's footsteps striding down the corridor she looks wildly around for an escape route. But there isn't one so she dives for her chair and begins to type, her fingers hitting the keys so hard that she tears her nail on the broken 'f'.

“Ah, Faith, it's been ages since our paths have crossed.” Lilah's standing over her and she keeps her eyes fixed on the paper and the gibberish that she's typing. “But your dear father's been giving me updates on how you're doing.”

“I've got nothing to say you,” she manages to force the words out.

“You had plenty to say last time I saw you,” Lilah reminds her with a cat-like smile. “But I suppose you have quite a lot on your mind. And I have to say, sweetie, Wes' perverse sexual proclivities notwithstanding, I really wouldn't want to be in your scruffy little shoes when he finds out what a bad little girl you've been.”

Her entire body feels as if it's suddenly turned to ice and she stares up at Lilah's smug, beautiful face in horror. “Have you... Does he know?”

Lilah's hands feel soft as they tip up her chin. She thought they'd be hard and dry. “It hasn't come up...yet.” And maybe she relents just a little bit. “Do you love him?”

And she doesn't even have to think about, not even after last night. “Yeah, I do. I really do.”

“Then you're even more stupid than I thought,” Lilah tells her with this sad, secret little smile that she can't even begin to decipher. “Do yourself a favor, sweetie, and get out while you still can.”

And instead of disappearing in a puff of sulfurous smoke, Lilah sashays out the door in a cloud of Mitsouko and she's left with barely time to recover before she hears Wes' door open.

“Faith! In here, now!”

He's shouting at her. Which is new and agreeably frightening enough that she's not getting wet and heavy for the mother of all spankings but gathering up a pad and pen with shaking fingers and willing her feet to start moving.

Now she knows what they mean by the green mile because walking along the corridor toward the electric chair would be preferable to walking toward Wes who's standing at the open doorway, his entire body thrumming with barely restrained rage.

He slams the door behind her, and she's already so overwound that the impact of wood against wood
makes her jump and turn to him with pleading eyes.

“Wes… I needed to go and get…”

He throws out his hand in a dismissive gesture and strides to the window. “I made it perfectly clear that I was not to be disturbed. Is that so very hard to understand, Faith?”

“No, but, well…”

He can't even fucking look at her, just stares out at the parking lot like it's about to impart the secrets of the universe. “Kindly stop stammering and spluttering,” he hisses. “One simple instruction yet it's beyond your limited capabilities.”

And yeah, she gets he's having a fuck of a bad day but he can just join the club because she's already the president. “I had to get some more shorthand pads,” she says sullenly. “It's not like I was skiving off.”

“If you hadn't burned every single bloody one in the first place, you'd have been at your desk and able to follow my orders!” He's as close to screaming as he can possibly get and when he turns round so she can get a load of his red face and wild eyes, it takes all the fight out of her.

Makes her heart ache just a little bit more because all she wants to do is put her arms round him. “Wes, don't do this,” she murmurs, her face all this sorrowful frown. “Please, don't take this out on me.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” he drawls, dropping the volume now and it's worse than when he was shouting. “Those pads are coming out of your wages. I want you to sit down at your desk and you're only to move to use the bathroom. You're not to take a lunch break today; you've already wasted more than enough time.”

Used to be that this was her cue to sit at her desk in a state of such arousal that she couldn't concentrate because of the tight ache in her breasts and her cunt, thinking about all the things he'd do to her at the end of the day. All the ways he'd make it hurt, then make it better. But as she slinks out of his office, tail between her legs, all she can think about is that there's no way to make this right. It's just wrong with more wrong piled on top.

She's been sitting there for an hour, wading through a tricky deposition, when she hears his door click close and he's standing there with his briefcase in his hand, that tired mask back on his face.

“I'm going to work from home,” he says tonelessly, already heading to the door. “I want you to work through the Mortmain case file. It's imperative that you don't make any mistakes.”

He looks gray under the slight tan he acquired at the beach and she can't bite back the words. “Are you okay?”

His shoulders slump a little. “I have a headache,” he says unwillingly as if she's forced the confession out of him with a pair of rusty pliers and some well-placed electrodes. “Please bring the letters home with you tonight and I'll go through them then.”

She gives a sigh of relief as she hears his car drive away and then with a tiny grimace, she gets up and retrieves the full to bursting Mortmain folder from the filing cabinet.

When she gets home, after waiting half an hour for the bus and having to sit next to this woman who doesn't seem to have got the memo that deodorant has been invented, the house is silent.
She wanders through the rooms, through the study and the library, the kitchen, even out into his little Japanese garden but he's nowhere to be found. For one awful moment she thinks that he's done the unthinkable; that he's left her. Got on the first place to New York and not looked back.

But before she can have a complete attack of hysterics she pokes her head round the garage door to see that his car is still there and she's able to take deep breaths and remind her heart to start beating again.

By the time she's finished, the tray looks perfect. Not just the rose that she's plucked from the garden and put in a stupid little vase that's only big enough for one freaking flower. There's ice cubes clinking around in the glass of San Pellegrino and she's even put a sprig of parsley on top of the cheese sandwich. Man, one of these days she's gonna get her own show on the Food Network.

She awkwardly grips the tray in one hand and knocks on his bedroom door. “Wes? Can I come in?”

Silence. She knocks again, louder this time, and hears a faint grunt from inside.

The room is in darkness as she gingerly tiptoes in. “Are you feeling better? I made you something to eat and I got you some aspirin. Shall I open the drapes and the window because it's kinda stuffy in here and…”

“Faith, please…” His voice is thick with sleep and “kindly fuck off” vibes, which she ignores and places the tray on his bedside table. When she switches on the lamp, he winces and holds his hand in front of his eyes.

“Wes, you look like shit!” she blurts out and he glares at her but she'd give it a five out of ten at best. “Thank you,” he snaps and then he's pouting like a little kid who's just had his TV privileges taken away. “I'm not hungry,” he adds, glancing at the tray and shuddering.

And yeah, he's all headachy and completely fucked-up but he's also working her last nerve. She toes off her shoes and sits down on the bed, shoving him across the sheets in the process.

“Tough,” she says flatly. “You're gonna eat this sandwich that I made and you're gonna take some tablets and you don't fucking get rid of me until you do.”

Then she gives him the evil eye right back, taking in the ashen cast to his face and the way his hand slightly shakes as he finally snatches up the sandwich and nibbles at it with these tiny little bites. “God, it comes to something when I'm, like, the mature one,” she mutters and he chokes on the last mouthful of his sandwich.

“I doubt very much that I'll live to see that day,” he says and she can't be sure but maybe there's a tiny smile ghosting across his lips.

“Probably because I'll end up putting arsenic in your tea,” she tells him, raising her eyebrows and giving him a prim look. He's smiling now, and when he leans over to pick up the tablets and the glass of water, he lets his head rest against her tummy for a fraction of a second too long.

“How much did you hear?” he asks her carefully when he's resting back against the pillows.

Now it's her turn not to look at him. “The tail end,” she says simply. “That I'm a dumb tramp but it's not like that's a newsflash.”

“Don't, Faith, just don't…” he starts but she swivels round and places her fingers across his lips.
“But if I'm dumb, Wes, then you're fucking dumb because you're gonna let people like her ruin what we have. I don't want normal, I don't ever want a night like last night. I want you.”

His lips are moving beneath her hand but she clamps her palm tight across the bottom half of his face and hopes she can say what she wants to say before she suffocates him. “Look, I get some of it, I really do and if you don't want to play our games, then I'll deal. I'm not gonna come like the fucking Fourth of July fireworks if you fuck me like you're frightened I'm going to break and you're just gonna have to accept it. But will you just stop being such a fucking jerk, Wes?”

She takes her hand away and thinks about giving him two seconds to catch his breath before putting it back, because he's giving her that look that she's gotten so sick of over the last two days. “It would seem my original theory that there's nothing more to us than this sordid little game is proving to be correct,” he says dully. “It's been two days, Faith and all I've had from you is threats and tantrums…”

She's this close to grabbing a pillow and holding it over his face. “Say fucking what?” she snarls and then forces herself to get it under control. Face tight with rage, she picks up the tray and heads to the door. Then she thinks better of it and turns round.

“What's gonna break us up is your bullshit line in normal. Wes, you wouldn't know normal if it fucking jumped up and bit you on the ass. And guess what? Neither would I! Now, I'm going downstairs and after that, I'm going to sleep in my room alone and I'm going to keep on doing that until you either kick me out or you get the fuck over yourself.”

And then it's her turn to show him that when it comes to slamming doors, he could take lessons from her.

Chapter Seventy-Two

It's three hours before he emerges from his room to join her in the living room, and if he still looks pale, still looks as if there's an agony of ouches waiting for him the instant he moves his head too quickly, she's not going to let it soften her. Except she is. Of course she is.

She's looking at him, swaying slightly in the doorway as if he's onboard a ship or something, and she's remembering how he looked after her when she had cramps, how he held her and made her feel better.

“Wes? You shouldn’t have got up,” she says, tossing a book she was staring at without reading word one onto the table and going to him.

She’s too concerned to remember that they're in the middle of a fight, and she brings her hand up to feel his forehead in an automatic gesture, one even Darla knew how to make, no matter how drunk she was. No fever, but he winces and clears his throat, pulling away a little.

“I'm feeling a little better. I just—I didn’t want this to continue any longer so I—”

Grief and anger flood through her, like icy, dirty water, chilling her. “You want it to end? You want me to go?” She’s stammering out the words and they’re thick and awkward in her mouth.

He looks puzzled, his forehead creasing in a pained, painful frown. “What? No, of course I don’t! Really, Faith, you have a tendency to jump to conclusions that’s quite worrying.” Ah. That was more like Wes. “I simply meant that a third night of this awkwardness would be—” He pauses and then says quietly. “I dislike it, Faith. More than I can tell you. The raised voices, the silences, the feeling that you…” He runs out of words again and gives her this helpless look.

“I don’t hate you, Wes,” she says. “Don’t think I could. I’m just still mad you decided to do this, and
I think you’re fucking it up so badly you should give it up, but, hey, you’re Wes. You’re stubborn. I get that, I really do.”

There’s the faintest hint of a smile in his eyes. “And you’re the epitome of sweet reason yourself?”

She gives him her sassiest grin. “Fuck, no, but takes one to know one, right?”

“Possibly,” he says, moving past her to collapse onto the couch, closing his eyes as he does, but still giving her enough hints that he’s hurting in the way his lips tighten and then part on a sigh.

She hesitates, and then goes over to him. “Can I—is there anything I can get you?” she offers. “More painkillers?”

“No,” he says wearily. “I’m fine.”

“So you won’t mind me putting on loud music and singing along?” she says tartly. “Wes, you look half-dead.”

“I didn’t sleep well,” he says unwillingly, opening his eyes a crack. “You weren’t there. There was that threat about the coloring in my books.”

She smiles at him, walking over to flick off the overhead lights and turning on a lamp in the corner, behind him so that it won’t dazzle his eyes. “Really don’t think that kept you awake, Wes. You know I’d never do that.”

She notices that his hand is beside him, palm up, fingers curled slightly, and she slides to the floor beside him and slips her hand inside it, careful not to jar the couch. His hand clutches hers with a convulsive grip that slackens apologetically a moment later, but he doesn’t pull away. She shifts into a comfortable position and rests her head on the seat cushion, staring up at his face, remote and shadowy. He’s closed his eyes again, but as she watches him, he opens them and gives her a glimpse of blue, and a faint smile, before shutting them again and relaxing, with a sigh, into the soft cushions.

She’s not sure if he’s falling asleep, so she holds very still, but after a few minutes his thumb moves in unhurried strokes across her fingers; gentle and barely there touches that leave her whole body tingling, not with arousal but relief.

She stays very still for a while and then turns her head and kisses his hand, stilling the back and forth motion of his thumb. The silence that’s grown between them as they sit in the dimness ceases to be comfortable and becomes charged with expectancy. His thumb lifts and teases the pout of her lips as she prepares to kiss him again and she smiles and nuzzles her mouth against it then rubs her cheek gently against his hand and hers, still linked, still lying beside him. His thumb sweeps over her lips again, more insistently, demanding—and she’s too used to meeting his demands with compliance not to let it slide past them and into her mouth, where teeth and tongue meet it with teasing touches that turn serious. His hand slides free of hers and he cups her face, his thumb still caught between her teeth as she laps at it, swirling her tongue over it.

He moans first, a tiny sound, caught in his throat, and she’s ideally placed to see that he’s hard now, the rigid length of his cock visible through the thin material of his trousers. Normally—usually—she’d wait for him to tell her what to do, but they’re both driving now, though it’s still Wesley making the rules, and he’s not well, so she takes charge of the situation and slides her hand over his leg, tracing the shape of his erection with one finger and feeling him jump and quiver almost imperceptibly as she touches him.

She’s in no mood to rush, and he’s willing to let her set the pace, because he moves just enough to allow her to reach him easily and lets his hands fall to the side. She keeps up the slow, increasingly
demanding rhythm, adding more fingers until her whole hand is on him, curled around a hardness that’s reassuringly real. With agonizing slowness, tormenting herself as much as him, she eases her hand upwards, flicks open the button on his trousers and goes to work on the zipper. Not with her teeth; nothing fancy, nothing that might remind him of other times she’s done this, when her ass has been stinging and scarlet from his hand, his belt, her brush—no, she uses her fingertips, delicately, carefully curled around the stiff metal tab. She’s too lost in the moment to do more than register the shorts that are going to make this just a little bit more fucking difficult, too aware of her body, awake and ready, with a warm ripe heaviness between her legs as her cunt readies itself to be fucked, in blind ignorance of the fact that she’s not planning to let Wes do anything more strenuous than whimper.

Slipping her hand into his shorts she releases his cock, watching it rise to meet her palm, warm and slick-tipped. She runs her thumb up the side and over the head in an experimental foray that earns her a hissed breath, sucked in sharply, though his eyes, as she sees when she peeks upward, are still closed. She smiles, a smile she doesn’t think she’d have let him see, a smug, gleeful smile, because this is something she’s good at, and he’s made her better, and if it doesn’t take his mind off a Lilah-sized headache she’ll eat a truckload of asparagus, she swears she will.

She doesn’t go for anything fancy, hampered by his clothes as she is, but she can’t resist pushing his shirt aside and kissing his flat stomach, where the dark hair lies smooth and fine, tasting his skin and biting down, just hard enough, on the point of his hipbone, knowing that the fall of her hair is draped across his cock in a maddeningly light caress she plans to replace with one equally so, when she decides it’s time to stop playing. Which is sooner than she’d planned, because the smell of him, clean but male, is driving her crazy, and when she kisses his stomach again and his cock nudges the side of her face she can’t help turning her head and taking him into her mouth in a sudden, swift taste of him, salt-slippery and hot.

And that’s all it takes for her to abandon plans, forget he’s feeling fragile, and totally ignore the fact they’re fighting. She moans around him and sucks hard, then goes to town, licking and kissing, sucking and—oh so very gently—letting her teeth sink in, holding him in place as her tongue swirls and dances across his cock. His hands are clenched in tight fists now, but he’s still not moving, and he can, she wishes she could tell him that he can, that it’s fine, he can touch her, but no way, no fucking way is she stopping now. His cock’s thrusting up into her mouth, little rocking movements of his hips sending it there, and that’s all it takes to have him bumping against the back of her throat, and she relaxes enough that she can’t help turning her head and taking him into her mouth in a sudden, swift taste of him, salt-slippery and hot.

He comes, with a groan, deep and guttural, bursting out of him even as he fills her mouth and his hands finally move to wrap around her head, holding her loosely, his fingers making restless, swift patterns as they rub against her hair. She lifts her head and twists it to kiss his hand, bringing them back to where they started, and looks up at him.

“Come here,” he says, in a voice that’s satisfyingly unsteady.

She moves to sit beside him, but he pulls her across his knees and kisses her hard as her hands slide around his neck. She’s still wearing her office dress but her legs are bare and she shivers as his hand moves up her inner thigh, palm flat, skimming along the sensitive skin until he reaches her soaked panties. They’re the French knickers he got her and there’s enough room for his fingers to slip inside and find her clit, sink inside her, rub and press and pinch and tease, while his mouth kisses her relentlessly, even when she’s coming, even when she’s struggling to cry out and beg him not to stop, never to stop. She’s left limp and quivering in his arms, gasping and breathless as he smiles with a satisfaction she knows is all down to the fact that he’s managed to make her scream without breaking any rules. And though she’s still feeling the aftershocks she’s not ready to admit he’s right. Because
he isn’t. This worked because they were both so fucking hungry and so fucking sick of fighting. Every time? No way. But he’s smiling and he’s kissing her again, gentle nibbles along her neck, and it’s too sweet to spoil by pointing that out. She's willing to stay there as long as it takes, as long as he needs—kissing him, stroking his cheek, running her finger along the slightly downy ridge of his ear, tangling her hand in his hair. Saying everything or saying nothing at all. Truth be told, though, she's glad he's opted for the latter option. Okay, scratch that. She was willing to stay there as long as he needed—that was until her arm went numb, wedged in awkwardly between the two of them. The sofa's cozy, but really, two's a crowd for longer than a few minutes.

It seems like it's been an hour, though, that they've lain there—silence swirling around them, just being still. Breathing shallowly, still not speaking; kissing occasionally, with eyes open. In the dark, there's no need to close your eyes when you kiss someone, she thinks. It's kind of special that way. But there's just enough light here for her to see that little by little some of her old Wes is reappearing. Not too much, unfortunately, but enough for her to be comforted for tonight.

Of course, she'd enjoy that feeling more if the numbness wasn't creeping past her elbow now, and if there weren't gonna be mad tingles when she finally does move it, which is a slightly nauseating prospect.

"Wes, we uh, kinda need to move. I can't feel my arm."

He laughs at that, a gentle chuckle that makes her feel warm down to her toes. “After you, dear,” he says, giving her a gentle shove and she slides back down to the floor, skirt and blouse askew, hair nearly matted in a spot that he'd twirled around his fingers endlessly for the past few minutes. He leans over to kiss her on the forehead as he glides off the sofa with some semblance of his usual grace. “I'm off to have a bath now, I think. Then we definitely need sleep.” He pauses, swallows deliberately. “You're not sleeping alone tonight.” She's wrapped up in shaking the pins and needles out of her arm and looks up with a start, agape, because it's that thing he does, that thing where he makes something that should be a question into a statement. A direct statement. She's not sure she heard that right, not at all. But he's got a brilliant grin on and winks.

“Oh God, Wes, really. Obviously you're feeling better if you're in the mood to tease like that.”

“I am, thank you.” He's suddenly horribly serious. “Come to bed soon, Faith?”

“Sure, sure.” Her voice is barely a throaty whisper, and she clears her throat. “I'll be there after I clean up the kitchen. I kind went a little overboard while you were resting.” She's blushing up to her ears now. “I tried to make some cookies. And I wasn't very successful.” Yeah, that was one way of putting it, even if success was measured in the ability to removed blackened chunks of overcooked dough from a cookie sheet. Because she totally didn't even accomplish that.

“Good Lord, you must have been completely traumatized if you tried to bake! I'm so sorry—I had no idea I'd driven you to that!” He's laughing at her now and she's ready to let it slide for tonight, because she'd sure love to hit him, but she's not sure how achy he still is.

“Look, we had no junk food. I was desperate.” She gives him a very stern glare and points in the direction of the stairs. “Now, get to your bath—before I totally make you eat some of 'em!”

Chapter Seventy-Three

The kitchen's spotless by the time she's finished. Munching on the couple of chunks of cookie that was all she could salvage from the blackened tray, she climbs the stairs, hauling herself up with her hand on the banisters.
She can't ever remember feeling this tired, so weary that it seems to have seeped in to her bones. Because she can't find peace and quiet anymore; doesn't know where it lives, but it sure as hell isn't here. There's this constant sick feeling in her stomach and it's nothing to do with skipping lunch and dinner today, it's more that her insides are tied in knots with the constant nagging fear that tugs at her every time the phone rings, every time it doesn't.

And it was just about bearable when Wes had all of those delicious ways to clear her mind of everything but him. Replaced the doubts and the worry and the guilt with the pure truth of pain and pleasure. Fucking it all out of her system, then wrapping himself tight around her and keeping her safe while she slept.

She pauses at the top of the stairs before taking a deep breath and opening his bedroom door.

The covers are pulled back on the bed, the pillow rumpled, and she takes a movement to tidy it up before knocking on the bathroom door.

“Wes? You nearly done?”

There's the gentle lapping of water as he moves and then calls out hesitantly. “Almost. You can come in if you like.”

He's still in the bath and she almost can't look at all that burnished, damp skin as he lies back in the water, head lolling over the rim top. But then her eyes skitter to the sink and the shaving kit and the mirror and looking at him seems like the safer option.

“You look better,” she says, hovering over him and not sure what the new rules of normal allow. Her panties are clinging to her sticky flesh and she feels grubby from all the anti-Martha-ing in the kitchen. This time last week she'd have been hauling off her clothes and getting in. In fact, he'd have told her to haul off her clothes, slowly while he watched, but even though he's not barking out orders any more, she's still waiting for his permission.

“I feel better, thank you.” His eyes are closed but his brow isn't furrowed in pain any more.

“You're gonna turn into a gigantic Wes-shaped prune if you stay in there much longer.”

His eyes drift open and he gives her a lazy smile. “If you let out a little of the water and put some more hot in, then I wouldn't be averse to you joining me in prunedom.”

It's not an olive branch. It's a whole fucking olive tree. And she flashes him her special smile, the one she only doles out on really rare occasions because she doesn't want him to get too used to it. She even tickles the soles of his feet as she gropes for the plug.

“Faith!”

“What? I can't see. Did I just get your little foot? Sorry 'bout that, Wes,” she protests and she's so relieved that they can still do this, that they're still allowed to do this, that she grabs his big toe and squeezes it gently before shoving the plug back. And all he does is roll his eyes and smirk.

He leans forward and sends a stream of steaming hot water in to the tub as she wriggles out of her dress and underwear. She can see his appreciative gaze in the mirror, the way it lingers on the faint bruises still left on her ass and the sway of her breasts as she takes off her bra and throws it in the direction of the laundry hamper.

“Bullseye!”
"I do wish you wouldn't do that, Faith," he huffs and she puts her hands on her hips, knowing full well that the movement lifts her breasts so they're all perky and pretty. "I've still got a headache," he adds, folding his arms so all that smooth Wes chest is hidden from view.

"You know what the best cure for a headache is?" she asks him as she clambers into the tub, carefully stepping over his legs and sliding with a little sigh into the water.

"Two aspirin and a good night's sleep."

They reach for the washcloth and he gives a start and then settles back in the water as she grabs the bar of soap. "Orgasms are, like, really good for headaches."

He doesn't say anything, just arches an eyebrow in a not very encouraging manner.

"I read it in this woman's health book for this social education class I took…"

"Which is why the US school system is so deplorable," he drawls, because it's one of his very favorite ranting topics. "Social education, honestly, what utter rubbish."

She rubs the soapy washcloth under her arms and along her neck and says quietly, "It wasn't in school. I took my GED in juvenile hall."

His eyes haven't left her breasts because he might be fucked up right now about the whole fucking thing, but he's still a boy. "Oh…well, yes. I forgot about your youthful misdemeanors. But that's all in the past, Faith. You know it makes no difference to me, it never did."

Just for that, because he sounds so goddamn sweet and honest about his belief that she's given up her thieving, cheating ways, she slides the soap over her breasts, catching the edge of the bar on her nipples and staring him straight in the eye. "I've done a lot of stupid stuff, Wes. Lots of things I wish I could rewind."

He makes a dismissive gesture. "The past is the past. I'd much rather talk about your future. Have you given any further thought to what you'll do in New York? I really should get some prospectuses in from Parsons for you."

She shrugs and lifts her leg up so he can see it all pale and gleaming in the soft light. "I don't think I'm cut out for college, Wes. I'll just get some little job, maybe waitressing or helping out in a clothes shop or something."

Her legs are pretty fucking hot, if she says so herself and he can't take his eyes off them so why the fuck is he still banging on about improving herself and not "entirely ruling out a course of further education."

"Maybe I'll take a cookery course," she says, more to get him to shut up than anything else. "I could stay home and bake cakes and, like, cordon bleu meals for you. Fatten you up so no one else will try and take you away."

"I'm sure that no one else would be foolhardy enough to even try and take me on," he mutters half to himself and she's fed up of all this talking and none of them saying what they really mean. 'Sides, her calf muscles are starting to ache from holding her legs aloft for so long.

She slides under the water to rinse the soap off and then sits up. "We need to get out now," she says firmly, squeezing the water out of her hair and standing up. "Are you gonna wear your shorts in bed?"
He gives her this 'what the fuck?' look and almost slips on his cute ass which she hasn't seen an inch of in the last couple of days. “I beg your pardon?”

“Because if you are, I'm wearing a nightie.” She wraps the towel round her firmly so he can't cop any moreeyefuls. “It's not fair, Wes. I can't sleep all naked next to you and have you not be the same. So either we're both naked or we're not, it's your call.”

“You really are the most impossible, maddening girl I've ever come across.”

“Well, yeah, and your point is?” Her cheeky grin is kinda lopsided but he doesn't seem to notice because he's putting his arms round her and pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“This is hard for me too, Faith,” he murmurs in her ear. “You really have no idea. Or maybe you do, which is why you just put on such a delightful show for me.”

“So you noticed? I knew it!”

“We can still make love. It was better this evening, wasn't it?” He cups her cheeks in his hands and tilts her head so she can't look away from the intent blue of his stare.

I don't want you to make love to me! I want you to fuck me. I want you to make me scream. I want you to make come so hard I forget everything.

“Yeah, it was, Wes. It really was,” she says and then crosses her fingers behind her back just to be on the safe side. “So, do I go and get my nightie or what?”

Anyone would think she'd given him this dilemma of end of the world proportions. He bites his lips and she swears she can hear his brain whirring through half a dozen different scenarios before he says: “Well, no. Why don't you just get into bed and we'll take the whole naked issue under advisement.”

In the end, she wishes that they'd both put on all-in-one sleepsuits with the feet in the bottom. Because it's too hard and he's really hard. She can feel his cock nudging against her bottom and he keeps shifting away from her like she's going to have an attack of maidenly outrage. Not fucking even! She's more likely to jump his stupid, conflicted bones and ride him so hard that he can't see straight. Which is why he's being really careful to keep to his side of the bed.

Thing of it is, she's such a slave to him, to his dick, that she's getting wet. And even though it's warm under the covers, her breasts are tight and heavy like she's walked naked through a blizzard.

“Wes? I know you're not asleep,” she whispers.

“What?” he mumbles, sitting up and shaking out the pillow.

“Why won't you touch me?” she whines. “I thought the whole point of me being here was that we'd cuddle up.”

“It's awkward,” he begins and she's just about had enough of this.

She snakes out her hand and clasps the warm, wet length of him, revels in the feel of it quivering in her grip. “It's not awkward, Wes, it's hard,” she hisses and then before he can mouth the million objections that he's working on, she shucks off the quilt and straddles him. “And I don't want you to make love to me, I want you to fuck me right the hell now.”

Now she's got his attention. And she's hoping against hope that this will short-circuit once and for all.
whatever fucking bizarro-world logic he's been working on these past few days. Maybe that's too much to hope for, but even so—he doesn't fucking say a word, just lets her take over.

God, it feels so good after all this strain, all the mixed signals and long silences. She'd gotten so used to being worried about past, present, and future that being in the moment for once is an incredible relief. And she can see it written on his face, too—all those harsh lines have been smoothed away, for just a moment. And she's going to take advantage of that.

“Gonna make it better, Wes,” she whispers as she leans down to kiss him.

He wraps his arm around her waist and pulls her down onto him with this almost feral little growl. Which in and of itself sends this little thrill through her, because that isn't Pod!Wes talking. Oh no. She can feel the difference at once, and she’s lost in an all-over thrill of lust that slams into her like a cold wave at the beach, leaving her gasping and exhilarated; because it doesn’t matter what they do so much as who she’s doing it with. Wesley trying so hard to be like the boy next door could spank her even, and it wouldn’t feel right, not really, but Wesley, her Wesley, can make her wet with a look, whimpering with a touch and coming with a word. And that’s something to think about, but later. Much later.

She feels his cock slide into her in one heavenly hard thrust and his hands come to her hips, her waist, and finally her breasts, moving possessively, almost greedily over her skin. His thumbs skim over her tight, hard nipples and then return, pinching them just a shade too gently, a little too carefully. She gives an inarticulate moan of protest, arching her back so that his hands are filled with her breasts and waits for him to use his mouth on them. There’s a tiny hesitation—what, is he consulting a freaking manual of officially allowed foreplay or something?—and then his lips fasten onto a nipple and suck hard, and thank fuck, he’s using his teeth too, sending shivery stabs of arousal through her.

She murmurs encouragingly, grinding against him and beginning to move slowly, feeling reluctant to lift up and let his cock slip out of her even for a few inches, even for a few seconds. He’s pinching and squeezing her other nipple harder now, doing it just right, and she’s starting to feel as if it’s all going to be fine, then she speeds up a little too suddenly and his teeth dig in and surprise a yelp out of her that’s pure pain. Fuck. He grimaces, lying back and giving her a despairing, apologetic look.

No. No. She realizes she’s saying it aloud and glares at him. “Don’t stop. I’m fine.”

His finger traces the swollen, reddened flesh. “Sore,” he corrects.

“Doesn’t matter,” she grits out. “Wesley, it doesn’t matter. I zigged when you zagged, that’s all.”

She’s not getting off him and he’s not going to make this an excuse to stop. No fucking way. “Perhaps I should kiss it better?” he suggests hesitantly and she gives him a relieved smile.

“You totally should. Lots of kisses.”

His hand comes up to cup her breast and she feels his tongue lap at the nipple until it’s wet and then he purses his lips and blows over it, making it pucker up, making her giggle.

“Am I tickling you?” he murmurs, doing it again anyway and then kissing it softly.

“Kind of, but don’t stop,” she says breathlessly.

He’s sucking on it again and it’s tender enough that he doesn’t have to do much to have her right back where she was, squirming helplessly and feeling a moan rising to her lips. She closes her eyes for a second and he takes shameless advantage of that, moving his free hand down to tease at her clit,
rubbing it hard and pinching it just as he transfers his attention to her other breast and captures her nipple between his teeth.

“Wes...oh God, Wes...” There’s this connection between clit and nipples and she’s not sure where the tingles are starting but it doesn’t matter because they’re spreading until her whole body is twitching and anxious and so very needy.

“You look so beautiful right now,” he whispers, lying back and staring up at her.

She smiles because he doesn’t know what that is until he’s got the view she has. It’s dark, so a lot of it’s memory and guesswork, but she can see enough to tell that his jaw’s clenched and his hair’s tousled up and she wants to get him relaxed and three times as messy. And, hey, she can if she wants to. No rules isn’t all bad.

She leans forward, so just the tip of him is caught in the slippery heat of her cunt, and kisses him, darting her tongue out and then sinking back so he has to chase her, lifting up onto his elbows to keep the kiss going. She ends up sitting in his lap, with her legs wrapped around his waist, kissing him fiercely with his cock deep inside her. She can’t move like this, not really, not well, but she can rock a little and it’s enough to make his face contort as her nails rake down his back demandingly and just a little too deeply. It’s that little pain that does it, she decides later. He retaliates with a smack on her ass that’s instinctive, not planned, not even hard enough to pink up her skin, but it doesn’t matter. She holds his gaze and sees the indecision there and makes it easier, leaning in and biting his shoulder as hard as she can without breaking the skin.

The second slap lands on her other cheek and it’s got a bit more zing to it. Breathing shallowly, she curves her back, bending forward, and sets her teeth in the skin around his nipple, drawing a hoarse groan from him as she digs them in. This time the slap’s hard enough to sting and he’s reached around so that his hand comes down on the center of her ass. It’s all she gets. With a frustrated, almost angry sound, he flips her over onto her back, rolling with her, and then pulling out at once.

“Hands and knees,” he says harshly, kneeling back and watching her move quickly into position, hurrying because of the tone of his voice, even more than the need to have him inside her again.

Three slaps and she’s burning, on the verge of coming. He bends over her and she feels his lips against her ear, tickling it as he whispers, “I’m not going to fuck you, Faith.”

There’s something familiar about those words but swamped in disbelieving despair as she is, it takes a while to place them. His office. Early on. When he—oh, fuck... It takes him about a minute to jack off, and it feels like an eternity, but she stays where he’s put her and somehow, even though it’s not what she wanted, it’s still something.

He relents enough to touch her, after endless moments when he’s just a presence behind her, and she sighs as his hand comes to rest on her hip, gripping it hard. Each sound that he makes; the brush of his cock against her ass as he leans forward, the final cry torn from him as his cock jerks and his come falls warm and wet on her back; they all combine to make her feverish and lip-bitingly frustrated, so that she’s got fistfuls of quilt bunched up in her hands and she’s making noises; desperate little whimpers with his name mixed in there.

When he finishes, she stays still, quivering, and he sighs and brings his hand to her cunt, pushing his fingers into her with a deliberate slowness that drives her crazy with the need to push back.

“You’ve been very disobedient,” he says softly, and she has a feeling that all it’ll take to make her come is Wes telling her she’s not allowed to, she’s so mixed up right now. “Disobedient,” he repeats, running a finger through the stickiness painting her back, “but perhaps I expected a little too much of
And it’s not fair to blame her, but she’ll save her protests until after she’s come, she decides dizzily, as he pushes her forward and spreads her legs wide enough to let him reach her with his tongue. She’s arching and wriggling and just fucking grinding against him, and when his fingers move to her clit, just out of reach of his mouth, she comes in spasms that go on and on and leave her wrung out and spent. She thinks she hears an indulgent chuckle as he cleans her up and she’s sure he pats her ass almost hard enough to qualify as a spank, but she’s just too tired to do more than reach out and hook her fingers into his before falling asleep.

Chapter Seventy-Four

She’s pulled out of sleep by his hand on her shoulder, gently shaking her awake and she comes to with a groan, “No! Leave me alone.” She buries her head in the pillow and arches away from his hand, which now has a firm, tugging grip on her arm.

“Faith, please wake up.” His voice is gentle but his touch is insistent. “I'll buy you a muffin for breakfast, a chocolate one.”

And then he snatches the quilt off her and she’s sitting up and blinking blearily at him. “Is there a fire? Are we on fire?”

“Of course not, now, get up.” He’s wearing a T-shirt and jeans and she’d be happy to see that his face isn’t squinched up in a pain or angst any more, but it’s still dark and she peers at the clock on his bedside table.

“Wes, it’s two in the freaking morning! What’s so important that you have to interrupt this killer dream about me and…”

He doesn’t say anything at first but walks to the bathroom and reaches behind the door to take down the white toweling robe.

“Put this on, please,” he says equably.

She staggers to her feet and lets him carefully thread her arms through the holes but she gives him a face full of grump to let him know that she's not down with having her beauty sleep snatched away from her.

“The study, I think,” he says and then turns and walks out the door and she has no choice but to follow him because he's using the voice and this had better be fucking good.

“I couldn't sleep,” he begins, when she curls up in the wing armchair opposite his. “Probably because I've been sleeping all day and I didn't want the morning to come with matters still so unresolved between us.”

She gives a sleepy, little yawn and stretches, feeling the familiar ache in her muscles from being locked rigid while she crested the wave of a serious orgasm. “I thought things got pretty damn resolved between us,” she mumbles.

He gives her this sly, little smile. “Yes, well I must admit that your guerilla tactics were rather effective in clearing up some of my more convoluted theories.”

“Your totally whacked theories, you mean.”

He nods his head a fraction. “I'm willing to concede that while my intentions were good, maybe the
practical application lacked something in the execution."

“I'm sorry Wes, I don't speak lawyer. Not at this time in the morning anyway. You wanna simple things up for me?”

“This isn't working,” he states baldly and her entire face feels as if it's dropped to the floor and she clings to the arms of the chair so her whole body doesn't follow it.

“What do you mean?” she whispers.

“No, no, Faith, I didn't mean us,” he assures her gently. “I meant my ridiculous notions of what constitutes normal. We're not normal, are we? Not either one of us.”

She lets herself relax just a fraction and sags back in the chair wondering whether it's possible for her to have a heart attack at the tender age of eighteen. “You finally got that memo, did you?” Her hands are in her hair, pressing down on her skull almost as if she can find the bit of her brain that can actually make sense out of stuff that's ultimately senseless. “Look, Wes, we do normal stuff all the time. We go to the movies and we eat breakfast and we floss. But it's the other stuff we do, makes us special. And anyway no one knows for real what other people get up to behind closed doors. Bet there's a whole bunch of other couples getting up to way kinkier shit than we've ever done.”

He lets her finish, which is one of the reasons why she loves him so much. He doesn't interrupt as she's stammering and trying to force the words out, just watches her through narrowed eyes, his gaze cool and assessing.

“We've taken risks. Appalling risks,” he says finally when the silence has almost had a chance to apply for its own show on cable. “And I know that sometimes I've hurt you, pushed you too far, no matter how prettily you insist otherwise. And I don't like how that makes me feel, Faith.”

She's flashbacking a series of freeze frames in her head. Being pushed up against his office door, the sound of her blouse ripped by his angry fingers. The whistle of the switch as it cut through the air and then the skin of her ass. The red, weeping marks on her wrists left by the belt when he tied her up. None of it was much fun.

“Okay, I get that, like, sometimes things got out of control but most times they don't and I love it. Like, there's nothing else but you and what you do to me and how it hurts and then you make it better, God, you make is so better and… and… how you've been these last couple of days, like you don't know me, like you're fucking scared to touch me, I don't want to be with that Wes. He's an asshole.” She shifts back in her seat, giving him a look from under her lashes because her little speech started in one place and ended up somewhere else, but he's leaning forward, eyes burning into her and he looks so fucking serious.

“You see, Faith, I wanted proof that you could love me without any of the games getting in the way…”

“I fucking do, Wes!”

Oh, that gets her the classic Wes glare. “Kindly let me finish,” he snaps and she bites her lips and sinks back down. “And even if you hadn't been so wonderfully solicitous of my wellbeing today, despite the fact that apparently I've been acting like an asshole,” he drawls out the word American style, almost putting air quotes round it, “I've been thinking that maybe your acceptance of me, of my needs, even my less appealing character traits, well…” He tails off and looks down at his hands, which are plucking at the knees of his jeans.
“Well?” she prompts.

“It might sound incredibly presumptuous of me but I believe I should stop worrying about why you love me and er, go with the flow.” He looks horribly embarrassed and she's not sure if it's because he just said the words 'go with the flow' or because he's had to agree with her on the whole asshole issue.

“You'd better fucking believe it, mister,” she says fiercely, getting up and sliding on to his lap. His hands settle round her waist as she presses tiny kisses along his jawline. “You might be big with the book learning, Wes, but sometimes you're so fucking stupid. I love you even though you're a control freak and you hurt me so badly. Not like that,” she assures him, as his fingers trace marks that aren't on her wrists any more. “By shutting me out and thinking you know what's good for us. You don't get to decide what's good for us, we both do.”

And she sounds so sure of herself, feet planted firmly on the moral high ground, even though she's aware that she's made plenty of bigass decisions about what's right for them, without asking his opinion. But it's not easy to bring it up, especially now. What's she gonna say: “Hey Wes, I'm giving my dad six thousand dollars of your money because he's got these sick pictures of us. That's okay, isn't it?”

She looks pleadingly at him, willing him to speak, to chase it all away, and obligingly, he cups the back of her head and pulls her in for a deep, wet kiss which makes her squirm against him, but when she grabs at his hand and tries to place it on her breast, he pulls away and tuts at her disapprovingly. “Don't think that your flagrant disregard for my rules, no matter how ill-advised they might have been, will go unchecked, Faith,” he drawls, giving her an arch smile that she's missed so much that she has to kiss it.

“I'm counting on it, Wes.”

“But you do have a point when you say that we should both contribute to decisions about our relationship, which is why I haven't been able to sleep. It seemed such an insurmountable problem given that we're, well… not like…”

He's floundering again, brow all wrinkled, hair still rumpled and he looks so fucking cute and he's being all wordy and trying so fucking hard to meet her halfway, that she's melting into a little puddle of goo.

“Because we're not normal,” she suggests, giving into the urge to rest her head on his shoulder.

“Well, no, I think that's become abundantly clear.” He shifts her on his lap so she's sideways on and she hitches her legs over the arm of the chair and burrows deeper against the warm, toasty smell of him. “But to avoid any more confusion, I've been working on a contract…”

“Huh?” Jesus, those joints he had at the cottage had addled his mind. “A contract? That's kinda cold, Wes.”

But his kiss and his hands on her are burning hot and she's wriggling frantically as he drags the flat of his tongue along her neck, gathering up the skin between his teeth and sucking hard. “It doesn't have to be, Faith. You may find that having a contract could afford you all sorts of benefits that you're unaware of.”

And she's just about to complain that he's speaking lawyer again when his hand flicks out and the loose knot holding her robe together comes undone, just like that. Which is a language she's fluent in, at least.
“For instance,” he continues, his fingers skittering across her belly like they're dancing and she bites back a giggle because it's just one pressure deeper than tickling, “you could have a clause that if you have to wait longer than an hour for an orgasm, you're allowed to eat one piece of food that's positively crammed full of sugar.”

Man, she likes the sound of that. It's practically a win/win situation because the orgasms she has to work for are always the best, plus she gets a Snickers bar on top of it. “And I get a say in the contract, right?” she asks suspiciously. “Because I want a clause that says that you never, ever wear your boxer shorts in bed again.”

It's hard to think because his fingers are tracing a lazy line along her inner thigh and he's peering intently at her skin in the dim lamp light. “You have a little trail of freckles just here,” he remarks almost dreamily. “I always kiss them when I get the chance.”

She clamps her legs tight shut, trapping his hand between them. “Off topic, counselor,” she mock-growls and he flexes his fingers experimentally and gives her a warning smile that she's on dangerous ground.

“Of course, we'll review the matter on a weekly basis and one of my clauses will be that Sunday afternoons are spent revising the contract and assessing how many times you've infringed on it.”

“And then I guess the rest of Sunday afternoon's gonna be spent with you taking the infractions out on my ass.” And she rubs that part of her against the part of him which is beginning to sit up and take notice.

All of a sudden she's being lifted as he stands up. “See, we're already finding common ground,” he tells her smugly as he begins to walk to the door. “We'll work on the draft tomorrow at lunchtime.”

“And then I'll make two copies,” she adds, clutching at his shoulders as he almost trips on the dangling belt of her robe. “Don't drop me. And then we'll both sign them and I'll file them in your study here so we can go over them on Sunday.” She ruffles his hair because she can't not. “Aren't I the perfect secretary?”

He toes open the door of his room. “I refuse to answer that appalling attempt to fish for a compliment, Faith, on the grounds that it might incriminate me.”

It takes two minutes until she's lying in bed, the comforting weight of him pressed against her back. One of his arms wrapped around her ribs, brushing the underside of her breasts as she takes deep, even breaths, his other hand resting heavily between her legs and even though she was wide awake and thinking of all the things she was going to put on her half of the contract, she's asleep within seconds.

Chapter Seventy-Five

She's just come in from her second smoke break of the morning at 10.45 on the dot to find Wes standing in the threshold of the hallway, a hefty sheaf of documents in hand. The phone's been ringing off the hook for hours and she got all glowy and smiling every time she heard him using that no bullshit, thank you very much voice on client after client. They were all full of petty demands this morning, but he fielded every call with a fortitude he hadn't exhibited in ages, leaving her feeling rather proud.

But that doesn't even begin match the feeling that squishes up in her chest when she sees him flash that patented goose bump-inducing smile of his before crossing over to her desk and plunking the documents down with a satisfying thud.
“Our contract,” he says, and she can't help but run her fingers over the neatly indented text, the pads of her fingertips thrilling over the indentations that the Selectric's daisywheel left after each impact on the thick bond paper. When the hell did he have the time to type this up? Can he even type? She snickers, thinking of him hunched over the keys, picking out letters one at a time, like an old, crusty journalist in a black and white film.

“What?” he says, peering down at her.

“You didn't actually type this yourself, did you?” She tries to hold the laughter in, and nearly loses it entirely when his forehead crinkles in dismay.

“Certainly not. This is just the most relevant a boilerplate contract I had on file.” He flips past the first few pages of affirmations. “I've made some revisions here.” He flips a few more pages. “And here. And all the other flagged pages.” She sees his neat handwriting in the margin, reading: Twinkies, Doritos, etc. and rubs her pinkie possessively over the crabbed letters, smudging the brown ink that's still a little damp. He must have written that in just a few moments before; he didn't even blot it properly. Just like that heriggles are gone and there's little tears pricking behind her eyes, and she's afraid to look at him, because if she does, her heart might just fucking explode. But then she realizes she can't exactly look at the paper either, because those tears become awfully real when she tries to focus on the recital paragraphs, the words now swimming on the page. His little scribbles and revisions are all over a prenuptial agreement.

She doesn't give a shit that she's really crying and snuffling now; forming a complete sentence is totally out of the question, but she tries anyway. “You... This... I...” She ends up just pointing at the words, index finger tapping them insistently.

“Well, I couldn't very well use a real estate contract, now could I? And I thought perhaps incorporation documents were a bit cold as well,” he says, handing her his handkerchief and tilting up her chin to plant a little kiss on her lips. “Why don't you let the calls roll over to the answering service while you look this over, as I'm sure you'll want to add your own riders? I'll order lunch in, and we'll discuss this at say...” He looks at his watch. “Twelve-thirty? Will that give you enough time to type up a new copy?”

“Yeah,” she croaks out and dabs the hankie at her eyes, staunching the rivulets of mascara that she’s sure must be running down her cheeks, making her look so lovely right at that moment. That's when a few words written in the margins catch her eye, regarding the number of cigarettes she could have per day, and the number of times she was allowed to use the word “fuck, fucking, or any other form of the word in the adjectival or exclamatory case,” and she feels like maybe instead of reaching for his hand and squeezing it meaningfully, as she had been thinking of doing, she should be kicking him in the shins instead.

“Hey! Hey! That was totally cheap, Wesley. Getting me all emotional like that—you'd better not be thinking that I wouldn't notice this fucking section.”

He gives a little guffaw and mutters, “Hardly,” and she yanks a well-chewed No. 2 pencil from the desk caddy, crossing out the “five cigarettes” and writing “up to one pack” over the strikethrough and then flips to the last page and writes: DIGUSTING FOOD RIDER: Under no circumstances will the party of the first part force the party of the second part to ingest asparagus or gross, stinky cheese from any European country. After tapping her eraser on the desk impatiently for a few seconds she adds: No liver or any form of foie gras EITHER!

“Well, I can see you're entering into this with a commendable enthusiasm,” he says in a snit she’ll bet, brie to donuts, is fake. “Do please remember that I’ll contest every amendment if I feel they’re prejudicial to what I’ve decided is best for you. For us.”
“Wes,” she complains. “You’re totally anticipating problems here.” She glares at him and nods meaningfully at the corridor leading to his room. “And I can’t concentrate when you’re looming over me.”

“Are you telling me to leave you alone?” he asks.

“You bet I am.”

“Really?”

He sounds so interested in that notion that she pauses, panics, and rephrases it. “Uh, maybe I’m reminding you, sir, that you’re supposed to calling Mrs. Linley back at eleven, and it’s nearly that now?”

“Efficient, polite and so very quick on the uptake. I’m impressed.”

She sticks her tongue out at him and loses it when he gives her an outraged glare even he can’t keep from turning into a grin. Then he goes off to soothe his client and she carries on with her notes, alternating between delighted giggles and indignant gasps.

_I have to stop calling him ‘Wes’ in office hours? Screw that!_ she thinks, scribbling in, ‘when clients are present’ with an emphatic nod and then relenting enough to add, ‘or I feel like it,’ because yeah, she gets off on the whole idea of him being her boss and it’s the one thing she regrets about the upcoming move. She starts to wonder who’ll be assigned to him in New York and feels a pang of sheer jealousy directed at that unknown person.

And there’s no fucking way he’s getting her to agree to ‘a complete cessation of the use of the adjective ‘pretty’ to describe the person of the first part.’ She underlines the, ‘Wes, you’re fucking pretty. Deal.’ with a deep, dark slash of her pencil and feels a glow of satisfaction. She’s not moving on that one, and if she has to pay for it, well, it’s worth it. Humming to herself, she doodles in some completely unnecessary hearts and carries on reading.

By the time the delivery arrives from their usual diner, she’s ready with two neatly typed, perfect copies. Well almost perfect; in the space for both their signature she’s—

“Faith, I have to assume you did this deliberately,” he says. After his first cursory read through, his eyebrows have been alternating between rising and snapping together, but it’s the final line that gets him. “In fact, if it wasn’t deliberate, I can only think that—”

“Totally deliberate, Wes,” she assures him after gulping down a bite of her sandwich. “Can’t tell me it doesn’t bring back pleasant memories?”

“Didn’t we recreate what happened the last time you spelled my name incorrectly just last night?” he asks pointedly.

“I guess.” Fuck, now she’s blushing. And staring at his desk, which she hasn’t seen up close and personal for a while.

“You’re really quite sentimental, aren’t you?” he drawls and she’s too taken aback to do more than gape at him. “Faith, I can’t begin to tell you how much of this will have to be altered.”

“Negotiated,” she hisses.

“Well, yes,” he concedes. “But implicit in that is the idea of compromise, so I suggest you begin to think of the areas in which you’re willing to do so. And—” he flicks back a few pages and thins his
lips, “might I also advise that you resign yourself to giving way completely on section 6.4?”

She knows which one that is and she gives him back a look she’s learnt at his knee, all steely-eyed and uncompromising. “Pretty sure I know which part you mean, Wes, and that’s staying.” She folds her arms and stares him down, watching the flush rise in his face.

“I think we’ll save this to discuss in detail on Sunday,” he decides. “And spend the intervening period in thought.” She’s actually got other plans, involving making up for lost time and the kind of orgasms that a girl remembers when she’s ninety, but she’ll spare a minute or two for the contract as it’s in her best interests.

“And now,” he says, with a bland smile that tells her he thinks he’s won a point, “I think you’d better get back to work, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” she coos with an outrageous flutter of her eyelashes and a sultry pout.

e raises his eyebrows. “Are you feeling unwell, Faith? A touch of indigestion, perhaps?”

She glares at him, snatches up her copy of the contract and leaves in a huff that lasts for about a minute before she’s dreaming about what they’ll do tonight. The phone’s an unwelcome intrusion into dreams that have left her clit throbbing gently, but she musters up her best secretarial voice as she warbles out her usual greeting.

“Well, don’t you sound chipper?" Liam slurs. And reality strangles her dreams and leaves them dying.

“What the fuck do you want?” she asks, knowing the answer, just as she’s known it since she was a child. He wants to hurt her, and the best she can hope for are the days when he doesn’t care enough to bother. When she was a kid, she used to play this game. Mostly when he and Darla were fighting and she couldn’t hear the roar of the TV over the roar of alcohol fuelled fury and bile. She’d shut her eyes and wish really hard that she was somewhere else. Never worked but she used to wonder if she just wasn’t wishing hard enough.

She tries again now; screwing her eyes tight shut so all she can see is her and Wes, hand in hand, floating high above the skyscrapers of the New York skyline.

“Can't a father phone his darling daughter?"

It didn't work. Never does.

“What do you want?” she repeats, her voice too scratchy to make it a proper hiss.

Liam pauses and it makes her heart lurch, like she’s caught between dreams and waking and falling forward. He never pauses unless even he realizes that he’s pushing things too far, too fast, too fucked.

“Baby, Mommy's not well and had a fall, you couldn't be an angel now, could you, and call 911?”

“That checks,” he says, turning on the Irish charm, which is so shop soiled that she wonders why he still bothers to make the effort. “What were you saying the withdrawal limit was again?”

She looks up to the heavens and finds that there's a big 'No Trespassers Allowed' sign hanging up. “A thousand, I told you already. Jesus!”

“No need for blasphemy there, Faithy,” Liam says disapprovingly. “You'll never make it past the
Pearly Gates with that kind of talk.”

She ignores him because she reckons that she's pretty much tagged on to his one way tickets to the burning fires of hell. “That first check was meant to last you ten days; it's only been a fucking week.”

And the fact that he's not hurling a spew of invective at her makes the goose bumps on her arms pop out. “Well now, I managed to run up the mother of all tabs at Paddy's and you wouldn't believe the spot of bad luck I had on the horses…”

“How many have you cashed?” she asks in this hollow voice, wishing that she'd been smarter that she'd doled out the checks one at a time.

“Well, there was one on Friday and, Faithy, I was cleaned out by Sunday night so I had to go to the bank again on Monday and I should be able to get there again before they close. Not like he can't afford it. When I think about what he's done to my poor little…”

“Just save it for someone who gives a fuck,” she mutters and then she can't hold it back any longer. “Three thousand in a week? Who the fuck do you think you are? Donald Trump? Like, he's not going to notice?”

“Aw, honey, sweetie, baby girl, give your old fella a break, will you?” He's trying to cajole her now, like they're the best of buds and she's Daddy's little girl. Then he plays his winning hand, even though he's a lousy poker player. “I've been thinking, Faithy, and maybe I could let you have another two snapshots of you and your boyfriend.”

“You are such a bastard…”

“I'm a bastard now, am I? Well, tell me this: would a bastard be looking out for you, telling Miss Lilah Morgan to stay the hell away from my little girl?”

The goose bumps are now accessorizing nicely with the cold sweat and she almost drops the phone through her clammy hands. “What did she say?” she gets out in this broken whisper. “She gonna leave us alone?”

“If she knows what's good for her,” Liam assures her with his usual punch-drunk bravado. “We're family, Faithy. Gotta stick together.”

And the really fucking laughably tragic part of it is that in this moment, in his addled brain, he believes it. “Dad, could you not cash another check, just leave it until next week. I can get you like, maybe one hundred and fifty dollars for the weekend. I just got paid…”

“I couldn't be taking the food out of your mouth,” Liam says, shocked that she'd suggest such a heinous thing, and then he ruins it. “Though if you could get me some more blank checks that'd be grand.”

“I can't, I really can't… if you knew what this is doing to me, Dad. Can't sleep, I can't eat… if he ever found out, he'd leave me and I'd want to die. Why the fuck do you have to ruin everything for me? Don't you want me to be happy?” And she thinks if she keeps talking long enough, if she can hit on the right combination of words, keep him on the phone until the banks close, she's bought herself another three days. Three days with Wes. Three days closer to getting the hell away from here, from him. Which goes to show how dumb she is.

“Ah, Faithy, you worry too much. He finds out then he'll spank you so hard that you won't be able to sit down for a week and you seem to like that, don't you, darling?”
“I fucking hate you.”

“So if you're hating me that much, then you won't want to meet up and get your photos then?” Liam crows. “What's it gonna be? Because I've got an appointment with my friend, the cashier.”

“I can meet you tomorrow,” she says dully, because there's no way out, just round and round in these endless circles. “One at the diner on Peachtree and Main. And I want two photos and the negatives or I'm canceling the rest of the checks right the hell now.”

And finally, he's ringing off with a breezy good-bye like he just phoned up to ask after her health and she's running down the corridor and into the bathroom so she can throw up the sandwich she has for lunch and the half cup of coffee that's now grown stone cold on her desk.

As she sits, trying to type with fingers that have turned into sausages she can't believe that Wes is still in his office. That her distress and misery aren't sending off some high-pitched sonic waves that are going to have him cat-footing in and demanding to know what the matter is.

Two cigarettes and a steno pad later, she's just coming in from the backyard when she hears her phone ringing and she's breaking the world sprinting record to get to it in time.

“Wesley Wyndam-Pryce's office,” she chokes out. “How may I help you?”

“Faith? It's Mrs. Waverly from the bank. You sound like you're coming down with something.”

She thinks she's going to die. Her whole body is shuddering between hot and cold and her feet are shaking so hard that she plants them firmly on the floor and wishes that her knee wouldn't keep banging against the desk.

“I'm fine,” she says and she's amazed that she still remembers how to speak. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Could you put me through to Mr. Pryce please, honey?”

She doesn't even have the time to cut her off but sees her fingers moving in slow motion and punching the R button on the phone, followed by Wes' extension.

“I've got Mrs. Waverly from the bank for you,” says the girl who sounds like her and Wes is making this tutting sound because he's been interrupted and then telling her he'll take the call and she's sitting there and watching the red light on her phone and it's glowing and glowing, taunting her and then suddenly it's not lit up anymore and she feels even worse.

She sits there, statue-still, waiting for his door to open because of course it will and it does and she can't move, just listens to the pad of his footsteps get nearer and nearer.

Her eyes are fixed on the archway waiting for him to come into view and it's almost a shock when suddenly he's there, a slight frown on his face that fades when he sees her.

“I have to go to the bank,” he's saying but his voice is coming from a long way away. “It's really very inconvenient… are you all right, Faith? You're very pale.”

She opens her mouth and there's nothing to say and now he's frowning properly, walking toward her and she's shifting back on the chair as he places a cool hand on her forehead, in a repeat of the same move she made the other night.

“You're absolutely freezing,” he says worriedly and he sounds so concerned, so like he fucking
cares, that she can feel another wave of nausea hitting her so she has to get to her feet, the chair crashing back into the wall and push past him to get to the bathroom.

She makes it just in time, throwing herself on to her knees and puking up mouthful after mouthful of bile. And then she feels his hands in her hair, holding it out of the way, rubbing her back soothingly, then lifting her up from her prone position and sitting her gently down on the chair while she starts to cry.

“Was it something you ate?” he inquires softly, snagging a handful of toilet paper and running it under the cold tap.

“I don't know,” she mumbles, taking the damp, wadded tissue from him because she can't bear his gentle, deliberate movements when she doesn't deserve them.

He stands there, hesitant, head tilted as he looks at her and she can't do anything but turn away from him. “Maybe I should take you home first,” he murmurs. “You really are incredibly pale.”

“No, Wes, I'm fine, you go,” she says in a voice that sounds like she's upgraded to three packs of cigarettes a day. “I can get a cab, I'll be okay.”

It takes her three minutes and, like, a thousand different permutations of the phrase “I'm fine”, before he gives in.

“I don't like to leave you like this but Mrs. Waverley said it was rather urgent though I can't imagine what's so pressing,” he says irritation sharpening his words as he helps her back to Reception like she's a doddery maiden aunt. “I'm sure it's nothing more catastrophic than me writing the date wrong again.”

“Huh?”

He pauses in wrapping her cardigan round her shoulders and gives her a rueful smile. “I always forget that you Colonials put the month before the day and the bank seem to get awfully irate when I insist on doing it the other way round.”

It's totally stupid but the tiny flicker of hope is starting to thaw her out.

“You think that's all it is?” she asks him eagerly. “That you still write British?”

He drops a kiss on the top of her head. “If it hadn't been for the unmitigated disaster that was the War Of Independence, Faith, you'd all be writing British,” he intones huffily and then he drops the act and gives her another of those soft like feathers looks that makes her want to throw up all over again. “You're to call the car service and I expect to find you tucked up in bed when I get home. Is that clear, Faith?”

She nods slowly. “Yeah, but really, Wes…”

“Yes, I know, you're fine and I fuss like an old woman,” he says, pulling on his jacket and then he opens the door, steps out and it's almost like he's swallowed up by the blinding sunlight and she can't do anything to stop it.

Chapter Seventy-Six

At least when he's gone, she doesn't feel like she's about to puke. That's also kind of because she remembered what Darla used to tell her about putting your head between your knees and taking deep breaths if you felt queasy. She doubles over in her desk chair and makes a lame stab at breathing
evenly for a few moments—and yeah, that helps a little, but it really doesn't get rid of the whole new wave of aloneness that sweeps over her.

Staring at the pointed toes of her shoes through the thick curtain of her hair, she's suddenly very aware that there's no one she can call, no shoulder to cry on. No point in worrying about that now. Hell, she's sick of crying today anyway, and she shoves the heels of her palms over her eyes and tries to think clearly for a minute. It's fucking impossible, though, and all she can think of is Wes striving purposefully into the bank to find the cops carting Liam away. It's just gotta be the dates, right? It's just a coincidence that he botched a check on the same day, right? But that line of thinking just makes her head spin again. It's just too much to think about now, so she gets up with a sigh and switches on the autopilot, wandering through the office, shutting the curtains and turning off all the lights, and calls a cab to take her home.

The house is dark and quiet and empty and the biggest echo chamber of all time. It takes every ounce of effort she's got left to force down a glass of water and in the end she doesn't even make it up to bed. Kicking off her shoes and collapsing on the sofa, bone-weary and ragged, she's asleep within minutes.

She's faintly aware that Wes is stroking the bridge of her nose, a new habit he's picked up since the weekend in the cottage by the ocean, which seems so far away now. But he's close now, so close she can tell he's already had a cocktail for the evening; his breath is warm and suffused with scotch. She takes it as a good sign that the warm spiciness is comforting and doesn't make her want to retch. “I told you,” she mumbles, still half-asleep. “You don’t do that to wake people up. You use it to put them to sleep.”

“In keeping with your contrary ways, Faith, I've found it to be the most effective way to rouse you. I believe I expressly indicated that I was to find you in bed and not on the sofa.” His voice is low and soothing and he's moved to stroking her hair and she just wants to curl up next to him in bed forever and never come out.

It takes her a few more groggy moments to realize that, miracle of miracles, he's not yelling, not throwing her out—so it must have been some bureaucratic bullshit at the bank after all.

“It was the silliest thing at the bank,” he says, so on-cue it's almost suspicious, but she'll take any small relief at this point. “Not even worth mentioning.” He takes another sip of his drink. “Are you still feeling ill? I brought you some soup—not from the diner, of course.”

She struggles to sit up and shakes her head. “I can't eat. I just really want to go to bed now.” She can't deny that it would be nice to be lost in a blur of pleasure and pain for a few hours, but if she's asleep, he can't ask her if she's fine every few minutes. She won't have to fight back the tears for a few hours. She won't have to feel guilty every time he's sweet or tender or loving; won't have to feel guilty that he's still mercifully unaware of everything she's hiding.

And when he doesn't say anything and just scoops her up and carries her upstairs to bed, she realizes this is what it's gonna be like now, fighting the battle a few hours at a time and snatching slivers of stillness whenever she can.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Because she’s young, healthy and her body doesn’t seem to realize that she’s in the fucking pits of despair, she wakes up at around nine, starving, horny and restless. It’s a mood swing that’s as unexpected as it is unwelcome because it means there’s no way she can stay curled up in bed, alone in the dark. And that means she’s got to face Wesley, who’s probably wondering what the hell’s wrong with her.
Inspiration strikes. If she gets Wes in the right mood he’s not going to asking any questions because he’s going to be doing the equivalent of eating a pizza and a gallon of ice cream after being on a diet for a week. Which has the added benefit of solving two of her problems as well.

Afterward, she’s not quite sure if she wasn’t a little feverish, or maybe not quite as awake as she thought, but at the time it all makes perfect sense. She freshens up, humming to herself as she paints her lips in a kiss me color, and brushes her hair with long, dragging strokes that leave it silky and curling wildly at the same time. Then she goes to her room and searches through the closet until she finds what she needs.

She walks down the stairs, mind blank of everything but what she’s got planned, and into the living room, where Wesley’s lying back on the couch, a book in his hand and nothing for company but some music he’s turned down so low it might as well not be on—in case she called out to him, she finds out later.

He looks at her, and the words he was about to say, which she’d bet involved asking how she was, never leave his lips. He swallows, which for Wes is the equivalent of an extreme reaction, and the book gets closed and put aside. “I can only assume you have something in mind, Faith,” he says, with an intonation to his voice that’s not quite cool enough to hide his curiosity, the same way that his position isn’t enough to hide the way his cock’s starting to harden. “Am I supposed to guess? Or do you plan on telling me?”

She spins in a slow, lazy circle, giving him chance to see her, dressed just as she would’ve been for a night at the club with Xander; red halter top, no bra, short, tight leather skirt skimming the curve of her ass and finishing a few inches farther down her thighs. Black, barely there tights, cheap black high heeled shoes that’s she’s danced in until they’re as comfortable as slippers.

Faith in her pick-up gear. Faith in her slut costume. Faith on the pull, out for fun, Faith as he’d seen her the first time.

“You wanted me when you saw me like this, Wes,” she says, making her voice low and husky.

She moves over, CD in hand, and changes the music, knowing he’s watching her though he’s silent now. She turns the volume up and smiles as the steady beat hammers out, bringing her old world into his, a brash intrusion that he doesn’t like, if the slight frown’s anything to go by, but that he doesn’t protest.

She doesn’t start to dance, but when she walks over to him there’s an exaggerated sway to her hips and she’s forgetting the way the clubs used to make her feel lonely and used and remembering the heat, solid and wet, so every breath she took was soaked in it, so she was filled, inside and out, with the noise and the lights and the heat and standing still just wasn’t an option.

She’d fucked more men as she danced than she had in the bathrooms, dark corners and alleyways. Writhed against them, letting their eager hands paw and pry, pouted at them, whispered words they couldn’t hear, felt their cocks dig against her stomach, her ass, then swirled away, grinning back over her shoulder, and wrapping her arms around someone else. Fucked them in a different way than they wanted, but hey, girl’s gotta have fun, and now she knows Wes was watching her back then, watching, wishing, wondering.

“I’d have gone home with you,” she says, and it might not be true, but she wants to think it is. Wants to think she’d have seen what he was right away, responded to it. “Why don’t you pretend I did?”

He stands and walks over to her, pausing a few feet away. His gaze sweeps over her, head to toe, and then he tilts his chin and purses his lips in silent contemplation of her charms. “No,” he says and
there’s a sickening sense of disappointment and, yes, humiliation, because being turned down by him isn’t ever going to make her list of favorite things, but then he smiles, a predatory, totally hungry smile. “As ever, Faith, you’re just a little inclined to rush things.”

“What?” “Give me a moment to change and we’ll do this properly,” he says, being suspiciously agreeable. “You can wait for me in the car; I won’t be long. Thursday night...hmm. It won’t be very busy, but if I remember rightly, it’s happy hour at the Alibi until midnight.” He gives her a meaningful look. “And, Faith?”

She can barely speak, she’s so busy freaking at the idea of going to a club with Wes, but she manages to croak, “Yes?”

“I went there to pick up girls. I didn’t go to dance.”

She absorbs the warning and then shrugs. “You want to pick me up, Wes, that might have to change.”

There’s a long moment when their eyes meet and then he smiles, with a promise of danger in his eyes that makes her quiver. “Oh, we are going to have fun, aren’t we?”

Chapter Seventy-Eight

The second that she gets in the car, she tunes the radio in to a station playing old rock ‘n’ roll classics and settles down to wait for him.

The leather of her skirt slips against the seat and it's impossible to get comfy, which just adds to her feeling of restlessness. This is either the best idea she's ever had, that he's ever had, or else it's going to go horribly wrong and she'll end up having to go home with some biker called Chuck who wants her to be his den mamma.

But she's so keyed up and tense, mostly about what the fuck Wes is going to change into (and she hopes that he hasn't got some hideous pulling outfit that's twenty years too young for him) that it works better than a hefty whack on the head with a crowbar at filtering out any thoughts that she doesn't want in there.

And, Jesus! What the fuck is taking him so long?

She's just working herself up into a state of mild hysteria in case they bump into Xander when she hears the click of the internal garage door and she wriggles in the seat like this is a first date or something equally whacked.

There's barely time to register what he's wearing, which is jeans and a dark-colored T-shirt and she's marveling at the previously unimagined image of Wes in a T-shirt and yum, a really expensive looking, black leather jacket that she's never seen before, when he settles in beside her and smirks at the blatant way she's staring at him.

“You have a leather jacket, Wes? You been holding out on me all this time,” she teases and she's using a voice that's a little cracked from such a long time in retirement. A voice that's half flirt, half promise, meant to be slurred in someone's ear over the thump thump thump of a heart-shuddering bassline.

He gives her this look, amused but with just enough bite to it so that she knows that if they were back in the library he'd have her tipped over his lap in the blink of an eye. Instead he shoves a brown paper bag at her.
There's something warm in it and she opens it to find a thermos flask and a warmed bread roll wrapped in napkin.

“I don't want you drinking on an empty stomach,” he says, leaning over toward the radio and then thinking better of it. It's a tiny, tender moment out of this weird time that they're about to have. “And if you get a single crumb anywhere on my upholstery, Faith, I'm afraid you'll have to suffer my wrath.”

“You really need to start working on your threats because they're kind of losing their edge, Wes.” She grins at him and he gives her a smile that's an eighth of an inch away from savage and starts the car.

It takes just over an hour to drive in to the city and neither one of them say much. There's this air of anticipation unfurling between them and she can't stop fidgeting, legs and arms twitching, and he's doing a cool hundred miles an hour down the freeway which just makes the itch in her veins that little bit more intense.

By the time he's pulling up to the curb, just down the street from the Alibi, she has to force herself to try and stay still. She wants to be moving, in motion, dancing in a crowd of hot, sweaty strangers and knowing that it's all for him, hidden in the shadows, watching her.

“How are we gonna do this?” she blurts out. “Are there any rules I should know about?”

He gives her this slow, cool smile, completely at odds with the burn of his gaze which stings her flesh, so her nipples are hard beneath the red halter top and there's this hot, sticky feeling between her legs.

“Just one,” he drawls and his knuckles are white on the dashboard. “You can smile at them, you can dance with them, let them grind against you, Faith, as they'll no doubt want to, but if I see you touch them, then, well…you can forget about being able to sit down for the rest of the month.”

“I wouldn't want…” she begins, but he stills her frantic rush of words by placing a finger against her lips.

“I'll see you in there,” he says and leans across her, his wrist brushing against her aching breasts to open her door.

She's almost forgotten the girl she used to be; the one who doesn't wait in line but gets the velvet rope unclipped for her by the bouncer she shared a moment or two with last New Year's Eve. The girl who doesn't have to pay the cover because she gave the guy on the door a blowjob last Halloween. The girl who doesn't even have to pull a ten dollar bill when she gets to the bar because some vaguely familiar looking guy with a Strokes T-shirt is asking her if she wants a drink.

She lets him buy her a double vodka and Red Bull, stays long enough to chug it back in three long gulps and listen to his lame attempts at a pick-up line, before she's giving him a “what can you do?” smile and heading right for the center of the dance floor.

It's been so long, that for a second she just stands there frozen, not sure what she's going to do and the last beats of the song are ebbing away and then she hears the slow fade-in of an old Daft Punk tune and her hips are swaying and her arms are rising up above her head and she starts to move.

The song merges into the next one and she feels lit up; like the music's washing over her and all she can do is dive right in. And, yeah, there are boys catching her eye and sidling up, trying to match her steps and the shake of her hips but she doesn't let her eyes linger. And Wes might have his one rule
but she has one too. Not going to let anyone buy her a drink that she hasn't seen the barman pour herself. That was one lesson learned the hard way; losing six hours of her life and waking up in a strange room, all sticky and sore, with some guy she'd never seen before lying next to her on a cum-stained mattress.

It's the familiar pattern of her feet moving on the sticky floor, chasing a dance of her own making, then heading for the bar, fighting her way through the crowd, avoiding the catty stares of the girls whose boyfriends were leering at her. But tonight, it feels different because she knows he's in here somewhere, watching her, waiting—because he's gonna make her wait until she's frantic with it—for just the right moment to pick her up, take her somewhere and rewrite history with his fingers and his tongue and his cock when he fucks her.

And then she forgets about him. Because they're playing her favorite song, and then the one after that and the one after that and the one after that is also her favorite and all she wants to do is lose herself in feeling. Her hair's damp as she brushes it impatiently back from her face and sings along, “I'm moving on up now out of the darkness…,” grinding out the rhythm and then she feels an arm clamp round her waist.

She rolls her eyes and gets ready to dig whoever the fuck it is in the ribs with her elbow when she feels his breath hot on her neck. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Wes.

Chapter Seventy-Nine

If she didn't know better, she'd think Wes had paid off the DJ to spin out the soundtrack to their little fantasy night, because the music's changed gears and the mix slips into the cold grind of electro, and she doesn't know whether to roll her eyes or take it as an omen as the speakers blare out “they only want you when you're seventeen, when you're twenty-one, you're no fun.”

She slithers out of his grasp, spinning 'round to face him. She's not ready for that drink, not just yet—just clamps her hand around his wrist and pulls him with her deeper into the writhing crowd.

“In a minute,” she says, getting up right close after finding a clear space on the floor, crushing her breasts against his chest and leaning in so he can hear her over the bombastic throbbing music. “I like this song.”

She doesn't expect him to dance with her; but he sure as hell didn't fight when she pulled him over here and he doesn't look nearly as uncomfortable as she'd expected. He's shed the jacket at coat check and probably had what she reckons to be at least three fingers of scotch just to come out of the shadows. He smells like expensive leather and even more expensive booze, which, until that moment, she didn't know the Alibi even stocked behind the bar.

She likes being smooshed up next to him like this and runs with it, wrapping her arms around his waist and pulling him closer until they're doing a kind of dirty grind at half speed to the beats ping-ponging from the speakers. “I knew you could dance, at least a little,” she says during a quiet segue, with a little knowing smile that's probably a breach of protocol for this game, but she so doesn't give a shit because she'll have this Hallmark moment tucked away for later. He's about to say something, but is drowned out with the aggressive thumping of The Faint. She just shakes her head with a laugh, clamping her hand possessively around his wrist again, and making a bee-line for her favorite bartender.

They're just crossing over to the part of the club where you can kind of hear yourself think again when this girl, this wan little blonde who kind of looks like Buffy Summers, if you cock your head
and add some smack to the equation, comes slinking out of the shadows, right into their path.

“Hey. Heeeeey, Wesley!” Blondie’s a slurring mess, an early drunk; teetering in her Manolos, straps of her ill-fitting cocktail dress slipping down her shoulders.

“Wow, you sure can pick ’em, darling,” Faith hisses in his ear as she slides around to miss a collision with Blondie's prissy pink cocktail. The high, hot track lights have thrown half his face in shadow, and with his lips pulled into a thin line, he looks downright sinister.

“Don't you remember me, Wesley?” Blondie simpers, adopting an awkward pose that thrusts her minuscule rack right up in their faces. “We had such a great time that night. But you like, never called me!”

“Mmm. Yes. Claudia?” Wes drawls at her, sliding his index finger over her elbow and up her arm to push a wayward dress strap back up to rest on her shoulder. She whips away, as if he's shocked her with a Taser.

“Hey, don't touch me, asshole! And fuck you. My name is Christina!”

“Very well then, Christina.” He's got that voice on, the one that's like the silence before slivers of shattered glass come tinkling to the floor after a wayward baseball comes crashing through a window. “I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, I hate to leave the barkeep waiting.” He wraps his arm possessively around Faith's waist. “It was lovely running into you.”

His hands are steady as he steers her to the bar, but she can see them shake a little as he picks up their drinks and leads her to one of the dark, plush booths that line the back wall of the club. She slides into the booth and he follows her, sitting next to her and leaning forward so she can't see anything but him.

“Cheers,” he says, handing her the vodka and Red Bull he's just bought for her and waiting for her to clink it against his whiskey.

And she's not entirely sure how he wants to play this but she has a pretty damn good idea. “So, like, you English?”

He smiles faintly into his glass and she knows that she's on the right page. “Yes.” He doesn't give her anything more than that, unless you count the way his eyes are running over her, assessing her, like he's just bought her or something and he wants to check that she's in full working order before he plugs in. “What's your name?”

She takes a good long suck on the straw that's poking out of her drink and shoots him a flirtatious look from under her lashes. “Tiffany.”

“You don't look like a Tiffany,” he drawls, his hand reaching up to brush a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” she says and smirks. “And you're Wesley, or at least that's what your skanky little friend just called you.”

And if she sounds jealous, then hell, yeah she is. “Wes,” he corrects her and then slides a fraction of an inch nearer, so his thigh is pressed against her and he's leaning his arm over the back of the seat so it's like there's only them. “Chrissie or Christina or whatever her name was; really not someone you need to concern yourself with. You're very pretty, Tiffany.”

“I get that a lot too,” she husks, inching away from him and pressing her back against the wall so he
can get a better view of her breasts and just like he's been handed the instruction on a flashcard, his eyes are fixed on them.

“How old are you?”

“How old do you want me to be, Wesley?” She kinda feels that she's been shoved on a stage and she already knows the script though she didn't have time to read it while she was waiting in the wings. And she's fiercely glad that it never went down like this, that she was never just some girl that he picked up in a club, fucked her, forgot her name. But she's happy to pretend for just one night, more than happy because he's leaning into her so every single molecule in her body is straining toward him and all it takes is the pad of his index fingers trailing a lazy line up her thigh to make her suddenly, shockingly wet.

“I'd rather like you to be legal,” he decides after a moment's thought, finger tracing a figure of eight and grazing the edge of her skirt on the upstroke. His tongue licks a blazing trail along her earlobe as he suddenly moves in for the kill. “You are, aren't you?”

“Barely,” she breathes. “Guess it's your lucky night.”

And he gives her a slow, satisfied smile and pulls away from her, leaving a respectable six inches between them on the seat. “Why don't you tell me about yourself, Tiffany?”

Now it's her turn to sidle closer to him and with every story she makes up about Tiffany, making head cheerleader, acing her SATs, her best friend, Brandi, she shifts another inch nearer to him. And it's not just the four double shots of vodka that are making her lightheaded, or the reflection of the strobe lights in his blue eyes; she's getting off on being someone else. Some golden girl who leaves her perfect life behind to sneak out to clubs but when she comes home at some ungodly hour in the morning that perfect life is still waiting for her: Mom, Dad, her little sister Amber, who fucking worships her, and Charlie, her cocker spaniel who sleeps at the foot of the bed.

And Tiffany has all that and she's going to get fucked by Wes. Man, who wouldn't want to be her?

“You're a very accomplished girl,” Wes says, finishing the last dribble of whiskey in his glass. “I'm sure that you have a devoted boyfriend somewhere.”

The words pop out of her mouth before she's even thought them because she's so wrapped up in her sunny fake life that she's gone totally method. “You wanna know a secret, Wes?” she says, biting her lip and looking away as if she's going to confess that actually she murdered Mom, Dad, annoying little Amber who trashes her clothes and even Charlie, and buried them under the patio. “It's kinda embarrassing but you look like a decent, upstanding guy.”

Wes' hand covers hers where it rests on the sticky tabletop and turns it over so he can rub his finger over the fleshy mound just below her thumb. And it's the exact same way that he teases her clit when he's fucking her and he wants to keep her right up there without actually spilling over into orgasm. “Only if you'd like to tell me, Tiffany.”

She swings her legs up, kneels on the seat and crawls toward him. “I've never, like, done it.”

His mouth hangs open for a split second and then he's schooling his features into something that resembles polite interest, arching his eyebrow meaningfully. “You're still a virgin? I'd never have assumed… the way you let those boys rub themselves against you when you dance.”

And his hands are on her hips at exactly the same moment that she lifts herself up so she can clamber on to his lap, the hard rim of the table digging into the small of her back, which matches the hard
throb of his cock prodding against her thigh. “Well, see, Wes, none of the boys I hang around seem to know what to do and so I came here looking for someone who’d…”

“Fuck you in a style to which you'd like to be accustomed?” he suggests archly. “Well, Tiffany, I rather think it's your lucky night, don't you?”

Then his hands are gently cupping the back of her head so he can bring her lips closer to his, his tongue snaking into her mouth, and it's slow and sweet and measured like it's the first time he's ever kissed her and he wants to savor her taste.

And Tiffany's way inexperienced, despite her nice line in sleazy club wear and she's getting really hot straddling the lap of the sinister but attractive older guy so who can blame her for grabbing his hands and placing them on her tits? “I'd really like you to be my first, Wes,” she hisses as he cups her breasts, tracing the tip of her hard nipples as she grinds against him. “You wanna go where no man has gone before?”

He gives her another NC17 rated kiss, all wet and hard and stubbly, before tipping her off his lap and placing her on her trembly feet. “Very much,” he says, standing up and she's forgotten how tall Wes is, how he can loom over her and give her a shark-like smile that's as scary as it is sexy. “But I doubt your devoted parents would appreciate me deflowering their daughter on her Bed, Bath and Beyond sheets.”

Tiffany disappears stage left for a second as she glares him. If he thinks he can get her all primed and good to go, then wimp out on her, he's got another fucking thing coming. Or, like, not. “The bathroom,” she says frantically, grabbing a handful of his ass and rubbing her thigh against his. “We can see if the end stall's free.”

“Oh, Tiffany, Tiffany, Tiffany,” he sighs sorrowfully, tutting and tipping up her chin so he can give her a reproachful look. “I really don't think a toilet cubicle is an appropriate venue. Your first time should be special.”

“You could take me back to your place?” The back of her hand brushes against his cock, which feels like it's going to make a bid for freedom any second.

He stills her hand. “I don't think my wife would be very keen on that idea. She can be annoyingly jealous.” And fuck him because he chuckles like he loves the idea of some little woman waiting for him at home while he's trawling the clubs looking for innocent little girls to fuck.

“Well, fuck you!” she snarls, whirling round and all ready to dive back on to the dance floor and start this game again so she's Faith and she's going to get…

“Yes, that is the general plan, Tiffany,” he purrs in her ear, wrapping his arms round her waist and letting her feel the insistent promise of his cock against her ass. “Oh, stop pouting, princess. I know a place where we can go.”

And she’s not sure she likes that he knows somewhere, not sure at all. Because, even more than Little Miss Name Begins With ‘C’, it’s making her realize that, yeah, this might be a game for them tonight but it’s something Wes has done before. She thinks about it as Wes retrieves his jacket and weaves his way through the crowd, not looking back because he’s so fucking sure she’ll be there, and if she isn’t he can always go and get a Traci, a Tara, a—

“Wes!” She tugs at his arm and he halts and glances back at her.

“Having second thoughts?”
And she is, which is why she’s biting her lip hard enough that it stings and throbs, but not about being fucked by him. That, she wants.

“No.” She slips into his arms, tilting her head back and giving him the most provocative smile she’s got as she rubs up against him. “Just making sure you’re still in the game, Wes.”

She keeps her arms locked around his neck, wrists crossed, hands not touching him, but she tilts her hips forward until she can feel what’s waiting for her. He’s hard enough that it starts a low ache between her legs but she doesn’t let her reaction show, just widens her eyes and moans like she’s got a mouthful of hot fudge sundae melting sweetly against her tongue.

“Mmm, guess you are.”

She lets her lips get close enough to his that a pout’s all she’d need to make them touch, and whispers, “You’re going to have to tell me what to do, you know.”

He smiles down at her as he reaches up to tug her hands away, circling her wrists with his fingers in a light grip. It’s a fucking scary smile and it’d probably have Tiffany running home to cuddle her teddy but Faith’s not going anywhere.

“And will you be obedient?” His fingers tighten. “Or will you need correcting?”

If she could just stop thinking about who else he’s said this to, she’d be fine, but she can’t and it’s razor-edging every word. “Guess we’ll have to wait and see,” she says. “Always been quick at picking stuff up, though.”

“I’m sure you have,” he says, all cool eyes and bruising fingers. “It’s possible though, that I might have slightly more exacting standards than you’re accustomed to.”

And before she can ride out the shiver of lust that sends through her, he’s dragging her off, one hand still clamped around her wrist so that’s she’s stumbling to keep up with him. When they get into the street he slips his hand into hers instead, and the feel of his fingers threaded through hers is all that keeps her from spitting out a seething spate of words that would all be so unfair because when he was picking up girls to fuck, she was yards away on her knees sucking dicks that went limp when she was done, skinning her knees on filthy concrete. Reason’s left the building though. She feels as if he’s betrayed her because he’s hers and she wants him to always have been hers. Past, present, future; hers.

“Stop it,” he says quietly as they come to his car. “Stop thinking about it.”

“Can’t help it,” she gasps out, and it’s muggy and hot out here, but compared to the club it’s a winter’s night and she can feel every drink slam into her body and loosen her knees and her tongue. “That girl—all of them—fuck, Wes. I hate them. I want to hit them. I want to hurt them for having you, any part of you. It’s stupid and wrong and I hate myself for feeling like this, but I can’t fucking help it.”

There’s an astonished look on his face and he clears his throat as if he’s lost for words. “Faith—”

And hearing him call her by name is all it takes to ground her again. She leans forward and kisses him fiercely, letting her tongue slide deep and curl around his. “Now, how did you know that’s my real name, Wes? You been keeping tabs on me? Are you mad I lied to you? Because a girl’s got to have some secrets you know.”

He pushes her away just enough to study her face and then nods slowly. “I asked the barman,” he says smoothly, back in his role as if he never left it. “I gave him money and he told me all about you.
You’ve got quite a reputation, it seems.” He brings his hand up to her breast and flicks her nipple with his thumb, pinching it so that it swells and hardens against the thin stretch of her top. “You’ll go so far, and then you stop. Do you like teasing those boys, Faith?” His mouth’s hot against the hollow of her throat. “And do you really think I’ll permit you to do that to me?”

She can feel herself sway and his arm snakes around her waist, supporting her. “Maybe I’ve been waiting for someone special,” she says. She takes a quick breath and gets herself together enough to make her next words a taunt and a challenge. “Think you’re it?”

“Get in the car if you want to find out,” he says and turns away abruptly.

She misses him opening the door for her but there’s something satisfying in knowing he wouldn’t have done it for Tiffany or—fuck, even she can’t remember that girl’s name.

“Nice car,” she says, running her fingers over the leather seat as Wes pulls out into traffic with barely a glance behind him. “You get it to match your jacket?”

That gets her a chuckle. “Not really.”

“So where’re we going then?” she asks after a long silence, wondering if even Wes has the balls to go somewhere snazzy with someone like her and ask for a room. Not that he’s heading to the good part of town. The streets are the kind where every third light’s been smashed and there’s litter piled high against trash cans that haven’t been emptied in weeks.

“Not far now,” he says, turning off the main street and making his way through a maze of streets without hesitating. His hand moves over to her thigh and even though the way he drives she really thinks he should keep it on the wheel, she’s had enough experience with his multi-tasking not to protest.

His hand doesn’t inch higher as if by doing it slowly she’s not gonna notice he’s heading for her cunt; no, this is Wes, he just puts his hand exactly where he wants it and says in a conversational voice, “Are you wet?”

“What the hell kind of a question is that?” she says, with the words bursting out of her.

She’s so into this now that she’s genuinely outraged, as much by the question as the smile that quirks up his lips.

“One I suggest you answer,” he says, “unless you’d prefer I find out a more direct way?”

She can’t speak, just gives him this imploring, helpless look, and he sighs, sounding a little bored, a little impatient, with the pulse beating strongly at his throat giving him away. “Very well. Spread your knees a little wider, please.”

They’re parting before she can stop them, because when he drawls out a command like that her body knows it’s going to get a treat. Eventually. Long, warm fingers move high, go deep. “Fuck!” If she’d been driving, they’d have crashed. He’s managed to bypass her soaked thong and thrust two fingers into her, with the heel of his hand rubbing hard against her clit and his elbow holding her in place, pressing against her stomach.

“Oh, you are wet, aren’t you?” he murmurs. “Does that feel good, Faith?”

“Yeah,” she gasps. “Feels fucking amazing.”

He lets her writhe against his hand until they pull up at a red light and then he pulls away, drying his
fingers on one of those handkerchiefs he always has handy. “Here we are.”

He pulls up outside a hot sheet motel that’s had the nerve to call itself the Alhambra, in front of a concrete planter that’s growing nothing but cigarette ends and oh, look, a really rare can of Bud, and smiles at her. “One hour should be sufficient, I think. Wouldn’t want to keep you up too late.”

She’s got just enough control to say tartly, “Yeah. Hate to oversleep; my boss is like totally freaked about the whole punctuality thing, y’know?”

“Really?” he says, opening the door. “He sounds most unreasonable. Perhaps you should hand in your notice.”

She watches him as he hands over enough cash to buy an hour in a twelve by twelve box with paper thin walls and sheets threadbare with use, and hopefully washing, and smiles. “Never gonna happen, Wes,” she says softly.

He locks the car, unlocks the motel door and walks in. She doesn’t miss the fact that he knows just where the light switch is.

“Home sweet home,” she mutters under her breath and if Wes hears it he doesn’t say anything, just shrugs off his jacket and throws it down on the ratty chair. She’s a little sorry he even turned on the light, because the place is as seedy and depressing as she’d thought it would be. The bedside-table Bible is a well-thumbed through copy of “Leg Show” (management is obviously detail-oriented), the bed sags alarmingly toward the floor, there’s water stains everywhere and some other, mysterious ones that she really doesn’t want to think too hard about—when all of a sudden the vodka isn’t working all that well and she’s feeling kinda nervous about this whole thing. She sure as hell misses the Egyptian cotton sheets already.

She’s not gonna let that change anything though. But she wouldn’t turn down another red bull and vodka if that meant getting rid of the weird little knot in her stomach.

He cuts off that train of thought quickly enough. “I’m going to undress you now.” He’s coolly assured as always; the full force of his conviction is enough to make her fall back into the moment, right back into the role she’s chosen for herself.

“What? I mean, don’t you want me to—”

He pins her up against the door, palm open flat against her thigh. And he’s giving her this steely, intense stare that’s chilling and really fucking hot at the same time. “How far are you willing to go, Faith?” And Jesus, if she hadn’t been wet before…

He’s not boxing her in anymore, but one hand is ghosting lightly over one nipple, almost absentmindedly, and he’s pushed her panties aside with the other. She’s trying to stay in the game, but the promise of his deft fingers is almost enough to make her forget her fucking name…

Thank Christ she’s not—Tiffany?—anymore but she’s not all that sure which version of Faith she is either. Or which Wes he is, for that matter. She’s pretty sure she’ll find out soon enough.

He hooks his fingers into the waistband of her panties and begins to slide them down, slowly. “You’ll not be needing these.” She parts her thighs just enough so they drop to the floor, the tiniest moan escaping her lips as he pinches her nipple, hard.

Then he’s leaning close and whispering in her ear: “Has anyone else ever made you come, Faith? Tell me the truth.” And he almost fucking smirks when he says it.
Three fingers now. They're making these slight, slow thrusts that are making concentrating damn hard.

She just nods, no.

“It’s not going to be like the feel of your own fingers, not at all. You know how to make yourself come hard and fast, don’t you? Know instinctively just where all those little spots are.” A pause as he kisses right behind her ear, and the gentleness of the gesture is at odds with the terse quality of his voice. “This is going to be different. It’s going to be slow and steady and you’re going to come when I’m ready for you to come. Do you understand me, Faith?”

One finger is flicking slowly over her clit again and it’s all she can do to bite back a groan. She’s always ready—he’s made sure of that. But this version of Faith isn’t sure at all and she whispers, “Yeah, I-I think so.”

“Good. I’m glad we’ve reached an understanding.” His voice is cool, detached, as he’s plunging his fingers deeper inside her. “Now,” he says idly, as though musing aloud to himself, “Did you dream about this, Faith? Did you think it was going to be like a fairy tale—with a white canopy bed and rose petals?”

Nah. She was never that naïve, never had any illusions. Pure-as-the-driven-snow princess Tiffany probably bought the knight in shining armor bullshit, hook, line and sinker, but not her.

“No, but I want this, Wes. Want you to make me come. And I want you to fuck me.”

He tilts her chin up and forces her to look him in the eye. He’s silhouetted in the light and she can’t read his expression at all. But he’s never looked so fiercely self-possessed. “You’re a demanding girl. You’re lucky I’m in an indulgent mood this evening.”

That’s when he kisses her, finally, and there’s such need behind it that she relaxes again, even if it’s just for a moment. She doesn’t know which is hotter—when they’re in the game or when they’re flickering out of it. His hand slips inside her top and he runs it over an aching nipple before sliding it under the strap all the way up to her neck, where he deftly unties the neat bow with a decisive tug.

“Such a deceptively complicated garment,” he growls in her ear as the straps tumble down, fully exposing her breasts now. “But so very provocative, the way it barely covers you.” His hand follows the straps down, fingers skittering along her neck and back over her breasts. “Your mode of dress would be appalling if you were more conscious of what it does to men—but you don’t know, do you Faith?” The one-two punch of his fingers still working inside her and the other hand slipping possessively over her breasts, rolling each nipple briefly between his warm fingers, has left her in a state of dry-mouthed incoherence.

“No,” she manages to breathe out before he’s shoving the top over her hips and unhooking her skirt while slowly dislodging his fingers from inside her bringing them up to her lips.

He's barely rasped out “Suck on them,” before she's taken his fingers in her mouth, swirling her tongue around them, the salty tang of her juices blossoming up her palate and down to the back of her throat. “You must know, at least a little. See how wet you are.” His voice fades to a guttural moan as she sucks and nibbles the tip of his index finger. She's so intent on this task that she hardly notices that he's sliding the top and the skirt off her at once, hands lingering to cup her ass cheek as her clothing slips past her knees to the floor. “Were you excited when you got dressed this evening?”

He hasn't unlocked his eyes from hers the whole time and she knows her eyes are wide and near-wild when he drags his fingers out of her mouth and latches them on one nipple, then the next,
tweaking them again to impossible hardness. “Yes,” she whispers, faintly. “Yes.”

She's not really ready for the first smack of his hand on her ass, but it rings out dully in the low-ceilinged room, echoed by her cry of astonishment. It wasn't a particularly hard blow, as he had little leverage with the door in the way; she's more reacting to the little sneer curling over his lips; the way his hand snakes up to tangle in her hair, sending an explosive shudder down her back and involuntary tears squeezing out of the corners of her eyes. Her mouth's still agape when he pulls her roughly to him for a feverish kiss, snagging her lower lip between his teeth before pulling away with a wolfish grin.

It's like he's Wesley concentrate; each touch, each action is familiar and yet not, infused with a potency she doesn't even remember being there even in the early edgy days of their dalliance; he didn't have this confidence then. She knows then that damn forgettable girl at the club didn't get a half of this, a fifth of it, even.

“It would be trite to call you a bad girl, Faith. But that is what you are.” His hand circles her tingling ass cheek, warming it farther. “And I wouldn't presume to discipline you, but your parents seem to have been quite lax, seeing as you're able to sneak out as often as you claim.” The mention of parents makes his words tart and forced. “Turn around and face the door.”

She blinks slowly at him and tilts her head questioningly, playing the innocent card to the maximum. He leans in closer, pressing her against the door with his body now, rakes his stubble along the tender flesh of her neck.

“You liked it when I struck you,” he whispers matter-of-factly in her ear. Without waiting for her response, he continues. “And you want more. So be a good girl, Faith, and face the door.”

He steps back and unpins her; she kicks her clothes away, where they've pooled around her ankles, and turns around as gracefully as possible. He's still close and practically boxing her in, and her hands scrabble against the door for something to hang on to.

“Palms flat, elbows bent, legs apart.” His hands are stroking her back tenderly, but the words are like daggers.

The pose is awkward, but when she slides her feet apart, she finds herself instinctively pressing her torso into the door, which thrusts her ass out perfectly. She almost shifts back, thinking maybe this version of Faith wouldn't know to do that.

“Mmm. Yes, you are a quick study,” he mutters, more under his breath than directly to her. “Perfect.”

“Wait, Wesley.” She pulls away from the door and peers over her shoulder at him, her stomach now starting to churn aggressively, as if she doesn't know what to expect from him, because really, she has no idea. “I...I don't know much about this, but shouldn't we... Shouldn't I be able to tell you, you know, if something hurts too much?”

“For a virgin, Faith, you're quite knowledgeable.”

She yanks out the first yarn that pops into her head. “I read this book the other cheerleaders were passing around one day. They thought it was funny, but it turned me on.” She's even astonished by the bold frankness of her story.

His harsh laugh is dark and hollow. “Very well, then, Faith. You know then if you say 'stop', I won't. The only way I'll stop is if you say...” He trails off for her to fill in the blank.
“Tiffany,” she whispers, and presses her cheek against the door, ass poised and ready for his hand.

The first few smacks aren’t too hard, but they’re enough to set her cunt throbbing and when he pauses and slips his hand between her legs to find her dripping wet, he lets out another cold laugh. “Better in person than in a book, isn’t it?” he says, gently stroking her clit. She can’t do anything but nod, but he doesn’t let that slide. “I’m sorry, Faith, I didn’t hear you.”

“Yes. It’s much better,” she whispers, shaking her hair away from her burning face.

“Good girl. That’s the right answer.”

He continues to rain blows on her upturned ass, pausing after every two or five or whatever strikes his fancy; sliding his fingers over her clit or inside her pussy, bringing her so near the edge of coming again and again before pulling his hand away completely and returning his open palm to her ass.

She’s screaming, begging, nearly crying—plaintively asking for him to let her come. He ignores her, smacking her ass again and again—until her fingernails are scraping against the worn paint of the door and she really is crying, pleading for release. He shoves three fingers inside her, thumb working her clit, and when he finally whispers in her ear, “Now, Faith,” she’s afraid her knees will give way and send her crashing to the floor. But he holds her there, pressed against the cool metal door, running kisses along her neck long after her sobbing’s ceased and her ragged panting gives way to more even breaths. It’s only as she turns within his arms that she realizes he’s still dressed. The T-shirt leaves his arms mostly bare, but he’s as composed in it as he is in one of his suits, tie knotted squarely, cuffs a white edging against the dark, fine wool of his jacket.

She’s feeling exposed and awkward now and as he steps back and stares at her, she has to bite down on the urge to cover herself with her hands; shield her breasts, send one hand fluttering down to spread across her smooth mound. She can just imagine his reaction to that.

“You beg so nicely,” he says and the approval in his voice deepens the flush on her face as she plays back the sounds she made as he spanked her, the throaty, tortured gasps torn from her; the pleading demands she made that sounded so reasonable in her head—let me come, not there, not there again, please—that emerged as helpless, incoherent babbling.

“And all that, and you’re still a virgin,” he murmurs, leaning in again. “In so many places.”

And he must think Tiffany/Faith’s a little slow, because as he says it his eyes go to her mouth and his fingers trail down the cleft of her ass and she’s stammering, shaking her head.

“I don’t know—what do you mean?”

“Oh, Faith,” and the amused tolerance scrapes at her, leaving her raw. “You know you do really. But perhaps I’m misjudging your…innocence?” And, fuck, the spaces he leaves between words could hold a dictionary.

A finger taps at her lips. “You certainly seem quite adept with your mouth, for instance. Tell me, Faith, have you ever been fucked in it?”

He’s not sparing her, he thinks, not candy-coating any of this, and she doesn’t fake the shamed shyness that lowers her eyes and trembles her lips as she nods.

“Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear,” he says sharply, fingers pinching her chin, forcing it high. “When I ask you a question I require a verbal reply and I’d very much prefer that you look at me as you give it. Do you understand?”
Her eyelids feel heavy, so it takes eternity to lift them and stare back into his eyes, blazing with a control that's freaking her out, though God knows she should be used to it by now.

“Yes,” she says, and then, because there’s only so far she’ll let herself be pushed down without shoving back. “Yes to both.”

“And are you good at it, Faith?”

She falls to her knees and looks up at him. “Yeah. I really am,” she says.

He gives her a remote, wintry smile and reaches down to tuck her hair behind her ears. Guess he doesn’t want to miss a thing.

“Show me.”

All she can see is the rigid length of his cock outlined by the dark blue denim and she doesn't know whether it's easier to look at that or the intent, almost savage look on his face as he stares down at her.

Her hands are shaking so hard that she fumbles with the button on his jeans, biting her lip and trying to force the small brass fastener through the hole. She manages it on the third go and he pats her head, which makes her want to snarl.

“See, that wasn't so difficult, was it, Faith?” He sounds amused but there's this edge to everything he says now so it's not about what he's saying but how he's saying it. It's making her feel like he's on a different page to her. Fuck, he's on a completely different book. Like, he really is this hard faced stranger and she's an inexperienced virgin whose only talent in the bedroom is sucking cock.

And then she's not thinking anymore because she slides down the zipper and it sounds deafening in the tinny silence of the room, punctuated by Wes' harsh exhalation of breath. Her hot, sticky hands drag out his hot, sticky shaft and she looks up at him just once, long enough for their eyes to collide and then she lowers her head and drags a delicate path with the tip of her tongue from his balls to the leaking head.

And she's going to do this her way. The Faith he's just picked up's way. Like she wanted to that first time. Like she would when she's spent six months of soul-destroying Saturday nights blowing random guys in toilet stalls and back alleys.

She swirls her tongue over the head again, closing her eyes and getting used to the hot-hard-wet feel of him and the bittersweet, salt taste in her mouth, like it really is the first time.

“Are you sure you've done this before, Faith?” he asks in that taunting voice but she drowns him, shuts him up by opening her mouth and taking him in inch by inch. One of her hands finds purchase on the tacky carpet, the either firmly grasps the base of his cock, jacking him off with firm strokes, tickling his balls when she thinks about it, which isn’t often because she's entirely caught up in the tricks she's learnt to make him see stars, make him see God.

Then she can feel the tip of him nudging the back of her throat and he feels it too because his hands are tangling in her hair, pulling on it so she can tip her head back as he thrusts.

He wasn't joking when he asked her if she'd been fucked in the mouth because that's what he's doing now. Barely giving her a chance to drag in air through her nose and mouth as he pulls out before he slides it again with these snaky, little twists of his hips. But he's not going too fast or too forcefully and when he does push it in a little too hard and she makes a gagging noise of protest, he strokes her hair soothingly.
“Do you like having my cock in your mouth, Faith?” he asks and he sounds so curious that she's almost tempted to stop what she's doing and give him a eulogy on just how much she does like it. But she's kinda busy here and though his fingers are tightening around her skull, these shallow thrusts aren't making him come undone like she wants.

When he pulls back slightly, she curls her fingers loosely around the twitching shaft and sucks hard on the tip that's just resting lightly on her tongue. He's so hard and ready now that she's swallowing down the tiny explosions of spunk even as she drags her tongue over the head of his cock again and again and then she tightens her lips around him, hollows out her cheeks and squeezes his balls until he gives this needy groan that rings in her ears even as he fills her mouth.

She gives the head of his cock one last, languid kiss then leans back on her heels, resting her back against the cold metal of the door as she looks up at him.

“Did I…was that okay?” she asks him hoarsely and just shaping the words out makes the taste of him linger in her mouth.

He's already tucked his cock back into his jeans and he shouldn't look so self-assured, so fucking in control when he's just come in her mouth.

“You look very pretty on your knees, Faith,” is all he says. “But I'd like you on the bed now, please.”

And even the Faith she used to be would think twice about getting any part of her near that sordid mess of stained sheets and nylon quilt but she rises slowly to her feet, trying to ignore the twinge in her knees, and he makes it easy for her by wedging his hand under her arm and practically dragging her across the floor.

“I did only rent the room for an hour,” he reminds her curtly. “And we do have rather a lot to get through. How long did you think it would take, Faith, to get fucked? I'm sure you thought about it.”

The backs of her knees hit the end of the bed and he's pushing her down, grimacing slightly in sympathy as the damp skin of her back makes contact with the cheap fibers and she pulls a face. “I don't know,” she mutters and her hands are creeping up now to shield herself from his fierce blue stare. But she's curling them over her eyes so she doesn't have to look at him.

“Stop that,” he barks, seizing her wrists and pinning them to the mattress as he straddles her hips. “How long, Faith? Five minutes? Ten minutes?”

She thinks back to when she really did lose her virginity, on top of some coats in the cloakroom at a party with some guy who'd latched onto her all night. Spent hours getting her beer from the keg and then took ten seconds to grope her tits until they were sore before pushing into her and coming in a single thrust. “I guess, like, three minutes or something,” she mumbles. “Maybe five.”

And she doesn't think he's faking the look he's giving her now because it's tender enough that she's not too pissed off about the big dollops of pity mixed in there too. “You poor little thing,” he coos, slackening the tight grip around her wrists and rubbing his thumbs over her pulse point. “And in this sordid little scenario that you imagined, did anyone go down on you? Did anyone flick their tongue over your clit, push it into your tight, little cunt?”

The “God, no!” is wrenched out of her, not because the Faith he never knew is squicked by the idea but more because she's in complete agreement with this Faith who's squirming on the nasty sheets, getting wetter as he paints pretty pictures with his voice.
“I didn't think so,” he chuckles, dipping down to suck the aching tip of her breasts into the moist warmth of his mouth. “Would you like me to?”

“Yes! Please, Wes.”

But he's giving the pre-show to her tits, moving from one nipple to the other, licking, sucking, nibbling until all she can do is push up against him and give him these airless little moans.

By the time he lifts his head her breasts are glistening. “Ask me nicely, Faith.”

“Please, please, please go down on me, want you to, please…” She's stuck on the begging setting, barely even registers the little nod he gives her before he slides down her writhing body.

“Put your legs on my shoulders, Faith,” he orders her and she's lifting up her shaking limbs, grateful for the hands that are clasping her ankles and making it easier. “God, you're soaked,” he mutters hoarsely and then… and then… and then…

It feels like he's devouring her. Like he hasn't had any food for weeks and she's an all you can eat buffet. If she'd known that the threat of renting a room for an hour could have made him so goal orientated she'd have suggested it months ago. Or would she? Because this is a little bit frightening. She's clinging onto the sheets, to her last shredded nerve but it seems like he's completely lost it.

He's so hungry. Licking a path from her clit to her asshole and getting sidetracked on the way so he plunges his tongue into her cunt over and over again, fucking her with it. And then when she's thrusting against his face, forcing out words that don't sound anything like “please” and “Wes” and “fuck, oh fuck”, he's leaving her empty and aching so he can suck her clit into her mouth and graze the edge of it with his teeth.

She doesn't know when she starts to come, only that she can't stop and that she can't see the water stains on the ceiling any more, can't see much of anything but this blinding whiteness in front of her eyes.

“Stop! I can't take it. Need you to fuck me,” she gasps, tugging on his hair, his ears, any bit of him she can reach.

His face is slathered in her juices, the sheen picked out on his cheekbones, as he crawls up her supine body, one hand grappling with the fly of his jeans.

“Do you want me to fuck you now, Faith?” He's growling at her and it's fucking scary as fuck but she's not going to back down now.

“Yes!”

“Tell me, Faith.”

“Want you to fuck me,” she whimpers pitifully. “Want it so much.”

“Even if I hurt you. It is your first time, after all.” He's choking out the words superfast like he wants to get to the end of Act Three.

Her hands haul him closer. And she's practically spitting in his face. “I don't fucking care!”

And it's this blur of his hands and his legs pinning her down, pinning her open as he shoves into her so hard that she's screaming because every time with him feels like the first time. She can never get used to the feel of his cock thrusting inside her.
Or him stopping, holding himself statue still and stripping her down to the bone with the fire and ice of his stare.

“Is there something you want to tell me, Faith?” And it sounds like he's finished the script and is improvising.

She grinds against him. Why won't he move? “What?”

“Is there something you need to tell me?” His voice is low and urgent and he's another Wes. Not the Wes she's in a motel room with and not her Wes. The other Wes, who's an expert at getting his witnesses to spill their secrets to the judge and the jury.

But he can't be because he's buried deep in her cunt, balls resting against her ass and he wouldn't because he doesn't know anything. “What? What do you want me to tell you?” she whispers.

He lowers his head and kisses this delicate path along her neck to her ear. “I want you to tell me if there's anything I should know.”

And it's all wrong, even as her cunt is clutching at him, quivering around him, when she still wants him to fuck her into someone new that her mind is switching off, racing through a thousand horrible possibilities of what he already knows, what the fuck really happened at the bank today and she decides that the game they're playing and this cold, harsh version of Wes that she's playing it with is the lesser of the many evils.

“Um, I don't know,” she stumbles, trying to be Faith the blowjob queen who for all her aching knees and empty heart was way more innocent than the Faith she's become. “I'm on the pill if that's what you're worried about.”

And it's not what he's worried about. Not if the cold, tight smile he gives her is anything to go by. “Very well,” he says, punctuating it with a careless thrust of his hips that isn't what she wants any more. “I can't promise that you'll enjoy this but then it is your first time and you must have expected that.”

He's not holding her down any more, but rises up on his hands as he plows into her and her body is so stupid, so fucking well trained that she can feel the tightening in her cunt, the spasms in her toes and fingers and…

“Wes!” Her arms are wrapping round him now, stroking the sweaty hollow of his back, moving up to brush against his hair, trying to touch him. “Wes, I don't want to play this game anymore. I want you to come back to me.” His body is heavy on hers but it’s not reassuring the way it usually is, not at all. Part of her wants to scrabble out from under him, run as far away as she possibly can from this fucking shithole of a motel and whatever the hell it is that they've been playing at; the other, equally conflicted part of her just pulls him closer, wraps her arms more tightly around him in the vain hope that when he looks back at her the harsh lines of his face and that cold, cold stare will be gone, softened. That he'll be himself again.

But she’s not even sure that she hasn’t seen the real Wes after all—something dark and scarred over that she’d seen glimpses of here and there but never pushed hard enough to unleash. The cheap quilt is bunched up uncomfortably under her and there’s a trail of cold sweat pooling at the small of her back and she can’t help but shiver. In response, he brushes her hair off her face with such familiar care and indulgent slowness that she lets out this little involuntary sound that’s somewhere between laughter and a sob.

“You’re not to cry, not anymore,” he whispers, ghosting his fingertips lightly over her heated,
furrowed brow. She closes her eyes and just lets him, not wanting to say a word in case she fucks everything up, again.

But she’s got this sense memory of him saying those words to her, and the cottage seems so long ago, so far away that almost immediately she’s got an ache in her chest and the familiar, acute prickling of tears behind her eyelids.

But she doesn’t say a fucking word and she doesn’t move, she just waits. The room is silent except for the twinned, steady sounds of their breathing and the tired wheeze of the put-upon bedsprings.

Finally he pulls himself up off her and sits at the edge of the bed. Buckles his belt with deliberate slowness. He’s turned away from her, looking straight ahead at a fixed point on the wall. That particular water stain must be really fucking fascinating, she thinks ruefully. And she wonders for just a moment if he’s really taking this to the logical conclusion—that any second now he’s going to hand her her clothes and tell her to get the fuck out.

She sits up, reaching out to him, feeling the muscles in his back tighten as her fingers brush against his skin, tentatively.

“Wes—”

“You don’t know what you want, Faith. I know this isn’t—isn’t it.” This time his tone’s not accusatory, in fact it’s almost resigned. But the words cut into her nevertheless.

She pulls her hand away as though she’s been burned. “Don’t fucking think you know what’s good for me, Wesley, because—” She’s holding back tears, and anger, and she’s shaking but she can’t help it. “Don’t … presume…”

Normally he’d smile indulgently and not a little proudly at her word choice but he doesn’t even acknowledge it. He just keeps talking, like he’s got this dialog already started and he’s only now remembered to share it with her. Except that he sounds as though he’s talking to himself.

“I should have stopped this. I should have known—” He laughs this rueful little laugh. “Variations on a theme,” he whispers under his breath. She’s drawn her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around herself but she’s still shivering. He grabs his jacket off the chair and drapes it around her.

“Somehow I always end up here, in this horrible little box. But it’s not the place for you, Faith, it’s not. And I—you shouldn’t have to—” He stops. Reaches out to pick up her discarded clothes. “Get dressed. I’m taking you home.”

And she’s too bone-weary and sore to protest. She wants to burn the cheap slut ensemble and the room and everything in it. The ache is still there and she doesn’t even know how to tell Wes that it was a mistake, yeah, but she’d wanted it too and everything was going to be okay.

If she said it out loud it would be true. But the silence in the room is deafening and she can’t face it, can’t say a fucking word. She dresses quickly, because she’s not trying to indulge or entertain him, she just wants to get the fuck out. Away. And she knows she’s got to get him out of there, because its toxicity is seeping into everything, making it ugly and fucked-up. She’s sure it’ll all be different once she pushes him into his shower, scrubs the taint off him and lays him down on his 300-thread count sheets. Once she can kiss all the doubts and anxieties away.

Or so she keeps telling herself, even as he stalks down the hallway as she stumbles shakily behind him. He doesn’t open her door for her, just nods for her to get in.

And it’s more of the same in the car—just this pervasive, heavy silence. And he’s taking all the
curves of the road like they’re speeding down the Autobahn instead of some crappy two-lane backwoods road. He’s taking this roundabout route that she’s not familiar with and she’s got this sinking, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach that he’s taking her to Darla’s. Hadn’t he said he was taking her home? What if he meant—

But he finally pulls onto his street and she almost collapses from the sheer relief of it. But he doesn’t pull the car into the garage—just brings it up to the door and idles the engine. He reaches across her lap and opens her passenger-side door from the inside, letting it swing open. “You have your keys?”

“Y-yes. What are you…”

“Go inside. Take a shower.” Voice like cut glass. Not an ounce of warmth there.

“Aren’t you gonna join me?” She tries to make it sound lighthearted and a little coy but her voice quavers a little.

He looks at her then, and there’s a slight thaw in his hard-set features. She reaches out to touch his arm—she needs the reassurance of a kiss, a touch, a word, something, anything—and he presses her fingers to his lips and kisses them with the smallest trace of the reverence she remembers from the early days. But even that doesn’t soothe her, because he looks so much older, and so weary.

“I won’t let you be Persephone, Faith. You deserve something better.”

“I don’t know what you’re fucking talking about, but this isn’t your decision, Wes. It’s ours. Whatever happened tonight is something we can talk about—” And God, she hates the shrill, slightly hysterical sound of her voice but she’s trying to force the words out before they stop making sense and—

“Go inside, Faith. Don’t make me tell you again.” And she doesn’t know what else to do so she gets out of the car, keys in hand, standing in the soft light of the entrance in her ridiculous, cheap clothes. Her thighs feel rubbery and she’s freezing cold. Everything’s all wrong. And she doesn’t know what to do or say because he’s lost it so very badly.

He waits to see that she’s gotten into the house safely before he speeds away.
Part Nine

Chapter Summary

Faith learns more about Wesley’s past.

Part Nine

Chapter Eighty

She showers because he told her to, but she would have anyway. She doesn’t bother about more than scrubbing herself down, rinsing and repeating; the grubbiness isn’t surface and the water isn’t helping.

Besides, she’s tired.

She can’t seem to connect her body to her brain so she’s drifting around her room; picking up a hairbrush and staring at it for a long moment before replacing it on the dresser; reaching for the towel that’s slid from her shoulders to the floor, folding it with a precision that forms it into a perfect rectangle, and then realizing it’s soaked and throwing it in the laundry hamper.

She’s missing him as if he’s been gone a month not an hour, and being here, in his home, surrounded by his belongings, is the salt that flavors her tears as they trickle and splash, unheeded, out of her eyes.

She goes into his room and stares at the bed, noticing dimly that Wes must have made it while he was getting changed, because the sheets she’d left rumpled are water-smooth, as usual, but she can’t bring herself to get in it somehow and she leaves after wrapping herself up in his robe, absentmindedly rolling the sleeves back because they’re way too long on her.

She’s been asleep on the couch for three hours when the sound of his car wakes her and she’s too drugged with sleep to come fully awake, but it’s all she needs to drift off into dreams again because if he’s come home that’s good, right?

When she wakes properly, squinting against a ray of sun that’s aimed directly at her eyes, he’s sitting on a chair opposite her, watching her with expressionless eyes.

He’s showered, shaved and suited up; the perfect executive, but even through sleep-bleared eyes she thinks he looks like hell. There’s a small razor nick under his chin and she glances down at his hands, still only because they’re locked together as they rest in his lap. If he’s slept at all it wasn’t for long enough; his eyes are red-rimmed and hazy.

She’s seen him like this before, early on when she’d never called him anything but ‘sir’ or ‘Mr. Wyndam-Pryce’, and it’s that click-click as things fall into place that make the first words out of her mouth a continuation of where they left off, erasing six hours of being apart, ignoring the fact that this is a discussion made for the night, not the day, with alcohol and emotion fueling the words and cushioning the blows.

Sober, in the sunlight, the words are sharp and acid-tart on her tongue.
“Want to know, Wes. What we did last night; did you ever do that while you’ve been with me? While you’ve known me?” There’s a perceptible flinch as reply that breaks her heart. “You—oh, you __”

She scrambles up, light-headed and dizzy, and it’s only that which saves him from her fists because she’s feeling a primitive rage that needs to hurt, needs to savage and destroy.

He’s shocked out of frozen immobility, moving to reach for her before she can say another word, capturing her hands as she raises them to lash out at him.

“No! Faith, you just asked two questions, not one.”

The careful precision of his voice is unexpected enough to halt her attack but she’s still feeling dangerously violent as she waits for him to carry on. They’re so close that she can see the weariness in his face, the drag of fatigue, the grayness of skin that ages him.

“Have I done that since you entered my employ? Yes. Since I got involved with you? No.”

And she wants to know details, wants to know every single fucking thing, but he’s told her all she’s entitled to, if that’s true, and she doesn’t think he’s ever lied to her, so she nods slowly, relaxes so that his hands release her, and steps back.

Then she slaps his face, making it harder than she’d intended because in the split second that her hand’s traveling through the air she sees him make the decision to let her and it’s fucking infuriating.

His hand comes up to touch gingerly at the reddened, smarting skin of his cheek. “Well, I hope that made you feel better,” he says with a sarcasm he hasn’t used with her in a long time. “I don’t think I’ll turn my other cheek but I suppose I deserved that.”

“Yeah, you really did,” she tells him. “But just so we’re on the same page here, Wes, you got that for leaving me alone last night, not for anything else.”

He arches his eyebrow. “Really?” he says with a deceptive mildness.

She can feel her lip quiver and she’s not going to cry again, she’s just not going to do it.

“You can’t keep doing this, Wes,” she tells him. “Can’t keep turning away from me when something happens.”

“There are a lot of things I can’t keep doing,” he says with a careful, chilling deliberation.

“Haven’t we just gone through this?” she demands. “Wes, last night—”

He lifts his hand in a small movement that dries the words in her mouth. “Faith, be silent. Please.” She waits, huddling her arms around her, feeling desperately lonely. “Last night was something I don’t intend to repeat.” He sighs and flashes her a smile, transient and lemon-sour. “And, yes, I’ve said that to myself before. Sworn it, been determined...and gone back anyway.”

“But not since we—” She swallows, whispers it, “You haven’t wanted to since you met me? Last night wasn’t because you missed it—was it? Because, if you—need to do that, I’d—”

She squeezes her eyes shut, seeing that room, that nightmare of a room, and can’t finish her sentence but she doesn’t need to.

“Let yourself be treated like that? Like dirt? For love?” The last words are spat out at her as if they’re
the worst insult he knows and it’s her turn to flinch.

“Well, yeah, Wes,” she says finally. “Because it sure as hell isn’t somewhere I’d go if I hated you.”

He gives her an incredulous look and starts to laugh, which, given the way his face is twisting up isn’t all that much of a good sign. “You, oh, Faith, you’re so incredibly naive. I forget how young you are sometimes.”

“Hey!” she snaps, anger warming her. “I’m not the one who thinks what we did last night was that big a deal.” She overrides his reply. “Yeah, it stirred up some stuff, but fuck, Wes; can’t tell me you didn’t get off on it, because you did, you really fucking did.” She purses her lips and fixes him with a glare. “And so did I.” She takes a step nearer to him. “It didn’t happen that way with us. It wasn’t the same. I wasn’t one of your fucking one-night stands, wasn’t one of your failures. Was I? Was I?” He shakes his head mutely and she feels a fierce, hot satisfaction. “What you did with me; you never did that with Christina, now did you?”

He glances at her and there’s a moment of hesitation and she swears if he says anything chivalrous about not kissing and telling, she’s going to hit him again, but harder.

“I—no. I told you, Faith; before you, it was never—” He’s meeting her eyes with an effort she can’t help admiring and he’s flushing, though the shape of her fingers is still lying darkly against his skin, staining it. “You’ve taken every one of my fantasies and made them real,” he says. “Made them—something I’m not ashamed of, despite the efforts of people like Xander.” He shakes his head. “Then last night showed me that I was fooling myself.”

“Why?” The question bursts out of her. “Why, Wes? It was a game; it was my idea—”

“Yes,” he says. “Initially, it was, but you were never planning on playing it outside this house were you? Once again, I took it further than you’d planned.” He frowns. “And you never stop me.” There’s a mixture of confusion and accusation in his voice.

“I would if I wanted to,” she says, trying to make him see that it’s true.

He shakes his head. “I’m not sure you would, Faith. You don’t seem able to judge your limits and I’m not sure I trust myself—”

“I trust you,” she says urgently, meaning it, every word, pushing back the guilt at what she’s hiding from him, because that’s not what they’re talking about here.

He gives her an odd look, speculative and cool. “Do you?” He twists his wrist and taps his watch, switching moods on her in an instant. “We’re already late, but if you hurry we should be able to get to the office by nine.”

“What? Wes, we’re not done here!”

He’s already walking away. “Faith, one thing I learned was how to separate my personal life from my professional one. I suggest you do the same. You’ve got ten minutes exactly.”

Chapter Eighty-One

It could be the fact that they’re both coasting along on very little sleep, but everything feels scratchy and off-balance. Especially when he drives two blocks along from the office and pulls in outside the fancy bakery that they never go to.

“Neither of us have had breakfast,” he reminds her when she frowns and then reaches for his wallet.
“I'll have a coffee with a double shot of espresso and a cheese Danish.”

She takes the ten dollar bill he's holding out to her and stares at him defiantly until he sighs and capitulates.

“And you're to have a chocolate muffin and a cappucino.”

And she tries to smile because at least he's giving her some sweet stuff but it slides off her face as soon as it appears.

“This all weird, Wes, and…”

“I'll see you back at the office. We seem to have rather neglected things this week and well, I have a list of tasks I need you to get started on,” he says, tapping his fingers impatiently on the dashboard and giving her a pointed look until she gets out of the car.

He wasn't joking about any of it; not the separating work from their fucked up version of Ozzie and Harriet or that he's got a shitload of things he wants done. As soon as she gets through the door, juggling coffee and paper bags, he's barking at her to get a pad and then spends the next hour throwing a list of instructions at her that should have her jumping for joy because it means that New York isn't just this dim, distant dream but something that's really going to happen.

“And you're to send that form letter out to all our personal clients, the second one to our business clients and then I need you to draft a letter to all our suppliers and the utility companies giving our close of business date and asking them to prepare their final bills. Have you got that, Faith?”

She finishes scribbling down the last line before she risks looking up at him. “Yes, sir.”

Then there's this pause, which seems less like a break in orders and more like he's dipping his toe in the water to see how cold it is. “Next week is going to be very busy, Faith. The auditors are coming in to go through my accounts.”

It feels like someone has suddenly replaced her blood with liquid nitrogen but she forces herself to stay calm and not even bat an eyelash. “Okay, is there anything you need me to do before they come?” Like, maybe find a spare three thousand dollars tucked away in a bag and put it back in the bank.

He doesn't answer for a while and she concentrates on the steady tick of the clock on the shelf, the dust motes swirling around in the stillness of the room and wonders why he can't hear the frantic thrum of her heart.

“Look at me, Faith,” he says softly and she lifts her head to try and meet his steady gaze but her eyes skitter away at the last moment. “Everything will be better, for us, for you, when we're in New York,” he finishes and he makes it sound like this solemn vow.

“Do you promise?” she asks him hoarsely because he never lies and he takes promises seriously.

The smile he gives her is so bittersweet and sad that she has to force herself not to fling herself at his feet and beg for forgiveness for what she's done and for the things he's accused her of doing last night. Just for it to be right again. “Yes, I promise,” he says simply and then he straightens up and puts on his game face. “I want those letters to catch the lunchtime post please.”

And as she has to type out a gazillion letters that all say the same thing to a gazillion different people, she works herself up into a rightly indignant froth that he doesn't have a computer and she's having to do battle with the Selectric, which has chosen today to decide that it really hates the latest
typewriter ribbon she's put in.

But by the time 1.50 rolls by she has a neat little stack of envelopes and cotton mouth from licking far too many stamps. That's what she tells herself but the thought of spending lunchtime with Daddy not so dearest might have something to do with it.

She's scooping the envelopes into a plastic bag when Wes appears in the archway. “Are you going to post those?”

“Yeah and then I have some stuff that I need to do,” she mutters vaguely, shrugging on her jacket.

“I was hoping you could work through lunch today,” he says, walking farther into the reception area. “We need to get started on the inventory.”

Given the choice between half an hour of Liam's beer fume-filled spite and doing inventory with Wes, maybe even getting him to chance the ghost of a smile—well, there's no contest. But if he knew what she was doing, where she was going, he'd thank her for it.

“I can't.” She knows how to do this. Spent years lying to Darla, to teachers, to social workers. The trick is not to give them anything but the barest facts. “I have to go out. Be back in, like, half an hour. Do you want me to get you some lunch?”

She has to look him in the eye for the first time that day, pulls her shoulders right back and tips up her chin to meet his frostbitten look. “Please ensure that you're back punctually,” he bites out and turns sharply on his heel.

It's one twenty-five and a barely eaten burger before she realizes that Liam isn't going to show. She's fed up of sitting here and feeling her heart flip over every time the bell above the door jangles. There's no way to reach him, no way to know whether he's sleeping off another night before. No way to get her hands on the fucking photos.

And then she has this moment of total clarity, or that's what her shrink back in juvie would call it. It's Friday afternoon and he's not going to show. He's fed up of sitting here and feeling her heart flip over every time the bell above the door jangles. There's no way to reach him, no way to know whether he's sleeping off another night before. No way to get her hands on the fucking photos.

And then she has this moment of total clarity, or that's what her shrink back in juvie would call it. It's Friday afternoon and he's not going to show. Not going to make it to the bank before it closes at three either. Doesn't have to be a brainiac to figure that she's clear for another weekend with nothing to come between her and Wes, except well, her and Wes.

Besides all that shit with the bank yesterday? He'd have said something by now if there were anything to say. There's a lot he holds back, like, the last thirty-seven years of his life before he met her, but the one thing she knows about him, trusts about him, is that if there's something not right, he just comes right out and says it. And she wishes he wouldn't half the time but he's wicked stubborn about that kind of thing. What he doesn't get is that so is she. But he's gonna find out.

That thought gets her sliding out of the booth and then the thought she has of how to scrub away the hangover of last night is what has her hurrying out of the door and, fuck me shoes be damned, running the three blocks back to work so she won't be late.

Didn't count on spending the rest of the afternoon on her knees. Not in the good way either. He has her clearing out archive boxes in the store room and sorting out files to be destroyed or sent back to their clients.

It's almost five o'clock before she starts getting antsy. She can't take a whole weekend of things being so fucked-up between them. Of this boring pattern they've fallen into of two days of happiness and two days of fucking abject misery. And she's falling over her feet to get upstairs when she hears the bell on her desk ring out.
Wes is already there as she pushes open the basement door. “I'll get this,” she calls out, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You go back to your office.”

Might be because she sounds more than a little manic, or it might be because it's the first time she's touched him since she belted him across the face this morning, but he nods tersely. “Be ready to leave in five minutes, please.”

She pulls a face at his retreating back and skips down the hall to meet the delivery guy. Everything she ordered over the phone is packed neatly in two boxes. The wine, the stinky cheese, the ice cream, even the stuffed olives, and perched on top is the bouquet of tiger lilies that cost her fifty dollars and had better be worth every last cent.

There just happens to be a pretty cut-glass vase stashed away in the recesses of her desk, maybe the remnant of some former secretary, or maybe Lilah's, or hell, maybe someone sent Wes flowers sometime, but she kind of doubts that.

Cheerfully humming a tune she can't place, she practically skips off into the tiny kitchen and arranges the shock of tiger lilies into something resembling a proper arrangement.

“Time to go. Why aren't you ready?” she hears him say, somewhere over her shoulder. Whipping around with the vase in hand and nearly sloshing some of the water out of the vase, well, she really wishes she had a camera to catch the look on his face. He's leaning against the door frame, and could it be? Yeah, maybe. He's smiling a little.

“Is it after five?” She smiles back, carefully crossing over to stand right in front of him.

“It is. Who...” He doesn't finish the query before she cuts him off, pushing buttons just for the sheer fun of it now.

“We're not leaving yet, so back to your office, Wesley.” He doesn't move. “Go on, go on. I'll be there in a minute.” She can't help grinning from ear to ear, holding out the vase to him. “Oh yeah, these are for you.”

He's rarely speechless, even rarer still, the kind of speechless that's infused with a little bit of shining delight. After searching for clues in his ashen, pinched face all day, it was a welcome reprieve. Yeah, she was right for once. Start with flowers, and the rest would be easy.

“But,” he finally manages to sputter out.

“No 'buts'—don't make me tell you again.” She gives him a mock-serious look until he finally takes the vase, shaking his head.

“I suppose I shouldn't tell you I had plans for us, for this evening.” He fixes her with that cold stare, but she wasn't buying it, not one bit.

“No you didn't.” She stares him down, unblinking.

It takes a minute, but he cracks. “Very well, Faith. You're beginning to know me a little too well. I have to admit I was at a loss.”

“Well, good thing one of us wasn't.”

Thankfully, he's been clearing papers and files off his desk all day, so the usual neat but precariously teetering columns of documents have been swept away and filed and the shining mahogany surface completely empty. Well, except for the vase of tiger lilies. He's still staring at them, bemused, when
she finally enters, arms full of food and little dishes and a cheese knife (what didn't he have in that kitchen?).

Arranging everything just so, she leans over the desk, kissing him on the lips. She's undone a few of the buttons on her blouse, in a gesture to the whole after-work hours thing, giving him an eyeful of cleavage.

“Don't touch anything yet. I need to get the wine and the glasses. Do you have a corkscrew?” The one thing that she couldn't find in the kitchen, of course. He pulls open the top desk drawer and pokes around for a few moments before pulling out a wine key from its shadowy depths.

“Will this do?”

“That doesn't look like any corkscrew I've ever used. Guess you'll have to open the wine then.” He very nearly laughs at that, and she very nearly sticks her tongue out at him for it. “I'll be right back.”

She turns on her heel, all efficiency, but looks back over her shoulder to catch him sneaking a stuffed olive. “Wesley! I said don't touch anything!”

He snatches his hand back like a chastised child, and hot damn! He even winked at her.

Gathering up the rest of the impromptu dinner, juggling the wineglasses and a plate of petit fours to go with the ice cream, she can't help but feel just a teensy bit pleased. She doesn't want to jinx anything, but yeah. It was working. Ply an epicure (thanks, Jane Austen, for that vocabulary boost) with flowers and food and a goddamn twenty-dollar bottle of wine and you get results. She just wonders why she hasn't thought of this before now, before it felt kind of like sticking a Band-Aid over a bullet wound. Still, it's working, so there's no use dwelling on what's already past.

Setting the glasses and tiny cakes down, she presents the wine with a flourish.

His eyebrow slides up in surprise. “Faith, I'm impressed. La Crema Pinot Noir. An excellent choice.”

“Yeah, about that. Actually, Roger picked it out, but I told him what I wanted it to taste like. I even mentioned, like, berries and a woody top note. And it had to be under twenty bucks.” She flashes a winning grin and scrapes one of the side chairs right up to the desk. He's already carefully cutting the away foil on the wine and with a few expert twists of the wrist and a hearty yank, gets the bottle open in no time flat. Splashing a bit into his glass, he offers it to her.

“You should try it first then, to make sure it meets your exacting standards.” She leans in toward him and he tips the glass against her lips. As requested, her berries are there, right up front, and when the last flavor spreads across the back of her tongue, it smells like sandalwood.

“It'll do, I think.”

“Well, that's a relief.”

She waits until they've both had a glass and a half of wine before she starts with the serious talking. For the first glass, it was all superficial flirting that tumbled into meaningful glances and stolen kisses and ended choked-down brie and her pasted-on smile. He's feeding her olives and she's sucking on his fingertips at the halfway point of the second glass. It was time.

She takes a hearty swig on her wine, rolls the stem between her fingers, chin tilted up, eyes locked on his. “Where did you go last night?”

“Is that all this was, Faith?” He's darkened in an instant—there's that condescending squint and the corners of his mouth twitch downward. “An elaborate production to soften me up for interrogation?”
“No,” she says, her voice miraculously staying even, uncracked. “I just want to know.”

He looks away, sighs, and makes her wait. But she's willing to wait as long as it takes, silent and still, except for an occasional sip of wine.

After what seems an eternity, he finally murmurs, “I just went for a drive.”

She eyes him suspiciously, but it's a waste because he's still looking at some undetermined thing in the corner of the room. “A drive.”

“Yes, Faith. I just needed to get away, as far as I could, in as little time as possible. I didn't know where I was going; I just needed to get there as quickly as possible. And it was all working quite well until, in my complete disregard for everything except speed, I ran out of gas.”

“You didn't.”

“I swear, really I did. I had to walk three miles before I found a gas station.” He finally turns, looks her in the eye. “I know you're wondering if I went back to the club, found that girl.”

“No. I'm really not. I know that's the last thing you would have done.”

He doesn't know whether to smile or glare at her for that, and the resulting combination is perhaps the most endearing look he's ever had on his face in the entire time she's known him. “Well, that's a relief.”

Their glasses are empty, and she pours the last of the wine evenly between them. “Don't worry, there's another one. It's not as good, I couldn't really afford...” His hand grasps hers as soon as she sets the bottle down.

“Thank you. For all this.” He squeezes her hand, and it's all a bit too much and she has to pull away and fidget with her hair, a hot flush rushing up her cheeks because he's really touched, he is.

“It was nothing, really.”

“No, Faith. I don't deserve this or you. I behaved abominably.” She can't help but try to interrupt, but he just holds out a hand to still her before she can get in a word edgewise. “No, no. I did. I shouldn't have left you alone last night.”

She wants to snap, “Damn straight!” at him, but bites her tongue, takes another sip of wine instead.

The words are tumbling out of him now. “I should have at least had the courtesy to explain things. It's just...I can't. This is hard and incredibly frustrating. I don't know where to begin. Don't think I don't want to tell you things, Faith. Not when it comes to this. I can't quite say...”

“Wes, don't. Don't rush things. It's okay.”

“...what needs to be said.”

She feels bad for interrupting him like that, when it seemed like he was on a roll, but she can't help it, because he was really just spinning his wheels in the mud. It's unbearably painful to see him like this; unable to form the words she's sure his heart was funneling to his brain. She knows this because she has the same damn problem.

He lifts up his half full glass of wine and finishes it in two nervous gulps and then he puts it down carefully on the desk and behind his troubled gaze, the nervous twisting of his fingers, she can see
something else there; a shaky kind of resolve that he's going to try and say some of the things that need to be said.

“I don't know why I'm like this,” he begins. “It would be so easy to wrap it up in some neat little psychological equation. That my problems are a result of a desperately unhappy childhood: a despot of a father. But, Faith, those are excuses, they're not reasons.”

Her hand creeps out so her fingers can curl through his but she realizes that there's nothing she can say, because he's finally fucking talking and she doesn't want him to shut up. Wants him to get all the poison out of his system, no matter how messy it gets.

And it's like her gentle touch is the key that turns some rusty lock inside him because he's leaning forward, elbows on the desk, head in his hands and spilling it out in these choked sentences. “I always thought it was a sickness, you see. Something festering away at the heart of me… that if I ignored it then it would go away.

“When I was at University…’” He stumbles, fingers tugging at his hair, then he lifts his head up and pins her motionless with the anguished disgust on his face. “I tried to do things properly, date these vacuous little debs, hold doors open for them, always pay for everything and there was no connection. I could see myself gangling and awkward, trying to impress them, only to be laughed at, ridiculed for my archaic attempts at gallantry. When you've never been allowed any respect, any control in your life, it suddenly becomes your raison d'etre. The need for it swallows you up, Faith.”

She blinks as he says her name because he's pulling her into this, telling her story as well as his. “Because no one will ever let you have it and you don't even know what you're looking for, just, like, that there's something wrong, something missing like you've lost your keys, yeah?” And she's so fucking inarticulate but he sits bolt upright and his eyes are slightly wild now.

“Yes! Exactly, that's it! I pored over dull treatises on the law by day and read de Sade at night, tried to tell myself that it was just a phase, a hangover from being continually labeled a failure and that if I could just pass my law exams, somehow take on the trappings of a successful life that I wouldn't feel like that. And it worked for a while though the price was costly, of never being able to get close to someone and then… well… oh, picking over old wounds is never a good idea, is it?”

She's so caught up in this terrible, sad picture of a Wes not much older than herself that she doesn't realize at first that he's trying to clam up, bottle it all back down until his mouth snaps shut tighter than a steel trap.

Before she can even think about it, she's grabbing his arm and pinching him hard, hard enough that he actually squeaks in protest.

“Tell me, Wes,” she hisses, pinching him again. “Don't you fucking dare shut me out. I want to know what happened next.”

He looks like he's going to bolt at any minute and only sheer willpower and her hand clutched tightly around his wrist is stopping him from jumping out of the chair and running out of the room.

“You want to know what happened next, Faith?” he asks with this horrible, hollow laugh that sounds like he's choking. “There was a girl, Winifred, Fred, and I loved her passionately like some hero in a storybook. I believed all those romantic notions that love was this purifying force that would save me; deliver me from this disease that was rotting me slowly.”

He's peering at her intently and she can't hide the flash of jealousy that she's wearing like a new dress. Because he's said that he loved her but it was never the romantic kind of love that you get in
Jane Austen novels. It was messy and fucked-up and it had led to this moment right here; a broken man confessing his darkest secrets.

“She was so gentle,” he murmurs, almost to himself. “Such a tiny, fragile thing that I wanted to protect her. And we held hands and I'd kiss her chastely on the cheek and thank her for a lovely evening. I spent my first month's salary after I was called to the Bar on an engagement ring.”

He scrubs the back of his hand across his eyes and gropes for the glass of wine, which is empty. Before she can even stop him, he's getting up in this violent, jerky motion so unlike his usual grace, flinging the chair back so it bangs against the wall. “I need another drink.”

But she's not letting him go, can't let him go and get lost in his memories of the perfect, fucking Fred (which is a stupid ass name for a girl anyway), so she runs after him.

She hunts him to ground in the kitchen where he's yanking the cork out of the second bottle of wine and he doesn't even look surprised to see her. “It's funny how I can still feel so angry, so utterly betrayed,” he says conversationally but he's gulping hard. “For all her cant about loyalty and trust…” He tails off and holds the bottle up to his mouth and it's the first truly shocking thing he's done because this is Wes who drinks his coffee from a bone china cup and his milk from a special glass that he gets pissy about when she tries to pour orange juice in there instead.

“Wes, hey, Wes,” she says softly like he's a wounded animal who needs help but is too dumb and hurt to accept it. “Don't you think you've had enough?”

“Beautifully put, as ever, Faith,” he whispers. “And no, I've not had enough.”

It's kind of terrible because she's never seen anyone swallow down quite so much alcohol in one go, not even Liam in the middle of a bender. But once she reaches up and tugs the bottle away from him, spilling red wine down his shirt when he clings on, his fingers slowly uncoil and then he's sliding down the cabinets and sitting on the floor, staring up at her, lost and frightened.

And she wants to say something. Something deep and profound that can touch him, move him away from the past and into the present, back to her. But words never come easy so she crouches next to him, pushing and pulling at his unresisting flesh until his head is in her lap and he lets her stroke his hair.

He's got to get it out and she has to know. Yeah, it's hurting him but it's hurting her more to always have him in the shadows, only revealing himself bit by bit. She wants him to rip off the plaster in one painful jerk.

“What happened with Fred?” she asks him in a tiny voice that doesn't even sound like it comes from her.

He doesn't say anything for a while and then he starts to speak, the words spilling out in this eager rush. How Fred was this doe-eyed Texan girl in England on a Fullbright scholarship and that his parents loved her even though she wasn't from the fucking mother country. And they had an engagement party with a swan made out of ice and shopping for place settings and all the other things you're meant to get when your life is mapped out in this pretty, perfect pattern.

And Fred's religious, or maybe just Texan, and she's saving herself for her wedding night because her virginity’s a precious gift you give to the guy you're gonna marry. Though Faith can't help but think that most of the guys she knows would prefer a case of Bud or some woofers for their car stereo.
Then there's a night out at the ballet, too much champagne and they decide to give it a dry run. 'Cept those shy, doe-eyed girls from Texas ain't ever what they pretend to be. Turns out that little, fragile Fred is a goer when he gets her between the sheets. Up for anything or so she said and so he thought and he said it was the champagne and the way the moonlight lit up her skin so she looked luminescent on the white sheets and he said it was a moment of madness and desire when he put her on her hands and knees and fucked her from behind with a little light spanking served up on the side.

Which is like, practically vanilla compared to what they've done but Fred's loving it and screaming so loud that they wake up the man in the flat upstairs. And she wraps herself round him and he goes to sleep with her voice cooing in his ear about how much she loves him.

Then the next morning she gets up, still all dewy eyed about the seeing too she had the night before. Then while he's in the shower, she leaves her engagement ring on the kitchen table, has breakfast with a friend to tell her all the gory details of how perfect Wes with his perfect future is a fucking sick freak with unnatural desires. And her friend tells her mother who tells Fred's mother who's in town to buy her frickin' hat for the wedding and it ends with Wes sitting in his father's study and…

“He said I was sick, that I was a pervert, that I didn't deserve a girl like Fred and I had to agree with him,” he recalls in this dead, dull voice as he stares up at the kitchen ceiling and she walks her fingers over the frown lines on his forehead. “Then I got this very tiresome, not to mention clichéd speech about never darkening his doorstep again which I took at face value.”

“So you came here?” she prompts, smoothing her thumbs across the thin skin under his eyes to catch the last of the tears.

“Well, no,” he corrects her, leaning into her touch so faintly that she's not even sure that he realizes he's doing it. “First I spent a month drunk, or maybe I spent it hung over, I can't really remember. I lost my job and I took all the money I had left in my bank account and bought a plane ticket to Fort Worth, Texas.”

She knows what's coming next, feels sick to the stomach just thinking about it. “To see Fred?”

“To see Fred,” he sighs in agreement. “In this misguided belief that she still loved me and we could put it all behind us and move on. But it didn't really go according to plan.”

“So what, they ran you out of town with pitchforks?” she asks indignantly but all her wrath is on his behalf.

He looks up at her and it's a fucking miracle because there's a wry twist to his lips that could be a smile if you were squinting really hard. “Oh no, it was much worse than that. We had this week-long reconciliation which we spent in bed. She said that she'd panicked that next morning; they were rather a religious family as I recall. And against my better judgment, I believed her when she said she wanted to explore 'the wilder side of her nature'.”

It's an effort not to clench her hands into fists and smash them against something. There's all this complicated stuff fighting in her head: big heaps of jealousy, sympathy, anger but she just keeps on patting and petting him. “So how wild did her nature get, Wes?”

He shrugs. “Not so much, as you'd probably say. I wouldn't let things progress any further than they had that first night. It really was a wonderful week. They had an ice machine in the corridor outside our hotel room,” he adds vaguely. “And she was very sweet about it when Saturday arrived. Said she'd had a wonderful time and that she was very grateful to me but all things considered she could never imagine herself being married to someone like me.”
He's crying again and it's not wussy or pathetic. Just fucking heart breaking that Wes, her Wes who reads her Jane Austen in silly voices and makes her breakfast in bed and buys her key fobs and fucks her so hard and so well that she'll never be able to love anyone else can be so broken when she doesn't know how to fix him.

“Wes, please don't be so sad,” she murmurs slipping down so she's lying on the cold, hard kitchen floor next to him. “We can make it all right, please.”

“I wish I wasn't like this,” he breathes against her neck. “You shouldn't…”

“No! No! No!” she snarls, squeezing her arms round him. “Don't even fucking think about saying what you're gonna say. I'm glad that you are like you are because it's you and I wouldn't want you to be anyone else. I couldn't love anyone else, any other Wes, but the one I've got.”

He tries to pull away from her but she holds on tight. She might not know the right words, the right combination to ease away his trouble but she's stubborn and stubborn's got her this far.

“I've still got you, haven't I, Wes?”

He moves his head and then his voice muffled, “You have me, Faith, though why you'd want me is still baffling.”

He struggles to sit up and she forces herself to let him. The wine splashes on his shirt look like blood and she presses her hands over them. “What we have, Wes, I guess it's not…we're not like… it's not about holding hands. It's never gonna be. And I can't keep coming up with new ways to tell you that I love you if you keep freaking out and pushing me away every time you start confusing me with some frigid little debutante from Texas.”

She finishes it up with a superbitch glare and she doesn't give a shit if she's supposed to keep her name out of it. He's staring at her, openmouthed and a bit slack-jawed yokel for her liking, and then he buries his head on her shoulder and starts to laugh.

“What's so fucking funny?”

Seems like there are tears of mirth now though she doesn't have a fucking clue why. “Everything,” he splutters. “Everything is funny: my alcohol-induced attack of maudlin reminiscing, your choice turn of phrase in describing the previous love of my life, us sitting on a kitchen floor at 8.30 on a Friday evening.”

And because she never got a chance last night, she cups the back of his head and kisses him now. Soothes away the last remains of all the guilt and the pain with the promise of her lips.

And if she can’t always tell him exactly how she feels, can’t always translate her feelings into words—well, she doesn’t always have to. Somehow this is all she needs to say—the fact that she’s not turning away from him is reassurance enough. She brushes away his tears and kisses him so sweetly and intently that she brings him back into the moment. His tongue slips into her mouth, wine-warmed and uncharacteristically, if endearingly, clumsy for it. They stay that way for a long time; his arms are wrapped so tightly around her, as though she’s the only thing keeping him grounded. At that moment the quiet between them is as important as the talking.

Eventually—slowly and somewhat regretfully—she breaks it off, knowing full well that she’s got to drag him home somehow.

“We need to get you home, Wes. We can’t stay here.”
“Why not? The kitchen floor seems perfectly amenable.” He lets out this funny little chuckle as he starts to reach for the bottle again but she intercepts him.

“Oh no, Wes. That’s enough.”

“Oh?” He looks at her slowly, struggling to focus on her and it’s strange to see his usually piercing blue stare so compromised. He smiles this slow, wry, slightly lopsided grin. “But I’m not done.”

She wraps her arms around him and tries in vain to get him to stand but he’s like a dead weight in her arms. She finally lets go of him and sits back down on the cold parquet with a thump. “Not done? Wes, I think you’re plenty—”

“Oh, but I’m just getting started. Because, really, no discussion of my past failures would be complete without mention of Ms. Lilah Morgan.” He leans close to her and drops his voice to a whisper, as though he’s letting her in on a secret. But really, it’s more like a mystery. “Shall I tell you?”

As questions go, it’s a fucking loaded one. And she’s not even sure that she wants to know. In fact, she feels like she knows enough already. The familiar knot in her stomach is back and she’s starting to wish that Wes hadn’t drained the last of the wine.

“Our marriage—if you can call it that—wasn’t so much about honoring and obeying as it was about competition and humiliation.” He makes this derisive little snort. “And for a while that was enough. I thought it was what I needed. Maybe it was.” He lets his head roll back against the cabinet and he closes his eyes. Sighs heavily. “She was everything Fred wasn’t. Everything—”

Faith shifts uncomfortably. “You don’t have to tell me, not if you—”

“Do you know what l’amour fou is, Faith?”

“No.” She’s almost afraid she’s going to find out.

“I do rather think we fit the definition rather well. We were well-matched in aggression, passion, and a certain clinical detachment. Every moment we were together was a pitched battle. Tenderness simply wasn’t part of the equation.”

Once he says that, her thoughts flicker back to a certain post-coital conversation they’d had early on, and now it’s been crystallized in her mind. She can put the pieces together now. And she’s going to be thinking deeply uncharitable things about a certain Lilah Morgan in perpetuity.

The sound of Wes’ voice snaps her out of her reverie.

“And I think I wanted it that way. Like it was what I deserved after I bungled things so badly with Fred. But Lilah just hated me for acquiescing to it...”

For the briefest second this dark cloud passes over his features and he looks so defeated and diminished. He smiles sadly. “She knew how to punish me so well.”

For a second, it’s as if she can see every bruise, see his body bared and bloody, but she knows he doesn’t mean it like that.

Lilah wouldn’t have bothered with anything that simple, that obvious. As one of Lilah’s victims herself, she feels a pang of fellow feeling as she imagines what Lilah did to repay every perceived slight; how she would’ve taken advantage of every weakness Wes revealed, or didn’t hide well enough.
But she doesn’t have to imagine it because he’s telling her, with a flow of words made possible by the wine, and if listening to him takes more endurance than anything else he’s ever asked of her she doesn’t let it show. The floor really isn’t comfortable but she shifts so she’s sitting beside him, pulling his unresisting arm around her shoulders and wrapping her arm across his body. This way they’re close, but he doesn’t have to look at her as he talks and there’s a small flicker of relief to warm her when his arm tightens automatically.

But the chill returns as she looks up at his face and sees the way he flinches every time he says Lilah’s name.

“We worked together so well, you see; she has a brilliant mind, incisive, quick; it was a real pleasure to tackle a case and know that she’d invariably come up with something original, a new slant on it—she was very amusing, very witty. I found myself able to relax with her. Our relationship turned physical one night when we were working late.” He sighs, stares up at the ceiling. “It’d been so long—I think it helped—I was fooled into thinking my rather enthusiastic response to her overtures meant I’d changed, but I hadn’t, of course.”

“Well, no,” she says a little tartly. “Could’ve told you that myself.” He gives her a questioning look and she rolls her eyes. “Wes, it’s your thing. It’s what turns you on. You can stop doing it but you can’t stop it being what you want, any more than Xander could get off on kissing me when he’d got the hots for Andrew Wells.”

His eyebrow lifts and for a moment he’s looking and sounding almost normal. “This would be a hypothetical kissing I assume?”

“Me and Xander? God, no; we totally tried to get it on. Dated for weeks. Just didn’t work out.”

“I suppose that explains his protectiveness toward you, and his possessiveness,” he murmurs, momentarily distracted.

“No,” she says, feeling a little exasperated. “That’s because he loves me and we’ve been friends forever. Got nothing to do with the fact we spent one fall lip-locked in the closet.”

“You’d be surprised,” he says. “And you’re probably right about my inability to alter.”

“No probably about it.”

“Yes. Well, be that as it may, it worked for a while; enough that we got married, though that wasn’t—wasn’t a decision prompted by romance as much as practicality.” He bites his lip, choosing his words more carefully now. “We didn’t—I never tried to do anything with Lilah that I did with Fred. Never let her see that side of me. She—guessed though. Found—evidence of my proclivities by rooting around when I was out—books, pictures, the letters I’d sent to Fred that she’d returned—”

She takes a certain pride in knowing she’s never done that. Stolen from him, yes. Gone through his stuff, no. No way.

“She laughed,” he said in a cool, distant voice. “Wasn’t shocked, wasn’t overly concerned; even offered to indulge my whims.”

“You didn’t —?”

He shakes his head, a swift, violent shake that goes on for far too long until she reaches up and stops him, placing her hand against his face. “Shh,” she whispers. “It’s okay, Wes.”

“No, I didn’t. Not with her. I wanted to put that behind me. Wanted to prove I didn’t need it, could
still function—but I couldn’t.”

It’s killing her to listen to this. Her hand is gripping onto his shirt, holding on so hard to a handful of cotton that her fingers are aching.

“Sex with her after that became—well, it was—” He’s searching for a word and she can’t help him though ones like ‘hellish’, ‘violent’ and ‘bloody’ are skittering around her head. “Adequate.” She winces. Worse than hell. “Then one night I just—I couldn’t.”

The admission’s forced from him by whatever compulsion is driving him to confess, be shriven.

“She was furious. Insulted. I don’t think she was hurt, but—no, I don’t think it was that. She withdrew, became distant, very cool. It was a relief, to be honest. Then one night I came home and found her waiting.” His hand comes up to rest against hers, gently prizing her fingers away from his shirt and then bringing their linked hands down to his lap. “She’d gone somewhere—some sex shop. Spent a fortune on every clichéd accessory you can imagine; fur lined cuffs, whips, gels. Gone to town on a set of the tackiest leather-look costumes.” He curls his lip. “Toys.” She thinks of what he used on her, and yeah, not his style at all. Those scarves; a belt, a brush, his hand. He doesn’t need more than that. Doesn’t need anything much at all when it came down to it.

“So you told her to get changed again or something? That you weren’t interested?” she says hesitantly, wondering if that’s the tiniest bit of pity she’s feeling for a rejected Lilah who might, just maybe, have been trying—

“Changed?” he says. “Oh—no, Faith. I don’t think I made it quite clear. The costumes were for me to wear. Not her. She said I was too weak to be anything else but servile, that she was going to make me kneel, make me beg—”

Something, some memory twists his face and he’s struggling to his feet, pushing her aside so that she’s lying, sprawled on the floor, as he bends over the small sink and heaves, the wine and food she’d chosen leaving his body as he retches, his body shaking in violent spasms.

She’s thrown up enough to know what he’s going through and she’s ready when he finishes, running the tap, bathing his face, getting him water to rinse his mouth with. He’s coming apart as she looks at him and she’s starting to panic.

With a strength that comes from desperation she gets him into the library, where a low couch gives him somewhere to rest, and covers him with a throw before going to start a pot of coffee.

When she comes back he’s sitting up, hands clasped in front of him, eyes downcast.

“I’m so sorry,” he says.

“If it’s for wasting all that fancy food, yeah, you should be sorry,” she says, with a mock- sternness, kneeling down so she can peer up into his face. “But the flowers are still in one piece, so it’s not a total loss.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t want an apology for telling me stuff, Wes,” she says. “Not ever.”

“You shouldn’t be burdened with my inadequacies,” he whispers. “I never wanted you to know—”

“Know what?” she demands. “That you’ve picked two total losers to get involved with? Want a rundown on my ex-boyfriends? Want me to tell you about the one who fucked me on Monday night
and his dick was barely dry before he was on the phone telling every single fucker on the football team about it? Or the one who took me to a party and his friend offered him a six-pack if he’d let me go down on him, and he agreed, and when I told them both to fuck off and made him take me home, he dumped me out of the car and I had to walk six miles home in the rain?” She takes a deep breath. “They don’t matter, Wes. What they did, how they hurt you—it’s over.”

He raises his head and studies her. “Sometimes, with you, I’ve believed that,” he said.

“Think it all the time,” she tells him, “because it’s true. Wes, I’m scared I’m going to say the wrong thing, fuck this up, but I love you. I’m like you. If you’re a freak, you’re a freak with a freak for a girlfriend. Finally.”

He frowns at her. “You’re not a freak,” he says, sounding annoyed. “Faith, you’re not to refer to yourself like that.”

“I won’t, if you don’t,” she says pointedly. “And if you start in on the whole bit about me deserving better, when I’ve told you and told you all I want is you, I’m gonna get seriously pissed.” She purses her lips. “No; I’m going to get irate. Yeah. Much scarier.”

He smiles, but it wavers. “I think I’d prefer you to be neither, so I’ll refrain.” The smile vanishes. “I feel dreadful.”

“You going to throw up again?” she demands, jumping up.

“Afraid so.” He swallows and lurches toward the kitchen, and she takes a few minutes to call a taxi before following him.

They’re going home where she can take care of him properly and no fucking way is he driving like this.

Chapter Eighty-Two

The cab takes its sweet time to show, and thanks to some strong coffee Wes has already started to sober up a little. Even so, she makes him stay on the sofa while they wait, ignoring his protestations that he should clean up the mess in the kitchen. She tucks the blanket more tightly around him and sighs with exasperation. “Uh-uh, Wes. You’re staying put.” She kisses him on the forehead and goes off to do what she can with the disheveled kitchen.

Finally she hears the telltale flurry of impatient beeps that mark the arrival of the cab. She helps Wes up; he’s unsteady on his feet. When the cabbie leans on the horn again he winces. “He’d better not have trained in New York City,” he mutters. “Otherwise I may be redecorating his interior gratis.”

“Uh, we’ll tell him we’re not in a hurry, okay?” Faith slips her arms around him and somehow gets him to the door.

Thankfully the cabbie turns out to be more tortoise than hare, and they manage to get to Wes’ place without any mishaps. He spends the ride leaning against her, eyes closed, drifting in and out of sleep. She shakes him awake. “Wes, we’re here.”

He looks positively grateful to be home, and sighs audibly when they make it over the threshold. She takes his hand and starts toward the stairs.

“C’mon, Wes. You’re getting a shower.”

He doesn’t protest, just shuffles listlessly up the stairs after her.
And when she starts to undress him, well, that feels strange too, because it marks this subtle shift. Like they’ve finally remembered that trust is all about these little, tiny, unremarked upon moments, as much as the big, turning-point ones.

She doesn’t draw it out, just unbuttons and unzips him with patient, gentle efficiency. He looks positively ashen as he leans against her. She notices. “The water will do you some good,” she says as she nudges him into the hot spray. And he just stands there, head back, eyes closed, letting the water wash over him.

“Better?”


She’s ready with one of his gazillion impossibly white, impossibly fluffy towels and she wraps him carefully up in it before she goes off to get him some water from the kitchen. By the time she gets back he’s shrugged off the towel and has crawled into bed. She sets the water down on the bedside table and starts to get undressed. And he’s not so far gone that he doesn’t watch her appreciatively as she slips out of her work outfit.

As she pulls back the quilt and sinks down onto the down-filled pillows, it hits her how incredibly exhausted she is. She curls her body around his and rests her head against his chest. He wraps his arm around her and neither one of them feels the need to say anything but that’s okay. It’s not the heavy, portentous silence of the past week but something refreshingly companionable.

Her eyelids are drooping shut when he says, “I’m never drinking again.”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s what I said after my first five shots of peppermint schnapps. And yeah, that little promise lasted a week, tops.”

“I really think I mean it this time. All things considered I’d have been better off if I’d learned my lesson after I drank half a bottle of my father’s Château Y’Quem when I was fourteen. He was right to never forgive me.”

She widens her eyes in mock-indignation, hand fluttering to her heart. “Château Y’Quem? I’ll never forgive you! That’s it!” She giggles and kisses him on the cheek. “Well, maybe I’ll forgive you in the morning. But right now I’ve got to go to sleep.” As if to prove her point, she lets out a big yawn.

“Faith?”

“Mmm?” She’s half asleep already; her sleep-clouded brain can’t quite understand what he’s still doing awake.

“Thank you. For everything. It shouldn’t have come to this. I should have told you—”

“Wes?”

“Yes?”

“Shut up and go to sleep.”

He smiles and kisses the top of her head. He lets that be the final word on the matter before he drifts off.

Chapter Eighty-Three
For only the second time since she's slept with him, she wakes up first. He's huddled under the
covers, his breathing even and slow and although the sun is high up in the sky, she doesn't have the
heart to wake him.

Instead she gingerly slides out of bed and, feeling as if she's auditioning for the role of scream queen
in a horror movie, she actually, genuinely, fucking tiptoes out of the room.

Showered and dressed in jeans, an old T-shirt and flip-flops, she puts the coffee machine on, snags
an apple from the bowl and unlocks the kitchen door. It's one of those beautiful mornings. The air's
already soft and hazy and full of promise and it looks like someone's painted the clouds onto the
impossible blue of the sky.

She takes a bite of her apple and chewing ruminatively she starts to turn over the events of the night
before. It was brutal. It was horrible. And she can feel her heart aching in sympathy for how much
pain he was put through, how much pain he's still in. But really? Deep down, she's glad that he got
fucked up and broken on the way to her. Because she's fucked-up and broken too and they're a
perfect, matched set.

But then she thinks that well, it's not exactly cool to be shaking her poms poms because Wes has had
his heart trampled on and spat out by a couple of bitches who…

“You look very pensive, Faith. You're positively glaring at that apple.”

She lifts her head from her savage contemplation of her half eaten Granny Smith to see him standing
in the doorway, looking calm and smooth like the destroyed man from last night was just a dream she
had.

“Hey,” she says softly. “How are you feeling?”

He stretches tentatively and gives her a rueful smile. “Despite the fact that I rather disgraced myself
in a variety of ways that I shudder to recall, I feel quite chipper. Maybe a little fragile but nothing a
cup of coffee won't cure.”

“What? You don't have a hangover?” she asks indignantly. “That sucks! You puked up a twenty-
bottle of wine; you could have the decency to have a headache.”

He pads toward her, taking a moment to stop and sniff the air, before sitting next to her on the bench.
“Maybe it's because you looked after me so wonderfully last night, not to mention all the water you
poured down my throat.”

She squints up at him and apart from a little puffiness around the eyes and a faint pallor bleaching out
the tan he got last weekend, he looks like a walking advertisement for the benefit of eight hours sleep
and eating five pieces of fruit and veg every day.

“Are you sure you're okay, Wes?” she asks again, leaning up to kiss him on the cheek.

His arm curves round her shoulder and he drops a kiss on the top of her head. And another one. And
another one. “Quite sure, my sweet girl.”

She's not sure how it happens but she goes from being made of flesh and bone into a puddle of girl
gloop just from the three words said with such fierce affection.

“Faith, about last night. I really am ashamed…”

“If you start apologizing for any of it, Wes, then man you're going to be looking at the business end
of a hissy fit. We on the same page?" And it doesn't come out quite as menacing as she planned it but his arm tightens around her.

“You spent all that money, arranged such a lovely and impromptu picnic only to have it ruined,” he murmurs against her hair. “I think the first thing on my agenda for this weekend is to buy you a…”

“I don't want you buying me stuff all the time,” she protests and it's sharp and shrill and as soon as she says it she's having to work really hard to not think about all the stuff that she doesn't have to think about until Monday when the bank opens again. “You wanna get me a present, Wes? All I want is you being you. And if you want to fuck my brains out at some stage today then that's fine with me too.”

He starts to give her his pissiest look, all flary nostrils and narrowed eyes but he gets bored halfway there and sighs instead. “That really is a revolting turn of phrase, not to mention what a mess it would make of my sheets.”

“Well, you could just fuck me into the mattress instead?” she suggests and he winces again because what? She's not using her increased word power or something.

“Now that you mention it, you have interrupted me several times in the last five minutes,” he says, his voice deceptively calm but she could pick out the little glint in his eyes in a police line-up now. “And there is a small matter of this disreputable T-shirt, which I'm sure I asked you to never wear again.”

He's seizing a good handful of faded and holey cotton, knuckles brushing against her belly. “I want to go to the farmer's market this morning,” he drawls so slowly that it's almost like he's taken the afternoon off between syllables. “Then we're going to have brunch up at the lake.”

She leans into his touch, hoping that he'll just rip the top off her and schedule in a little pre-brunch action. “Then what?”

“I'm also sure that you were at least a couple of minutes late returning from lunch yesterday,” he replies smugly. “I'm sure by the time we've eaten, I'll have thought of a suitable method of chastisement. Now go and change.”

And it's okay that she pulls a face at his bossiness even as she can feel the blood quickening inside her at the thought of what he'll be able to come up with, after a couple of hours if he really puts his mind to it. “Any special requests?” she asks, standing up and putting a hand on her hip like the whole getting changed thing is too boring for words.

He leans back on the seat and gives her a look that strips the top layer of her skin away. “The little polka-dot dress and I'll be most displeased if you even think about wearing anything underneath it.”

She runs away from him, polka-dot dress fluttering in the warm breeze, when he tells her that he's going to buy Brussels sprouts, and is only persuaded to tuck her hand neatly into the crook of his arm, like a lady, when he confesses that they're a winter vegetable and he wouldn't dream of buying them at this time of the year.

Then he wipes the forgiving smile off her face by leaning down, so that his cheek, smooth from shaving, brushes hers, and telling her, without troubling to lower his voice, that she’s not to move out of his reach until they’re back home, no matter what, and as her fingers clench around his arm because with her knees this water-weak it’s all that’s keeping her upright, he chuckles with a complacency that’s both infuriating and reassuring.
It’s not as easy as it seems either; the sunshine and the start of strawberry season has brought out the crowds and they’re forced to squeeze their way past people laden with shopping and entirely too busy looking for bargains to watch where they’re going.

It’s a double buggy with an enchanting pair of twin girls in it that prove to be her undoing. Even Wesley, who’s not shown any sign of being paternal while she’s known him, has to pause and give them an indulgent smile as he bends down and returns a stuffed lion, just in time to halt a scream that would’ve left their harassed mother deaf most likely. It's either his English accent as he says, “There you are,,” or the fact that when he smiles gravely he’s irresistible, but whatever it is, the toddlers are cooing, the mother’s pushing back windswept hair and giving him a thank you that somehow turns into a life story and without Wes’ arm, she’s forced to step aside to let a man in a hurry get past and somehow she can’t get back to his side.

So when the buggy gets swallowed up, with nothing but a faint howl to mark its presence, as little Bethany (who teethed early but still doesn’t sleep through) drops Mr. Roar again, Wesley looks for her, extends his arm, raises his eyebrow meaningfully as he touches nothing but air, and fuck, let the games begin.

“I didn’t do it on purpose!” she protests later. “And if you hadn’t been so busy with that woman—”

“Mrs. Patterson,” he says reprovingly. His eyes narrow in thought. “I think I handled a case for her husband some years ago, before they got married. He was involved in a car accident, and, strangely enough, she was driving the car that hit his. An odd way to meet, but it seems to have been successful.”


He tightens a knot, steps back and smiles. “I’m sure you did. Which is gratifying, but not in the least relevant.”

His finger traces a line from the back of her neck and down the long hollow of her spine. “You’re very beautiful, you know,” he tells her, his touch lingering, as though he can’t bear to move his hand away. Then it does move, lifting and returning in a single sharp flash of sound and sensation, and she can’t hold back the low cry of surprise that first stroke gives her because she forgets how it feels, always, and it’s always new.

“I’m going to make you even more beautiful,” he whispers and he doesn’t stop until he has, and her ass is as pink as the flowers she’s kneeling among, tiny wildflowers threaded through the grass, and she’s glad he decided they could go to the lake another day when they saw the traffic headed that way, because they couldn’t have done this there and she’s not sure they should be doing it here, but she’s not going to stop him.

And he keeps her there, kneeling and naked, arms tied around the willow tree in his garden, while he feeds her from his hand, strawberry juice staining his fingers and her lips, and only unties her because he wants to fuck her and she tells him, fervently and at length, that, no, unless he uses the silk scarf to gag her, she’s gonna make enough noise that the people at the bottom of the hill will hear her.

Which means when they get inside he makes her wait for an hour before his cock finally slides inside her, after forbidding her to do more than whimper, no matter what his mouth and hands are doing because he says the sounds she makes are beautiful too.

And when he hears her whispering his name and telling him she loves him, as they lie, curled together in a sleepy, sated snuggle, he smiles, eyes closed, and tells her he loves her too.
Chapter Eighty-Four

They're woken by the insistently ringing of the doorbell. It takes Faith a second to remember where she is. She hauls herself slowly up to a sitting position. Wes is already pulling on his trousers.

“You expecting something, Wes?”

He half-turns toward her, the slyest smile on his lips. “Perhaps.”

“I told you not to buy me anything!” She swats him playfully. “It's not more than ten bucks, right? Right?” She gives him her best intense glare.

And goddamn it, he actually rolls his eyes. “Ten—and some change. And who said it was for you?”

“Wes! What did you do?” But it's too late—he's already out the door.

She starts grabbing for her clothes. Problem is, her dress seems to have disappeared. Now she remembers—it's still hanging from a bush in the garden. She doesn't even remember when he finally stripped it off her. Was it before or after the—

Then she hears the front door slam and she's now insanely curious about whatever's going on down there. But she figures that she'd better exhibit some patience—she thinks her ass has had enough for one day.

She feels the same intense anticipation as if it were Christmas morning—or so she imagines, because actual Christmas morning in her household usually involved a knock-down drag-out between her parents. And isn't that just the gift that keeps on giving?

Just when she's pondering that, she hears Wes' footsteps on the stairs. He leans against the doorframe, arms folded across his chest and looking rather pleased with himself.

“You're welcome to come downstairs now,” he drawls tantalizingly.

She pulls on her kimono and slips past him into the hallway. His eyes are following her but he's not moving from the spot. She bounds down the winding stairs two at a time and he admonishes her from the landing: “Faith, it would hardly be prudent for you to slip and fall headfirst over such a trifle.”

She pauses long enough to see his smirk of eminent self-satisfaction. That's just enough to spur her on.

And sure enough, there's an impressively large box and a couple of not so shabby smaller ones sitting next to it in the vestibule.

“Oh my God!” she screeches, jumping down the last three steps. “You didn't? How… when? Shit, Wes!”

“Really, Faith, there's no need to be quite so strident,” he admonishes her with a grin but he's got this soft look in his eyes like secretly he's delighted by her delight.

But she can't look at him because she's diving for the biggest box. “We've got a TV and… a home entertainment system and a DVD player! And, Wes, this cost way more than ten dollars and change.”

He crouches down on the floor next to her as she runs a disbelieving hand over the boxes. “Shall I
“arrange to have them sent back then?”

She bumps him with her hip, almost toppling him over. “Well, fuck no! But Wes, it's so much money.” It's even more money than she's stolen from him and that unwelcome thought suddenly takes up residence in her head like a gang of squatters who refuse to leave.

“It is rather a lot of money,” he agrees carefully and she can feel his eyes on her. “But I did enjoy that bizarre Queer Eye show at the cottage and if it makes you feel better you can read a book in the library while I'm watching it.”

“That wouldn't be fair!” she protests hotly. “And, like, how would you even know what the good shows are?”

“I'm sure I'd manage,” he says drily, standing up and staring at the boxes with a certain amount of trepidation. “But I'm sure it would be far more rewarding if you were to help me. And if it really bothers you that much, you can pay me back. I'm sure I could come up with some barter system for every hour you spend glued…”

“Oh, whatever!” And she's too busy scoffing and then sticking her tongue out at him to think about double meanings and blank checks.

It takes them a good hour to set it all up after they've dragged the boxes down the stairs, into the den.

She makes Wes a cup of tea because, of course, he can't just start ripping away the cardboard and figuring out as he goes along. Nope, he has to sit down and read all the instruction manuals, then lay out all the leads in some super-secret sequence while she's ordered not to touch anything under pain of death.

And she's not too impressed either when he confesses that he hasn't signed up for a cable package because they'll be in New York in a few weeks.

“It hardly seemed worth it, Faith,” he mumbles, peering round the back of the TV set. “Could you pass me one of those leads and stop pouting while you're at it?”

“You can't see me, Wes, so you don't even know if I'm pouting and man, all the good shows are on cable.”

“I daresay we'll cope. We can watch DVDs or I can watch DVDs and you can finish your Dorothy Parker.” He crawls out from behind the TV and gives her a stern look that she isn't buying for a second.

“There's no way you're gonna be able to work this thing without my expert advice,” she tells him and yeah, she is pouting now. “And my Blockbuster card,” she adds triumphantly. “I might even let you buy me some popcorn.”

He snaps the last lead into place and adjusts one of the speakers perched on top. “I may be agreeable to renting some films but I'm taking the whole issue of junk food under advisement,” he demurs, bending over and switching the set on.

Nothing happens and he looks so mystified that she bursts out laughing. “You must have plugged something in wrong.”

“I absolutely did not,” he huffs. “I followed those labyrinthine instructions exactly.”

She picks up the remote and presses a few buttons but still no joy, until she waggles it in her hand.
“This feels kinda light. You put the batteries in it, yeah?”

And if she lives to be a hundred, she's never going to forget the expression on his face, that goes from outrage to realization and then back to outrage within a millisecond.

“Wes,” she says so sweetly that it gives even her a sugar rush, “if you drive us into town so we can rent some movies and you let me buy three different kinds of junk food then I promise that we'll never, ever talk about this again.”

He's whipped and he so knows it and she tosses the remote control in the air and catches it one-handed. “I'll even let you choose the movies,” she promises, while he stands there with his hands on his hips and shoots her laser beam death rays with his eyes.

Then he shrugs and casts a look of utter loathing at the new TV, which stands there all shiny and knowing. “Very well,” he sighs resignedly. “You'd better go and retrieve your dress from the rose bush in the garden and get changed.”

She had been going to let him choose the movies because she's a fucking saint and yeah, they were going to be provisos about foreign languages and shit but as soon as they open the door of Blockbuster and she sees all those colorful boxes lining the shelves, all her good intentions get forgotten.

Wes is staring at the shop in bemusement like he's just walked into the monkey house at the zoo and she grabs his hand and drags him, unprotesting, through the early Saturday evening crowd of harassed parents and their ankle biters.

“We have to get this!” She shoves Lost In Translationat him. “It's my all-time favorite movie, you'll love it. Oh, and this. Shit! I haven't seen this for ages.” Ghostworld and The Royal Tenenbaums join the pile and Wes is trying to read the synopses and not drop anything as she tugs his sleeve and pulls him toward the art house section.

“You can choose something too,” she tells him graciously and he arches an eyebrow way higher than it's ever gone before.

“Thank you, Faith,” he says gravely. “That's very magnanimous of you. We'll have this and this, and definitely not this,” he adds, giving her Ghostworld back.

“But it's my favorite movie ever,” she whines, trying to push it into his hands.

“You've said that about the last ten DVDs you picked up,” he reminds her tartly and picks a box up from the shelf. “If you don't stop being such a brat, I'm going to make you watch this.”

She peers over his shoulder at reads the description: “‘A man seeks answers about life, death, and the existence of God as he plays chess against the Grim Reaper during the Black Plague. God, Wes! No fucking way.”

He juggles the boxes so he can slip his arm round her shoulder. “Not even if I let you gorge yourself into a sugar coma,” he purrs in her ear but she twists out of his grasp and wags a finger at him.

“Nuh-huh!” she taunts him. “You trying to bribe me, Wes? I'm shocked.”

And there's nothing he can do as she dances away from him and goes to look at the New Releases because there's children, really, young children about and so he'll just have to think of a suitable punishment for when he gets her home, which is just fine by her, she thinks with a decisive nod as she puts Ghostworld back and picks up Donnie Darko instead.
Half an hour and a slightly fierce discussion about why *Kill Bill Volume 1* is not appropriate Saturday night viewing later, Wes has caved in on the junk food if it comes from the gourmet food shop a couple of blocks away.

“And as I had absolutely no say in our movie choices, it's only fair that I select your calorific treats,” he says smugly. “Wait here.”

She peers in at the window, trying to use mind control to get him to walk over to the freezer compartment when she sees a neon light reflecting off the glass and then she’s flashbacks to another night, with Xander, standing across the street and begging her to do him the mother of all favors.

The brown paper bag that Wes is clutching looks promisingly full but she only gives it a cursory glance because she's too busy trying to work up to voicing the bright idea she's had.

“I thought you'd be trying to wrest this out of my hands.” Wes chuckles, then frowns because she's biting her lip and shuffling her feet. “What's the matter, Faith? Are you going to grill me on exactly how much money I've spent?”

She draws a pattern on the sidewalk with her flip-flop and tries to give him a winning smile, which doesn't feel right on her face. “I think we should go and get some porn to watch,” she blurts out because there ain't no way in the world to dress it up.

And yeah, he's shocked because his eyes widen slightly but then his face gets that closed-in, hungry look which doesn't lead to anything good but her clutching the bed sheets and screaming. “Really? Well, that sounds…interesting.”

She jerks her hand in the direction of the neon sign. “There's this store just down that alley,” she mutters. “Like, a private store.”

Wes is staring at her like she's just lifted her dress over her head and flashed the entire town. “Don't you have to be over twenty-one to frequent those kind of establishments?”

“Well, it's not like they check ID on the door and that place is wall-to-wall sleaze.”

“And you know that because?” He's got his lawyer voice on now and she's got all his attention, which is just how she likes it.

“Well, I went in there one time, for Xand,” she explains, as he gently takes her arm and crosses the street. “He wanted some gay porn and he was too chickenshit to buy it himself.”

“So you offered, out of the goodness of your heart?”

“You know me, Wes. I try to do someone a good turn every day,” she smirks but he's too busy looking shifty as he checks to make sure that no one's followed them down the alley to notice.

“If we go in, Faith, and it's a big if, I don't want you rushing around, picking embarrassing objects off the shelves and thrusting them at me and neither do I want a running commentary on said objects. Are we clear?”

“As crystal, sir,” she snaps back and he's dithering and it's that time in a relationship when it feels right to do a little porn shopping together. So she saves him from having to make a decision and reaches up to ring the bell.

Faith’s heard these rumors about these girl-friendly places with discreet whited-out windows,
salespeople who double as safe sex educators, and a try-out room for vibrators.

But then, shitty one horse towns in the middle of nowhere don’t get one of those. Instead they get this grungy, neon-lit hole-in-the-wall whose owner seems to think that penis-shaped gummy candies are the height of sophistication.

It’s been a while since she’d been in and she’d had just long enough to completely forget how fucking creepy the place was. At least she’s not alone this time.

Maybe that’s worse.

When she and Wes walk in everyone in the place looks up furtively from their wank mags. Faith smiles nervously and Wes grabs her by the elbow and leads her through the small, stunned crowd with all the assurance of Moses parting the Red Sea.

“So, Faith? What exactly did you have in mind? There are so many wonderments to choose from.” On cue, he picks up the “Honeybun Spanking Kit” with an expression that’s equal parts curiosity and obvious distaste. He flips the package over to read the explanation, mutters “Cinnamon?” under his breath, and puts it back on the shelf.

That’s when he spots a veritable wall of Rabbits and attachments and he drags Faith over to it. “Do you think Mr. Bunny would like a friend? A dolphin, perhaps? Or a…” He picks up a luminescent silver vibe and peers at it, “…bear?”

“I think Mr. Bunny is just fine on his lonesome, Wesley,” she grits out, hoping against hope that the Furtive Perv brigade isn’t listening in. “Didn’t we come here to look at the, uh, films?”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized that we were in a hurry. I’ve never been here before and I think I’d like to browse first.”

And she’s rolling her eyes before she can even stop herself. Wes grabs hold of her arm again. Leans over and whispers in her ear, “Don’t think I didn’t see that, Faith. I’m sure I’ll think of something suitable later. Perhaps I’ll even find…” He casts his gaze around the gaudy, crowded room. “Ah! Yes.” Still holding onto her, he crosses the room to this rather tacky array of cheap pleather paddles and canes. “Something like this.”

She blanches, whispering, “You’ve gotta be kidding.”

The bastard actually takes a second to smirk. “Yes, I am rather.”

“Goddamnit!” She punches him in the arm. “Let’s get some porn and get out of here. It’s kinda creepy.” It comes out more shrill than she’d expected.

“Fine. But after your bratty behavior earlier this evening, you don’t get to choose.”

She splutters for a second. “But Wes! You don’t know a goddamn thing about—”

He looks incredibly amused. “I don’t? And you’re an expert then, Faith?”

And she’s all set to go into serious pout mode when a copy of *Bend Over Boyfriend II* catches her eye and she snaps it off the shelf, waving it in front of him. “This is a modern classic, Wes.”

His gaze flickers over it and skitters off with disinterest. “If that’s what you have in mind, Faith, you can file it away with the tying-me-up scenario.”
“It’s just a movie. I didn’t say anything about—”

“No, you didn’t. But I could see that gleam in your eye.”

“Someday I’m going to have my wicked, wicked way with you, and you’re going to like it,” she lilts out as seductively as possible when she doesn’t want the whole frickin’ store to hear.

She gets a raised eyebrow for her trouble. “Oh, really?” He chuckles. “You sound awfully assured of that, Faith. And really, in the foreseeable future I rather think I’m going to see the swift reddening of your arse.”

Her cheeks are coloring as he says it and he skims his fingertips slowly over her breasts before she can stop him. “Stop it, not here,” she hisses.

“No to worry,” he says mildly as he goes back to studying the vast array of boxes. She gives him five full minutes before she barks out impatiently, “Jesus, you are the most serious porn shopper in the world. What, are you reading the plot summaries or something?” Now it’s his turn to look a little sheepish and she giggles. “You totally are! Oh my God, I’m never letting you live this one down, Wes.”

Finally he picks something off the shelf. He turns to her with a look of supreme triumph.

“What did you get?” She cranes her neck to see but he’s covering up the title too well.

“It’s a surprise. Now, be a good girl and go outside while I pay for it.”

For once she doesn’t mind doing what he says, even though walking through the shop alone is way worse than doing it with the solid presence of Wesley beside her. There’s one guy who looks unsettlingly like—oh fuck it is—the guy who taught French and left mid-term when he got caught giving an airhead blonde extra tuition that somehow needed both of them naked to do the trick. Harmony’d been barely legal because she’d been kept back a year, but it hadn’t saved him. And the soixante-neuf jokes just wrote themselves.

She ducks her head before she can see what he’s reading or—gross—where his hand is, and heads for the doorway in a controlled manner that might look like a dead run to an observer.

She doesn’t wait right outside but takes little sideways steps until she’s far enough away from the entrance to be officially not hanging around it, and waits. For a hell of a lot longer than it normally takes for someone to pay for something, and she knows damn well Wes isn’t getting fucking carded so what the hell is he doing in there?

When he emerges, cat that got the cream smirk firmly in place, the bag he’s holding is way too loaded to be holding just a vid and she hisses at him as he comes alongside her and takes her arm.

“Wes? What did you get? You were supposed to be getting a movie. One. What did you—”

She tries to rummage and peek inside the bag but he holds it away from her and says in the voice of sweet reason, “Faith, if you want me to empty the bag and show you my purchases in the middle of the street, I will, but wouldn’t you rather wait until we’re somewhere slightly less public?”

He’s got her there, and she can only nod, biting her lip, and then glare at him as he locks the bag in the trunk, still with that annoying smile twitching at his lips.

She pouts until halfway home when he reaches over and lays a warm hand on her knee. He doesn’t move it, doesn’t say anything, but something in her melts and she relaxes and it’s only two steps
from that to bouncing, because, shit—

“We’ve got a television!”

He gives her the most indulgent of smiles. “We do indeed.”

“And now we’re normal,” she says, with satisfied certainty. She sneaks a look at him and he’s spared a second to give her a baffled, bemused glance. “It’s true, Wes,” she says seriously. “Gotta tell you; no matter how freaked Xander was by what we get up to in the bedroom, it was nothing compared to the look on his face when he found out you didn’t have a TV. Really.”

He stares out at the road and his face is unreadable.

“You’re not going to send it back!” she says, totally panicking because shit, that wasn’t the right thing to say at all.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he says. “Send it back when I haven’t watched a single one of the delightful movies you chose? I can hardly wait to dive into them and become a couch potato.”

He says it in such a tentative, prissy sort of a way, as if he’s not sure he’s got the right phrase, that she bursts out laughing, and the hand on her leg twists and his fingers pinch her thigh, high enough up that her laughter cuts off abruptly.

But when she looks at him, dry-mouthed and with an ache starting a few inches north of his fingers, he’s grinning and she realizes she’s totally been had.

When they get home, he sends her to the kitchen with the bag of snacks, and tells her to arrange them and bring them to the den. She watches him vanish, porn goody bag in one hand, DVDs in the other, and rolls her eyes. Getting a TV is good but she’s wondering if she’s made a monster. Give any man a remote and he turns into a control freak; the effect on someone like Wes was too scary to think about.

When she discovers the jelly beans she forgives him in advance, and the caramel popcorn’s like a blowjob in the bank.

By the time she wanders into the den, mouth full of a mixture of orange and cotton candy beans because she loves mixing them up, he’s got it working, and holy mother of God, it’s huge. Even the fact that all she’s looking at is a commercial for toothpaste, and she’s getting entirely too well acquainted with some man’s tonsils, doesn’t stop her from voicing a near orgasmic moan of delight.

“It is rather impressive, isn’t it?” he says, with so much pride you’d think he’d gone out into the forest and hunted the sucker down with his own little bow and arrow. “Well, this certainly isn’t how I’d planned to spend the evening—” She experiences a small pang of regret because whatever it was he’d had in mind, it was bound to have been good, and if she ends up missing out on sex because he gets addicted to channel-hopping, she’s going to send it back herself. “—but I’m sure it’ll be entertaining.”

And it is. He insists on watching a non-porn movie first and as it’s still daylight and they’re both sober, she’s not inclined to argue. He holds her hand and she snuggles up beside him on the couch, with their feet propped up on the footstool that’s wide enough for both of them to use. The room darkens, he produces some beer that, even if it’s imported from Belgium, is still beer, and she drifts off just as Westley and Buttercup are battling a R.O.U.S or three, dreaming about doing just this, until it occurs to her that she doesn’t need to because she already is.
When the credits roll, he stretches and stares at the mess they’ve made with the brief popcorn fight. “Hmm. I think we’ll have a short intermission,” he murmurs and then looks thoughtful. “There should be ice cream at this point, if I recall correctly.”

“You don’t have any,” she points out. “And if you did, I’d have found it by now and eaten it when you weren’t looking.”

“I sincerely hope not, Faith,” he says. “Such wanton greed and deceit would bring my entirely justified wrath down upon your head.”

“My ass, you mean,” she says, giggling, because fuck, she’s getting buzzed from the beer, her stomach’s full of sugar and starch and Wes is looking at her with that gleam in his eyes that promises fun times ahead.

“Well, now you come to mention it,” he purrs, “that is a more suitable location, perhaps.” He stands up. “But as there isn’t any, you couldn’t have eaten it, now could you?”

She’s left to work out the Wes logic as they get fresh supplies and the beer gets swapped for a red wine that’s as smooth and rich on her tongue as the chocolate truffles he puts just out of reach, so she has to ask him every time she wants one and kiss him before he’ll slip one into her mouth.

He reaches into the brown paper bag from the porn shop and pulls out a video, giving it a long stare as if he still can’t quite believe it’s there in his house, in his hand. “Why were you so amused at the idea of reading the plots?” he asks.

She snorts. “It’s porn, Wes. Who cares what happens in the three minutes before they get naked?”

He stares at her. “That’s a remarkably limited way of looking at it,” he says.

“Don’t see why.” She still can’t see what he’s got, but his thumb’s covering a pair of tits that probably got a dressing room of their own and there’s a promising looking tangle of arms and legs.

“You don’t find yourself aroused by a certain setting, a stock character? Horny housewife, sexy student, naughty nurse?” He’s reeling off the alliterative clichés with his mouth twisted wryly but he doesn’t sound bored and the look he’s giving her is intent enough that she knows from experience he’s going to want an answer.

“Well, none of those. Not really into the girl-on-girl action, y’know?”

“And so my fantasy of you with one of your fellow inmates dies an untimely death,” he sighs.

It’s unexpected and she flushes. “Hey! Wasn’t like I was doing time. Juvie isn’t—well...” Her voice trails off because, yeah, she did get an offer, but it wasn’t from one of the girls, it was from one of the officers, and fuck, as if she hadn’t got enough crap to have nightmares about. The flash of sharp nails digging into her breast and sour breath kisses makes her shudder. “Not my thing,” she says fixing him with a glare. “And if there isn’t a cock to be seen in that, you can watch it by yourself.”

He stares at her in silence and she grits her teeth. “If we’re talking about clichés and fantasies, Wes, what about you?” she bites out. “Bet you went to a fancy boarding school with all sorts of fun when the lights went out.”

His eyes are cool and a little distant and she’s not sure if she’s angrier at him or her, because she wanted this to be happy and fuck, he’s dredged out enough harrowing memories for one weekend.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Faith, but the only service I performed for the upper class boys was to
write a good deal of their homework in exchange for cash.” He smiled. “Oh, were you expecting six of the best and a buggering behind the bicycle shed? I’m afraid I can’t offer any spicy stories along those lines.”

There’s a sticky pause and then he says softly, “I think this is where I apologize, isn’t it? You look remarkably upset and it wasn’t in the least bit tactful of me to bring up your past like that.”

She sighs. “No, it’s fine.” She gives his hand a forgiving squeeze.

“I’m still curious, though.” He tilts his head. “No fantasies at all?”

She starts to blush, because, yeah, she’s got them, but since she met him they’ve changed and he’s got a starring role in most of them. “Wes, I’m practically living it; why would I want to dream about it?”

He purses his lips and mercifully lets her off the hook, maybe because he’s feeling guilty about the juvie bit, probably because he’s dying to watch the porn. He gets up and slides it into the VCR and settles back with her.

The title’s enough to make suspicion flare. Two minutes in and she’s spluttering.

“Wes!”

“Mmm? Ssh, Faith, it’s just getting to a good part.”

She spares the screen a swift glance. “That’s not how you change the typewriter ribbon!”

Wes smiles. “Oh, I think Cyndy’s doing a marvelous job,” he says. “Even if she somehow managed to get ink all over her blouse and had to take it off. Oh dear; she’s dropped her pen. I wonder if she’ll bend over. And, well look at that. She’s not wearing anything under that rather brief skirt. Not very professional of her, is it?”

She gives him a ferocious jab from her elbow but he’s apparently too entranced in the exciting life of Cyndy, the office slut, to notice.

It’s a fairly standard film as these things go, and by the time Cyndy’s serviced half the typing pool, her boss, three customers and, go her, changed the toner in the photocopier, they’ve both gone silent and there’s a space of several feet between them. It’s not that they’re not aroused; she can see Wes is hard and yeah, even with the fake groaning and moaning, there’s still enough action to have her interested, but it’s more the fact she’s watching porn with Wes that’s turning her on than what’s going on in front of her. Which makes her wonder what’s got Wes going.

Then Cyndy gets cornered by the coffee maker by Nikki who’s mad because Cyndy fucked her boyfriend at the Christmas party and even the banner that flashes across the bottom of the screen advertising that immortal encounter (Buy ‘Santa Fills Their Stockings’ and get this deluxe, imitation leather wallet FREE!!!) can’t take away from the tension, because, man, does Nikki look mad. And she’s so mad that when she tells Cyndy she’s gonna pay and pulls her down over her knee and starts to whale on her ass with a hairbrush yanked out of a purse that’s barely big enough to hold a lipstick but, hey, movie magic, you gotta suspend your disbelief, Cyndy just squeaks heartrendingly and somehow slips so she ends up on her knees between Nikki’s legs and Faith knows where that’s going, but the spanking, fake though it was has changed something and she can’t look at Wes without feeling the heat in her face and reliving the sting of his hand on her ass.

The last ten minutes spin out excruciatingly slowly, but it ends eventually (Cyndy gets promoted! And has the cutest name plate on her desk that tells the world she’s an Ass Manager) and she can’t
help whimpering with relief as Wesley presses buttons with a frowning intensity and sends the room into darkness and silence. He reaches over and switches on a lamp and then looks at her. “That was the most—” He’s silent again, and then he gives her a puzzled look. “Did you like that?”

“I’d like to say it didn’t suck, but it did.”

“Every five minutes,” he says with a shiver. “Good Lord, it’s enough to make one want to be celibate.”

“Over-reaction, Wes!” she says, because, crap though it was, well, they all were, and he’s so missing the point. “And you got off on it.”

“I really didn’t,” he said.

She reaches over and taps at the proof. “Then what’s this?”

He doesn’t blink an eye. “An involuntary, purely physical response to a carefully calculated audio/visual stimulus?”


He cuts off her recital with a reproving cough. “Very possibly.” He leans back and raises his eyebrows. “Now, if I recall correctly, Cyndy would know just what to do to take care of it. A remarkably industrious young lady in some areas, though her shorthand skills seemed limited.”

And she’s not having Wes comparing her to Cyndy with a wistful look in his eyes. Standing up, she strips off her dress and gets his full attention riveted on what’s hidden behind a scarlet satin thong and a matching push-up bra that she doesn’t need but still does the job.

“You going to pay me overtime, for this, sir?” she says with a sassy grin as she straddles his knee and goes to work on his shirt buttons.

“Say it properly,” he tells her and the games stop being new and a bit weird and they’re back where they belong, with Wes in charge, and there’s nothing fake or tacky about the way her heart’s started to hammer and her clit’s started to throb.

She drops her eyes and then glances up at him, all meek and anxious. “Do I get overtime for this, sir? Because it’s after five, you know.”

Her nipple’s trapped between his fingers and teased hard and aching before he replies.

“I’m sure I can compensate you for your efforts in a way that’s mutually satisfying,” he says sounding so fucking serious that it takes her a minute to recognize it’s a line from the movie and by the time she does he’s got her lying face down across the footstool and he’s finding out for himself just how wet she is.

He hooks his foot under the stool and drags it closer, making her yelp and cling on to the sides as it shifts underneath her.

Then he’s snagging the side of her thong with his finger and letting it ping back against her hip. “I don’t like this,” he says conversationally. “It leaves nothing to the imagination.”

And considering the way the red satin divides her ass in two and is almost as bright as her bottom after he’s administered a really hard spanking, she can’t help her annoyed. “Well, you like me plenty when I’m naked and that leaves jack shit to the imagination.”
He's already sliding the satin down her legs and she obediently wriggles against the padded leather seat to make it easier for him. “If you're naked it's usually because I've made you that way,” he replies instantly and she knows that he's thought about this a hell of a lot. Her in her underwear, her out of her underwear. “I prefer those cotton short things you're so fond of…”

“They're called boy-cut panties,” she hisses and she has to wonder about the weirdness that is Wes. He's got her wet pussy, all primed and raring to go, about six inches away and he's lecturing her about her choice in knickers. Isn't that what the English call them? “And what about those black panties you got me? They cover up everything.”

He gives a dreamy sigh like a thirteen-year-old girl getting her first glimpse of Orlando Bloom. “I know, that's why I bought them. Well, that and they do cling so delightfully to your arse,” and he trails his fingers down that part of her anatomy and now it's her turn to sigh and arch up into his caress. “And they do have the advantage of letting me do this when you're wearing them.” He slides his hand under her, finding her clit with a feather light touch that makes her shift restlessly, waiting for his “Hands and knees please, Faith,” and scrambling into position when it comes.

She waits and knows she's quivering with anticipation but he just pats her ass almost absentmindedly and gets to his feet. “I think we should watch another film,” he suggests mildly and now she's quivering not so much with anticipation but with barely suppressed rage because she's posed just like Cyndy when she got it up the ass from the photocopier repair man and he's more interested in the TV. It's so fucking going back first thing tomorrow.

Then she realizes he's holding the porn bag and she decides to hold fire on returning the TV if she gets at least two orgasms in the next hour. He crouches down and she almost giggles at his look of awe as the DVD tray slides smoothly out so he can pop the next film in.

“What are we watching?” she asks eagerly as he sits back down and tries to ignore the fact that her ass is practically in his face. He doesn't seem to mind though; as she peers over her shoulder at him, he pops a chocolate truffle in his mouth and aims the remote control over her head.


The credits roll and she stays meekly in position while the first two horny men have their way with the court stenographer and one of the jurors and yeah, she's predictable because all that fucking and grinding and “suck it, bitch” are kinda turning her on but it's not the same as when they're holding hands on the sofa and she can see him getting hard, feel his fingers twitching against hers.

“Stop fidgeting, Faith,” he orders and she tries to lock herself in place but the lights are dim so he can't really see anything, not her wet pussy or her hard nipples, just the ghostly white curve of her ass in the shadows of the room.

Horny man number three is fucking the girlfriend of the accused in the washroom, when she hears a rustling sound, then the crinkle of plastic. What the fuck is he doing? Was it the porn bag or the junk food bag? She's trying to decide which one she'd prefer when she feels him shift forward on the couch and run his hand up her thigh.

“You're wet,” he remarks softly, teasing around her dripping hole with the tip of a finger. “That's very good. I don't want you to take your eyes off the screen, Faith.”

There's more suspicious sounds, plastic and paper so she's only got one eye on the screen as horny men four and five respectively spit roast the fancy lady lawyer which makes her think of Lilah and she doesn't even realize that she's given a little shudder until she gets a hard thwack on the ass with the edge of the remote control. Man, that home entertainment system is on its last fucking promise.
“What are you doing?” she asks suspiciously over the cheesy, plinky plonky soundtracks and the “yeah, baby, let me fuck your mouth.”

His finger is still thrusting shallowly in her cunt but he pulls it out and then there's something else there, something that isn't made out of any part of Wes. Unless he's suddenly turned into silicone in the last five seconds.

“It's called a G Twist Vibe,” he says silkily. “And I remembered your favorite color so I bought the candy pink model.”

“Gee, thanks,” she says sourly and punctuates it with a tiny, high-pitched yelp as he stops rubbing the end of it against her pussy and slides it home,

“I know you were quite adamant that Mr. Bunny was content to be an only child,” he continues, amusement dripping from every word, “but I was worried about him, frankly.”

And she's saved from having to give him the really cutting remark that she just needs a second to work on because he gives it a couple of quick twists and she's already pushing back, trying to fuck herself on it because they've been watching porn for the last two hours and what? She's meant to be made of fucking stone?

“Now, now, Faith, there's plenty of time for that,” he admonishes her gently and then sits back down, leaving her on all fours with a pastel pink vibrator shoved up her cunt.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she growls, whipping her head round to give him the mother of all glares. “You just can't leave me like this!”

Wes' gaze swivels momentarily from the on screen action. “Good God, that's a creative use for a gavel,” he murmurs before fixing her with a steely stare that's completely lacking in sympathy. “I just have, Faith and what's more I expect you to hold it in place until the end of the film. I could turn it on if you think it would help. Now watch this scene, they had one of the stills on the box and well… it's the main reason why I bought it.”

She tries to watch some brunette chick with these humungous hooters take it up the ass but her mind's on other things. She keeps clenching her muscles to hold the vibrator in place and it just makes things worse, makes her wetter so she can feel herself throbbing around the vibe, feel it sliding ever so slightly so she's forced to try and tilt her hips up to hold it in place.

He makes a tutting noise because he's way too busy watching her than the Sensurround, enhanced vision porn, which should be flattering but it's fucking not. “I don't see what's so great about this scene,” she snarls, trying desperately to cling onto the vibrator which seems to be making another bid for freedom. “Once you've seen one ass fucking, you've seen them all.”

“Possibly but I thought she looked a little bit like you.”

“Say fucking what?” she practically screams, scrambling upright and yanking the vibrator the rest of the way out of her. And then she throws it at him for good measure. He catches it one-handed which would impress her at any other time but really not the hell now. “I remind you of some skanky, porno queen? Take that fucking back!”

And either Wes can't see how mad and fucking offended and hurt she really is. Or else he's just got a death wish because he smirks. “Maybe a little, round the eyes. Can't you see it?”

No, she can't fucking see it because she's not even looking. Way too busy jumping up off the stool so she can straddle him and pin his hands to his sides. “Take it back, Wes, now.”
Any other time and she'd be rubbing herself against his seriously hard cock but he's not getting
anything tonight but the cold shoulder. She can feel him testing the strength in her hands that she's
got curled around his wrists and yeah, he could probably break free of her grasp. And in that case,
she'll just have to whack him over the head with the fucking vibrator until he sees stars or sense.
Whichever comes first.

“Really, Faith, you can't see the likeness?”

“No and really not seeing the funny in this either, Wes, so you can just fucking take the smirk off
your face.”

Instead he just peers over the top of her head and she is going to kill him, slowly and bloodily and
feed his rotten corpse to the dogs when she realizes his gaze is back on her angry face. “I was
mistaken,” he says gravely. “She looks absolutely nothing like you. It must have been a trick of the
light.”

“You're just saying that,” she mutters darkly, tightening her grip. “Because you know you've worked
my last fucking nerve.”

He doesn't make the slightest sound of protest even though her fingers are aching, just leans forward
so he can plant a row of kisses across her cheek toward the tight, angry line of her mouth. “There
isn't a girl in the world who's as beautiful as you,” he whispers against her lips. “Or has such a pretty
mouth,” he adds, pressing tiny ardent kisses against it and she's letting go of his hands, her heart and
her body softening so she's clinging to him.

“I'm not going back on the stool,” she states firmly though, daring him to contradict her. “Not after
you've been so mean.”

He turns her around gently so she's sprawled across his lap, back nestled against the seat of the sofa,
his arm round her shoulders. “Well no, this is much nicer,” he agrees. “But I'm afraid that there's one
part of your former arrangement that I can't concede. Open your legs, please.”

And she guesses that compromise is as good as it's gonna get so she's parting her thighs and letting
him slide the vibrator back inside her with these maddening little thrusts that make her squirm against
him. When it's wedged inside her as far as it will go, he pats her knee.

“Now I want you to stay perfectly still until the end of the film,” he says reasonably. “Do you think
you can do that?”

“I guess,” she says with a nod and he gives her a sly smile which makes all the little hairs on her
arms stand up.

“Good,” he says and then turns the thing on.

She makes this sound that's uncannily like the one her evil, skanky twin is making a few feet away,
but it’s got the edge because she really fucking means it. Staying still just became impossible,
because she’s doing her best not to come and the only way she can do that is to wriggle until her
fucking G-spot isn’t being remorselessly stimulated by something designed to do just that and
succeeding all too well.

He doesn’t turn his head but he says mildly, “Faith? Perfectly still wasn’t a suggestion.”

“If I stay still, I'll come,” she hisses, doing the shallow breathing and tummy clenching and anything
else she can think of to stave it off. “And I guaran-fucking-tee you, I'll be moving then.”
His lips get all thin and annoyed and she’s not sure he’s putting it on. He points the remote at the TV like he’s the conductor in a symphony or something and pauses the movie, leaving them both staring, transfixed, at a ten-inch dick in extreme close-up until he clears his throat and presses ‘stop’ instead, so the screen goes mercifully blank.

“Recently, Faith,” he says in a cool voice, “you’ve lost the small amount of control I thought I’d managed to instill in you. Perhaps I’ve been entirely too lenient of late.”

Yeah, or perhaps you’ve fucked about with the rules until I don’t know if I’m coming or going she thinks darkly, not even amusing herself by the pun. Saying it out loud is really tempting but she keeps her lips closed because she’s certain she’d never get it out without whimpering and that’d kind of ruin the effect.

“Certainly you should be able to control yourself better than this,” he says disapprovingly, pushing the vibe back where he had it before and frowning when her hips buck up in a despairing attempt to dislodge it.

“Wes...” And she’s dying here, feeling the sweat pop out all over her and the heat gather and swell, spreading out so that she thinks if he touches her somewhere—anywhere—she’ll come just from that, explode and shatter and burn.

“You’re not to come, Faith,” he says sternly, implacable and unyielding.

She stares up at him, drowning as he watches from the shore. He’s made her aware of her body in a way she never was before, and he’s sure as hell taught her some control, but she knows her limits—fuck, so does he—and she’s perilously close to them right now just from feeling the hard muscle of his thighs against the back of her legs and seeing the way he’s breathing just a little bit fast for a man who’s been Mr. Couch Potato all night. Adding in the porn film and the relentless humming in her cunt, you’ve got an orgasm that’s not going to wait and why he can’t fucking see that, she doesn’t know.

Then he reaches down and runs a fingernail across her clit and she screams before he takes it away, dimly aware that his arm’s tightened around her shoulders as the climax hits her and her body convulses around the vibe hard enough to add a few more ridges to the fucker.

And it’s only as she opens her eyes in time to see a satisfied look on his face that she gets that he fucking knew she couldn’t do it, all along.

But he’s not going to admit it, not going to confess that it wasn’t fair and she never stood a chance.

No. He’s going to punish her for failing.

And he’s done it before, and it’s been part of the game, but there’s something a little dark in his eyes as he smiles down at her, tugging the vibe free and placing it neatly back on the packaging because it’s practically dripping. And when he tells her to get back on the footstool, she’s expecting his hand, or even, God forbid, something from that fucking grab bag, to make her ass, still tender from earlier, sting and smart all over again.

She’s not expecting him to say softly, “I saw your father yesterday, Faith.”

That, positioned like this, he can’t see her face, is all that saves her. The shudder that she holds back with an effort of will he’d be proud of, is more of a shiver because she’s been dipped in ice and her blood’s thinned to water and pierced with icicle-shards. It hurts to breathe, hurts to think, and her voice is unnaturally calm as she says, “Yeah? Bet that just made your day.”
“Indeed.” His hand gives her ass a pat that’s auditioning to be a slap and then it pauses, resting lightly on her skin. “No, wait, I’m mixing up my days. I saw him on my way to the bank, so it must have been Thursday.” There’s no room to feel any more panic; she’s overloaded with terror already and you can’t wet water. She lies there, waiting, with her heart trying to escape her body, smash a hole right through her ribs and fly away.

“At least I think it was him; he drives a white pick-up truck, yes?”

“What? No!” She’s babbling now, a summer-heat wave of warmth melting the ice. Not Liam. He hadn’t seen her fucking father, hadn’t seen him, hadn’t spoken to him, didn’t know. Wes didn’t know. “Red, it’s red, rusty but red.”

There’s a reproving smack. “I think that’s enough talking, Faith. There’s the matter of your deplorable lack of—”

“Wes?” She’s desperate enough to twist around and if he sees her eyes are wet, maybe he’ll think it’s from coming so hard or something. “I’m sorry.”

He looks at her with a face so expressionless it’s like staring at marble, chilly and smooth. “What for?”

And she lets another chance go by.

“For moving. For coming. I’m sorry. You’re right, I wasn’t trying.” And she can’t look at him for this bit, so she faces forward, locking herself into position and whispers, “You should punish me, Wes. You should hurt me.”

There’s a long silence and then he stands up. “I think we’ve both endured enough for one evening,” he says and she’s all set to panic again when she sees he’s nodding toward the T.V and realizes he means the god-awful movies.

Walking toward the television he takes out the DVD and stares at the shiny side like he’s wondering where they fit the little people in. Then he replaces it in the case and gives her a smile so natural she wonders why she thought he was angry, and says, “Oh, do get up, Faith. I promise you I’ll deal with your disobedience later, but for now I’d rather like to eat something that’s neither salty nor sweet. Are you hungry?”

And she’s really not but she smiles back just a bit too fast, a bit too eagerly, and says, “Yeah, Wes. I really am.”

Chapter Eighty-Five

After tugging her dress back on, she trails disconsolately after him and into the kitchen.

She’s not sure how it’s happened, or maybe she is but she’s sure he doesn’t know. He can’t know. He’d be grilling her like she’d just taken an oath on the Bible—but all of a sudden the cozy intimacy of their movie fest has become something else. Something that resembles a six feet block of concrete standing in between them.

He’s rummaging for food in the fridge, pulling out a tray of steak and green leafy things, which she eyes with a certain amount of distaste. The thought of putting food in her mouth to compete with the metallic top note of unease and the memory of all the sugar she’s consumed isn’t something that’s filling her heart with joy. And the thought of an argument because she won’t eat her greens would just put the fucking cherry on top.
Before she even registers it, she's taking tiny steps toward him where he's washing the meat under the faucet.

“Are you mad at me, Wes?” She's got this whiny thing going on, which makes his face momentarily tighten before he gives her a bland smile.

“Of course not. Why ever would I be mad at you?” he inquires smoothly but she's sure there's a slight edge to the question.

“Dunno. I couldn't help it before,” she blurts out. “I didn't want to but…”

“Instead of trying to wheedle your way out of whatever retribution might be coming, why don't you make the salad?” he suggests, brandishing a bag of tomatoes at her.

And in the books that she's started to read, they're always going on about these comfortable silences but this silence, punctuated only by the sound of her knife as she chops vegetables into perfectly sized pieces and the spit of the steak under the grill, is pretty fucking far from comfortable. It's awkward and spiky and she doesn't know what to do to make it right.

It certainly isn't sitting down next to him and trying to force herself to eat food that tastes like seasoned cardboard. She chokes down half the steak and a few radicchio leaves, even spears up a couple of chunks of tomato to show willing but her heart isn't in it and he whisks her plate away with one of his special sighs, which is so gusty it threatens to blow her napkin off the table.

He scrapes the rest of her dinner down the waste disposal and if he mentions starving children in Africa or any one of the five major food groups she's going to shove his head down there too. But he doesn't. And when she raises her head from her silent contemplation of her fingernails it's to find him staring at her with this really odd expression which makes her heart flip over a couple of times and then start revving up.

He looks exhausted. Just flat-out fucked with it and she can't tear her eyes away because it's like she's seeing him, really seeing him properly for the first time in ages. And there's these deep grooves on either side of his mouth which she's sure never used to be there and lines on his forehead because he's got a semi-permanent frown. Shouldn't he look happier? Like, if he loved her and she loved him and they were due to run off into the sunset together any day now.

“You barely touched your dinner,” he says flatly with no hint of accusation but it echoes in the silence and her head snaps up.

“I ate too much popcorn before,” she says immediately, even though most of it ended up scattered about the sofa cushions after their impromptu battle.

“Don't lie to me, Faith!” he growls and it's so fierce, almost verging on venomous that she hitches her chair back. “I won't tolerate it.”

She can feel her face crumbling as if someone's just knocked down her foundations and they're back in this tired old pattern of attack and retreat as she stumbles to her feet and heads for the door. “See! You are fucking mad at me!” she spits out through a mouth full of sobs but she's not even out of the door before his arms are around her, pulling her back as she tries frantically to disentangle herself.

“Faith…” he murmurs into her hair and it's tender enough that she stills.

“I haven't done anything wrong,” she insists. “You keep changing the rules on me and I don't know what you want.”
He turns her round and brushes the tangled curls back from her face and she's frightened of what he's going to find there. “Everything will be better when we're in New York,” he says urgently. “We can put everything behind us.”

She's clutching handfuls of his shirt and then she gives in to it and touches him. Feels his heart beating out a frantic rhythm beneath the cotton. “Wes, you do love me, don't you?”

And this is just another dance they do because she's being so fucking needy and instead of not standing for it, like he used to, he's whispering reassurances, trying to make everything better with his words and the hands that are stroking her cheeks. “I'll give you a bath, you'd like that, wouldn't you? And then we'll watch another movie…”

It's too much that he's so forgiving when she's fucked him over three thousand times. She's got nothing to give him because she's already taken everything so her hands are sliding to his belt, unbuckling it with steady hands and he doesn't stop her, just wraps his hands in her hair as she sinks to her knees.

When he comes in her mouth, it's like a tick in a column so her account's in balance again. And she can remember to breathe in and breathe out again so by the time she's cuddled up on his lap watching Lost in Translation, she can enjoy the solid warmth of him surrounding her without feeling guilty. Besides, he doesn't say anything as he brushes the tears from her face with careful strokes of his fingers because she's already told him it's a really sad movie...

Chapter Eighty-Six

It isn't until they're snug as two very tense bugs in bed that she starts to feel slightly more human.

They're lying side by side, not touching, but it's dark and in the dark everything is softer. Not so many sharp edges and lines. His face is a blur as he rolls over and strokes a hand up her arm.

“It's been a terrible week,” he says feelingly. “Possibly the worst week since records began.”

“Oh,” she sighs in agreement, winding her fingers through his when he reaches for her hand and all of a sudden she's anchored when before she felt like she was freefalling, trying to catch on to anything to stop herself rushing through the air.

“There was the dinner party from hell,” he continues and she can feel him shudder. “And my disastrous attempt to, well…”

“Turn us into Ozzie and fucking Harriet?”

“Possibly if I actually knew who they were. Is he the one who has that awful reality show?”

And unbelievably she's gone from stiff as a board and wide-eyed with angst to giving a gurgle of laughter and snuggle into his welcoming arms. “That's Ozzy Osbourne, Wes. Jeez, get a ticket to the 21st Century.”

His chest rumbles as he gives a rueful chuckle, coaxing her against him so she can hitch her leg over his. “And we were both sick and I'm still of a mind to write a scathing letter to the diner.”

And she's not going to let the real reason why she had her head wedged down the john disturb this fragile, shaky peace. “I don't think it was their fault,” she mumbles, continuing in a rush to move on to the next reason why the week had sucked like a nuclear powered vacuum cleaner. “I was just having an off day and you had a migraine and we…that weird shit in the motel room…”
“Yes, I think we should declare a moratorium on that kind of role-playing for the time being. And possibly any more encounters with my ex-wife.”

And it's dark and she's feeling brave or maybe just stupid enough to add: “And mentions of that sad sack of shit who's supposed to be my father.”

He doesn't say anything, just smooths his hand down the length of her spine, his touch light and soothing. “I sometimes think life would be easier for us if we went to live in a cave, miles away from the rest of the populace.”

“You'd fucking hate it,” she splutters, raising herself up with an elbow to his chest which makes him grunt, and he possibly even glares but his face is in shadow when she squints down at him. “No way am I living in a cave, even with you.”

“Maybe that's a clause you need to add to the contract when we go through that tomorrow,” he teases. “The party of the second part refuses to become a cave dweller.”

“Oh, do you still want to do that?” she squeaks because they haven't been able to get through a single day lately without weirdness and upset and her tummy hurting. And contracts written over pre-nuptial agreements seem way more fairy tale, or like her and Wes' version of a fairytale, than this week's horror story.

His hands are on her again, kneading her shoulders, brushing her hair away from the nape of her neck, all sneaky tactics to get her to rest her head in the crook of his shoulder.

“Of course,” he assures her and his voice is so gentle, so fucking sweet and she wonders how he can do that, just make everything all right in her world with that husky tone. “How else am I ever going to get you to desist from describing me as pretty?”

“Like that's ever gonna happen,” she snorts, because this is one dance that she loves.

“Or to get you to stop crying because it leaves me feeling utterly helpless. Do you think your tear ducts will respect the letter of the law?”

She presses a kiss against the hollow of his throat and fights the urge to tell him that she never used to cry so much before she met him. “Probably not, Wes. I'm eighteen, stuff makes me cry. It's just I love you so much,” her voice is this hoarse whisper and yeah, there's that familiar prickle at the back of her eyes. “And it's scary sometimes because I hate that I become this stupid, weepy girl.”

And still dark, still hidden away from the rest of the world so they can say all the things they can't say when the lights are on. Because he's kissing her and sighing against her lips, “I love that stupid, weepy girl. And I love the bad-tempered girl who swears far too much. And I love the girl who force feeds me junk food. And I love the girl who's going to go to sleep in the next ten minutes most of all.” He punctuates the most adorable fucking words he's ever said to her with a tired yawn that almost threatens to dislodge her but she clings on and shakes her head.

“I'm not sleepy, Wes,” she mutters apologetically. “I've eaten way too much sugar and I got all upset and now I'm kinda wired and…”

“I have a cure for all of that,” he purrs and the gentle sweeps of his hands change their cadence so they're heavy, fraught with promise as he flips her over so she's on her back and he's looming over her.

Then he's slithering down her supine body, pausing to nip and kiss and suck all the lucky inches of her that he deems worthy. Teasing her nipples with the rough drag of his tongue and stopping only to
lift his head and order her hoarsely to spread her legs.

He only stops again when she's come more times than she can count. She's wrung out and boneless, still breathing heavily and floating somewhere high above the bed.

By the time she finally returns to her senses a minute or so later, Wes has wrapped his arm around her and sidled close.

“That… works remarkably well,” she sighs contentedly with the last bit of energy she can summon. She can't see his expression but she hears a low, wry chuckle. Smug bastard.

“Wes?”

“Hmm?”

There's some part of her brain that's rebelling against the afterglow, against the sleepiness, and it's fighting to shove words into her mouth. It takes all the effort she can muster to bite the incriminating bits away, until all that's left is an incoherent mumble.

“I'm sorry.” She's smooshed up against him, lips against his neck, and she's surprised he can hear her at all. “So scary sometimes. It's all kind of scary, getting pulled in too many directions at once.” She sighs, glad this probably isn't making any sense at all. “I don't know, I'm just thinking too much I guess.”

He curls his hand around the back of her head, fingers slipping along the back of her neck. He's making these soothing shushing sounds that she's pretty sure she doesn't deserve, but she forgets that thought and snuggles in closer to him, making breathing barely possible, comforted by the spicy scent of his sweat and her juices on his skin, by the steady and tender pressure of his fingers on the tight tendons of her neck. He tuts a little as he massages the last knot away, and her eyes are drooping heavily. Before long, she's fallen asleep there in his arms, slipping into an echoing, empty corridor of dreams.

Yeah, she'd had a pretty rotten dream; they'd been walking in Central Park, or her dream-twisted, TV-informed version of it. The *Law and Order* one where joggers are murdered and little boys kidnapped and teenage girls molested during parades; the tree limbs bend toward the broken asphalt paths and the sky is gray and heavy with clouds. He'd gone into a thicket of trees without a word and disappeared and she'd yelled her dream-self hoarse, running through the endless trees and screaming for him before awakening with a start.

She's alone in the bed, legs tangled in a sheet and miles away from the pillows. The space where he should have been is only slightly warm, but not cold. Struggling up on an elbow to see if maybe he's just in the bathroom or something, his heavy silhouette against the wan moonlight filtering in from the window catches her eye.

“Wes?” Her mouth is dry and cottony from sleep; her voice raspy and weak, as if she really had been screaming for real and not just in her dream. She's not even sure if he heard her, because he doesn't reply. There's a nagging lump in her throat that's rising up and she swallows it down painfully. It's that damn helpless feeling, the one she wishes she could tell him about when she's more awake, when she could couch it words that wouldn't just bust out and give away all her damn secrets in one go. “Wes, come back to bed. It's so late.”

He turns to look at her, or at least she thinks that's what he's done. The back lighting of the moonlight makes his face completely unreadable, as she can only see the high arch of a cheekbone and the drawn, tight corner of one side of his mouth.
“Go back to sleep, Faith.” He sighs, voice thin and scratchy and obviously exhausted and pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers—a move that's almost always endearing—but in this context makes the little hairs on the back of her neck stand up and send a cold shiver down to the base of her spine.

“Wesley,” she chokes out, pissed that she's sounding like a needy, demanding girlfriend because all she really wants is for him to stop thinking, to stop worrying and come and wrap her up in his arms again. She doesn't like the thought of him there in the dark, all those sharp gears churning in his brain. She's too tired to fully comprehend it all, but it really can't be a good thing. But maybe she's still asleep then, and this is just a weird, vivid part of her dream.

When he turns away from her and looks back out the window instead of climbing out of the chair and coming back to bed, though, she knows this is all really happening and there's nothing she can do to stop it. Except maybe close her eyes and pray that he's not come to any solid conclusions and hope in the morning it's all blown over.

It takes a long time for her to fall back asleep and in the end she fakes it, counting to one hundred slowly a few times before he finally returns to bed, curling on his side away from her and shoving his arms under the pillow.

Chapter Eighty-Seven

When she wakes up from more unsettled dreams—from the tossing and the turning to these horrible flashes of New York City being some kind of hellish inferno into which she's been cast, she wakes with a start. Her first instinct is to reach for Wes, and thankfully, he's there. She sinks back down onto the pillows, sighing with relief as she wraps her arms around him.

Still half asleep, she whispers, “Had the most awful dreams, Wes. You were gone, and then I couldn't wake up and…”

His voice is muffled by the pillow. “I'm here, Faith.”

She kisses his shoulder, snuggles up next to him, fully ready to finally get some decent sleep. “Did you sleep okay? I think I was dreaming but the bed was almost cold and you—”

He cuts her off with an “I slept just fine,” that's ever-so-slightly curt.

“I should have returned the favor, is that it?” She giggles and throws her leg over his, brushing her hands along his back before settling them around his waist.

He rolls onto his back and smiles sleepily. “Perhaps.” He's all Cheshire Cat enigmatic this morning. It'd be goddamn aggravating if it weren't so endearing.

“Perhaps?” She mimics his tone of crisp formality. “Are we going to have to set up a system of strict barter, Wes? Because I seem to recall we have some matters to discuss this morning.”

He chuckles. “Do we, Faith?” He rests his arm behind his head, looking down at her with amused affection. “Are you going to cross-examine me now, counselor?”

“If it pleases the jury, your honor.”

“I think there's some courtroom conflation going on, but I'll let that pass for the nonce.”

She leans against his chest. “For the nonce? Where are we, Wes? The freaking mother country?”
“I’ll not have you speak of the mother country like that, Faith.” He gives her his best look of pure mock-effrontery. Which is pretty damn good.

“Wes? Shut the hell up.” Rolling her eyes, she puts her money where her mouth is, giving him a kiss that’s dead-serious even if she isn’t.

“That… works remarkably well,” he whispers into the concave space between their lips before he pulls her close again.

It’s not like an early morning roll in the sack is all she needs to forget the nightmares and long shadows and the cold half of the bed in the middle of the night, but it’s certainly a good start. Except that when she slides her hand along his belly and tries to slide it under the sheet where she can see a textbook example of morning wood waiting, he grabs her wrist, pulling it away and pinning her arm to the bed.

She flutters her eyelashes at him, “Oh, so, we're playing it like that this morning?”

“We're not playing anything now. We have plans.” Little kisses dot her lips between each perfectly drawled word. He's looking pretty mischievous for someone who didn't get a lot of sleep.

She tries not to be bratty about it, she really does. “We have plans?” She squints at the clock. “At eight o’clock on Sunday morning?” He nods gravely, the picture of seriousness. “Uh, look. Not to be harsh, but if we're not gonna knock boots in the next five minutes, I'm going back to sleep.” She manages to wrench her arm out from his grip and huffily flops over, only half-kidding and half-annoyed. “Go watch “Meet the Press” or go do your crossword or something. Putter in the garden.”

He's prying her back around to face him, and dammit if she can't keep up the act, even if yeah, she really rather would be going back to sleep. He looks so obviously pained at the mention of puttering in the garden, she thinks, that she pulls him in for a kiss, the kind of kiss that turns into a hasty grope, that could turn into a quick hand job, if only.

But no. “Faith, really.” Pries her hands away again and again. “Wouldn't you rather save this for this afternoon? Maybe until after you're better rested and fully fortified with the best breakfast this hellhole of a town can offer on an early Sunday morning?”

“And that could be had where, exactly?” A big yawn threatens to turn her face inside out, and now that she thinks about it, it's probably not wise to ignore that low rumble in her tummy that's getting a little demanding now since she didn't make the most of dinner last night and is pretty much running on sugar fumes at this point. “Not really in the mood to go gallivanting around at this time of the morning, even if all the waitress at every hole-in-the-wall, hidden treasure diner in this town do all seem to know your name.”

He rolls his eyes at that and sighs heavily. “Just stay right here, you spoiled thing. You don't have to move an inch. Well, actually, you may want to sit up when I get back.”

It takes her less than a minute to drift back to sleep after he leaves—he won't say what he's up to despite (or maybe because of) her wheedling questions, and she's suspicious when he doesn't even shower, just slips into yesterday's jeans and T-shirt and disappears, with vague promises to be back shortly.

She's not too far asleep, though, because the blessed aroma of coffee nearly has her jumping out of bed and tackling him before he can get in the door. And she's doubly grateful when she spots that the cup is from the edgy local coffee shop a few blocks away and not from like 7-Eleven or something. Not like he would bring her that dreck anyway.
What he has brought her is an excessively foamy and sweet caramel latte, which she announces will be her beverage of choice on Sundays from now on; same for the chocolate croissants, croissants stuffed with ham and cheese and spinach, and the plain ones spread thick with sweet butter and strawberry preserves. Sunday food, perfect in bed.

And she's known him long enough now, long enough to know that when he's paying that much attention to every damn detail of the food, making sure it's expanding her tastes but isn't too challenging, he wants something. And sipping her latte and watching the sunlight streaming through the windows glint off the near-invisible and horribly endearing scattering of gray in his hair that's usually well hidden by the low lights in the office, she's really quite content to give it to him.

Chapter Eighty-Eight

After they’ve dressed, they go, not to the living room as usual on a Sunday morning, but to the den, and Wesley settles down with his crossword while she indulges in some serious channel surfing because she’s realizing just how deprived she’s been since she moved in with him.

He endures it for about ten minutes, though his sighs are starting to work her last nerve, and then he flings his pen down and tells her to stop.

“What? You said I could watch it!”

“I said that before I realized you had the attention span of a gnat!”

“Of a what? Wes, it’s—” She casts around for something comparable and them smiles triumphantly. “It’s like when you read,” she says. “You do this flickery thing with your eyes, and, flip, you’re on another page.”

“Yes?” he says cautiously. “I hardly see how—”

“Most people would still be up on word three of the first sentence,” she says. “Now, me, I can’t read as fast as you, but I can see a channel, know it’s crap, and be moving on when you’d still be staring at the screen wondering what the hell was going on and bingo, you’d be sucked into a commercial and hauling out your credit card to buy something in three easy payments that trust me, you’ll never use.”

She presses the channel button again, gets someone gutting a fish—oh, please! She’s just had breakfast—and carries on skipping.

“Faith,” he says, in those measured tones that always mean business. “The television isn’t mentioned in the contract because I didn’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“That’s sweet,” she says, grinning as the screen’s filled with Teletubbies. “We should totally get a Noo-Noo to clean up,” she tells him. “Don’t know why they don’t make them.”

He gives the screen a cursory glance. “I believe you call them vacuum cleaners over here,” he says. Killjoy. “If I may continue?”

“Sure, Wes.”

“With your eyes on me?”

She smoothers a smile and, because she loves him, mutes the sound before giving him an expectant look.
“Thank you,” he says, laying the sarcasm on as thick as the butter on her croissants. “Now that it’s here though, it will most certainly be included. I’m not going to have you spending hours watching it, and I’m certainly not going to endure your constant changing of the channels.”

Yesterday she’d had moments of wanting the TV to be back in its box but now she clutches the remote protectively. “You’re not sending it back!” she says, with a quaver in her voice. “Wes, that’d be so mean!”

He gives her a small, tight smile. “As if I would ever be so cruel,” he purrs, like he’s never once denied her what she wanted when it suited him. “I won’t take it away from you, Faith; I’ll simply control your access to it unless you show me that you can use it responsibly.”

Sometimes he sounds more like a parent than a lover, but she doesn’t pursue that thought. “Well, fine,” she says sulkily.

“Don’t look so downcast,” he says, giving up on the crossword when it’s still, from what she can see, only half-done, and standing up. “It’s all negotiable, remember.” The smile’s a confident one now as he holds out his hand to pull her to her feet. “Of course, I might have a slight advantage in that area.”

“Where’re we going?” she asks as he leads her out of the room. “And why? Because you’re a lawyer you mean?”

“Partly,” he says. “But it’s more that I’m very good at getting what I want, exactly as I want it. It’s taken me a long time to get to the point where I can, and I don’t think I’ll give that up easily.”

He draws her close and kisses her throat; the warm press of his mouth against her skin making her laugh a little shakily as she tries to kiss him back. “Wes,” she whispers.

“Shall we go upstairs first though?” he says softly, capturing her earlobe between his teeth and biting down gently. “And you can show me what you wanted to do to me this morning?”

And when she nods eagerly he gives her a cool, smug smile, stepping back out of reach, and saying, “I think I just proved my point. You’re easily swayed from your objective, Faith. I’m not.”

“You bastard! Wes, that was totally—” She glares at him, feeling frustrated because if he’s in this kind of mood God knows when she’ll get to come, and then turns her back on him. “Fine. I’m distractable and swayable. You’re the one not getting any, so chew on that.”

“Go to the study, Faith,” he says pleasantly, ignoring her little snit. “I think, as this is the first time we’ve done this, we should make an early start.”

“Works for me,” she says, starting to walk and, as she’s sure he’s watching, throwing in a nice wiggle of her ass.

It earns her a single slap, stinging and tingling, right across her backside and she turns, folding her arms. “Tell you what; why don’t you go first, Wesley?”

He puts his hand on her shoulder and pushes her around again. “I like the view better this way.” His hand smoothes over her ass. “Though you’re wearing entirely too many clothes.” There’s a final pat and then he links her arm in his and urges her forward. “Wasn’t I going to make you spend the day naked? Perhaps today would be a good day for that.”

And she’s almost certain he’s joking, but she gets this flash of them discussing the contract; her naked, Wes spiffed up in suit, tie and shoes, and she shudders because, damn, would that give him
“You’re shivering,” he says solicitously. “Well, perhaps we could wait for it to get a little warmer.”

She’s wearing a T-shirt, tight and sleeveless, over a pair of jeans and she’s feeling plenty warm enough, but she gives him a nod anyway. “Really think we should, Wes,” she agrees.

“Though there’s something to be said for it,” he muses, ushering her into his study. “I’ve always found meetings like this to be unbearably tedious in the past; as I have such a personal interest in this one, I expect it to be less so, but there’s no denying that were you to be, ah, naked, I’d almost certainly be distracted. Possibly even moved to be indulgent. You like it when I indulge you, don’t you?”

And if she’d ever doubted his manipulative skills, she takes it all back now. Indulgent. Like breakfast in bed indulgent. Like letting her watch more than five minutes of television, and God forbid he ever finds the Discovery Channel because she’d never get a look in, indulgent. All in exchange for her giving him something sweet to eyeball as they negotiate, but there’s more to it than that. Naked, she’d be wet and wanting in minutes, and he’d be looking at her with those cool, appraising eyes, and there’d be all these little touches, and suggestions made in that iced-honey drawl, until she’d end up signing something that left her totally at his mercy.

Which, okay, wasn’t all that horrible a notion, but she had her pride.

“Tempting, Wes,” she says, pretending to consider it, “but the way I see it, this is a time out, yeah? No games, no power plays, just you and me setting down some rules with me getting to make some for a change.” She smiles up at him and flips the collar on his shirt. “Lose this, and I’ll lose mine, otherwise, no way.”

There’s an appreciative, almost admiring look in his eyes as he nods over at the chairs he’s put behind his desk. “Very well, Faith. I hope you won’t regret throwing away—”

“Save it, Wes,” she snaps, going over to the desk and taking his chair. There’s an impressive array of pens and pencils and two neatly stacked copies of the contract set out ready. She picks one contract up and starts to read it. “Might as well go and get us both a coffee, Wes,” she murmurs. “Think we’ll be needing it.”

And that’s pushing it, it really is, but he just chuckles and disappears, coming back five minutes later with two mugs and, fuck, he’s found time to change into a suit and he’s the Wes who decimated Lilah in a courtroom, the Wes who barks orders at her in the office without expecting any response but instant obedience.

“That’s cheating,” she says as he sits down. An eyebrow arches and he waits. ‘That’s cheating, sir,” she bites out.

There’s an irresistibly impish grin that does something to her and he says, “Cheating’s such an ugly word, Faith. I’d call it, oh, maximizing my power base.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” she says indignantly. “You hate bullshit like that.”

“Oh, very well,” he concedes. “I’m cheating.” He hooks one finger in the thin strap of her T-shirt and pulls it away from her shoulder. “No bra. You’re cheating too.” His fingers move to stroke across her nipples, hard enough to be seen through the clinging cotton. “It’s working too; I find myself thinking about peeling this off and spending fifteen minutes or so touching nothing but your nipples with my tongue and teeth, until they’re—”
“It isn’t working, Wesley,” she says, wishing her voice hadn’t gone all husky. “Now about this first part—”

All business in an instant, he picks up his copy and stares at it with the frowning intensity that does more for her than she hopes he knows. “Faith, this seems perfectly straightforward to me. You’re required to dress appropriately at the office; that’s nothing new, nor have you objected before.”

And she hasn’t. The clothes he chose for her still make her feel different when she puts them on, still change her in some indefinable way, holding her safe, her armor, her reassurance that she’s perfect in his eyes.

“Everyone on the face of the planet gets casual Friday and I want it too.”

“Really?” He leans back and taps his pen against his knee. “Very well.”

“What?” Suspicion flares. “That wasn’t negotiated, Wes; that was a walkover.”

“No,” he corrects her, “it was an agreement to the basic principle.” He smiles slowly. “Now we hammer out the details. You’re to wear only black; no jeans, and no dress or skirt with a hemline above your knees.” He looks thoughtful. “My mother says the headmistress at her school used to check their uniform was within acceptable limits by making the pupils kneel down. If their skirts didn’t brush the floor, they were too short.”

“And you plan on doing that with me?” she splutters.

“I think it has a certain appeal,” he says. “There would have to be penalties attached, of course, should your attire fail to meet the conditions, but I’m sure we can devise something mutually acceptable there. Do you have any thoughts on that, or would you like me to come up with something?”

She’s starting to get a sinking feeling. “Wes, there’re, like twenty parts to this, and that’s not counting the television and some extras I thought up. It’s gonna take forever.”

He looks almost dreamy at the thought of it. “A good while, yes, especially if you argue with me.”

She takes a swig of coffee and sets the mug back down. “Argue? Oh, that’s such an accurate word. I’ll agree to no jeans, but what’s this thing you’ve got with black? I wear black four days out of the five; Friday I want a change.”

“You may wear navy. Or gray,” he says, as if he’s making one hell of a concession.

“Yeah, and you can bite me,” she says. “I pick the color of my knee length whatever, okay?”

He studies her face and nods grudgingly. Taking a deep breath she picks up her pen and makes the changes.

One down.

“Two fifteen-minute breaks for every eight-hour shift. Plus a half hour for lunch. That’s the goddamn law, Wesley! And, uh, accordingly I think I should be able to break those fifteens into four seven-and-a-halves. That’s not the end of the world.”

They’ve barely made it to section three, after a relatively easy barter over the office coffee-making and water cooler duties. She’d agreed to always making coffee as long as he changed the dreadfully heavy and awkward bottles on the cooler. And made the lunch run to the diner three times a week.
“I'm well aware of the vagaries of labor law in this state, Faith.” He announces this without looking up, being totally engrossed scribbling something farther down the page, and she can't quite make out what it says. “I believe we both worked on Ms. Hellman's case—you may recall she was denied the legally-required breaks at that loathsome chain restaurant?”

“Right. So then, like, there's nothing to discuss here. Wouldn't want to be doing anything illegal, right? Wouldn't want to have to turn you in to the Department of Labor!”

He gives her a look that would make even the most hostile witness shut their trap and stop slouching to boot. She straightens up in her seat, happy to see that this clearly pleases him, even if just for a brief second before he switches back to hardcore trial lawyer mode. “Still, I must insist that you take your fifteen minutes as required by law and not break them down. I simply can't have the phone unattended five times a day—the answering service charges for each rollover. Two fifteen-minute breaks, one at ten-thirty and one at three-thirty and a half hour for lunch. The matter is not up for further discussion.”

She ponders shoving the pencil in his eye, but decides that's maybe not the most professional or romantic thing to do. Instead, she scans down to the section on her cigarette ration. “If I agree to that, I'll require two concessions.” She likes the way the stilted dialog trips off her tongue, makes her feel a little more powerful and in-charge, even if it's all a big sham, and she's totally in the palm of his hand. Still, it wouldn't do not to put up a good fight.

“Yes?” He drawls it at her and just that one little word makes her nearly forget what they were discussing. She's lost for a moment in staring at the perfect, dimpled tie knot snuggled up against his neck, itching to loosen it just a teensy bit.

“Five per day, Faith. That's all I'll allow.”

She knows she can't get the full twenty of one blessed pack, but she doesn't want to lowball it.

“Fifteen.”

“Seven.”

“Twelve.”

“Seven.” He sighs. “Really, Faith. Is this quite worth all this?”

She cuts him off with no compunction. “Ten. And I have a proviso to have up to a full pack if we go out clubbing or to see a show or if the day is like, inordinately stressful.” She can't believe his words, big clunky legalese monsters like proviso and inordinately are as easy to deploy now as her affected and overused “like” and her personal favorite: “I was all, whatever, dude!”

“And by inordinately stressful you mean?”

“Oh, any day your ex-wife shows up. Or we run into any member of my extended family.” If only that would be enough to take care of those little problems.

“Very well, but your ration will be cut to five if I find you've burned any office property.”

Of course. Of course he'd bring that into it, this being the flammable objects section of the contract and all. “Fine. That's fine.” She's already licking the tip of her finger to turn the page and trying to remember the next item when he slips his fingers around her wrist before she can fully flip the page over.

“You're sure, Faith? Because we can always deal with willful destruction of office property in a
more corporal way.” He gives her that wicked grin and her toes curl at the memory of being bent over his desk, one stinging swat of his palm against her ass in exchange for each steno pad reduced to ashes. She flips to section five, paragraph 3 sub-a—admittedly, it’s her favorite section. There’s a neat little table, perfectly indented and aligned, with each possible infraction and the—as Wes so delicately put it—the corporal punishment required for each.

“One per notepad. Unless the number destroyed is over, shall we say ten? Then two per for every one over that quantity.” His voice has gone husky, and goddamn, she’s afraid she’ll just melt if she looks up from the page and meets his eyes.

And then there’s the little fact that she can’t ignore the fact that her mouth’s gone dry and he surely can’t ignore the fact that she’s barely squeaking out a faint, “Sure, yeah. Great,” as he pencils in the new entries into the table.

She’s momentarily fascinated by watching him write in his even, elegant, slightly fussy hand. Like almost everything else about him, it’s so controlled and yeah, pretty.

And damn if it isn’t going to be her mission to make that particular word totally sanctioned under their legally binding agreement. So it might be a hard sell, but hey, anything worthwhile is. And it’s not like she’s asking for an addendum along the lines of “Party of the second part is allowed to practice Japanese rope bondage skills on the party of the first.”

While she’s momentarily distracted by the image that conjures up, Wes clears his throat meaningfully.

“What is the next point of contention, Faith?”

“Adjective use, sir.”

He looks a little thrown off his game for a second there. “‘Adjective use?’” He taps his pencil against the page. “Ah yes, I recall your fondness for one in particular.” He smiles coldly. “Very well. As this is all about negotiation, I require a bit of quid pro quo.”

He’s piqued her curiosity. “Yeah?” She arches an eyebrow at him. Quid pro fucking quo.

“Television watching shall be restricted to one hour on weeknight evenings and two hours on the weekend.”

“But Wes! What about movies? That isn’t enough time for—”

“I’d much rather see you read a book, Faith, and I have an entire library full of them. You hardly need to rot your brain with that drivel that seems to overrun the airwaves.”

She smirks knowingly. “What if there’s a Queer Eye marathon, Wes? You gonna make me turn that off?”

He’s forced to think about that one for a second. Frowning, he concedes, “Perhaps this clause is subject to the whims of the party of the second.”

“I thought you didn’t have whims, Mr. Buttoned Up Lawyer Guy. I mean, sir.” She reaches up to loosen his tie, brushing her fingertips over his crisp shirtfront. “And, gosh, what if I have a whim right now?” She grabs hold of his tie and pulls him closer.

Much to her surprise, he lets her. “Well, I think we’ve made some progress in our negotiations, and it’s time for a little break. This is hard work, after all.” He starts kissing the slope of her neck, his
fingers restless against the thin material of her tank top.

She giggles and pushes him roughly away. “Man, I never thought you’d cave so easily! Now who’s easily swayed, hmm?” He looks totally stunned. Rooked. Hoodwinked. And damn if she doesn’t get some personal satisfaction out of that. That image is sure as hell getting filed away in her personal album of precious moments.

“You should see the look on your face!” She’s still laughing.

“All right, Faith, you’ve made your point, rhetorically inexact though it may be. Now—” He fixes her that steely look that he fucking knows she can’t resist. “Dare we even broach the potentially charged topic of Orgasms, Frequency of and Allowances Made Regarding?”

Oh, and as much as she wants to take this contractual clause out for a spin right that second, because he’s shifting a little in his seat and she knows what that means even before she looks down and sees the now easily-recognizable outline of his hard-on under his trousers, she’s not just conceding anything too easily this afternoon. Not when the gridlocks of negotiation are possibly the best damn foreplay ever.

She scrunches up her forehead and ponders a particularly opaque paragraph of the section in question. He’s been incredibly thorough, all right. The language is air-tight—even if she wanted to alter the text, she wouldn't know where to begin.

“Is there a problem?” he asks, tapping his pen on her knuckles.

She pulls a sour face, glaring at him, nostrils flared. “You knew! You knew when you wrote this there was nothing I could do to get around any of this.”

“Ah, the value of an excellent legal education. And I suppose this wouldn’t be the best moment to tell you that I was at the top of my contract law class.”

“Not really, no.” The thing is that really, she doesn’t want to change anything; hadn't wanted to, even the first time she'd read it the other day. That's not really the pressing issue. “Just wondering, Wesley, how exactly am I supposed to remember all these items during the heat of passion?”

“That’s really not my problem is it?” He smiles indulgently and tips his chair back, insouciantly crossing his legs.

She's on the edge of fuming now, annoyed that he could turn the tables so effectively in the span of a few minutes. “Fine. For every blowjob I give you, I get one orgasm, no waiting. No teasing. No games. Anything after that is fine. But that first one? My way.”

“Just one, Faith? Is there a way to accurately measure and control that sort of thing?”

If he’s about to start laughing, she'll have no choice but to slap him, hard. “At least one.”

“Fair enough, at least one, it is.” He inks that in next to the typewritten block of text. “Anything else? I admit, it was unfair of me to box you in so tightly here, especially placing the onus on you to have this all memorized by…” He pauses, thinking. “Wednesday.”

“Next Sunday.”

“Friday evening.”

“C’mon Wesley. A week is fair. There's three pages here. Three pages! And you know, come to
think of it, there's quite a bit here about 'Frequency of' but not a whole lot of 'Allowances Made Regarding.' That's one allowance I could sure use right now.”

He leans in close, runs his fingers along the curve of her breast. “Anything else you could use right now?” That smile chasing over his lips could only be described as luscious.

She wriggles back in her seat, her turn to whip out the steely glare, but that doesn't stop his caresses. “Distracting me like this is an underhanded trick, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce. In addition to reporting you to the Department of Labor, it looks like the State Bar's ethics committee should be notified as well. Sexual overtures during contract negotiations—I'm sure they have some rule against that kind of thing.”

“I believe you were guilty of the same thing just a few moments ago.” He snatches his hand away, but moments later, it's snaking up her inner thigh.

“Yes, but I didn't swear an oath before God and whatever to be all ethical and stuff.”

“But seeing as this is a highly unorthodox contractual situation, I hardly think it's business-as-usual. And I don't think that the ethics committee would even care about this contract once they found out I was involved in illicit relations with my secretary.”

“Well, the way gossip goes around this town, I'm surprised they haven't already beaten down the door, demanding your head.”

He gives a derisive sniff. “Thank goodness it takes time for gossip to reach the state capital. I think they still may relay messages by carrier pigeon.” She rolls her eyes at his lame joke. “Now then, I'll give you until next Sunday for the memorization. But that means your most recent addendum will not go into effect until then.”

The bastard. He would pull something like that. “Fine.” She sticks her bottom lip out, all pouty, for emphasis. Maybe not the most professional act, but she's gotta even the score somehow.

He flashes her a real, sweet smile for the first time all afternoon and traces his finger along the edge of her protruding bottom lip. “Are you sure you wouldn't like a little break?”

She thinks about it for a moment while she's nibbling on the tip of his finger, even gives it a few swipes with her tongue so his eyes darken and he leans closer to her.

Sucker!

“I guess we have been negotiating for, like hours,” she muses as he starts worrying at her bottom lip again like it's his favorite thing in the world. “Maybe you should go and get us a glass of water each and we can finish discussing this whole orgasm issue.” She shoots him her perkiest smile, all teeth and tits, and gets a pained glare in return.

“Faith…” It's half warning, half endearment but she just snatches up the contract and brandishes it at him.

“Look, Wes, there's a whole bunch of papers here that say I got rights and I don't think you're respecting them. And I don't think you're respecting the letter of the law either,” she adds with a smirk. “You're like totally abusing it.”

“Yes, in much the same way that you see fit to abuse the English language,” he snaps but he's getting to his feet and walking to the door. “You'd better take this time to deliberate on your rights, Faith, because it's only fair to warn you that they're looking more than a little shaky at this juncture.”
She sticks her tongue out at his stiff back and picks up her pen. By the time he's back with two icy
cold glasses of water and, thanks, Wes, ice and lemon too, she shows him the corrections she's added
in her neatest handwriting.

“Better sit down, Wes,” she grins, snatching the contract back before he can get a good look, and
she'd be shrinking back in her seat at the permafrost in his eyes if he couldn't quite stop that little
smile tug at his lips.

“And I advise you to stay seated while you still can, Faith,” he murmurs silkily, throwing himself
down in the chair with easy grace and folding his arms. “I assume this concerns 'Allowances Made
Regarding'?

“You assume right. Okay, if the party of the first part makes the party of the second…”

“Really, is it necessary to go through this party and part rigmarole every single time?” he sighs
warily and, fuck! she's gonna wipe that smug smile off his face if it kills her.

“Don't butt in, Wes! Didn't we cover that in the whole thing about you not respecting my rights?”
She'd been mentally rehearsing that exact note of reproach ever since he left the room and she's got it
to a fucking tee.

“Very well, carry on,” he says with a little wave of his hand but then he's folding his arms again,
crossing his legs and staring at her unblinkingly. She's seen him do this in court when he's working
the whole judge, jury and executioner thing and she is so *not* going to let him.

“As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted,” she spits out, because she already knows that
her ass has got an urgent appointment with his hand, so she might as well use her snottiest voice and
be done with it. “If the party of the first part makes the party of the second part wait longer than an
hour for an orgasm, or any other time period previously stated, than the party of the second part is
allowed to consume three pieces of junk food, and I defined junk food in an addendum at the
back…”

“How very thoughtful of you,” he says kindly. “And did you define what you meant by piece?
Because really, Faith, this wording is very vague. Three pieces could mean three Cheetos or three
packets of Cheetos.”

She squinches up her face at him as she picks up the pen and adds, “to be defined as an item sold
with the intent to be consumed in its entirety.” Though she says it herself, she's damn good. “Right,
allowance number two…”

She's added in eight extra clauses, including that she's never, ever to sleep in the damp spot because
he's the one who makes them, that she's never ever to be fucked with vegetables or any other kind of
organic matter and that no stinky cheese, or cheese of any kind, is to be used in foreplay.

And he just sits there looking bored. He even picks up his letter knife at one point and start cleaning
his fingernails with it, even though they're way pristine for someone who's never paid for a manicure
in his life. He doesn't disagree with a single clause but then against he doesn't agree with her either.
It's getting to the point where even she's starting to get sick of hearing her voice bleat on and on
about the party of the first motherfucking part.

She comes to a halt after her last clause about a statutory amount of snuggling time after orgasm to
find him *stifling a fucking yawn*. And she'd bet all her orgasm allowance for the week (“a number
greater than five but less than fifteen, not including instances of multiple orgasm”) that he's faking it.
“Wes! You're not taking this seriously,” she wails, because she's way into this. Hell, she's thinking of going back to school and doing a law degree.

He lifts his head from silent contemplation of his big toe and pins her with a stare that's more steely than the entire steel output of Pittsburgh. “I'm taking this entirely seriously,” he tells her, oozing smugness from every pore. “And do I need to remind you that these are merely hypothetical orgasms and will remain hypothetical if I refuse to sign this contract, which is fast descending into the realms of whimsy on the part of the second party.”

Her mouth drops open so wide that she swears her chin just brushed the floor. “You wouldn't fucking dare!”

The elegant arch of his eyebrow says quite plainly that he would.

“I don't need you to have an orgasm,” she snarls. “You don't sign this contract, Wes, then I'm gonna be spending some fucking quality time with Mr. Bunny. And yeah, pun intended.”

He gives her a pitying smile like he can't even believe that she's that stupid. “But you're forgetting, Faith, that I don't need a contract to fuck you. I just thought that you might welcome the opportunity to have some small say in the matter, though perhaps I under-estimated your enthusiasm. Really, it's rather charming but in the circumstances I'm unable to agree to at least five of these clauses so we find ourselves at a stalemate.”

Now it's her turn to fold her arms, with a side order of flouncing. “Fine!”

And he's doing the whole starey thing again and it's beginning to seriously freak her out. Or, like, get her really wet because he's in the suit and he looks so cold, so unapproachable, that her fingers are itching to rumple him up, get him fucking messy.

The effort kills her but she manages to unclench her fingers from the arm of the chair and straighten up so her breasts are all pert and directly in his eye line. “I'll give you a blowjob, if you agree to all my clauses,” she offers brightly. “No quid pro quo, I'll just blow you off here and now and you don't have to do anything to me. Like, a one-time deal kinda thing. What do you say?”

And it's not often she deprives him of words, but that did it. Despite the pretended boredom, he’s in a legal mindset, what with all the clauses and shit, and she seriously doubts he gets offers like that in court or out of it.

She watches him with her eyebrows lifted inquiringly, serene smile fixed in place as if she’s just asked if he’d like another crust-less cucumber sandwich or something, waiting for him to do more than stare at her with eyes that go from startled to speculative in seconds.

“It would have to be—and please don’t think I’m denigrating your undoubted proficiency in that department—one very special event,” he says finally.

She’s close to giggling because she’s noticed the way he avoided saying the actual words, as if he’s fine with spanking her ass rosy-red, fine with fucking her until she’s begging incoherently, but wrapping his mouth around something as crude as ‘blowjob’ leaves him floundering.

“Well, see, Wes, you’ve got to agree up front,” she says. “I’m not going to have you,” she searches her memory and finishes triumphantly, “reneging on the deal after you’ve come, I’ve swallowed, and the blood’s back north of your belt.”

He gives this fastidious little wince but she watches his Adam’s apple jump and she’s tasting the power, sweet and heavy, that she’s got right now.
“What’s it gonna be, Wes?” she says, with a sober face and if she runs her tongue over her lips as she waits, it’s just because his thumb’s rubbed them and they’re dry. Honest.

“Faith—” He glances away, takes a deep breath and then gives her a long look. “You do realize that I’ve spent the last minute settling on the exact number of times your arse and your hairbrush get to meet?”

He’s going to use the hairbrush? Fuck. It’s not that it hurts that much more, it’s just that she misses the immediacy of his palm cupping her curves, and she’s convinced a spanking with the brush lasts longer, because with nothing to go on but her wails and the artful reddening of her ass, he’s less likely to decide she’s had enough.

When his hand is smarting, and he can feel the heat in her skin, he’s more inclined to be merciful.

“That’s later, Wes,” she says, tapping an insistent finger on the pages before them. “And until we get this settled, I’m not leaving the room and I’m not going over your knee.” His eyes flicker to the desk and there’s a faint smile that she wipes out by adding, “Or bending over the desk, a chair, or anywhere else.”

“I can see you’re set on this,” he says solemnly. “I underestimated your—”

And he takes sixty long, interminable seconds telling her that he’s desperate for her to go down on him, without ever saying anything he couldn’t have said in front of the fucking Queen without raising a blush.

Men.

She stands up and pats the seat of the chair invitingly. It’s wide, leather and there’s room for two; because she grabbed it, he’s spent the last hour perched on a wooden one, which probably didn’t help improve his temper. “Sit down, Wesley,” she says, sultry sweet, pushing it back a little to give her room.

He gives a look that mingles suspicion with anticipation as he changes seats.

“What?” she says indignantly. “Fuck, Wes, I’m not gonna bite you.” She considers that. “Well, not much.” A thought occurs to her. “And you’ve got to promise me not to interrupt, or interfere, or give me orders.” She smirks, “Though if you beg, I’ll, uh, take it under advisement.”

“Every comment like that just adds another stroke,” he says softly. “Would you like me to tell you what the total is at the moment?”

“No!” she says, and fuck, she’s going to be the one begging if this doesn’t work out. “Promise, Wes! I’ve never known you break a promise. I trust you.”

“Really?”

There’s a shadow in his eyes and she’s not having that. Not now. Luckily, she’s got ways of distracting him. She hooks her fingers in the hem of her top and starts to peel it up, pausing just before the lower curve of her bare breasts goes on show.

“I promise,” he says and damn she didn’t know he could speak that fast. “But, Faith, why are you—”

“Wes, questions come under interruptions. I won’t gag you—”
“Consider that a given.”

“You’re interrupting me again,” she spits out, feeling frustrated.

“I’m—” He shakes his head. “Sorry.”

He’s got the sense to leave it at that, and she takes a second to focus before flashing him a mollified smile and two nipples.

She toys with the button and the zipper that are keeping her jeans on but settles for pushing them down without making a big thing out of it, taking her thong with them, because she doesn’t want to piss him off with her choice of underwear and get his, ‘adds mystery’ lecture again. Stepping out of them she gives him a chance to admire her—which he does, eyes skimming over her appreciatively, taking in the view—before sinking slowly to her knees. Once there she puts her hands on his knees and pushes them apart, shifting until she’s between his thighs. She can feel him tense in readiness and smiles up at him. “Going to make you whimper, Wes,” she tells him, knowing that’ll pretty much guarantee he’ll be doing his best not to make a sound. “Going to make you come so hard you’ll never sit in this chair without wishing I was right here, about to do this.”

She places her hand over the definitely 3-D shape his cock’s making as it presses against his trousers, and sighs. Hard and ready. Not that she expected anything else of course. She’s doing this her way, so there’s no question of using her teeth to pull down his zipper; takes way too long and she wants to see him, feel him; taste and smell him too, because he’s always whatever the equivalent for cocks of minty-fresh is, clean without being devoid of any scent but the soap he used.

So he’s warm against her fingers and lips in a moment and she’s murmuring something, anything, just to feel his cock jerk as her lips flutter against the most sensitive square inch of flesh he possesses.

She can almost hear him wondering why she bothered to strip when, let’s face it, he can’t see much of her from this angle and she’d made it clear he didn’t have to return the favor. Poor bemused Wesley. She solves the riddle for him after a few leisurely lapping licks and a devastatingly slow glide down until his cock’s as deep in her throat as she can manage without totally spoiling the effect by choking. Then a few more of the delicate touches of her tongue that have his fingers digging into the arm of the chair and one lightning fast slam-gulp that shocks a moan out of him, but by the time he’s biting his lip in chagrin, she’s pulled off him and she’s looking up at his face and she doesn’t need a mirror for this, she’s in it.

One sinuous slither later and she’s astride his lap. His mouth opens but she closes it with a kiss, darting her tongue against his and not giving him chance to protest.

Not even when she hitches up and sinks back down, impaling herself with a hands-free ease that’s only possible because he helps her instinctively by tilting and because she’s slippery as hell and has been for so long it’s her teeth that bite down on his lip, her whimper they hear first.

He feels so fucking good, she could come just from this.

But she’s promised him something specific and before he starts to think she’s cheating, she takes her mouth away, just a little, and begins to count as she rises and falls like the Roman fucking Empire.

“One...two...God, Wes!...four...”

When she gets to ten, sighs and lifts off him, she only waits to see the amused gleam of comprehension light his eyes before she’s back on her knees.
He tastes different now and she wonders if it’s totally weird to kind of like him like this, with her juices coating the rigid length of him so that the kisses she plants, in teasing profusion, are sticky and slippery. She tastes good too, she decides, and goes to town on cleaning him up until a sneaky little glance upwards shows her that he’s ready for another lesson in behaving properly during negotiations.

He’s going to pay for that yawn, she thinks. Oh, he’s so gonna pay.

He makes this pitiful sound when her mouth leaves him, and she shushes him with a kiss before moving to sit astride him again. He knows what to expect this time and he’s got the tiniest smirk, as if he thinks maybe she’ll get so caught up in this he’ll get to come, and it won’t be officially be a blowjob so he won’t have to agree to her conditions.

So she grips the base of his cock hard and rubs the slick tip of him against her clit, swollen and tingling, rubs it once, twice, three times. He’s not smirking by the time she gets to nine, not even when on ‘ten’ she treats herself to one dip down that gives her everything he has, rammed deep enough to hit every sweet spot she’s got.

Pulling off him, after just one—is it still a thrust when he’s held still and you’re the one moving, she wonders? Reverse thrust, maybe? —takes every ounce of self-control she’s got, but thanks to Wes, she’s got more than the average girl.

This time she’s ravenous for the taste of him, swallowing him up, head dipping in a rhythm that’s speeding up like a tap dancer on crack. He’s so close to coming that she can feel that tell-tale hardening, that jerk as the spunk gets set to rise and erupt. Panting, wild-eyed, she lifts her head and gets, not a whimper but a heartfelt groan, and her name, choked out and barely recognizable.

She doesn’t think her legs will hold her up long enough for her to climb into his lap again, so she settles for something that’s cruel and unusual punishment, letting go of him altogether, sitting back on her heels and sucking her fingers into her mouth and then letting them drift down to her nipples, tight and aching now, so that the splash of coolness as the dampness her pinching fingers leaves evaporates is what makes her exhale on a sob, not the stab of perfect pain from her merciless tweaking.

He’s transfixed, hands holding onto the chair arms so tightly his fingers will be aching when he peels them off, eyes on her face as it twists with pleasure that’s so close to pain they’re kissing cousins, gaze dropping to her busy fingers, eyes burning so she can almost feel the scorch on her skin.

She can’t leave him untouched for long, not really, wouldn’t be fair—so she reaches out and swipes her fingers across the thick spill of pre-come and uses that as totally unneeded lubrication as her fingers go down between her legs.

There’s a protest rising, she can see it and she leans back, spreading her legs so he can see, can watch her torment herself with touches that never connect, squeezes that miss her clit, a dozen slides down to where her cunt’s waiting to be filled that leave it empty of all but want and need.

She fucking tortures herself in front of him, repeating every trick she can remember him using, every way he’s kept her on the edge, feverish and flushed with arousal.

The, when she really can’t stand it any longer, when the fingers that are teasing her stop feeling as though they’re hers, she whispers his name, so that his gaze goes to her face and she bends in a beautiful arch and lets him come in her mouth, on her tongue, in her throat, feeling the tears sting her eyes as he gives in and his hands go to wind in her hair and he lets her finish what she’s started.
She lifts her head, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, in a gesture as unstudied as it is necessary. His eyes are closed but as she watches, they open and he stares down at her.

Without speaking, he stands, fastens his trousers and picks up his pen and the contracts. When his name’s on the line, black ink wet, he holds out his hand and helps her up, keeping hold of her hand.

“Wes?” she whispers. “Please?”

Considering that she's naked and dripping wet, it's pretty obvious what she's all weak-voiced and desperate for.

Wes doesn't say anything though, just brings her hand to his mouth and presses a kiss against her knuckles, but when she takes a step forward so the stiff, starched front of his shirt brushes her breasts in a way that's almost comforting if she wasn't so goddamn worked up, he gently pushes her away.

“Wes,” she pleads again, making her eyes go big, like Disney big. “You gonna help a girl out?”

His brow wrinkles in confusion. “Help you out?” he echoes incredulously, as if she's just asked if they go out on a baby-murdering spree. “Surely you're not suggesting…”

“Damn fucking right I'm not suggesting,” she hisses, trying to grab him by the waist, which he manages to avoid with an adroit side step, his hands reaching to seize her upper arms in an almost punishing grip so she can't work on a bit of follow through. “I'm begging, Wes. Okay? I'm begging you. I made you come, didn't I?”

He allows himself a tiny, teeny smile of smug satisfaction. “Yes, you did. And thank you for that, it was rather inspired.”

“So you get some, then I get some,” she insists, wriggling in his hold. “I get a whole load of some.”

She really should have insisted on a clause in the contract about the party of the first part's way annoying collection of smirks, sneers and really fucking smug smiles, pretty much like the one he's giving her now as he looks down at her frantic struggles and heaving breasts and shakes his head sorrowfully. “Believe me, Faith, there's nothing I'd like more than to alleviate your suffering but you were adamant that the favor wasn't to be returned.”

“Yeah, but…”

“If I recall correctly, your exact words were, 'No quid pro quo, I'll just blow you off here and now and you don't have to do anything to me.'” The smile turns sympathetic but resolute. “Now, I have to respect the letter of the law.”

And with that totally bogus argument, he thinks he's won. Which he so hasn't. “I said you don't have to do anything to me. Didn't say you can't.” She pauses and then smiles triumphantly. “Or that you shouldn't. Sides you signed the contract, buster, and can I direct your attention to section 3, paragraph 5, clause b: for every blowjob I give you, you have to give me a no-waiting orgasm and I need one right now. C'mon, Wes!”

Yeah, it's not like she expected him to go down (girl's gotta dream?) without putting up a fight, but she's like found her inner Ally McBeal, 'cept her inner Ally McBeal isn't some anorexic, uptight bitch who doesn't know how to dress, and he could at least look impressed at her legal prowess. Or the way her nipples are tight and peaked, her thighs starting to glisten with her juices.

He shrugs off his jacket and folds it neatly over the back of the chair and she's one crazy, mixed-up girl because that gets her even hotter than if he'd said something really obscene in his most clipped
voice or just went straight for the main course and jammed his fingers inside her.

“Really, Faith, you made certain insensitive suggestions concerning the possibilities of me reneging on your kind offer and now I find that the boot's very firmly on the other foot.” He stares down at her toes, which are curling into the nap of the rug and seems momentarily distracted before he lifts his head and gives her a bright smile. “Still, no need to look so dismayed, I still plan to give your arse a relentless spanking even if I don't plan on making you come.”

“God!” she bursts out, throwing her arms into the air in frustration. “You're such a bas…”

“Yes, yes, I'm a bastard,” he says in a bored voice but his eyes are gleaming in a really unsettling way. “Now how shall I administer your much deserved chastisement?”

And there’s no way she’s not coming in the next five minutes, either with or without his help. “I'll just go and get my hairbrush,” she says in her most innocent voice, which actually not so much, as he sits down on his chair and looks around the room as if he's searching for new and cunning ways to make her ass burn.

She’s almost skipping out of the room when his “tsk tsk” pulls her back and she turns round to see him wagging his finger at her. “I think it best if I keep you within my sights, Faith,” he tells her pleasantly. “We really don't need the hairbrush anyway. I'm sure I can improvise something.”

“I wasn’t going to—” she begins, but he hasn’t even started to arch a disbelieving eyebrow before she’s ‘fessing up. “Okay, I was. I was going to get the brush and take, like, thirty fucking seconds to get myself off. Could probably do it in less. Fine! Are you satisfied?”

She can feel her face heat up, less with embarrassment than frustration. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is helping her to calm down right now. Not the way he’s sitting, in the exact position he’ll be in when she’s over his knee, not the way his hand’s open, palm up, not the way he’s still looking just the littlest bit mussed.

And, oh, fuck, not the way he’s moving and unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling—God—rolling up his sleeves, with precise, careful folds so that they’re each the same distance away from his strong, beautifully shaped wrists.

“Oh, I’ve been very well satisfied, thank you, Faith,” he purrs. “So thoroughly so in fact that I’m not quite up to the task of satisfying you.”

She can’t believe he’s making jokes right now but he’s looking insufferably pleased with himself for such a fucking lame attempt at humor.

“You don’t have to fuck me, Wes,” she says, hearing the desperation edge out the dignity. “You can —”

“Spread you out on the desk in front of me and touch you with my fingers?” he interrupts. “Find every place that makes you quiver; stroke every spot that makes you squirm. I can push my fingers into you, where you’re wet, where you’re hot and you grip onto me with a strength that’s always a surprise. One finger, two; you’d like even more than that though, wouldn’t you? The way you feel now I could fuck you with my hand and you’d mewl and beg and love it.”

Her hand’s holding onto the door handle and she can feel the shape of it, smoothly rounded, the metal warming against her hand, but it’s all she’s conscious of because she’s lost in what he’s saying, drowning in that blue-iced stare.

“Too direct, not subtle enough? Perhaps you’re right. Would you like me to use my mouth on you
instead, Faith? Have you hold yourself open for me, wide, wide open, so I could see you, could see how wet you were, see how much you wanted me, needed me.”

She thinks she’s nodding, but she’s not speaking. She’s not sure she can. Every word he’s saying, in that cool, deliberate voice, is stroking her skin, tugging her inexorably toward the edge, and he knows it. There’s no satisfaction in his eyes, just a watchful, tense waiting but she doesn’t know what for.

“I’d touch you with my tongue so lightly you barely felt it, Faith. Taste you against my lips, kiss you, bite you, lick you. Open like that, I could go anywhere I pleased, fuck your cunt and your arse with my tongue, driven as deeply as I could. You’d let me do that, wouldn’t you?”

And if ever there was a competition for most rhetorical question, that one would win and there wouldn’t be a dissenting voice in the house. She lets go of the handle and starts to walk to him, drawn by his voice and he stops her with a word.

No. A command.

And as she crawls to him, gaze fixed on his face, she wonders why it feels like he’s the supplicant, not her.

Though, once she’s on all fours, with the prickly kilim rug stinging her knees and the fleshy bits of her palms, she feels like one of those pilgrims who climb up a jagged mountain, all the way on their knees, just to kiss the hallowed ground of a shrine. The way he's looking at her, still devouring her with that cold look of appraisal that she can't read, it's both utterly frightening and utterly seductive. But he's involuntarily biting his lower lip, just a tiny bit of flesh caught between his teeth—he probably doesn't even know he's doing it, which is perhaps the hottest thing of all. It's a little crack in this game, the kind they hadn't played in ages. And the prospect of that is enough to make her forget all about the damn rug rubbing her skin the wrong way and she's become positively feline, slinking along the rest of the distance between them, then leaning in to curl around his calf, tipping her face up to rest on his knee.

When he runs his hand through her hair, half-absentmindedly, it's nearly enough to make her start purring, for real—until with a twist of his wrist he's pulling her up on to his lap, not face-down, as she'd expected, but up to his greedy mouth, up for a kiss that's half hungry and half satisfied, because if there's anyone who can make a kiss feel like that, it’s him. He's pulling so much out of her that she's not sure what to do with her arms, her hands, and just lets them drape limply across her knees.

The first thing he spots when they pull apart is that reddened flesh, still indented with the tiny teeth-marks of the rug's rough fibers. His free hand strokes her palms, her knees, seemingly entranced by the slight damage inflicted there. She can't help but whimper when one soft fingertip traces idly across the zigzagging creases that meet in the center of her palm.

“But before we get to any of the aforementioned activities, I think it's only best to redden your lovely arse to match this,” he says, sweeping his hand over her knees again. “It seems pointless to even inquire as to whether you'll like that.” She's glad he's not expecting her to reply because her mouth's so dry she can hardly swallow, much less actually speak. He extricates his hand from her hair and deliberately undoes his tie the rest of the way, pulling the narrow end out of the perfect Windsor knot first, then letting the elaborate construction collapse before whisking the whole thing out from under his collar and popping the top button of his shirt open.

The divot where his neck meets breastbone is so inviting, begging her to brush her lips across it—but before she can dip her head to do so, he snatches the side of her face up in one hand, almost as if to slap her, but instead pulling her in for another forceful kiss that leaves her panting and lightheaded so
that she almost doesn't hear him order her into position, draped over his knees.

Now the wool of his trousers is prickly on her skin instead, and she's kind of snuggling into it when he strokes her hair away from her neck and bends over to murmur “Hands behind your back, Faith.”

He threads the tie 'round her wrists, twisting her arms gently so that the back of her hands are pressed to the small of her back. There's an economy to the knot he uses, but he takes his time, deliberately brushing his hands across her ass or along the ridge of her spine.

Tutting in satisfaction, he returns his attention to her hair, tilting her head on to the armrest of the chair, so she can almost see his face, but not quite. It pulls her neck in an odd way, and that, combined with the awkward angle of her arms, makes her suddenly very self-conscious of the fabricated pose he's placed her in.

“Now,” he says, warming his palm across one ass cheek. “I know you were quite eager to use the brush, and I'm almost sad I didn't have you fetch it, even if you would have taken that time out of my sight to immediately get up to no good.” She can tell from the tone of his voice that he's smiling in that wry, sardonic way—even if she can't clearly see his lips from that angle. “And of course, my belt is out of the question—we don't want a repeat of the last time some Italian leather met this flesh.” She cringes, not from the sense memory, but from the thought that in this state, in this moment, she wouldn't resist the resounding, hot lashes of the smooth calfskin across her ass.

“I...” she sputters, before she can stop herself. “I'd like that this time, Wesley.” She almost believes it too, for a minute.

His hands stroking her other ass cheek now, and if he doesn't do something soon, she's gonna squirm away and take the brush to her ass up in the master bathroom.

“No,” he says, bringing his hand down crashing down on the same place he'd just been caressing; the slap and her resulting cry of surprise mingled with desire echoes hollowly in the high corners of the room. “No, Faith.” Another slap, another whimper. His voice drips with honeyed concern: “I know you too well now. I know you want it like this.”

And she does. And she needs him like this too—calm and detached; the steadiness of his voice and the nearly metronomic regularity of the flat of his palm against her ass—all of it keeps her just short of going over the edge. The illusion of him being in complete control is so very crucial to the game. There's a delicious heat radiating out from the various points where his hand has already met her tenderized flesh.

“Keep talking, Wes. Please.” If she sounds desperate, well, maybe she is, a little.

“And what shall I talk about, Faith? The weather?” The pads of his fingertips ghost lightly, thoughtfully across her back. Her ass may be thankful for the momentary reprieve, but the delicate, slow touches are devastating in their own right. She arches impatiently against him, eager to gain contact with the promising erection that she can feel through the light wool of his trousers. If he doesn't start talking soon she’s going to fucking lose it. Then again, if he does start talking she's going to lose it, so really it’s win/win.

“Always so impatient.” He says it quietly, under his breath, but there’s no hint of a scold there. Deep down she knows he wouldn’t have her any other way. He gives her one last, indulgent pat before he lifts his hand away. She’s come to fetishize that little cooling waft of breeze that she feels right before his hand is about to connect. And when it does, she bites her lip against the shock of the familiar. She doesn’t want to make a sound, doesn’t want to betray her desire even if it’s written all over her face.
He’s alternating sharp, quick blows with these little massaging, gentle touches and it’s killing her by degrees. She manages to wriggle forward a bit so she can feel the insistence of his hard-on. He must be feeling indulgent because he lets her.

“You came for me once, just like this. Shall we see if you can do it again? Would you like me to introduce my fingers to the equation, Faith? Or would that be cheating? Hmm?”

“Thought you weren’t going to make me come, sir,” she grits out, but just barely, because his fingers dip down in between her legs, briefly, to see just how wet she is before they come to rest again at the small of her back. He’s testing her resolve. The question is: is she going to beg, or not?

Her arms are starting to ache, just a little, and she’s trying not to squirm but she’s feeling heavy and feverish and she just wants to get off, quick and dirty, rather than have it drawn out in all this agonizing glory.

But she’s determined to not say a fucking word. Not a—

“I’m thinking about my options. Should I indulge you or not? And in what fashion, exactly? So many choices.”

Things haven’t really changed so much since the early days, when he’d make her wait and wait; those days when *fuck me now* was her daily mantra. Hell, it seemed to work better for her than “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and people like me!”

And goddamnit, he knows damn well what he’s going to do. He always does. He’s just being smug. A flash of annoyance pushes her desire out of the way for one split second.

She’s still thinking about that when he gives her one last resounding smack and hauls her roughly up by her shoulders until she’s sitting on his lap facing him. She winces involuntarily as she rocks back on her stinging, reddened ass. Just as quickly, partly to alleviate the pressure and partly because it’s payback time, she leans forward to brush her breasts against Wes’ chest and to sneak a kiss at the vertex where his collarbone and shirt meet.

And again, he lets her. At the same moment, his hands reach behind her and start to undo the knot in the tie that’s binding her wrists together.

The surprise must register on her face because usually? The slow torment by pleasure could go on for hours. The shock makes her bolder than she’d normally be, because she finds herself asking him, “What game is this, Wes?”

He tips her chin back and gives her this look that’s so sweet and immediate, and so different from his chilly, intense glare of the past hour that she can feel her heart hitch in her chest.

“It isn’t one.” With that her arms slip free and he leans forward to kiss her.

“Not a game, hmm?” she murmurs into his ear, nuzzling his neck after pulling away from that kiss. “Just another tease, or are you telling the truth?” And, damn, she’s feeling as bold as brass tonight.

“You doubt my intentions, Faith?” He tries to pull up his cold facade again, but doesn’t get very far; with her hands free, she can concentrate on undoing the rest of the buttons on his shirt with a deliberate coolness she’s definitely picked up from him.

Looking up from her task, she tries not to roll her eyes at him, but doesn’t succeed. “Am I going to regret saying yes?”
She decides his little snuffling snicker—magnified by the slow wagging of his head, eyes downcast to hide what she's sure must be mirth—must be the cutest thing he's done in the past day or two.

“Hey, hey. Don't think you're getting off that easy, sir.” She's only undone more two buttons and is toying with the third, and she can feel his heart thumping at hummingbird speed inches from her fingers.

In return, his hands are curled around her breasts, the round knob of his wrist bone a comfortable pressure against her flesh. “I never entertained any idea of the sort.”

“Good, because you're not getting off the hook with adorableness tonight.” She pauses with well-timed pensiveness. “Or at least not until you've made me come and carried me up to the bed because I'm too spent to walk.”

“Adorableness?” The sibilant end of the word drips with incredulity when he says it.

She slips the third button open. “Yeah, Wes. Add that to the list of words you're gonna get used to, right up there with pretty. I'll attach an addendum to the contract tomorrow.”

“Mmm. I thought we'd finished our negotiations for the week.” His fingers hover over her hard nipples, dragging the tiniest swirl of air over them—she's so sensitive even that slim disturbance of the air is enough to magnify the insistent tug of desire inside her cunt.

“Well, a girl's got a right to change her mind, right?”

“Absolutely, but not until next week. And I'm sure this particular addendum will, unlike some of the others, require copious amounts of quid pro quo.” He clamps his mouth shut purposefully when the Latin phrase brings out a little mischievous glint in her eye.

“Speaking of.” She can't help the huge grin that's spreading across her face.

He clears his throat. “Of course.”

She's freed another button, and yanks the shirt out from his trousers, letting it fall open and admiring the view. “You were getting off track.”

“No I wasn't.” His fingers swoop in finally, giving her nipples a gentle twist.

Now it's her turn to clear her throat and try to stay focused. “Yes you were, Wesley. I assume you'd come to a decision while you were still tanning my ass.” She shifts her still-tingling ass in his lap, sliding against his hard cock, just as a little reminder that they weren't through, not by a long shot. “And this is some new non-game game you've come up with to keep me waiting.”

“I assure you it's nothing of the sort.”

“Uh, huh, and then this small talk and wandering hands, you're okay with that?”

“Of course.” One hand still toying with a breast, the other slips down below her waist, the warm pads of his fingertips gently stroking her still perfectly-shorn pussy with over-deliberate care. “May I ask you something, Faith?”

She's lolling her head on his shoulder, planting a row of kisses along the edge of his neck, and can barely muster an affirmative “Mmmhmm,” in reply.

“A moment ago, you said 'spent'—and I don't recall you ever using that particular antiquated word
before; I was so distracted by that *endearment* you employed.”

His fingers haven’t paused their diligent work, and her head’s gone fuzzy and all she really cares about are his hands and their business; and her lips, absentmindedly skimming his collarbone now, her arms draped crookedly ‘round his neck, her fingers curling in his hair.

“Read it one night. When I couldn’t sleep.” She gasps when he slides two fingers inside, immediately crooking them to reach that damn elusive throbbing spot while his thumb still works over her clit. “One of your books in the library, an old one. Victorian, maybe?”

His voice is tinged with slight amusement. “No doubt, as that’s the bulk of the collection. Do you remember the title?”

“Wes, c’mon. I’m a little distracted here. I don’t remember.” She sighs and shifts so he can thrust his fingers in a little farther.

“Oh, I’m sure you do.” There’s a slight variation in his handiwork, and a split second later she realizes it’s connected to the gear shift in his brain. “As a matter of fact, I don’t believe I can allow you to come until you do remember.”

Any whimper she’d let out now wouldn’t even begin to convey her frustration. “Wes, I thought you said this wasn’t a game.”

“I think I’ve got right to change my mind, right?”

She curses the fact that she’d ever said that, her breathing ragged and torn by the little cries of pleasure escaping from her throat. “Fine. It was…”

Shit! What was it? She can’t remember—it was about a girl married off to a rich prick to save her family from poverty and has all these erotic adventures—but she’s pretty sure that kind of plot point won’t differentiate it from most of the other books in his library, based on some of the other volumes she’d flipped through. And it doesn’t help that the warm tingle of near-orgasm is turning hot and burning the longer she tamps down the burgeoning waves of pleasure.

“Yes Faith?” Her cunt’s locked tight around his fingers, and he’s still working them mercilessly, pushing her closer and closer to the point where she won’t be able to fend off the insistent orgasm any longer.

A little tiny light bulb in a far corner of her brain switches on. “Emily. Something about Emily and her voluptuous delights.”

He lets out one of those indulgent chuckles that she loves and loathes in equal measure. “See now, that wasn’t so difficult, was it?”

She can’t reply for the frustrated scream she lets rip before succumbing to the pressure of his thumb against her throbbing clit; of the slight, twitching thrusts of his fingers, twisting as far as he can reach, deep inside her.

Chapter Eighty-Nine

It’s pretty good as orgasms go, her back arching against the arm of the chair, her muscles clamping down on his wicked, wicked fingers as he presses hard against that maddening, demanding little spot inside her, but it’s not enough.

And when he slowly takes his fingers out of her and licks them clean with slow swipes of his pretty,
pink tongue, she's shifting restlessly against the hard cock nudging against her buttocks, riding out these delicious little shudders that aren't satisfying her, just making her wriggle on his lap.

He gives her a keen look even as he runs his damp fingers almost experimentally along her twitching thighs, watching in rapt fascination as she can't decide whether to fling herself away from him or do what she eventually does and lean into his touch. Her skin's adorned with a collection of goose bumps, which makes her hiss as his caresses become more deliberate.

“Why Faith, whatever can the matter be?” he asks in his most solicitous voice and she gives a groan of frustration and her hands are reaching up to clutch at his shoulders.

“Want more, Wes,” she mutters, trying to drag him down for a messy, wet kiss which he avoids by throwing his head back and giving her a reproachful look. “Need more.”

“But I do believe we've resolved the issue of quid pro quo to our mutual satisfaction,” he drawls, his hand cupping her sticky mound, a finger darting to tease her swollen clit so she's writhing against his knowing, insistent touch and letting out panting little breaths between gritted teeth.

“Want you to fuck me, go down on me, make me come.” She's spitting out the words because he's gotta know and they're painting these flesh-toned pictures in her head of the things he described before. Of her splayed out on the desk, holding herself open and letting him, well, do pretty much anything he fucking wants and really, what else is new?

His eyes are heavy-lidded and she has to lean over and kiss them because she knows that he's seeing exactly the same thing. “Want your cock in me, Wes,” she husks in his ear, just to make sure they're on the same page and when his eyebrow quirks upwards and he gives just the tiniest start, it's enough motivation to slide off his lap onto really shaky feet and tug at his arms.

He evades her desperate hands with light, little slaps and he's chuckling like she's too fucking amusing for words. “What on earth are you doing, Faith?”

And she stamps her foot then, she really does. And growls at him for good measure. “Stop playing games, Wes! It's mean and I know you want to fuck me so why won't you?”

He gets up from the chair on one easy movement and a shocked gasp, hand to his heart. “I'm being mean?”

But she's not in the mood for any more of his bullshit because he's not being funny or charming any more, he's just annoying the fuck out of her and not in a good way either.

“You're being fucking mean,” she clarifies and he's saying something, a whole lot of something which she tunes out because she's clutching his arm and dragging him out of there. Well, not dragging but she's tugging him out of the room and up the stairs and he's not exactly digging his heels in and refusing to follow.

“I can't imagine what you hope to achieve by this display of willfulness,” he tells her sorrowfully when they finally get to the bedroom and she pushes him down on the bed and straddles him. “Gonna get fucked, by you, right the hell now,” she tells him, still very much on the growl setting and he's sprawled under her, shirt halfway unbuttoned, hair rumpled by her angry fingers and she doesn't even remember doing it but the button of his trousers has popped free and his zipper is halfway down so she can see skin and that little trail of hair and his cock twitching against the dark gray wool. “You're so fucking pretty,” she murmurs, not even trying to make him mad enough to pin her down and fuck her into the middle of the next decade. Just stating the obvious.
His eyes roll so far back that she can't even see the pupils anymore but it's not got fuck all to do with how exasperating she may or may not be but more about the frantic movements of her hands, wrenching the last of his shirt buttons free and scratching at his nipples with her blunt nails.

“I think you must be going down with a fever,” he announces firmly, eyes dancing with delight in the dim light of the room, as he rolls her over.

At fucking last, she thinks, trying to squirm herself upwards so she can get the hard jut of his cock against her clit which feels like it's twice the size it should be but he's sinking down on her and wrapping his arms tight against her writhing body so she can't move.

“I think we should lie here quietly until it abates,” he murmurs in her ear. “You're obviously unwell and I really think you need to sleep, Faith.”

She lies there quietly for about three seconds before she renews her wriggling, making damn sure to grind back against his cock. “Maybe you should the fuck the fever out of me,” she suggests, clinging onto the edge of the mattress and pushing back so she can get free of his heavy limbs.

“That's not really an approach that would find much favor with the medical community,” he begins, but he shuts up at the exact moment that her hand delves between her legs and she plunges two fingers inside her twitching cunt. She shuffles farther away from him so he can see what she's doing and lets her head fall back against his lap.

“I could do this then,” she moans, turning her head so she can nuzzle against his cock. “You like watching me come, don't you?”

“You're very beautiful when you come,” he says immediately, gravely bending over her so he can gently still her hand. “So abandoned, so completely lost in the moment; you give yourself so utterly to your pleasure and then your eyes snap open and you're mine again.”

His words are soft and there's this note of, like, reverence to them that calms her down from the Big Orgasm Quest to scramble to her knees and press a soft kiss against his cheek. Considering that she's been acting like a demented, horny, teen nympho for the last half hour, it's innocent enough to make his eyes soften and his hands brush the hair back from her flushed face.

“I do love you, Wes,” she says fiercely like he's questioned the way her heart still goes pitter patter every time he walks into a room and his lips curve into the sweetest, gentlest smile she's ever seen him wear.

“I know,” he says simply. “Though probably not as much as I love you,” he adds so her pittering pattering heart ends up somewhere around the ceiling and then he's kissing her, taking tiny, little sips from her mouth that only become fierce and fuck-me-now when his tongue curls against hers and she throws her arms around his neck.

“I love you even when you won't fuck me,” she breathes against his mouth. “When you make me wait.”

“I don't think I'll be making you wait much longer,” he says and she gives a tiny, incredulous groan as he then has the fucking nerve to gently disentangle himself and slide off the bed.

“Wes.” Her whine is going to get its very own page in the Guinness Book Of Records as she slumps back against the pillows and watches him not take off the rest of his clothes.

“No need to sound quite so petulant, Faith,” he calls over his shoulder, staggering to the corner of the room where the old-fashioned looking glass reflects the speculative gleam in his eyes. “I once asked
you if you'd like to see yourself come,” he reminds her, sizing up the mirror and then carefully pulling it away from its resting place. “You weren't that keen, as I recall, but I'd really like you to reconsider.”

She narrows her eyes and parts her thighs. “You gonna make me come by fucking me?”

He nods as he drags the heavy frame closer to the bed. “Yes, that was the general idea.”

And she can’t help remembering the night he first suggested she watched herself come and how she’d stood in front of this mirror, naked from the ankles up, Cinderella-clad feet pretty in pink.

And it’s impossible not to think about what happened after that, and her right hand goes to her left wrist, rubbing at skin his belt left bleeding.

“It won’t be like that,” he says, and it’s uncanny how he reads her mind and honestly, just a little fucking scary, because if he can work out what she’s thinking, then he must know—She stamps out that spark of conjecture before it turns into a forest fire, telling herself that it’s only natural he’s remembering what she is.

“It can be,” she tells him. “I know you’d never hurt me, Wes. Not really.”

“I don’t find that reassuring,” he said, and there’s a frown on his face. “Faith—don’t—when we’re —”

He gives a groan of pure frustration and seeing him stumbling to explain himself gives her the chance to speak for him for once. “I won’t, Wes. If I think you’re too involved to realize you’re hurting me, I’ll tell you, I promise. I won’t let you go further than you want.”

And that’s just about as weird a promise as it gets, when she stops to think about it, but his face clears, and he gives her a small, grateful smile. “My darling Faith,” he murmurs, and there’s this moment where they’re both separated by space, but smiling at each other, and she feels so fucking mature she can’t believe it.

Before she reacts to that by doing something totally juvenile, he turns away, closing the curtains against the fading sunlight and turning on enough lamps that she can see herself reflected, with no detail lost, in the mirror at the foot of the bed, but the room around her is deep in shadows. When he joins her, he’s naked too, kneeling behind her and kissing her shoulder gently.

“You’re to watch yourself,” he instructs her. “I want you to see your face, the way your mouth falls open as you pant and moan, the way your teeth catch your lip and you bite down hard.” His hand drifts across her mouth and down to her breasts and she can feel the heat from his body prickle against her back. “I want you to see how your skin flushes here and your nipples tighten and swell—does that hurt? When they do that?”

“They ache, but it feels good,” she tells him. “And when you pinch them—”

“Like this?” he says, forefinger and thumb applying a pressure that builds until she arches her back, pushing up against his hand.

“Yes! That feels—oh—”

“I can see how it makes you feel,” he says, releasing her abruptly, his voice cold. “I can see because I was watching you, but you weren’t, Faith. Your eyes were closed.” He shifts back a little and she’s staring into the mirror, hardly daring to blink, and when mirror Faith’s ass gets slapped by his palm, cupped so it’s more sound than pain, it takes her a second to feel the smart.
“You’re to watch,” he drawls in her ear, “all the time, no matter what I do, is that clear?”

She nods slowly. “Yes, Wes,”

“I promise you it’ll be worth it,” he says, and she’s wondering, because if she’s watching, will she do it the same as always? Will she disappoint him?

“Wes, I don’t know—” she begins and her head turns to glance at him, just for a second, before she realizes what she’s done.

Any faint warmth that had returned to his voice goes south for the winter and she’s flooded with panic as he hisses, “Are you disobeying me deliberately, Faith?”

“No, Wes. I’m sorry, it’s just that this is difficult.”

He draws his finger down her spine, nape of neck to cleft of ass; a slow deliberate stroke of skin. Then he places his palm against her ass and slides it upwards, equally slowly, until his hand’s cupping the back of her neck, sending shocks down her, atavistic thrills and chills because his hand’s only got to tighten—

And then it does, and he’s pushing her forward, forcing her back to curve inward because she’s trying not to lose sight of her reflection. It’s not painful, not really, but it’s awkward, and when he tells her to cross her wrists behind her, she’s not sure she can.

He sighs, and that’s enough to spur her on, because for once she can see exactly what expression he’s got when he’s behind her, and he’s looking—not pleased because fuck, she’s meeting his eyes in the fucking mirror and she should be looking—

“At yourself, Faith, is that really so hard to comprehend?”

“No! No, it fucking isn’t, I just can’t do it.”

She closes her eyes because she’s gonna cry, she knows she is, and this is turning into something so far removed from the frantic necessary fuck she’d been longing for that she’s primed for frustrated tears.

He leans over and takes something from the drawer beside the bed and she doesn’t have to see it, because as soon as it’s wrapped around her wrists, she knows it’s a scarf, soft but more than strong enough to hold her in place and he knows it.

The way he ties her up, swiftly and with a decisive tug on the knot, she knows his annoyance isn’t fake. There’s an impatience that’s foreign to him and she sighs.

“Wes; can we start over? Please?”

“I don’t know, Faith,” he says tersely. “Do you think your ability to comply will improve if I permit that?”

“Worth a shot,” she says, striving for chirpiness, and the chuckle she gets is water in the desert.

“I’ll allow it then,” he tells her, “but I can’t let your recent behavior pass entirely, you know.”

As if she’d thought for one moment that he would.

“I’ve usually confined my attentions to your arse, Faith,” he says, stroking his fingers over it until her fingers are curling against each other as the tender, smarting skin reignites, “but it’s been dealt with
once today, and I’m sure you’re going to feel fairly uncomfortable at work tomorrow as it is. But there are other places.” There’s a slight pause and then he pulls her up, so that she’s kneeling again, and tied as she is, her breasts are thrust out and prominent.

“Wes?” she says uncertainly, because fuck, if this is going where she thinks it is.

“No, Faith,” he whispers, “not now. But I will do, you know.”

And this would be the point where she freaks, she thinks in some distant part of her mind, but it isn’t. It’s the point where curiosity and fear mix with arousal and she knows if he wants that, she’ll let him, as always, and she wonders how far he’s gone in his fantasies and what he’s got waiting for her.

“You missed that,” he says, breaking her reverie, “but I didn’t. When you were thinking about that, imagining it, you smiled, and your breath caught in your throat in the most delightful way.” He purses his lips. “Spread your knees, Faith. I think you’ve pleased me enough with that little display for me to overlook your lapse in concentration.”

The cashmere blanket’s warm and soft against her knees as she obeys and they stare. The girl in the mirror’s wet enough that there’s no hiding it and she’s all wide eyed and wanting.

“I have to watch?” she whispers, and with every second that she does, it’s getting easier, as if the girl she’s watching isn’t her, and the way she moves is her choice, not Faith’s.

“Watch,” he tells her, freeing her wrists so she can fall forward onto her hands and knees. “Just that.”

And she watches as his fingers tease her, watches as his tongue laps at her as he nuzzles into the warmth of her body, sees how the girl’s eyes widen and flutter almost closed, how the muscles in her neck stand out as she cries a name over and over.

Then his cock nudges against her and her attention wavers, because she wants to see him, needs to see him and she’s going to look, going to look—

He slams into her, in one hard, fast jolt and her eyes snap back to the girl in the mirror, because oh, see, she’s loving that, and there’s a fierce heat in her eyes and her arms are locked, bracing herself as the thrusts hammer against her, in a rapid, relentless remorseless—

They pause—he pauses, and the girl’s crying out, mouth twisting in disappointment, eyes desperate, mouth pleading, because she’d been so close and now he’s sliding into her in shallow, slow strokes that tease her and she’s hammering a fist against the bed in a rising frustration, teeth bared, lips peeled back.

It’s a glorious anger, and she looks beautiful indulging it, but the relief that wipes it away as his hands grip her hips and he starts to fuck her deep and fast again is even better.

And when they come, though the girl in the mirror’s eyes close, Faith doesn’t miss a thing.

She’s still kneeling on the bed, arms shaking slightly from the effort of keeping herself upright and when she glances up, there she is, pale-faced and smudgy in the mirror, Wes looming behind her like a dark shadow.

It's beginning to feel like there's four of them in the room and she looks to see what Mirror Wes and Mirror Faith are doing. And he's smoothing a hand down her back and she can feel the warm glide of his fingers against her spine, against the dimples just above her buttocks and the Faith in the mirror has this secret smile that she doesn't think anyone else has ever seen.

She gives up the fight and flops forward onto her tummy so she's a nose away from her reflection. And she has to tear her gaze away for just one second so she can look over her shoulder at Wes who's somewhere down around her ankles.

“I know what we look like, Faith,” he says testily and she grins like a shark with lipstick because the biter’s just about to get bit.

“Wesley Wyndam-Pryce get your ass over here and see how pretty we both are,” she bites out in her best don't-fuck-with-me voice and he gives a tiny sigh and then throws himself down next to her, jostling her with his elbow and looking everywhere but at the pissed off Wes in the glass.

“If you use that word again, you're going to be infracting the contract,” he announces in a manner that could be construed as sulky, your honor. ‘I'm sure you've said it more than five times during the course of the afternoon.”

She pokes her tongue out at him and then pulls a face before rolling over and craning her neck to make sure that her tits are doing a damn good job of staying perky. “We're beautiful,” she gloats. “We are one kickass couple.”

And because of the mirror, she gets to see the exasperated glance he gives her, how it stops looking pained and becomes fond and tender. “I do hope that that isn’t going to be your new adjective of choice, Faith.”

Her face looks all mouth upside down and his eyebrows pull together in outrage when she lifts up one of her legs so she can nudge his ass with her foot. “No, Wes,” she says in a sing-songy voice. “‘Sides, I'm way more beautiful than you are. There could be a copyright problem.”

The expression on his face makes her giggle as he bites down what she's sure is going to be a furious denial at her bogarting the beauty side of their relationship. He opens his mouth a couple of times and then closes his lips with a little 'humph'ing sound.

“You're in a very peculiar mood, Faith,” he says finally. “I'm not entirely sure I like it.”

“Man, Wes, don't be such a big baby,” she coos, letting her foot rock against his ass cheek again, testing it for springiness and not missing the clenching of his jaw. “You're still mighty pretty.”

She can see him move before she even feels the sudden coiling of his limbs and she's already shrieking and trying to scramble off the bed and away from him as he rolls over and yanks her back with a grin that's positively feral.

“Get off me!” she yelps as he pins her arms above her head with one hand, while his fingers skitter over her rib cage. “Don't tickle me! You know I don't like it.”

“Don't call me pretty,” he says reasonably, delving for her armpit and clamping his knees on either side of her wriggling legs as she bucks up and tries to dislodge him.

“I promise I won't, Wes,” she gasps between pained giggles as his fingers lightly press against all her most ticklish spots. “Promise.”

He narrows his eyes suspiciously but his fingers still. “I'm not sure I quite believe the sincerity of that statement.”

She can't help but pout slightly because is that just a fancy way of saying that he doesn't trust her?
Which, actually, yeah. But she chases the thought away as soon as it pops into her head because they're having fun and he looks so fucking cute. “Wes, I promise I won't call you pretty again today,” she says with every ounce of credibility she can muster even if she can't do anything about the smile that's cracking out.

“Very well then,” he says almost reluctantly, like he doesn't want to let her go as he takes his hands away slowly.

She lies there for a second, feeling his weight on her and she makes a little groaning sound like he's too heavy and he's shifting away…

“Sucker!” she squeals, slithering out from under him like a supercharged eel and launching herself at his back, her arms wrapping round his neck.

“Faith!” he growls, giving a little shimmy to try and shake her off while she clings on for dear life. “Stop it immediately.”

“Nope,” she purrs in his ear, tightening her hold as he staggers to his feet. “You might not be pretty, Wes, but you're still cute.”

“I'm going to…”

“And adorable.”

“Be exceedingly angry if…”

“And beautiful, but not as much as me…”

“You don't desist from…”

“Still fucking gorgeous though, Wes…”

“This appalling behavior.”

He sounds all wrath of God but he's hooking his arms under her knees so she can't fall off and hurt herself even as he shoulders the door open. She takes that as a good sign and licks his ear as a prelude to biting down on the plump of his earlobe so he giggles. He really fucking giggles then tries to cover it up with a manly cough.

“Where we going, Wes?”

He shifts her a little bit so she can relax her death-grip around her throat. “I'm glad you asked me that, Faith. I'm going to put you out on the street and not let you back in until you apologize.”

“Oh, whatever, Wes,” she crows, as he gingerly starts down the stairs. “No way am I letting go.”

“As you would say, Faith, you've worked my last nerve,” he tells her gravely but she just squeezes her thighs together and this little piggy back ride is getting her all kinds of good feelings where her breasts and spread pussy lips are smooshed against the smooth length of his spine.

“Giddy up, Wes, you can go faster than that.”

And she's shrieking again as he reaches the bottom of the stairs and picks up speed so he's running toward the front door.

“Not to worry, Faith, it's really not that cold at this time of year,” he drawls, skidding over the
“No! Wes!” she gurgles, as he lifts the latch. “You're naked and I'm naked and okay, I won't say it again.”

He opens the door just a fraction. “I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that.”

“I won't call you any adjective that describes how freakishly hot and attractive you are, especially girly ones,” she laughs, pressing a kiss to the nape of his neck. “Doesn't mean you'll know whether I'm just saying them in my head though.”

“I suppose that will have to do.” He slams the door shut again. “Are you going to get down now?” he asks her in a deceptively mild manner.

She pauses from kissing his nape again because it's one bit of him that she's woefully neglected. “Kinda depends on what evil revenge you're plotting.”

He walks over to the stairs and turns round so she can slide off him onto the second step and just to make sure he can't whip her over his knee, she waits until he's turned round, with arms folded so he can glare at her and jumps on him again, curling herself round him and not doubting for one second that his arms won't be there to break her fall.

“I know you're not really mad at me, Wes,” she wheedles, kissing the tight line of his mouth. “Your eyes are too blue to be angry with me.” And it's true when he's really pissed off, his eyes darken so they're practically navy.

“That makes absolutely no sense,” he begins but she kisses him to shut him up and to feel his tongue slide into her mouth.

And when neither of them can breathe too well, he has to let her go, their lips clinging for one brief second. “I take it you approve of the mirror then?” he asks, stroking her hair away from her eyes.

She nods and she can feel the blush heat her cheeks, which just makes him all kinds of interested.

“What is it, Faith?”

“Just well… I get that you wanted me to see what I look like when I come.” She hesitates and he tightens his arms round her, shifting her up a little bit so she can look down at him. “But I couldn't see anything else.”

“And what did you want to see?” He sounds genuinely curious.

“I want to see what you see when you're fucking me, like, from behind.” Her face is poppy red but she struggles on because she's only just thought it but now it seems terribly important that he's denied her a front row seat all the time. “I want to see everything,” she finishes on a whisper.

She's never seen him look so, well, horny, even if she can't feel what she's sure is one hell of an erection. “Well, that's a very tempting thought,” he breathes. “And it is still early.”

But she's not sure she's ready for it right this minute. She wants to process the idea, torment herself with images of watching his cock slide into her cunt for a little bit longer. And besides, there's other things that are way more important right now.

“Maybe you should think about it while you're making me lunch,” she suggests with a demure smile. “Because I'm fucking starving.”
He quirks his eyebrow for a second at that, but doesn’t say anything, just takes his very attractive ass toward the kitchen. She starts to follow, but he pauses in the doorway, blocking the way. “I’d prefer if you stay out of the kitchen, Faith.” There’s a peculiar glint in his eye she doesn’t wholly trust.

“Wes! What the hell are you going to make?” she barks at him, wincing at how shrill she sounds. She mutters, almost as an afterthought, “Shit! Did we add ‘brains’ to the icky food codicil?”

He must have heard her because he just smiles impishly and disappears into the kitchen, leaving her alone—hungry, bored, and still kinda horny.

Well, if he’s going to be whipping up some infernal delight designed to “improve” her unsophisticated palate and positively guaranteed to make her long for her mother’s atrocious Spam Surprise, then she knows she’s got some time to kill. She finds herself wandering down the hallway to the library. Just the sight of the heavy red door gives her chills and makes her limbs feel heavy.

Once inside, she runs her fingers along the spines of the books. Does she want words or pictures? Decisions, decisions. She passes over Emily’s voluptuous delights in favor of the rather promising-looking *La Rose D’Amour*. The book is old, worn, musty. Not so long ago she would have scrunched up her face and put it back on the shelf; but she’s grown to appreciate older things. And if it’s something of Wes’, well then, she’s fond of it by extension.

She slides the book off the shelf, carefully, takes it and settles down into the overstuffed chaise. She knows he’d never approve of her using one of his precious books for one-handed reading, but if he’s going to be making something frightful for lunch then it’s a quid pro quo he’s going to have to fucking live with.

She can’t help but smile at the fussy little bookplate on the first page.

The language is strange but fascinating. The names still make her giggle—”cunny”? “dart of love”? —but after a certain period of acclimation she’s come to appreciate them. Anyway, the books are a charming novelty after the skanky *Penthouse Letters*-style junk she and Xander used to pilfer from the 7-Eleven. She got off on that, too, but then, she didn’t know there was any alternative.

As she starts to fuck herself she’s surprised to find herself trying to replicate the play of his nimble fingers—the deft way he circles her clit, or the deliberate, agonizing slowness with which he finger-fucks her. She’s never had the patience he has—when she’s done this it’s usually rushed, artless. He’s shown her another way, and it’s not even a conscious thought, she knows implicitly that even her touch feels different now. He’s taught her so well—

As her fingers speed up, the lines in the book start to blur together until they’re just gibberish on the page. Her eyes drift shut, and there’s this formless rush of images unspooling in the darkness that are more about sensation and sense memory than about a logical sequence of events. Words, pictures, impressions—doesn’t make sense but it doesn’t have to. “Si quelque chose me séduit.” Watching him jack himself off. “I’m not going to fuck you.” She’s splayed open on the desk, his tongue working in her, fingers everywhere at once. The sun is shining and he’s fucking her slowly, indulgently and she whispers, “Please, don’t make me wait,” and then they’re in the bedroom and it’s not a lazy fuck at all but something a little urgent, fast and intense and she can see it all in the mirror—see everything she’s wanted to.

“You like to watch, don’t you? My curious girl,” the-Wes-in-the-dream whispers, and he looks as deadly serious as the real Wes would when he says it—he’s a perfect corollary.

She’s so close to coming, every muscle tense and expectant, when she hears quiet footsteps in the hall and the telltale creak of the heavy door. She pulls her fingers out of her pussy and tries to sit up
before he can see what she’s been doing.

Too late for that.

“How did I know I’d find you here?” he asks casually, pausing on the threshold. She just sits there, sure there’s a look of guilt written all over her face, her whole body in fact.

“Been awhile since I watched you bring yourself off.” He sits down on the chair opposite, settling in comfortably and looking slightly wistful. “Brings back such lovely memories,” he whispers, and the fondness she hears in his voice raises goose bumps on her arms, makes her shiver as she flexes her fingers against the walls of her cunt. She stops to look at him but her eyes feel heavy-lidded—like she’s in a dream she doesn’t want to wake up from and he’s the only real thing in it. By way of reply he gives her such a lovely smile.

She’s just lying there, fingers poised but not moving, waiting for him to forbid it, or issue her a terse command, or something. But he’s silent and still, as though he’s just waiting for her to finish what she’s started. She doesn’t know why she’s feeling so apologetic about getting herself off on her whim rather than his, but she does. In his house, in the quiet formality of his library, it feels almost furtive. Which makes no sense really, but there you have it. Nevertheless, she’s deeply relieved when he says quietly, as though he doesn’t want to startle her, “Please, continue. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

And if she blushes scarlet from head to toe she doesn’t care, she’s feverish with want. She’s close now. And she wants him to watch her come again. The mere thought gets her really fucking hot but the reality is going to be that much better.

He kneels down beside her. Runs his fingertips across her skin, ever-so-lightly, letting them come to rest gently flat against her back. “Please,” he whispers again.

He stays by her side as she masturbates, hand skimming across her skin as she bucks and writhes. She’s just a little shocked when his fingers slip inside her from behind, but the extra pressure is welcomed, and she can feel her orgasm start to crest again.

She can’t help but cry out when it finally hits. After so much build-up, it’s forceful and a little violent; he merely waits patiently for the aftershocks to abate. The whole time he just keeps touching her—keeping her in the moment, not letting her drift off.

After a few moments of quiet bliss, she finally forces herself to sit up. She’s still kinda self-conscious for some reason, but he sets her at ease by producing her kimono (which he must have brought in with him). He holds it open for her so she can slip her arms into it.

“I made us some lunch,” he says quietly.

She giggles. “Good, because now I’m really starving.”

“You certainly know how to work up an appetite,” he adds appreciatively.

“I’m a growing girl, you know,” she chides him as they head toward the kitchen.

Speaking of which, he’s got this elaborate spread laid out on the kitchen table. There’s food enough for at least four. He’s made these large, hearty sandwiches for both of them, and there’s a bowl of exotic fruit salad and fresh squeezed juice. It’s all a fucking work of art and she tells him so. “What’s in this, Wes?” she asks, her mouth pleasantly full.

“Guess.” She’d like to wipe that smug smile off his smug face.
God, the bread is light and chewy and faintly redolent of garlic. Then something spicy assails her palette—it’s strong and sharp but just as quickly it’s counteracted by something tangy, creamy, and slightly sweet. The next texture she bites through is the crisp, cool crunch of Granny Smith apple, a thin sliver to cut through the creamy sweetness of the—whatever it is. Finally she gets to something familiar—thinly sliced steak. But this isn’t gray and stringy, but full-flavored and buttery. Tender. She could get used to that, for sure.

“I don’t have a clue. C’mon, spill. I know guilt when I see it.”

He looks almost sheepish to have to admit it. “If you must know, it’s gorgonzola dolce.”

She just out her lower lip, folds her arms defensively across her chest, and gives Wes her best glare. “Clearly a written contract means nothing to you, Wes. And you a lawyer and all. I’m very disappointed.”

He evades her query. And then curiosity must get the better of him because he says, “You liked it, though, didn’t you?”

She can’t bring herself to lie to him. “Yeah, yeah I did.”

“See?”

She doesn’t want to admit that he’s right, so she just cocks her head to one side and grins. “So, Wes—how exactly are you gonna make it up to me?”

“And I need to make this up to you because...why, exactly, Faith?” he asks, popping a chunk of vivid prickly pear fruit into his mouth, sucking the red juice from the tips of his fingers and chewing slowly and deliberately, never breaking eye contact.

He's totally playing her, pushing her for the sheer fun of it. She sighs heavily, rolling her eyes. “No, uh, stinky cheese, remember? The disgusting food rider?”

“Of course, of course.” His voice is even and measured, his brain whirring away—she can see it in his eyes, and it's vaguely disconcerting. “You might have a case, I admit, if we hadn't just had that charming interlude in the library.”

“Didn't break any rules there, Wes.” At least, she thinks she didn't.

“Dear me, I thought I'd trained you better than that. Certainly you read the fine print?” He's indulgently patting her hand now, shaking his head with a disapproving air.

She doesn't want to ask, just snatches her hand away and gamely takes another bite of sandwich that's gone from delectable to chewy sawdust in her dry, nervous mouth. “What fine print?” she finally chokes out after a long gulp of juice.

“Section 7, paragraphs 3, 4, and 5. Specifically 5 sub-a.” The ease with which he rattles that out makes her rip another bite out of the sandwich and swallow it down quickly and half-chewed, even though her appetite is rapidly fading.

“Five sub-a?” She can't even remember section 7, not at all. “You're making this up—I don't remember a section 7, Wes.”

“Oh, I assure you, I'm not. Section 7 specifically deals with a number of things, including, if I'm not mistaken, the disturbance of certain books in the library in paragraph 4 as well as, conveniently enough, the appropriate punishments for bringing yourself to orgasm without my permission.
Oh, and how her palm itches to smack that smug look off his face. “You are making this up. There isn’t a section 7.” Her voice is thin, and getting more shrill by the minute. “I would remember. And hey, I think I did have your permission there.” Oh, yeah. That part's easy enough to remember. She bites back the impulse to remind him he'd practically begged her to continue, if she wasn't mistaken.

He waves dismissively, an indulgent smile crossing his lips. “True, true. I'll grant you that—though technically you did begin before permission was granted.” She fights back the really childish urge to stick her tongue out at him for that, mostly because now she's sure that this elusive section 7 doesn't really exist and he's just dragging this out to see if she'll snap, she's sure of it. “But there's still the matter of the book.”

Of course, that's the most important thing, the damn book. She's picking at the crusts of the sandwich now, not even looking at him anymore.

“That's a rather rare edition of *La Rose d'Amour*; the color plates are in exquisite condition, considering.”

“Of course, considering,” she says, faintly bored of this game. But he won't have any of her pouting, reaching out and tipping her chin up and for a moment there's a perceptible shift in what's now clearly his faux-stern demeanor as he kisses her on the lips before letting his hand drop back into his lap.

“Yes, considering it belonged to my great-grandfather, and my grandmother, upon discovering it among the massive collection of his library after his death, attempted to burn it rather than have it cataloged and passed on to me, as part of my inheritance.”

And yeah, the image of Wes' thick-ankled, bifocaled grandmother snapping the book shut in horror at the first glimpse of the bawdy and explicit frontispiece is enough to make her giggle.

“Little did she know that a great majority of the volumes that were specifically directed as belonging to me, aged three and a half, were full of much more questionable content.”

“Wait, you were a freakin' toddler and your great-grandfather left you his secret library of porn?”

“As ever, Faith, your word choice is both charming and utterly horrifying at the same time. But yes, basically—he'd had some rather curious ideas in his later years. Except I never fell into this inheritance. My father, after rescuing *La Rose d'Amour* from certain destruction in the library fireplace, realized the incredible value of the collection, and was able to convince dear gran to sell the entire pile and keep the funds in trust for me.”

“But like, those books were yours!”

“Indeed, they were. But I admit, certain current facets of my personality had yet to appear at that tender age, and off to auction they went.” She's laughing now, completely convinced that the whole thing was a setup so he could tell her this story. And she can't be mad for that, because he so rarely ever spoke of his family, and especially never laughed about them. “The story had become one of those apocryphal family tales.” He puts on a quavery old lady voice: “Oh Wesley, you're so much like your dear great-grandfather, God rest his soul! And to think he'd left you all those horrid, dirty books!”

“Did she really sound like that?”

“That’s a fair impression of the old bat, yes.” He clears his throat, continuing the narrative. “And so,
when I gained control of the trust at age twenty-five, I spent the next three years carefully rebuilding the collection based on the auction records."

"You didn't!"

"I did."

She can't help but reach out and affectionately run a finger along his stubbly cheek. "There's no section 7 of the contract, is there?"

He shakes his head, snickering. "I'm sorry, Faith. I didn't mean to drag out the joke so long, but you were so indignant, it really was rather charming."

"Oh, sure. Laugh it up, buster, because you're so gonna pay for this."

She's grateful that he's still laughing. "I imagine I will. What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, I'm beginning to think that you shouldn't argue with any request I have, for the rest of the evening, for starters. And right now, I'm thinking you, me, and a bubble bath."

"Well, we'll see about that first part," he says, patting her knee as if to say: In your dreams, dearest Faith. "But the second's not an unwelcome prospect, actually. I was afraid you were going to ask to tie me up and have your way with me, as you so often threaten to do in these situations."

She doesn't respond at first, but pries open the second portion of her sandwich and removes the cheese with exaggerated care, slapping the two halves back together with a grin. "Now, see, Wes, you're givin' a girl the idea that you'd actually want that to happen, since you've brought it up and all."

His grin is swift and wicked as he toys with the rim of his glass. "If it were to ever happen, Faith, and I stress the word 'if', the amounts of quid pro quo involved would be quite staggering, I assure you."

Which is about as close to a 'yes' as she's ever got. He's breaking, she can tell. "Man, Wes, you know you want to," she teases, looking at him from under her lashes as she slowly pops a chunk of watermelon into her mouth. "What if I said I'd... y'know, um, I'd let you act out your favorite bit of your favorite book with me if you let me tie you up and do my worst?"

Like, how bad could it be? She's thinking it might involve getting dressed up in something Victorian and letting him fuck her up the ass, which, good times, but the dark glint in his eyes and the almost feverish way his tongue keeps popping out to lick his bottom lip reminds her that when it comes to guessing even half the stuff that Wesley would actually like to do to her, she's still stumbling around in the dark with a dying battery in her flashlight.

"Well, now, that's a very generous offer, Faith," he purrs, raising his eyebrows, like he's deep in thought. "My favorite part of my favorite book? Tell me, have you ever read '120 Days of Sodom' by de Sade?"

She tries to look nonchalant, relaxed even, but it's completely ruined when she chokes on the mouthful of sandwich she's just swallowed.

He pats her gently on the back while she takes a huge gulp of juice before waving a casual hand in the air. "Yeah, sure, '120 Days of Sodom', that's the one where the hero makes sweet, beautiful love to his girlfriend and then takes her out for ice cream, right?" she asks hopefully and he bursts out laughing, throwing his head back so she's mesmerized by the lean column of his throat.
“I don't believe I'm familiar with that version, Faith,” he chuckles. Then he leans forward so he can cup her cheek. “I do think that this conversation should be revisited once you've done the appropriate research, Faith, as I'd hate you to bite off more than you can chew. Figuratively speaking, that is.”

And even though she turns her head so she can nuzzle his wrist, she can't let him have the last word. “I'm gonna tie you up one day, Wes,” she promises. “And you're gonna love it. Gonna beg me to do it again.”

“Oh, whatever, Faith,” he drawls and while she's still goggling at the inflection he manages to achieve, which she knows for a fact that he's picked up from her, he stands up and begins to clear the table.

“You're so mean, Wes,” she pouts, reaching up to snag a piece of mango from the bowl he's just picked up. “You're always teasing me.”

“And you always react so beautifully,” he tells her with a wink. “Though there are a couple of requests you mentioned which I feel duty bound to honor.”

“Bubble bath?” she asks hopefully because she's a sticky mess of his cum and her juices between her legs and now she thinks about it, she's sure that she's starting to smell pretty ripe.

He opens the fridge door and fusses around for a few seconds because he has a system. Fuck, does he have a system. It's got to the stage where she refuses to put anything in there or take anything out because he gets all pissy if she has the audacity to put the milk where the mayonnaise should live.

“Bubble bath, Wes?” she prompts again when he's re-arranged the contents of the fridge to his liking and starts loading the dishwasher, which is another no-go zone as far as she's concerned. “I'm feeling a little skanky, y'know.”

“I love knowing that you still have my spunk inside you,” he murmurs half to himself and while she's reeling from that unexpected little confession, face heating up like a Fourth Of July fireworks display, he continues. “But, yes, a bath does sound rather timely.”

“Cool,” she sighs happily, getting up from the chair and stretching luxuriously. “That should work out all those little kinks. Or, like, maybe just a few of them.”

That earns her another grin and he must be getting serious face ache from all that uncharacteristic smiling he's been doing this afternoon. “Well, now that you've brought up the subject of kinks, I must confess I was rather taken with your wish to repeat our little experiment with the mirror.”

She's determined not to start blushing again so she just shrugs like she's not bothered one way or another, even though she can feel the familiar slicking up of her cunt at the thought of getting to watch as his cock finds its way in there, see his fingers rubbing against her clit. “Yeah, I'd like that,” she mutters thickly.

He closes the dishwasher door with a decisive thud and holds out his hand so she can curl her fingers round it. “Then we find ourselves in complete agreement for once,” he says with another face-splitting beam. “Shall we?”

And unresisting, she lets him tug her toward the stairs.

Chapter Ninety

He runs the bath hot enough that she knows when she gets out her skin will be the same color as it would be if he’d spanked her, but minus the bruises. She’s relaxed, weightless as the bubbles that
part for her as she slips into the bath, and ready for anything Wesley has in mind.

He pins her hair up high on her head, frowning with concentration and fussing with a wayward curl that refuses to stay in place, until she dabs his nose with a cloud of bubbles, and giggles as he sneezes and gives her an indignant, outraged glare. They stay in long enough to get clean, with his hands caressing her under the cover of the scented froth, so that she closes her eyes in the end and leans back, supine, letting him touch her where he wants, letting him lift her legs, dripping foam, and drape them over the side of the bath, spreading her wide as his curious, deft fingers explore flesh he knows better than she does by now.

She’s drifting in distant sensations, nipples hard, despite the heat, and when he murmurs, “You’re wet,” she doesn’t annoy him by pointing out the obvious, just smiles a secret, knowing smile, and arches her back, pushing his fingers even deeper inside her and riding out a climax that laps her skin in silky, gentle heat, like the water.

“Never was much for baths before I met you,” she tells him. “Never had time.”

“They’re wonderful places to relax in,” he says. The tip of his cock’s just visible and she snickers and crowns it with bubbles, which earns her a tickle of skin so water-logged it’s not really ticklish anymore. She gives him a smug smile, knowing she’ll pay for it later, and distracts him with a question.

“So what’s the worst thing you’ve ever done in a bath, Wes? The wickedest, naughtiest, going to make you blush to tell me, thing?”

“I don’t blush,” he says as dryly as possible given that he’s water-sleeked and damn, it suits him. “and you’ve known me for long enough—”

“Twelve weeks tomorrow,” she says promptly.

He arches his eyebrow, though she’s fairly certain he knew that already. “Really? It seems like longer.”

“Is that a dig?” she asks, deeply suspicious.

“No. I’m just a little, well, it’s a relatively short time to have one’s life completely altered, wouldn’t you say?”

“Sometimes it only takes a minute,” she tells him. “But that’s usually when something bad happens.”

His hand reaches up to cup her face. “I would never class meeting you as that, Faith.” He grins. “Though I do find myself with a peculiar fondness for you when you’re drenched, it seems.”

“Hmm.” She lets that go and asks, “So what have I known you for long enough for?”

He tsks. “Never end a sentence—”

“Wesley!”

She splashes him and he relents. “It’s just that you should, knowing me as intimately as you do—”

She reaches out and slides her fingers along his cock, hotter than the water and way more fun than the squeakiest of rubber ducks. “Got to say, when you’re right, you’re right, Wes.”

“Really, Faith!” The reprimand would work much better if his cock wasn’t twitching in her grasp but
she pouts and releases him. “You should know the answer already.” She frowns and he adds, “Guess correctly, and I’ll give you a small reward.”

“What? Not —” She starts to picture him spread out on the bed, a black scarf tethering each wrist and ankle and he smiles, reading her mind with effortless ease.

“Not that, no. A small reward, remember.” He leans back and sighs with pleasure, slipping under the water so it comes to his chin and closing his eyes. “I know; I’ll allow you to choose the color scheme for our bedroom in New York.” He opens his eyes a little. “I don’t think I’ll permit you a room of your own with a bed in it again, Faith, though you may certainly have one as a sitting room, or study. You’ll sleep with me, always.”

“Never want to sleep anywhere else, Wes,” she tells him and there’s a moment of stillness as he absorbs that, giving her a grateful, almost wistful look.

“You’ve got until I decide I’m bored with bathing to guess,” he says.

She sits up and stares at him, lying back, eyes shut again, hands on the side of the bath, long, elegant fingers loosely curled against the cool porcelain. He thinks she knows? Why? It can’t be anything they’d done, though the memory of that first night with his careful scissor snips baring her flesh to his gaze is enough to make her gasp and shudder a little. So.

“Oh!”

“Yes?” he drawls.

“You were reading and you dropped a book in the water,” she says, with complete certainty.

He nods, giving her an amused look. “Good girl! I was, ah, using it in much the same way you were earlier,” he says, and she can’t tell if he’s blushing, though he probably isn’t, because they’re both pink cheeked by now. “At a rather crucial moment, I felt it slide from my grip and—” He shrugged. “I was devastated and remorseful, but that goes without saying.” He stares up at the ceiling and laughs quietly. “I punished myself with a self-imposed ban on reading in the bath for a month and a similar moratorium on jerking off.”

“How old were you?” she says.

“Fourteen.” He stands up, giving her one hell of a nice view, and runs his hands down his body, to get rid of the clinging bubbles.

“And did you make it? The jerking off, not the reading in the bath?”

“For a month? At that age? What do you think?” He picks up a towel and begins to rub his hair dry, wrapping another around his hips. “You can get out now,” he says, spreading a towel for her to step onto.

“I think, knowing how stubborn you are, you’d have stuck to it,” she says, pulling out the plug and leaving the bath with a pang of regret.

He gives her a long look, as if weighing her sincerity and then grins. “I tried, I really did, and I lasted for—”

“A week? Two?”

He gives her an astonished glance. “Faith, you’re sweet to credit me with that much will power, but
no. Three nights.”

She shakes her head in mute astonishment and lets him dry her. Guess he’s changed since then, though come to think of it, maybe not. He’s certainly never let three nights go without making love to her.

“And now,” he says, with an undercurrent of anticipation that makes her realize that ever since she mentioned it, he’s been thinking about nothing else, pushing away the event itself with food and baths and chat so that he could savor the waiting. “Now, Faith, I think we can satisfy your curiosity.”

He nods at the bench in front of the mirror. “You remember the first time you sat on there? What I did to you?” And there’s an awful lot of first times and memories floating around, but she pushes the thought away and nods back. Positioned, whipped, fucked with the handle of the razor he’d used...oh, she remembered.

He moves the bench far enough back that the mirror reflects it, then sits. “Come here.”

She walks over to him and hesitates, unsure of what he has in mind. He spreads his knees and pulls her between them and slides his arm around her waist, bringing her onto his lap so that he can kiss her. His skin’s hot against her hand, and she can feel the steady beat of his heart. His cock’s rigid and heavy, but when she rubs against it, feeling it grind against her cunt, already wet, despite the careful attention he’d given it when he dried her off—or because of it—he shifts her back, breaking the kiss.

“Turn around,” he says in a whisper, eyes glittering.

She stands and lets him move her as he pleases, bending forward to place her palms against the counter, finding her reflection and smiling at it. The girl in the mirror’s looking expectant and no fucking wonder, because there, right there—and oh, she can look now, she’s allowed to—between her thighs is Wesley’s cock and even as she watches, that Faith, the lucky one, bites her lip and moans as it nudges and bumps against her, before sliding in, inch by inch, until it disappears.

“Sit back,” he says, and she obeys him, lying back against his shoulder and feeling him brace himself, taking her weight and leaning forward just enough to keep his cock inside her. It feels odd, this angle, this position, but she’s too enraptured by what she’s seeing to care.

The mirror’s holding them and she can go from Wesley’s face, hidden as he bends to nuzzle at her neck, her throat, to her breasts, one bare, one cupped by his hand, those clever, knowing fingers hard and demanding as they pluck and play with her nipple, and down, to where he lies hidden within her.

“Move,” he says nipping at her shoulder and lifting his head so he can watch them too. “Watch.”

And she lifts up a little and sighs as she sees his cock, glistening darkly, and his hands slip to her hips and lift her even higher, so she’s poised, with just the tip of him inside her, and then he moves his hands down and takes her with them and there’s a rush of feeling as she’s filled again, cunt with cock, eyes with the sight of it, and she cries out.

“God, Wes, we look...”

“Hot,” he says, in a whisper. “You look unbelievably erotic like this, Faith.” He turns her head so that he can kiss her and slaps her leg in a not entirely serious rebuke when he sees that her gaze is straying to where mirror Faith’s being kissed.

“Narcissa,” he says. “Not Olympia.”
The sound of his hand on her makes her shiver and he smiles and she sees every emotion play across his face; the satisfaction and the faintest trace of cruelty beneath the tenderness, that she’s come to accept, come to crave.

She knows if she ever had him tied up, she wouldn’t be all that kind, not really, no, but she knows he’d love anything she did, just as he knows that she’s happy with the place they’ve reached, where she’s moving on him, muscles quivering because it’s hard without his hands supporting her, but he can’t help her, because one hand’s teasing at her clit, and he’s careful not to obscure her view, and the other’s slapping her flank in a rhythm she’s controlling, because every time she sinks back, sheathing him inside her, she’s rewarded with a smack, and she makes him hit her faster and faster, until her skin’s burning, a scarlet patch of stinging heat, but he won’t come, though she can see he’s close, see the muscles in his neck stand out as he grits his teeth then throws back his head, moaning her name even as his hands continue and she can’t watch anything now but his face and he’s not looking away.

She slows down, just a little, just to see, just to play with being in charge—

And he growls and lifts her up and forward, slamming her against the counter so it digs into her hips, just where his desk does, thrusting his fingers into her hair, locking them around her skull, spreading them wide and pulling her head up so she has to look.

And she can’t see his cock like this, but she can feel it and it’s in her and he’s fucking her hard, fucking her fast, fucking her with his gaze never wavering, meeting her eyes in the mirror so that when he comes, face twisting, mouth open on a soundless cry that turns vocal only after his hips have jerked once, twice, she can only remember that split second of loss when his eyes squeezed tight shut because he couldn’t help it, because for that one moment, he was alone with what his body was feeling.

And then she’s coming too, and she doesn’t look away, doesn’t hold back, and it’s easy to see why he watches her come with such wonder in his eyes because yes, she’s pretty. She’s so very fucking pretty.

“Never knew I looked like that,” she whispers as he eases out of her and snuggles her to him, his hand able to press gently against the mark he’s imprinted on her skin, shockingly cool because it wasn’t the one he’d used to hit her with.

“Say, ‘thank you, Wesley’,” he tells her, with a kiss after every word.

“Why?”

“Because it was mine and I shared it with you.”

“Thank you, Wesley,” she says solemnly and then cracks up into a goofy smile and gives him an ardent smoosh of a kiss because she loves making him laugh when he’s kissing her.

“Got lots more to thank you for than that, Wes,” she murmurs against his lips.

“I know, Faith. I know. And I, well, ah, I...”

“Oh come on, now—you’re not clamming up after all your little secrets you’ve told me today!” She knows she shouldn’t really prod him like this, for fear that he’ll snap shut and shove everything back behind his cool glances and enigmatic smiles—but she can’t help but risk it as he seems in such a chatty mood, the current stammering notwithstanding. “I was really getting to like this sharing and caring version of you, Wes. If you’re not careful, I may demand that we play a little game of I
“Never.”

“Oh dear, Faith. A game concocted in your capricious mind could only lead to trouble.”

“C’mon! Don’t be such a party pooper!”

“Is this anything like Truth or Dare? Had a rather awful experience with Truth or Dare once.”

“Hasn’t everyone?” she laughs. “It is a little like that, I guess. You just have to ‘fess up to things you’ve never done.”

“But there’s no forfeits?”

“Hey, I wasn’t finished, don’t interrupt!” She wags a finger at him and he dutifully snaps his mouth shut. “It’s actually more like a drinking game, see. If you have done the thing the other person says they haven’t, you have to take a drink. Which, you know, is kind of a forfeit.”

“With our opposing natures, I imagine we’ll get drunk relatively quickly.”

She hadn’t thought of that, really. And it seems a bit early for that kind of thing; they haven’t even had dinner yet. “Uh, yeah. Well, we don’t have to drink every time.”

“No, no. I believe in playing games by the rules.” Of course he does.

“I’m just worried about what happened the last time you had a belly full of wine.”

“Oh really, Faith. I promise not to get maudlin.”

“Promise?”

“Absolutely. And you won’t either.”

Now, not in a million years did she ever think that they’d be curled up in the big bed, fingers wrapped around crystal stems, trying desperately to keep the wine from sloshing on to the sheets because they’re laughing so hard. They’ve long digressed from the formula of the game and are just giving up little secrets now; the kinds of stories that only seem to come out in wine-fueled post-coital chatter. Like the fact that he’d just ‘fessed up to trying to steal a book once—which wasn’t all that surprising when she stopped to think about it.

“So you have done your share of shoplifting, then? That’s a shocker!” Even if it wasn’t surprising, she felt obligated to yank his chain a bit.

For a moment he looks a little offended that she’d doubt him. “I sacrificed my chance for prefect that year because of that little incident! A little more sympathy, please.”

“I’m just surprised, Wes. Doesn’t seem like you to pull something like that, especially when your academic standing was on the line.”

“Well, doesn’t everyone go through that phase?”

“Yeah, suppose so. Just took me longer to grow out of it than other people. And I had bigger quarry than forbidden books and a beer or two from the convenience store.”

“Now, now. No getting maudlin, remember, Faith? I would hate to subject you to the forfeit.” In their version of the game, any teetering on the brink of melancholia was to be met with threats of an unknown forfeit—that was his idea, of course.
“Who says I wouldn't want one?” she says, vamping it up: voice smoky; tracing a finger along his chest.

“Really, Faith—I'd think your arse would still be a little tender from this afternoon?”

She drops the seductress act, waves a hand dismissively “Oh that! I'm fine.”

“Mmm. Yes, we'll see if you still feel that way when I finally take your hairbrush in hand.”

“Okay, okay.” She backpedals furiously and punches him playfully on the arm. “Yeah, it's still fucking tender.”

That smug grin and tilt of the eyebrows is so fucking frustrating, but it's one of his faces she loves the most, when it comes down to it. “I believe it's your turn now.”

“Way to change the subject there—real smooth.” She tilts her head up a little higher to give him a dainty peck on the cheek. “Well, since we're on the topic of commerce—I tried to sell rocks to the neighbors once.”

“And I'm sure they queued up 'round the block.”

“Mmm, not exactly. When Darla found out what I was up to, she was mortified. That look on her face, it was priceless. I can still remember it.”

“Whatever possessed you to sell rocks?” His free hand strokes her hair, smoothing away the sharp part of the memory.

She sighs, slipping past the jagged corners of happy days gone wrong to find the core of the story. “We lived in this nice house once, when Darla was kinda serious about this investment banker guy, over on Sheffield Lane. I was, like, six or seven maybe. Anyway, he had this perfectly landscaped garden in his backyard—he never lifted a finger to take care of it though, that's what the Mexican day laborers were for. And there were these pretty rocks—black and flat and they got hot in the sun. I liked that, and I thought other people might too. So I piled them all into my wagon, and I walked up the street yelling, 'Rocks for sale! Rocks for sale!'“

“That's very charming—that you'd want to sell the rocks, rather than give them away.”

“Well, you know, I'd already learned the value of having a little money squirreled away somewhere, even back then.” Her forehead crinkles in dismay—damn it all; she'd picked a stupid memory that wasn't happy after all.

“Ah, ah. None of that, Faith.” He flashes a quick, brilliant grin she wishes were enough to erase the rest of the story: Darla slapped her across the face for embarrassing them in front of the entire neighborhood and that hot shot boyfriend of hers was pretty pissed too, because she'd disturbed his stupid, precious landscaping.

“Guess there's not all that many happy stories in my past, really. I'm sorry.” Even the most innocent ones, like this one, had a way of turning sour when she dug down deep enough. “Guess I told 'em all.”

He pulls her now-empty wineglass from her hand, placing it next to his on the bedside table and then wrapping his warm arms 'round her, pulling her close and planting a tender kiss on top of her head. “Don't think about that now, please don't.”

“I didn't mean to ruin the game, I didn't.” He doesn't let her continue, interrupting her apology with a
faint shushing noise pulls her even closer, so that her head rests against his chest and the comforting hammering of his heart and the even rise and fall of his chest pull her away from the quagmire of bad memories.
A tragedy brings not peace of mind but a dreadful discovery.

Part Ten

Chapter Ninety-One

The last thing she remembers just before she dozes off is his voice whispering in her ear, “Soon you'll only have happy stories, Faith, I promise you. You won't even be able to remember the unhappy ones…”

And the first thing she hears as she slowly comes to is his voice from somewhere above her. “Wake up, sleepy girl,” he says and he pulls the covers off her though there's a sharp breeze from the open window.

She squints up at him, blinking furiously at the late afternoon sun that floods the corners of the room and gives a little yawn. “Cold, Wes. Shut the window,” she mumbles, trying to wrest the quilt out of his grasp.

He must have been up for a while because he's dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and looks disgustingly chipper, even as she's running her fingers through the tangles in her hair, which is still half secured in the sloppy pony tail he put it into before the bath. “The room needs some air,” he announces firmly. “It's starting to smell, well…”

“Like a whorehouse?” she suggest with another yawn. “Wes, come back to bed. We don't have to fuck.”

And she's sinking back down into the pillows and curling up on his side of the bed to try to get away from the draft when he seizes her ankle and begins to tug her firmly and inexorably toward the end of the bed. “Up!” he snaps and she's trying to grab onto the sheet but it's descending with her so all she can do is feebly kick her heels and moan mightily.

“Wes, please! Don't wanna get up,” she wheedles as he pulls her upright and snakes his arms round her waist so she can't crawl right back on to the bed. “C'mon, I'll give you a blowjob.”

She pouts up at him but he's shaking his head firmly and not even bothering to fake a glare, because he's too busy sighing. “I don't think that's going to be possible, Faith,” he informs her sorrowfully. “I think you're going to have to join me in my new life as a celibate.”

And she can't have heard him right, or is he trying to pull that normal crap all over again? Her heart thuds painfully and she's giving him the mother of all evil looks. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Language,” he admonishes her, tapping her still-tingling ass with two fingers.

“Never mind language,” she hisses, trying to dig her heels into the carpet as he yanks her toward the bathroom. “What do you mean celibate?”
“I mean that I think you've succeeded in breaking me,” he says without even the glimmer of a smile. “Even in my days of youthful excess, I can’t seem to recall being asked to perform quite as frequently as I have today.”

She doesn't even bother to hide her sigh of relief. “You came, what? Like, three times. I came way more than that and I'm still good to go.”

“Five times,” he reminds her, opening the bathroom door and tugging her through it. “You're a third of your way through your orgasm allowance for the week already, Faith.”

“Still got another ten to go,” she says smartly, yanking the band out of her hair and making ouch faces as it snags on a stubborn knot.

“Here, let me do that for you.” He carefully works the elastic free, while she stands there patiently. Or tries to, but her hand's sneaking to his crotch and her fingers are tracing the familiar length of his cock beneath the denim and yeah, it's not exactly standing up and trying to get her attention but it all seems to be in working order. “Faith, please don't do that.”

“Feels all right to me. Though maybe I should have a look, just to be on the safe side,” she suggests, giving him a sly smile and a sideways look, her hand curling round a now promising bulge.

“Maybe later,” he says vaguely, firmly removing her hand and giving her a nudge. “Shower, please. I want to go into town to take the DVDs back. I'd hate to think what retribution Blockbuster might wreak if we return them late.”

“They fine you, Wes, it's no biggie.” Then a thought occurs to her and she leans back against the tiled wall of the shower cubicle, weight resting on one leg, hand on her hip, tits pushed out. “Hey Wes. We should go and get dinner, my treat. There's this great pizza place on Spring…”

His eyes are running across her body, displayed just how he likes it, and when his gaze finally gets to her face, she raises her eyebrows. “Seen anything you like?”

“Just a girl who's absolutely not going to have pizza for her dinner,” he drawls. “I've already made reservations for eight o’clock at a charming little Italian restaurant…”

“Ha! Italian! So I can have pizza!”

“Which doesn't serve pizza because it's a respectable establishment,” he finishes, sitting down on the bench where he'd fucked her and giving her an expectant look. “Are you going to shower sometime before Christmas?”

“You could help me,” she whines prettily, but he doesn't answer, just picks up her hairbrush from the counter and taps it against his palm significantly.

And in some ways it's weird to wash herself when he's just sitting there and watching her as she rubs the flannel over her breasts, between her legs, not even trying to turn him on, but just to get clean. And she's teasing him about what color she's going to paint their bedroom in New York—”bright orange with this violet trim, it's gonna look wicked cool, Wes”—and he's clamping his hands over his ears until she chucks the sponge at him and she suddenly realizes that this whole day kinda personifies their version of normal and she wouldn't swap it for all the world.

After they've returned the DVDs so Wes won't be kicked out of the Rotary Club for getting them back late, they drive into the city. She's wearing her favorite little black dress and her even more favorite pink shoes. Wes has got his hand on her knee and letting her listen to The White Stripes and everything is right in her world.
Even driving past the pawn shop can’t prick holes in her bliss. But it does make her cover his hand, stroking his knuckles with her fingertips so he takes his eyes off the road briefly to give her a swift, tender smile.

And it’s then that she decides that she’s going to tell him. Fess up all the wrongs she’s done him. She’s not sure how and she’s not sure when but she’s suddenly certain, like she’s never been certain of anything before, that it will be all right. That he’s gonna be righteously pissed with her, and yeah, she deserves it. Might not talk to her for a couple of day, which she can handle. And she knows that she’ll have to get used to him not trusting her for a while. But she loves him and he loves her and they’ll be able to sort it out.

It’s like she’s suddenly had a ten ton weight lifted off her shoulders so she’s sinking back in to the leather and making a solemn vow to herself that by this time next week she’ll have told him.

“Tell me something, Faith,” he suddenly says and he sounds so serious and like he’s just fucking read her mind that she shudders and turns startled eyes to him.

“W-what?”

“There’s no need to sound quite so alarmed, I just wondered exactly how you planned to decorate our bedroom.”

Now it’s his turn to look surprised at her sudden and blinding smile, all gums and giddy-around-the-gills with sheer relief. “Oh that. I don’t know,” she babbles. Then she pauses and thinks about it. “White. But, like, weathered white. So I’m gonna paint the floorboard and then sand them down and have all these rough edges round the trim and floaty white drapes and I’m gonna find all this old furniture in junk shops and flea markets and I’m gonna paint that white too and then fuck it up so it doesn’t look too perfect.”

He’s not making any obvious gagging noises because he’s actually nodding. “Very Martha’s Vineyard.”

She settles back in the seat again and tries to get used to this new, relaxed feeling. “I want it to look like we’re really living by the ocean even if we’re in the middle of New York.”

“I’ll tell the realtor to leave the room as a shell and we can see about hiring contractors…”

“I want to do it myself!” she exclaims sharply. “And anyway, they’ll just rip you off. Like, they’ll charge extra to make stuff look distressed when you can do it with a fifty cent piece of sandpaper.”

“Faith, you really need to stop worrying about how much things cost,” he says softly, stroking her knee. “I have ridiculous amounts of money.”

“I know but, like, it’s our room and I want to do it so it’s perfect,” she explains haltingly, even though it’s not what she really wants to say. “It’s, like, you have money and you share it with me and I have other, like, stuff. I have stuff… Shit, Wes, I’d want to be with you if you were dirt poor and we had to live in a fucking trailer!”

It’s almost on the tip of her tongue. She’s opening her mouth, tasting the words. Maybe gonna start with a clichéd but effective, “There’s something I have to tell you…” but he’s pulling over onto the grass verge so quickly and sharply that she’s jerked back by her seat belt and when she turns to him, he’s freeing himself and leaning over so he can cup her face in his hands.

“All the gold in California couldn’t feed the unbridled horde of my desires,” he whispers and then takes her mouth in a kiss that’s exactly like something out of a Hollywood movie.
Then he gently unwinds her arms from around his neck, places one last kiss on her clinging lips, clips his seat belt back on and starts the car.

Chapter Ninety-Two

She’s thankful that his eyes are back on the road, because between his words and the kiss she’s got a catch in her throat and—Jesus, hormonal much?—she’s even tearing up a little bit. She quickly stares out the window and surreptitiously wipes the corner of her eyes with the back of her hand, hoping he doesn’t notice. He doesn’t; too busy trying to evade this pickup truck that seems to be right on their ass. She tries not to pay attention, just keeps staring out the window at the reflected car lights and the dusky evening light.

When she shifts in the seat, the fabric of her dress rustles rather tantalizingly against her bare flesh, and she smiles secretly to herself. Wes probably won’t recreate what happened the last time they went out to a restaurant, but hey, a girl can dream, right? And anyway, what matters is that she feels beautiful and it’s a beautiful evening and she’s so very happy.

“Wes?”

“Hmm?” Still not taking his eyes off the road.

“How do you say, ‘I love you’ in Italian?”

There’s a pause and she watches his lips quirk up in a smile. “Ti amo,” he says.

“Thanks, Wes,” she says demurely. “That’s so sweet of you.” Before he has time to work up to getting huffy because she’s tricked him into saying it—and it’d be too funny if he ended up ordering her to repeat it, she leans over and kisses him quickly enough not to be distracting. “Ti amo too.”

“Hmm.”

“I do!” she protests.

“I know you do, my little zabaglione.”

And though she spends the rest of the drive demanding to know what he just called her, he just grins and keeps making up more and more unlikely answers, until she sees it on the menu and kicks him hard just as he’s being best buds with the wine waiter who gives Wes a pained look because Wesley’s face screws up in agony and he thinks it’s down to his suggestion of a ’96 Gaja Sito Moresco and the poor guy’s almost tearful as he describes its total yumminess.

When he’s gone, placated by Wesley’s fulsome apologies, delivered without so much as a glance at Faith, she gets the death glare.

“You seem absolutely determined to be as bratty as possible this evening.”

“But I’m so damn good at it, Wes,” she smirks as she reaches under the table. He intercepts her hand before she reaches her goal. She’s disappointed, but not surprised. He’s the only one who gets to do that.

If he’s annoyed he doesn’t acknowledge it, just responds with, “I do believe there are vegetables to be eaten in your future, young lady. And absolutely no dessert.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Christ, Wes. Now you’re just being an ass.”
That sets off a little spark. For her trouble she gets all her favorite expressions of his at once—the quirk of his eyebrow, a certain hard set of his jaw, that fucking intense blue stare. “Am I going to have to take you over my knee?”

“That'd be a start,” she says in her best sullen teen voice and she fucking loves it when they just fall in to this patter that you'd think they alone had perfected.

“I think you're trying to get a rise out of me, Faith.”

She sidles close, giving him a good view of her cleavage. “So, is it working?”

His gaze drops down and then back up and he’s giving her a chilly smile. “Rest assured, Faith, if my exhausted, drained body is capable of responding to your undoubted allure—” Okay, she thinks there’s a compliment in there somewhere. “You’ll be the first to know.”

“Cool!” she says brightly.

He snips a slightly faded petal off the carnation in the vase between them with his fingers. “I didn’t say you’d benefit from it,” he says dryly.

“How? Kind of a waste if I don’t,” she protests.

He smiles. “A salutary lesson in manners is never a waste, Faith.”

She snatches up a bread roll and splits it with her thumb and slathers butter on an inch thick before biting into it with a defiant look.

“Fine,” she snaps, when her mouth’s less full.

“You know,” he says, and there’s a disquieting gleam in his eyes, “I think I’ve been entirely too lenient with your transgressions of late. Certain basic rules are being overlooked, and there’s nothing for it but a refresher course.”

She starts to say something, but the waiter arrives and begins to prepare a Caesar salad at the table, with a dramatic shredding of leaves and sprinkling of fresh Parmigiano and he’s waving a wooden spoon around which’d be fine if it wasn’t for the way Wes was staring at it speculatively. There’s one just like it in the kitchen at home.

She’s too busy panicking to notice the anchovies being laid tenderly on top of the mound of salad but Wesley’s grin alerts her and she gives a full body shudder at the sight of them. “I’m not eating them,” she hisses.

“Very well,” he says agreeably, placing them both on his plate. “Really, Faith, there’s no need to be quite so emotional over a garnish.”

Put like that it does seem kinda childish, so she’s all set to apologize, when he carries on, “And I’d like your attention, please. As I was saying, you’ve become lax in certain areas.”

“Name one.”

His eyes narrow. “Very well. Your posture. You’re slouching and I’ve told you repeatedly that I won’t allow it.” His mouth thins as he bites out some orders. “You’ll sit up straight. The chair is not to touch your back at all for the duration of the meal.”

“Wes—”
He ignores her. “If it does, you’re to make a mental note of it. At the end of the meal, I’ll expect you to furnish me with the exact number of times you failed to obey my instructions.”

“Suppose I just don’t notice?” she says, feeling a flutter start, low down and frantic.

He gives her a tiny smile. “Perhaps I should provide an incentive.” She’s hopeful for a second, because that’s like a reward, and Wes thinks up good ones. “Such as pointing out that I’ll be watching too? And that if your tally is inaccurate—or, no, I won’t penalize you for a higher number—if it’s less than mine, well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, shall we?” He’s got the snootiest smile ever on his face as he picks up his fork and he’s not even looking when he murmurs, “One,” under his breath as she slumps down in dismayed silence.

She does a pretty good job of sitting up straight through the salad but it means she barely talks to him because she’s so busy concentrating and he tells her that’s not good enough.

“It’s polite to converse, Faith, and I do enjoy talking to you as well as reducing you to helpless whimpers.”

She gives him a furious look, because she’s fairly certain the clatter of almost dropped plates at the next table is down to him saying that without bothering to lower his voice. “What do you want to talk about? The weather?”

“That’s only a viable topic in Britain, because it’s so varied. Here the relentless sunshine does tend to make it a bit of a non-starter.”

And by now she’s felt the padding of her chair against her spine at least three times and she gives him an imploring look that softens him enough to start a story about his first time in court, and although there’s a drop in temperature when she puts her elbows on the table and an icy, “Kindly add two to the running total for that,” that has her pouting, it’s not going too badly.

By the time dessert arrives—and zabaglione’s not bad, but there’s a distressing lack of chocolate—her back is aching and she’s drooping.

“Poor Faith,” he whispers because he drops his voice to be nice to her; wouldn’t want that getting out and ruining his rep, oh no. “Perhaps later I can rub your back. Would you like that?”

“Really would,” she says eagerly. He hasn’t done that often, but he’s so good at finding every ache and soothing it away with strong fingers.

The waiter returns with his credit card and the bill and Wesley scrawls his signature on it, barely pausing when he works out the tip and probably leaving more than he has to, because he usually does.

“Well, Faith?”

She leans back against the chair with a sigh of relief, wriggling her shoulders blissfully. “Counting this one?”

“I really should, but no, the meal’s over.”

And now it’s crunch time and she doesn’t know whether to hope she’s safe, or add on a few.

“Tell me what’s going to happen,” she stalls.

“I’m going to add five unless you reply right now,” he says blandly, dropping his napkin on the
“That’s not—” She gives in, and goes with the truth. “Twenty-three.”

“You’re sure about that?” he purrs.

“It’s what I counted,” she says, goaded beyond endurance. “Might not be what you counted, might have missed some, but you wanted to know and that’s it.”

He stands up and holds out his hand, drawing her to her feet. As he ushers her past smiling waiters, nodding good-bye, he murmurs. “Strange; I made it twenty-nine, but you know, I think just this once, we’ll split the difference; twenty-six. Does that sound fair?”

“Whatever,” she mutters stalking past him as the door’s held open for them. “I’ll save any objection until I know what you’ve got planned.”

Chapter Ninety-Three

And yeah, she's pouting a little on the drive home, even though the food part of the dinner was pretty incredible and she's actually starting to understand why Wes listens to Glenn Gould on long car rides. The buoyant arpeggios provide the perfect postprandial soundtrack; just goes to show that garage rock isn't always the best for screaming down the highway at a speed most certainly way above the limit.

Still, there's only two things she can think about through the haze of her food coma—the fact that even cradled in those cushy leather seats, her back is still killing her and there's the little nagging matter of her twenty-six punishments. Which, you know, she's glad wasn't twenty-nine, actually.

“You're awfully quiet, Faith. Was it something I said?” They haven't exchanged words in about ten minutes, and he's still in a teasing mode despite the fact that's she's been telegraphing her best “don't fuck with me” attitude since she got in the car.

“Oh no, Wes, I'm fine. Really. Don't worry about me.” The sticky sweet falseness of her voice is enough to make her gag. “Thanks for dinner, by the way. I really did have a wonderful time.”

He looks away from the road long enough to give her one of those blood-chilling warning glances, because somewhere in the middle of that last sentence, her tone's slipped from honey-dripping to bitterly saccharine, but she just flashes him a smile and turns up the volume on the stereo before he can protest.

It's a long drive with just the Goldberg Variations to pass the time, 'specially during that long slow one in the middle. Though she has to admit that Wes is pretty damn darling when he's humming along, long fingers drumming out a completely out of whack rhythm on the steering wheel. Even if she's still technically in a snit, she can't help but sneak little sidelong glances at him, always turning away a spit second before he tries to sneak a glance at her. She's biting back giggles as they weave through the quiet residential streets, up the hill to the house—and if she's not mistaken she thinks she sees a little flare of the nostrils that betrays his straight faced-act as well.

So, she's not really surprised when it's his turn to flash her a smile once they've pulled into the garage. She can read them all now, and this one's the sweet one crossed with the wolfish, predatory one.

“What the hell have you dreamed up now? You have a new plan, don't you?” She eyes him
cautiously as he makes a rather pathetic attempt at playing innocent. “You can't hide it—it's written all over your face.” Her chin tilts up defiantly. So there!, she almost adds, but thinks the better of it.

“I can't imagine why this is such an earth-shattering moment, Faith. It's not like you had any idea what my plan was when we left the restaurant.”

And yeah, so he's right about that. “Whatever, dude,” she says with a heavy sigh and leans back in the seat before popping her seat belt open and reaching for the door.

“I wouldn't leave yet if I were you.”

“You wouldn't?”

“No.” He leans over and peels her hand away from the door handle, and starts idly tracing his fingertips over her palm. “This is what I want you to do.” His voice drops to that chilling level and dammit if he isn't playing dirty, but she's willingly hanging on his every word now; his every breath, even.

“You're to go upstairs and undress.” His precise, crisp diction is making her wetter by the minute, and he's leaning in close, so close his breath is hot on her cheek and she just knows he can hear her heart thumping in her chest because it's pretty damn loud in her head. “Wait for me there, I'll be along shortly.”

She squeaks out what she thinks might be an affirmative sound, before pulling away.

“Oh, and, Faith?” She can only nod dimly in response. “Sit on the bed, hands to your sides.” Right, because she wouldn't want to violate that non-existent clause in the contract again.

Getting out of the car with any modicum of grace is a challenge—she's pretty sure her knees are shaking—but she manages fairly well, slamming the door for good measure to punctuate her exit.

So, she thinks he's gonna make her wait twenty-six minutes, maybe; that she'll get off easy. But he didn't exactly have that look in his eye, so she's not surprised when he's in the doorway after just a few minutes, glass of scotch on the rocks in his hand.

“Good, I'm glad to see you haven't decided to continue your little snit up here,” he says, pointedly eying her erect nipples and swirling his drink around, ice cubes tinkling against the glass.

“Who says I haven't?”

“Oh, Faith, really? Was it as bad as all that? Don't you think you deserved that punishment just a little? You were being unconscionably bratty.”

“Just having a little fun, Wes. No harm in that.”

“It went further than fun.”

“You wanted me to eat anchovies! And you gave me a lecture on table manners in a crowded restaurant. Not cool.”

She's never seen him walk like that in a long time, the way he's crossing toward her now. There's a purposeful glint in his eye, and as much as she used to love these open-ended games—tonight, maybe not so much.

That is, until he sits down on the bed next to her, brushes her hair away from her neck, plants a soft
kiss on her shoulder, a dotted row of them along her clavicle. “I'm sorry. That was, as you say, not cool. It won't happen again.” His lips tickle her ear and send a parade of goose bumps crawling down her neck. When she reaches up to stroke his stubbly cheek, she thinks her hands might be shaking too.

“Thanks,” she manages to choke out before he kisses her, his lips warm and pliant and spicy from the scotch.

And he's really rather lucky she didn't bite off his tongue when she feels the ice cube slipping down from the hollow of her throat down over one nipple, then the other. For a split second she thought he might have spilled his drink, but this was no gaffe. When she pulls away, she sees those impossibly long fingers of his clamped around an ice cube that's rapidly melting, raining tiny droplets on her thighs.

“I've got a whole glass here of ice cubes. And very little whiskey,” he says, setting the glass down gently on the night table. “You've been so horribly hotheaded this evening, perhaps this will cool you down a bit. And by my calculations, you've still got twenty-three more minutes before you're allowed to come. Now, lie back and scoot up a bit.”

And for the first time in a few hours, it's something she does without a complaint crossing her lips first. And she's pretty sure she's never really seen him get undressed that fast either, tossing his clothes aside with a hurriedness he rarely displays.

Carefully picking another cube from the glass, he wields it like a piece of chalk, tracing invisible designs across her flesh, leaving a cold and burning trail that cranks up the sensitivity of every nerve in her body until she's writhing and begging him to ease up—just as the cube melts down to nothing—giving her a tiny reprieve while he pops two ice cubes in his mouth.

“Oh fuck,” she whispers hoarsely as he brings his head down and snatches one of her nipples in his mouth, sucking on it ferociously, his tongue cold and rough against her sensitive flesh. “Oh. Oh. Fuck. Damn that's cold, Wes!”

“Mmm. Yes, it is, isn't it?” he says, looking up at her with a look of unmitigated glee before turning his attentions to her other nipple, lapping and nibbling at her near-frozen flesh until it's nearly warm again.

He only pauses in his ministrations for a few moments to take a swig of the watery scotch before plucking another cube from the glass, carefully tracing it along her inner thighs, pushing them apart. “And it's so very hot here.” He oh-so-carefully drags it closer to her pussy, ever-so-slightly tracing it along the edge of her hole, up over the lips, and cautiously circling it around her clit. And yeah, it is pretty hot because the cube melts in no time at all, leaving just his fingers gently toying with her as he dips his head to lap up the water with long, slow strokes of his tongue.

And when he pulls away and takes yet another cube from the glass, she thinks she might just die right there because she knows what's coming next, and her heart's racing with horror and anticipation.

“Spread your legs.” And even though she'd give anything to clamp 'em shut, she does what he says. “Good girl,” he mumbles as he drags the ice cube across her inner thigh again and gently pushes it into her cunt and any lapping flames of desire that were smoldering there become white hot and she's amazed the damn thing didn't melt immediately because he's already pushing another one in, and she screams as the first hits right at that perfect little spot and threatens to throw her into an orgasm before she realizes what's happening.
“No, Faith. Not yet,” he whispers, running his fingers across her burning cheeks, smearing away the tears of frustration glittering in the corner of her eye before—fuck!—taking another cube and placing it on his tongue.

It’s amazing how even though her pussy is so hot and pretty much drenched now between the rapidly melting ice cubes and her copious juices, his tongue stays cold long after that last ice cube on his tongue has melted away, the tip swirling lazy figure eights around her clit again and again as she comes hard, practically kicking him off the bed.

She’s gasping and shuddering when it’s over, tiny trembles that won’t stop, even when she’s curled up against him.

“You’re wet,” he whispers. “And so am I,” he discovers, as he moves out of her arms and glances down his body, where the dribbles and drips of ice water have left the hair on his stomach dark and clinging flatly to his skin.

“Sorry, Wes,” she says, finding the strength for a tiny smirk.

He rolls his eyes and saunters into the bathroom, coming back huddled into a robe and carrying a hand towel. She lies still and lets him dry her, doing it efficiently, but, being Wes, making it more than an exchange of damp, chilled skin for warmly tingling. He finishes and tries to tug the cover off the bed, making her moan because it means moving, and she really doesn’t want to.

“Shush,” he says. “It’s quite soaked in places and I refuse to sleep in a puddle.”

Still making little sounds of protest, she lifts her hips so he can snatch it away and soon she’s snuggled up against warm cashmere again and he’s rolling her to her stomach, robe thankfully discarded so she can feel his skin against hers and the muscles of his legs flexing against her ass, still tender in spots.

“Do you still need this?” he asks, fingers poised. “I have to say, you seem adequately relaxed already. Positively limp, in fact.”

She snuggles her face into the blanket. “You promised.”

“So I did.”

She feels a kiss pressed gently against her shoulder and then his hands go to work, strong fingers digging in hard enough to make her yelp, then groan, with an ecstatic ‘uhnnn’ sound that makes him chuckle.

“I’m more accustomed to you making those sounds when you’re coming, Faith. This isn’t supposed to be erotic, you know.”

“It isn’t? Guess I never got the memo, Wes, because I have to say, the way you do it, it’s practically fucking R rated.” She feels his fingers pause, as he works out if he should be pleased or annoyed, and then continue their rhythmic exploration of a square inch of skin just below her shoulder blade and she wriggles and sighs in pure contentment.

Positioned as he is, it’s impossible to miss the fact that he’s hard and when he finally gives up, as it’s not easy massaging a puddle of goop, which is pretty much what she’s become, she reaches out and touches him.

“Want me to go and get some more ice?” she asks, with a sly grin.
“I don’t think so,” he says, with a yawn that looks genuine. “It’s getting late and we have a busy day tomorrow.”

“Oh, come on, Wes,” she wheedles. “Would be fun.”

“No. Doing it to you is fun,” he says, getting under the covers in a real hurry. “You squeaked.” He smiles. “That was rather sweet,” he reveals. “I, on the other hand, have sufficient control that I’d be no fun at all.”

“Oh, I bet I could get one or two sounds out of you,” she says, starting to wriggle off the bed. “Especially if I had a mouthful of ice when I went down on you.”

His hand shoots out and clamps around her wrist. “I said ‘no’,” he reminds her, pulling her back on the bed. “Please don’t make me say it again.”

The outrage she feels goes way beyond pouting. Lips thin, she gets in beside him and flounces into a position that puts her on the extreme edge of the mattress.

Wesley sighs and flicks off the light, making the room as dark as her mood. “If you think sulking will do anything but make me annoyed—”

“I’m not sulking.” Which is a Big Lie and they know it. “But I’ve just added one more thing to the list of stuff I’m gonna do to you when you’re—”

“Tied up and totally at your mercy,” he says in a bored drawl. “Which might have happened by now if you didn’t mention it so often and hadn’t embellished your plans so frequently.”

She’s practically fucking speechless by now and vibrating head to toe with suppressed fury.

“A word of advice,” he whispers, moving so he’s lying on his back, not touching her. “Never give too much away when you’re planning a strategy to get what you want.”

She doesn’t answer and he waits for long enough to be sure she won’t, before saying, “Faith? I’m too tired to deal with you as you deserve, though I think you’ll find my fatigue has left my memory unimpaired, but if you could rouse yourself from your fit of petulance to kiss me good night, I’d—”

There’s a pause, and then he continues, “I’d like that.”

And she’s the most ungrateful bitch ever and she’s all set to fling herself at him in an orgy of tearful sniffling apologies when she remembers that he’s tired.

Turning, she slides into his waiting arms and kisses him as gently as she can, stroking her fingers across his forehead until it’s smooth, letting her kisses tell him she’s sorry without saying more than, “Go to sleep, Wes.”

He gives her a grateful, fleeting brush of his lips that’s about as far away from his usual kisses as it gets, but still leaves her feeling loved and he’s asleep before she’s got the pillows just right.

Chapter Ninety-Four

She sleeps like the dead. But then coming at least six times and a big dinner will do that to a girl.

And she's in the middle of this dream where Wes and her are adrift in the middle of this big sea full of ice caps, and they're clinging to this piece of wood and he's asking her to let go and start swimming because there's a little tropical island just behind this big iceberg and he's made dinner reservations…
“I’m scared,” she tells him, clinging on to his arm so he can't start making with a front crawl. “It's, like, icy. And I can't see anything but more ice.”

“You have to trust me,” he says, shaking her hand loose. “And we can have coconuts and bananas for dessert.”

Then she's on her own, watching his sleek head bobbing away from her while she tries to call to him. “Come back, Wes. I don't like coconuts.”

And there's something tugging at her legs and she tries to wriggle free but its grip is unrelenting, unyielding and then there's this soft, furry thing brushing against her inner thigh and her eyes snap open and she's clutching handfuls of sheets because his head is between her legs and his tongue drags once against her clt and he must have brushed his teeth because it tickles and tingles but then she's not thinking about dental hygiene or much of anything because he's pushed it into her cunt and he's fucking her with it.

“Wes,” she moans. “What are you doing?”

He laughs right into her pussy because it's pretty obvious what he's doing and she can tell from the weighted heaociety of her limbs; of how wet and swollen she is that he's been doing this for a while.

“It's rude to start without me,” she complains but there's no bite to it because if he wants to have her for breakfast, instead of his usual croissant and coffee then she's not really in a position to argue.

What she is in a position for is to run her fingers through his hair and press up against his hungry mouth, reveling in the bite of his fingers as they push her thighs farther apart.

He backs off slightly so he can slowly and languidly suck at her clit and she's not rushing to come for once, but concentrating hard on the wet, tugging sensation and suddenly it's not enough and she's wriggling away from him, shifting down the bed so she can clutch at his shoulders.

“Wes… morning Wes,” she sighs, trying to pull him up. “Don’t wanna come without you this time.”

He places one last slither of a kiss against her pussy and slides up and over, into her waiting arms.

“Good morning, Faith.” She's already licking her juices from his sticky lips. “I trust you slept well.”

And even though the wet head of his cock is nudging against the crease of her thigh and her hips can't stop moving, trying to get him inside her, the heavenly weight of him in her arms and the soft, sunny smile on his face seems more important.

“I love you,” she gasps, like it's only just occurred to her and she's pretty damn certain that she's never meant it as much as she means it right now. “I love you so fucking much, Wes. I had this dream that we were shipwrecked and you swam away and left me…”

He's kissing the words out of her mouth. “I would never do that,” he whispers fiercely. “And I had to wake you because I missed you so terribly…”

She rolls onto her side, taking him with her, reaching down to stroke his cock and get it inside her. “I was right here,” she protests with a smile, kissing the high plane of his cheekbones. “Wasn't going anywhere.”

“I missed your croaky morning voice,” he tells her softly. “And that little half smile you give me before you're properly conscious… yes, that one right there,” he adds, tracing the corner of her mouth with his finger.
She slowly arches up against him, tightening round his cock and hoping that she never comes because she wants to stay like this forever.

And it seems like hours that they spend pressed tight together, murmuring oh-so-fucking-sweet nothings to each other until his hand burrows between them, fingers ghosting gently over her clit and she comes in these long, languid waves, dragging him with her, spilling over him while he tells her how beautiful she is and how much he loves her.

Even when they finally manage to drag themselves out of bed and he confesses with an almost shameful smirk that he set the alarm clock an hour earlier so he could give her his special brand of wake-up call and still be able to get to work on time, she can't shake the goofy smile off her face.

It seems to her that while they were both asleep, something strange happened. Like, they fell more in love with each other so that their morning routine is interrupted by kisses and she can't even reach around him to get a mug down from the kitchen cupboard without curling her fingers around his neck first so she can feel his warm skin.

She's still wrapped up in dreams during the drive in to work. Words like “auditors” and “inventories” barely penetrating as she brushes them away like they're flies just buzzing away at the corner of her vision.

“I'm trying to get into work mode, Faith,” he says as he parks the car in front of the office. “But I'm starting to see the benefits of four day weekends. Maybe I should write a stern letter to the State legislature.”

He opens her door and she tucks her hand into his as she gets out of the car and doesn't let go. “We could always have a mental health day, Wes. I don't want you working too hard.”

“I thought we had one of those last week.” He's swinging her arm as they walk to the door, which makes her giggle and bump him with her hip. “Though maybe we could take Friday off if you're particularly industrious, though…”

“Faith? Faithy?”

She turns round and collides with Darla's tear-soaked gaze as she staggers up the drive behind them.

“Mom?”

And Wes lets his hand drop just as Darla launches herself at her, arms tight round Faith's waist and she's shaking, trembling, sobbing something against her shoulder.

“What is it? What's wrong?” she asks in a shrill voice, struggling to get away from the soft weight of Darla because it feels wrong. Like majorly wrong. Like baby aliens suddenly sprouting out of her stomach wrong.

But Darla isn't going anywhere, just clings on tighter, cries a bit harder.

“Shear,” Wes says hesitantly, hand reaching out to gingerly pat her shoulder. “Maybe we should go inside and Faith will get you a glass of water.”

He's practically lifting Darla off her and handing Faith the office keys so she can open the door and he can guide Darla carefully inside like she's a doddery old lady. Then he takes her down the corridor and she's left to trail after them, wondering what the fuck's happened now. And knowing Darla it's gonna be the same, tired old story. That she only had one drink and then another one after that and then one for the road and she's lost her job/got fucked over by some guy/lost that week's
rent…

But it isn’t until they’re all in the office and Darla is perched on the edge of the couch, still hiccups
ing and spluttering into one of Wes’ handkerchiefs that she starts to worry that maybe this isn’t just
another one of Darla’s monthly meltdowns that can be made better by a hundred dollars and a trip to
Al’s Liquor Warehouse.

“Has something happened to Xander?” she asks tremulously. “Is it Granny? Fuck, has she got cancer
or something?”

“Faith, maybe you should get your mother that glass…”

“It’s Liam,” Darla chokes out suddenly. “Stupid bastard's gone and nearly killed himself.”

And she’s going straight to hell because she’s wishing that the words “and nearly” weren’t part of that
sentence and that he’s lying dead and gone in the fucking morgue.

“What happened?” Wes asks all cool and detached like he's taking a witness statement and Darla
looks at him like she's only just realized he's there. Then she remembers that he is there and she
doesn’t like him.

“Can you excuse us?” she says in her snootiest, I used-to-be-a-goddamn cheerleader voice. “I need
to talk to my daughter.”

Faith’s reasonably sure that Wes is none too happy with Darla’s tone but she can see him biting back
a comment, choosing discretion over valor. He blanches for the briefest second, but recovers quickly.
“Of course,” he says, nodding solemnly to Faith before leaving the room. She’s relieved. She’s got
even enough to deal with without a pissing contest between a distraught Darla and a protective Wes.

She grabs Darla by the shoulders and forces her to look in the eyes. Darla’s are red-rimmed from
crying, her face puffy and tear-streaked, but her gaze is steady and Faith doesn’t smell the familiar
sharp, medicinal tang of cheap booze. That’s a good sign—Darla hasn’t gone on one of her patented
therapeutic benders yet.

Faith slips her arms protectively around Darla, which again feels weird and awkward and shouldn’t
this be the other way around? In response, Darla’s hand clutches at Faith’s, desperately, and Faith
can’t help but squeeze back with all the feeling she has. “Mom, please tell me what happened. I need
to know. Start from the beginning.”

Darla just heaves this heavy sigh that has modulations of relief and sadness and bottled-up rage and
everything in between. There’s an entire lifetime of grief let loose with that one sigh. Like, she’s
spent all these years waiting for the other shoe to drop and now she doesn’t know how to fucking
deal. For a second Faith can feel old anger surfacing, because, fuck, the two of them spent most of
their marriage (and plenty of time thereafter) in this tiresome drunken holding-pattern of co-
dependence. Good times, yo, good fucking times. No wonder juvie was practically a walk in the
park, in comparison.

Because, yeah, her whole life’s Liam’s been this toxic force but for better or for worse, he’s shaped
it. Made her strong and adaptable because she was used to his bluster and bullshit and learned far too
young to insulate herself from his abuse. Not to mention his charm—that was the ace up his sleeve,
his fallback when things got a little out of control. His charm was the most toxic thing of all. It sure
as hell kept Darla coming back for more after all the shit that went down between them.

But she puts that aside, because Darla’s been trying so hard to make amends. Now that she’s made
good on her promises for once, Faith wants to be there for her.

She tries again, softening her tone of voice. “Please, Mom, I want to hear it from you and not…” The paramedics? The police? She’s not sure at this point.

Faith always thought Liam had nine lives, maybe more. Thought the bastard would die in his sleep or something totally peaceful and totally lacking in poetic justice.

So, yeah, “nearly” isn’t close enough. But that’s an awful thought and she tries to focus on the explanation that Darla’s on the edge of sputtering out, slowly but surely.

Darla just stares straight ahead and starts mumbling in this uninflected monotone, like she doesn’t have the energy for anything else. “I knew he was gonna do this eventually, he’s so reckless. Always driving like a fucking maniac, the fucking bastard. I kept telling him, but he never fucking listened to me.”

Yeah, there’s plenty of anger to go around, Faith thinks.

“He’d had a little bit to drink, I think—a little bit.” She laughs this totally hysterical laugh that sounds more like a strangled sob and maybe it’s both. Faith knows the feeling. She pulls Darla close and tells her it’s going to be all right.

Darla starts sobbing again. “I’m so sorry, honey, I never meant—I wanted us to be a real family, y’know? I know you don’t believe me, but…”

Faith unwinds herself from her mother’s grasp and looks at her for what seems like the first time. She feels like the grown-up one and it’s weirdly liberating. “As long as you’re not chasing your words down with cheap vodka, I believe you.”

Darla smiles faintly and rests her head exhaustedly on her daughter’s shoulder. “Why do we always have these talks when something awful’s happened? Why can’t we just—talk, y’know?” And Faith’s smoothing Darla’s hair back and just whispers, “I know, I know,” over and over until she can feel the tears sliding slowly down her cheeks.

A shadow at the door brings her head up and she sees Wesley through a blur of tears. Blinking them away she gives him a little shake of the head and he looks from her to Darla and frowns with an indecision that’s not like him. There’s a brief flash of anger as she wonders if he’s going to remind her she’s on the clock, but then he disappears and comes back in with a tray.

Coffee, hot and strong.

He sets it down, produces a handkerchief and hands it to Darla, who gives him a startled look and, driven by instinct, begins to tidy herself up, her antagonism washed away by her crying jag. Even with the tear-soaked eyes, she’s still looking a hell of a lot better than Faith’s seen her for years and it’s surprising how much of a, well, a relief that is.

“I don’t wish to intrude,” Wesley says, stirring sugar into Darla’s cup and putting it into her hand so that she raises it to her lips without thinking, “but I take it there’s been some sort of car accident?”

“You were listening?” Darla snaps, with a flicker of resentment. “You always spy on my daughter?”

Wesley sidesteps that one. “If you drink that, I’ll take you both wherever you need to go. Is—” There’s a pause, as if Wesley can’t decide what to call Liam and she’s distantly curious about what he’ll go with but he settles for ‘he’. “Has he been admitted to Vincent Memorial?”
Darla nods, a fresh gush of tears spilling down her face. “Yes. They had to; he can’t pay, but he was so hurt—the police said—”

“Please don’t worry about that,” Wesley said, and Faith knows he doesn’t mean to be anything but kind, but Darla rounds on him.

“I’ll worry if I want to, mister! My husband, lying there, dying and you’re telling me not to worry, telling me you’ll pay. Is that it? You’re fucking my baby and so we all get to benefit?”

“Mom!” Faith reaches out and wraps her hand around Wesley’s wrist, holding on as he goes still, face closing down. “Save the outraged parent for later, and for Christ’s sake tell me what the hell happened.”

The lack of sympathy calms Darla down for some reason. With one last, defiant sniffle into Wesley’s handkerchief, she takes a deep breath.

“He was in his car. This early in the morning, that means he never went to bed.” Her eyes go to Faith. “You know.”

Yeah. She knows. Memories of tiptoeing around the house all day, bored out of her brain because Liam’s sleeping off a bender and came home with the milkman, as he calls it, even though Faith doesn’t know what one of those is. Milk comes from the store, doesn’t it? And he’s snoring so loud there’s no escaping it, but the tiniest bit of noise, a cartoon on the TV, and he’ll explode from his bedroom, sour-breathed and violent, fists swinging, mouthing obscenities she learned before she knew her ABCs.

“So, he was weaving about, and the cops started to follow him. Guess he had a tail light out, too, and Lord knows that heap he drives is a deathtrap, so they flashed him and—” Darla’s forehead wrinkles in puzzled thought. “I don’t get it. He’s been pulled over before and he just sweet talks them, or gets a ticket he’ll throw away before they’ve got back in their car. Half of them remember him from school and they’ll cut him a break—”

Because making a winning touchdown twenty years ago is so fucking clever. Yeah.

“But he took off. Just put his foot down and they had to chase him. He was doing sixty along Main; school kids everywhere, rush hour. He came to that set of lights on Franklin and went through them on red.” Darla gives a long gusty sigh and takes a sip from her coffee, hand shaking a little. “Thank God no one else was involved.”

“But what happened?” Faith snarls. Somehow, her grip of Wesley has changed to him holding her hand and his fingers tighten a little in warning. She tries to stay calm. “Did he, like, drive into something?” She pictures the place Darla’s talking about; sharp bend, lights and— "Oh God. Did he hit the factory wall?"

Darla nods slowly. “Lost control trying to miss a truck heading straight for him and plowed right into it.” She gives them a wobbly smile. “After they laid him off, he always said he’d die before he went back there. Guess he did his best.” The smile slips off her face. “He’s in a coma, Faith. They say he won’t wake up.”

And it’s just so funny that he did that. Put a hole in the wall, ten-foot high and solid brick, that surrounded Wilkins Manufacturing. He’d hated that place; he’d worked there for years, and, for once, it wasn’t his fault he’d lost his job, they’d just been cutting back, and she remembered being mortified one night when she’d been with him and he’d stopped and unzipped and pissed on that wall, finishing with a satisfied grunt as she walked away, cheeks burning, hoping no one had seen—
“Faith!” She realizes that she’s laughing, and Wesley’s looking concerned, and Darla’s looking affronted, and oh, fuck, she can’t handle this, but she’s got to.

“We should go to the hospital,” she says abruptly.

Wesley nods. “I think so. If—Liam’s not able to talk, I imagine the police won’t bother you, Darla; it’s not as if you can shed any light on this, after all. If you’d like me to deal with them? I might be able to take care of some of the procedure?”

He says it a little doubtfully, as if he’s expecting her to bite his head off again, but she nods heavily and gets to her feet. “It doesn’t matter now, does it?” she murmurs. “Whatever he’s done, it’s all behind him now. Hours, Faith. They don’t expect him to have more than...”

“Mom...” Faith’s helpless in the face of her mother’s grief.

And she wishes she could share it, just a little, but she can’t.

Chapter Ninety-Five

The drive to the hospital is accomplished in silence. Darla sits in the back and sniffs into Wes’ hankie every now and again and even though her world is meant to have collapsed, because isn’t that what it's meant to feel like when your father is lying in intensive care with a death sentence hanging over his head, she’s more pissed off that both of Wes’ hands are gripping the steering wheel and he’s not resting his palm on her knee.

And she keeps having more of these whacked out, inappropriate thoughts as she sits in the waiting room, book-ended by Darla and Wes. Like, why can't Darla get up and have a pee instead of sitting there and banging on about how she “told him a million times to get that damn tail light fixed?” Because then she could turn to Wes and he'd take her in his arms and stroke her hair and tell her that everything would be all right. It would be, if he said so.

As it is, he's careful to leave a couple of inches of space between them, probably so Darla doesn't get any more cracks in about how he's been violating her little girl. But like magnets or something, she can feel herself leaning nearer and nearer to him, until her shoulder bumps his and finally he turns his head and looks at her.

“Faith, are you sure you're okay?” he asks her quietly, his smile gentle but his eyes on Darla who's, like, so listening to this little exchange.

“Yeah,” she says and she doesn't know why her voice sounds so shaky. She tries again. “Yeah, I'm fine.”

And then she guesses that he doesn't really give a fuck what Darla thinks about him because he wraps his arm around her, pulling her close so he can kiss the top of her head.

“I know this waiting can be interminable and hospitals are never the most cheery of places,” he murmurs and Darla's sniffing again, less in a sobby way and more, like, she thinks he's a pretentious bastard who uses too many big words.

“Do you think we'll have to go and see him?” she asks because that's what's really starting to freak her out. The thought that there's meant to be this big, dramatic, deathbed scene and he'll open his eyes just before he croaks and beg forgiveness and they'll have to say that everything's frosty cool even though he was a worthless bastard who made their lives utter misery. “Like, if he's really fucked-up then he's not gonna be allowed any visitors, right?”
Darla gives this frantic little moan. “Shit! I need to call Father Gilroy to give him the last rites.”

Wes' arm tightens round her shoulders in a warning but she's already snorting. “Yeah, because he's already got a fucking lot reserved upstairs for him and his immortal soul.”

Darla's hand is this ghostly white blur that doesn't seem real until it connects with her cheek. “He's your fucking father!” she screams. “You should show some goddamn respect!”

“Why? And why the fuck are you pretending that you give a shit about him?” She rubs a cold hand against the stinging mark on her face, feels Wes tense against her and waits for Darla to say her next line but Wes is leaning across, practically shielding her from view as he shoves her out of the way and she knows before he even starts speaking exactly how cold and clipped his voice is going to be.

“I appreciate that emotions are running rather high,” he says icily and she can't see his face but Darla inching back frantically to escape from his gaze is all she needs to know. “But please be assured that if you lift a hand to Faith again then I'm taking her home immediately. And I believe that an apology is in order.”

Darla opens and shouts her mouth a few times and Faith knows there's plenty she wants to say, especially with the way her eyebrows shot up when Wes called her on the whole face-slapping thing. But then she kind of hunches in on herself and grabs Faith's hand with icy fingers. “I'm sorry, baby,” she whispers just before she bursts into tears again and Faith has to pull herself out of Wes' hold just in time to have Darla collapse into her arms.

It's actually a relief when Wes' cell phone starts ringing and he has to go outside to answer it, the evil glares from Darla and the receptionist following him across the waiting room.

“We need to get Father Gilroy,” Darla's choking out like a stuck record. “And I need to talk to someone because they've just stuck us out here and he's all alone and I don't want him to go like that, Faithy. Thinking that he's on his own, that we didn't care.”

“It's all right, Mom,” she says mechanically, rubbing soothing circles on Darla's back. “They'll come and get us in a minute.”

But they sit there while the minutes feel like they've become hours and she's bored to tears with the nicotine yellow walls and the weird drunk guy sitting opposite her who keeps dribbling and smells like he hasn't had a bath in days.

She sees Wes out of the corner of her eye, standing by the entrance and when he catches sight of her, he waves and makes a beckoning gesture with his hand.

“I'll just be a sec,” she murmurs at Darla, pleased to be able to shrug her off, get to her feet and run, not walk, over to Wes.

“I don't want be here,” she implores him as soon as he's in hearing distance and then, at last, with another two steps his arms are around her. “I don't want to see him because I'm gonna fucking lose it completely.”

“Shhh, shhh,” he's whispering into her hair, stroking the back of her neck. “I know, Faith, but your mother needs you.”

“Just hold me,” she begs and his arms are tight round her waist again so she can rest her head on his shoulder. “Oh, Christ, this is fucking horrible.”

She tries to cling to him but he gently disentangles her and takes hold of her upper arms so she can
give her a little shake. “You're going to be fine,” he says firmly. “But you have to be strong and brave and then this will all be over. Only happy stories, remember?”

And she's nodding and mumbling, “I guess,” but it's more to get one of his approving smiles than because she means it.

“I have to go,” he continues, rubbing his thumb over her bottom lip to smooth away her pout. “I need to sort out a few matters for your mother.”

“But you're coming back, right? Because I don't want to have to see him and I want to stay with you...”

“Of course, of course,” he assures her hurriedly, fingers tracing over the mark that's Darla's left on her cheek. And he's still wearing that small smile but it's starting to look forced, starting to appear more like a grimace. “I'll keep my phone switched on and you're to call me if you need anything.”

“But you won't be long, will you?” And she's clutching on to him again so he has to pry her loose, trying to distract her with the sweet little kiss he presses against her lips.

“Really, Faith, I'll be back as soon as I can,” he promises and he's already out of the doors before she can persuade him to not go, so she has no other option but to walk back to Darla who's standing there talking to a doctor and looking like her whole world has turned to broken biscuit.

She's taking tiny steps, walking slower than she's ever done in her life but she's at Darla's side in an instant, holding her up as the doctor attempts to explain what's happening backed by a constant soundtrack of “no, no, no” and “I refuse to accept that.”

It's just snatches of phrases she's heard on ER. “…unviable to operate… massive internal bleeding… organ failure… DNR…” and she's tuning out, trying to think about normal stuff like what Wes is going to make for dinner and whether they're really going to take Friday off when she realizes that Darla and the doctor are looking at her expectantly.

“What? Huh?”

“Faithy, we need to...” It's Darla who looks small and defenseless now, her hair mussed and eyes saucer-wide and red-rimmed. “The doctor says we can go in and sit with him now.”

The big hospital-white swinging doors that lead to the ICU loom large and she's not at all certain she can make the walk there, much less put her arms out and shove 'em open once she reaches them. Because with Wes gone she feels so tiny and powerless in the bustling hallway, precariously leaning out of the way to avoid an orderly rushing by with a squeaking, wobbly gurney.

Still, brooding won't postpone the inevitable and Darla's cold hands clinging to her forearms drags up some primal protective instinct she thought had been quashed by years of neglect and insults and stinging cheeks reddened by too many slaps for her mouthy attitude.

“Faithy, we need to...” It's Darla who looks small and defenseless now, her hair mussed and eyes saucer-wide and red-rimmed.

“I know Mom, I know. Just gimme a sec, okay?” She can't help but purposefully tuck her hair behind her ears and straighten her skirt, which is all askew and rumpled from hours of sitting in those uncomfortable waiting room chairs. “Maybe you should go on ahead and I'll call and see if they can send Father Gilroy over?” Anything to put off seeing what she knows is waiting behind those damn swinging doors.
Darla looks horrified at the suggestion. “No, Faithy. No, stay with me. I need you!”

Any other time, she would have rolled her eyes at Darla's plaintive tone, mostly because it was usually a big manipulative put-on, the only way she knew how to get what she wanted. But Faith can't ignore the unexpected pang of sympathy in her gut that's currently at odds with the urge to turn the other way and hustle the two of them right out of the hospital and turn their backs on the drunken asshole who, in less than half an hour, would only exist in a string of painful memories, if the doctor was to be believed.

“Yeah, okay. We can do this.” she says, reaching down and grabbing Darla's hand a little too tightly

She was expecting him to look smaller, because she'd heard people always looked smaller in hospital beds, right? People teetering on the verge of death shrank down to a more manageable size, she'd supposed. But not Liam.

Darla's surprised too, because she lets out a little gasp of surprise; her hand, still clinging to Wes' handkerchief, flying up to muffle the sound. It wouldn't have disturbed Liam, though, even if he were just asleep and not in a coma, over the whirring and beeping and hissing racket of the countless machines hooked up to his near-motionless body.

“I thought they...” Faith manages to stutter out after the shock had worn off. In spite of the large gash across his forehead, he looks like he's just sleeping off another one of his benders. He certainly doesn't look on the verge of death.

“No, Faith, weren't you listening? They won't do it until the priest gets here.”

And as if on cue, there's a small cough behind them. Yanking her hand out of Faith's, Darla flings herself on her poor, unsuspecting parish priest, a surprisingly young fellow with a bright shock of red hair. Of course she'd wanted this one, and not old, doddering Father Jurecki. Young and Irish? Of course.

“Nice of you to come, Father,” Faith manages to choke out, mightily impressed at the new level of Darla's histrionics as the poor fellow shepherds her to the chair next to the bed.

“Yes, a, uh, Mr. Wyndam-Pryce phoned and said I should come over as soon as possible.”

“Oh, Faith, that was so good of your Wesley, wasn't it? He's just so reliable and responsible.” Darla's voice dribbles off into a new wail when the EKG lets out a loud squawk before settling back into a more even string of beeps. “Oh, Father, my Liam tried, he did. He may not have been the best husband and father in the world, but Lord knows he tried.”

Luckily the tiny snort that Faith can't hold in is drowned out by the squeaking tread of the ICU nurse, who's picked the perfect moment to bustle in, a flimsy sign hanging from her index finger with the letters DNR inked on it in permanent marker, still fresh enough to drag a trail of noxious fumes in her wake. She tacks it up in the blank wall space above the bed, which sets Darla off wailing again, and turns her back to the tearful tableau, all business.

“Are y'all ready?” she says in a soft voice that doesn't match her brusque body language, and it takes Faith a moment to realize the nurse is speaking to her and not Darla.

And just like that, she's crying, unable to tear her gaze from Liam's puffed face, afraid all this new racket will just be the thing that will rouse him from the coma, but that's sure not gonna happen because here's the nurse is asking her to decide if now is the time to let him go, let it all go, let it all end. Just like that.
“Yes,” she croaks out, and everything's silent except for the persistent drone of the life support equipment; even Darla stops keening and sniffling because she's nodding in agreement.

Faith didn't think that they actually unplugged anything when they unhooked someone from life support, but that's kind of what happens. The head nurse removes the oxygen line, and the IV and the feeding tube and a bunch of other things she's not sure of the function of before leaving them without a word, her shoes squeaking all the way out into the hall.

Father Gilroy's already making the sign of the cross, and she finds herself involuntarily and hastily running her hand in the same motion, kissing her thumb at the end of the circuit, the way the old Irish nuns had demanded.

“Per istam sanctam unctionem, indulgeat tibi Dominus quidquid deliquisti, Amen.”

Liam would have appreciated the young priest going with the Latin; she wishes desperately Wes were here to translate what's just been said, his arms wrapped 'round her and voice low and comforting in her ear. There's a splash of holy water and the pungent scent of the myrrh cuts right through the sterile hospital smell, and then the three of them are mumbling the Our Father, as quietly and quickly as they can and still be respectful about it.

She doesn't remember when she ended up sitting on the frigid linoleum at Darla's feet, their hands wrapped together, but there she is, the cold seeping through her wool skirt, watching the blip of the EKG slow down in infinitesimal increments as time drags on. Father Gilroy has long since begged off, and they've been waiting for hours now—three long, dragging, anticlimactic hours as Liam tenaciously hangs on, refusing to go until he's spent every last one of his allotted seconds on this earth. Even Darla's wrung every last tear out, it seems, and they sit there, stock-still and silent. And Faith can't help making wagers in her head. In twenty minutes, she thinks. Definitely twenty minutes. And twenty-one minutes later, there they sit, his chest still rising and falling shallowly. Over and over, it went like this, time on an infinite loop of twenty minute increments until finally the EKG was practically a flat line.

Struggling to her feet and dragging Faith up with her, Darla leans in to kiss Liam on the forehead one last time, elbowing Faith to do the same. “Give your father a kiss good-bye, honey.” Seeing Faith's obvious hesitation, she adds, in a low whisper, “He can't hurt you now, baby. Can't hurt us anymore.”

Which is why it's kind of creepy that his eyes pop open and the EKG flatlines just as she's leaning in to barely brush her lips over his still-clammy forehead.

She jerks back, mouth open on a startled cry her throat's too dry with shock to make. No. No fucking way is he...then she looks into his eyes and knows she's safe. They're empty, and if peaceful means you've stopped fighting, then, yeah, he looks peaceful.

But empty works too.

And she wants to wipe away the memory of his flesh against her mouth but she knows how it'll look to Darla, so she endures it for three long seconds before she breaks and scrubs at her lips feeling as if she wants to spit, throw up, anything just to get rid of the sensation of cool, damp dead flesh.

“Let’s go,” she says, sounding desperate even to her own ears. “Mom, let’s go.”

Darla nods, tears drying on her face, shocked into silence by the finality of it all.
A nurse is hovering at the door, a stretcher waiting. She steps back and lets them file past her and when Faith glances back, there’s a sheet drawn up neatly over Liam’s head and suddenly he’s just a body, pushing the covering into an odd, lumpy shape. Nothing more than that.

There’s a stack of paperwork to go through but Wesley’s helped there too, having spent some of the endless waiting time in signing forms to cover the expenses—and considering Liam barely had time to warm the sheets before dying, there’s a staggering bill to pay. With that seen to, it doesn’t come down to much and though each time Darla signs her name, she makes this little moaning sound, Faith manages to get through it without starting to cry. Darla signs for a bag with Liam’s clothes in it—fuck, now that’s creepy—and she doesn’t know why Darla clutches it so tightly when she tossed everything he left at the house into the trash with a tight-lipped smile on her face.

She’s still not thinking beyond the next moment, so all her attention is focused on getting out rather than where they’ll go when they do. They turn left through some doors, and then there’s a long walk down a corridor with an old man in a wheelchair watching them as they get closer, reaching out and grabbing at Faith, demanding, "Have you come to take me home?"

Then she freezes, disorientated and lost, surrounded by walls that are closing in, really closing in, and she’s going to faint, she knows she is and she’s almost looking forward to that slide into darkness, but she thinks Liam might be in it, waiting for her, and it’s enough to snap her out of it.

“Honey? There’s a coffee shop in here; we could get something?” Darla says. “You’ve gone so pale.”

“I just want to get out of here,” she says, shaking off Darla’s hand. “I can’t fucking breathe.”

And the panic’s coming back and she needs Wesley so much and he’s gone and she knows she can’t leave Darla, knows she can’t go back to work, like this is a normal day. But she wishes she could.

Then someone calls her name, and just for a second, she thinks it’s him and she spins around and it isn’t Wes, but it’s Xander, breathing fast, as if he’s been running, looking as if he’s just woken up. He hugs Darla first because she throws herself at him, a fresh audience bringing out more tears, more lamentations, but he’s looking at Faith over her shoulder and she gives him a smile because if she can’t have Wes, Xander’s the next best thing.

Even if, technically, she’s not speaking to him, but that doesn’t seem to matter now.

With Xander there, the maze of corridors become a sixty second walk, and then they’re out in the sunshine and she’s suddenly starving because it’s way past lunch and floaty with a dizzy relief she’s too euphoric to feel guilty about. Liam’s dead. Everything’s fine.

“How did you know what happened?” she asks Xander, as he helps them into a cab and gives Darla’s address. “Was it Wes?”

Xander shakes his head. “My mom. She heard about it on the local news.” He leans over the front seat. “She tried to call you, Darla, but you’d gone. She phoned the hospital and they wouldn’t say how Liam was, but they told her you were both there.”

“It was on the news?” Faith asks.

“Car chase, on Main? Oh, yes.” Xander shakes his head. “For this town, that’s big news.”

“I hate this place,” she mutters.

“Well, you’ll be leaving soon,” Xander says. “That’s still happening, is it?”
Darla gives a little gasp, but she can feel her lips set like stone. “Yeah. I’m so outta here. Soon as fucking possible.”

“Faith—I need you,” Darla whispers.

“I’ll be here for another month at least,” Faith says. “Don’t worry about it.”

And she can tell she’s not heard the last of it, but they drive past the accident scene right then—of course they do, because the taxi driver’s a fucking ghoul and he slows right down to eyeball the rubble and the hole in the wall, with the splintered sparkle of glass across the road—and Darla’s reduced to a series of, ‘Oh God, Oh God’s’ that lasts until they get home.

Except it’s not home anymore. It’s a small house that’s still a mess, though the new and improved Darla’s gone so far as to put a plant outside the door, red petals limp because it needs water, and it’s not connected to her, not really.

So she feels more of a visitor than Xander, though it’s only been, what, six, seven weeks, since she moved out? He’s the one who puts on the kettle and leads Darla over to her chair—no one sits in the one Liam used, even though his ass hasn’t settled against the worn, faux-leather in months, even though it’s the best seat to watch the TV from. It’s so much his chair, she wonders if they’ll bury it with him, beer stains, cigarette burns and all.

And she wants to smoke, but she doesn’t think she should leave Xander in the awkward, grief-filled silence. It’s not until Darla fumbles in a purse for lighter and cigarettes and lights up, that she realizes she can smoke indoors if she wants to, without Wesley’s disapproval. Doesn’t stop her feeling guilty though as she sucks in a long, long drag and sighs as it hits her.

There’s a knock at the door and she glances at Darla, who’s struggling to her feet. “I’ll get it.” The door sticks, as it’s always done, and she gives it the automatic tug and lift that frees it.

She’d expected it to be someone with food, and so it is; Mrs. Calter, from two doors down, clutching a foil container that’s just got to be chicken casserole with chips on top, because it’s what she always brings when babies are born, people die, or there’s a disaster.

Wasn’t expecting her to be peering up at two cops, shiny buttons, grim faces, guns at their hips, standing behind her.

“Faith? I brought this for your momma. Poor Darla. He’s passed on, then?” There’s an avid curiosity in her faded blue eyes as she hold out the dish.

Faith takes it automatically, and stands there holding it as the tallest police officer says, “We’d like you to come with us, please, Miss. Just a few questions.”

And her hands are slowly heating up as the warmth from the dish seeps into them, but the rest of her is icy cold.

“Questions? I wasn’t there. No one was. What do you want?”

Mrs. Calter clucks sympathetically and Faith shoves the dish at her. “Look, this isn’t a good time, right? Thanks, but can you come back later?”

“Well, I—”

“Faith? What’s the matter, sweetie?”
Darla appears, company voice on, getting ready to star as the bereaved widow, hair fluffed just enough to look better, fresh hanky at the ready. Her weak, brave smile falters when she sees the cops.

“Can’t this wait?” she says plaintively. “My husband just passed away. Whatever he did, it can’t matter now. He’s dead, God rest his soul.”

They know that! Faith wants to scream, but she can only swallow, rubbing her palms against her dress until they’re stinging.

“It’s not about the accident, ma’am,” the tall one says. “Not exactly.” His eyes go to Faith. “Miss? You can collect your coat and purse, but we’re going to have to take you with us now.”

Xander shoulders past Darla. “What’s going on? Where the hell do you think you’re taking her?”

“I don’t think we’re taking her anywhere, son,” the policeman drawls. “I know we are. Little matter of suspected fraud, embezzlement, and forgery.”

Xander’s eyes go wide with shock as the pennies drop in a cascade of clinking copper, and he and Darla are asking questions, as Mrs. Calter backs away, torn between wanting to get every detail and the desire to hurry up and down the street spreading the juicy news that’s so going to make up for not being the one to hear about Liam’s accident first, but Faith’s not asking anything as she steps back into the front room and picks up her things.

She should have known. Liam. Her fucking father might be dead, but it’s not over. He’s going to drag her down with him. She’s got a vast emptiness where her mind used to be, so she’s not thinking how they know, or what they know, just accepting that they do, that her sins have found her out, just like the nuns always said they would, but she never believed them.

Then there’s this little spark of hope, white heat hot against the cold black night in her head.

Wes.

He’ll have to know now and that’s not how she wanted him to find out, but he’ll fix it. He’ll whisk her away and he’ll be angry, oh he’s gonna be so very angry, but it won’t matter, because he loves her, and it’ll be fine. She clings to that and it lets her start to think again.

“I have to call someone,” she says as they take her arm. “My—my lawyer.”

“You can do that at the station,” she’s told as they urge her toward the waiting cruiser.

“No, you don’t understand. He can sort this out, he’ll come.” She’s starting to babble now, though Darla’s caught on to what’s happened and she’s collapsed in Xander’s arms, howling loud enough to make the policemen wince. “Mr. Wyndam-Pryce. I can call him right now, if you’ll just let me—”

Her purse, with her phone it in, is taken from her and tossed in the front seat and her hands are cuffed. There’s a faint, nasty smile in the policeman’s eyes, though his voice stays polite.

“Wyndam-Pryce? Might want to get a new lawyer, Miss.”

Chapter Ninety-Six

And she remembers this. The crackle of the two-way radio and the two cops in front laughing and joking like this is a normal day and there’s nothing more important to talk about than the fishing trip they’ve got planned for the weekend. There’s a metal grill separating her from them and she stares at
this one spot right in the center where the frame has buckled slightly because no way in hell is she
looking out of the window at the passersby peering in to get a look at a genuine, real-life criminal.

She's trying to think; trying to get herself a plan but all she can see are a series of freeze-frames in
front of her eyes; Liam shrouded on the stretcher; the page of blank checks and Wes. Oh God, Wes.

The only thing that's holding her together, keeping her stiff and upright so that he'd smile
approvingly, is the thought that when they get to the police station he'll be there. Because he has to
be there. Not just because of the legal shitstorm that's brewing but because he has to be there, to sort
it all out, make things better.

He's going to be fucking furious. Christ, she's not going to be able to sit down until they get to New
York but there'll be this little room at the police station like there was last time. And really bad coffee
and donuts and she'll tell him and it's way too late to be confessing but when she explains about why
she did it, how she was protecting him…

She blinks in surprise as the door's tugged open and she's asked to get out of the car. Hadn't even
realized they'd pulled into the station parking lot and now she's clambering out and it's hard when
you're cuffed and wearing nose-bleed high stilettos and fuck, she can't stop shaking even though the
sun is fierce and there's not a single cloud in the sky.

It doesn't take long to process her and they take the cuffs off her so she can sign her name on the
inventory form and the personal detail form. Even manages a smile when they get through because
then she can see Wes.

But they're already leading her down this corridor that smells like school and they're not going into
the little room with the coffee and donuts, and the nice social worker who gives you tissues when
you start crying but down these stones steps and there are cells. Like she's found herself in an
episode of Murder One and she's pushed into one of them with a metal bed and a fucking can in it.
The door slams shut behind her with this resounding, metallic thud and then there's the sound of the
key scraping in the lock. And it wasn't like this the last time.

In the end, it's just too much effort to think about any of it. And she just curls up on the hard, thin
mattress, pulls the itchy wool blanket right over her head and stays there being really careful not to
breathe too loud until she hears the door clicking open.

She's so sure that Wes is going to be standing there with his most pissy expression stuck to his face
so for a moment she just stares at the cop with a frown.

“I'm taking you up for questioning,” he grunts at her.

“I need to make a phone call,” she says, staggering to her feet. “I need to call my lawyer.”

“Yeah, yeah, you can do that upstairs.”

They give her a list of court-appointed lawyers which she ignores as she dials Wes' cellphone
number with fingers that don't want to co-operate. It rings and rings, which doesn't make any sense,
like nothing's made sense for the last five hours. Because he said that she should call if she needed
anything and she needs him now. And then it stops mid-ring and clicks straight through to the
automated voice-mail and she opens her mouth to speak and nothing will come out.

She can feel the cop glaring daggers at her through the glass panel in the door and she forces her
mouth to start working. “Wes, it's me. I'm at the police station and I don't know what they've told
you… I just need you here. And I'll try and explain what's been going on… I was gonna tell you
but...I'm really sorry. I'm so sorry and will you please come and get me and take me home? Everything is so fucking messed right now and I need to see you, so just...just. See you soon, 'kay?"

It's really obvious that the two detectives questioning her think that she's some fucking dumb bimbo.

They go through the tired, old rigmarole about a lawyer again and she insists that Wes is her lawyer and that they have to wait until he gets there because he's going to sort out everything.

“Are you refusing to have legal counsel present, Miss?” Detective Park asks her for, like, the twentieth time so she's rolling her eyes and pursing her lips.

“Mr. Wyndam-Pryce is my lawyer,” she repeats in this flat voice. And the other one, the blonde woman, Lockley or something, leans right into her face, which is such an invasion of her personal space that it isn't even funny.

“Faith, you're here because we've got a pretty watertight case against you for embezzling Mr. Wyndam-Pryce out of $2000 by forging his signature on business checks that didn't walk out of that office by themselves, which is why he can't be your lawyer. Throw in a little conspiracy to commit fraud and you're looking at fifteen to twenty years so I strongly advise you to call another number on that list.”

“Wes is my lawyer.”

“Okay, Faith,” Park says after they've exchanged “can you believe how fucking stupid this chick is?” looks. “You're going to have to sign a letter saying you've refused legal counsel.”

Liam was never going to win any prizes in the Father of The Year contest but the only thing he ever gave her, apart from a stubborn streak a mile wide, was four life lessons.

1. Anyone she meets in a nightclub after midnight is up to no good.
2. How to mix the perfect vodka martini
3. How to cheat at five card stud.
4. And when you're being questioned by the police, you don't give them jackshit.

And once she's signed the fucking form they're firing questions at her and she's staring at the little red light on the tape machine and keeping her mouth shut tighter than a steel trap. Because they've read out her rights and she's got the right to remain well and fucking truly silent.

“You've given Mr. Wyndam-Pryce's address as your place of residence, Faith. Are you having sexual relations with him?

“When did you first meet Peter Harper?”

“Whose idea was it, Faith? Did you go to your father or did he come to you?”

“Pretty cold, isn't it, Faith? You spend all day with this guy, go home with him, sleep with him, and all the time you're helping your father rob him blind.”

“So Peter Harper reckons it was all your idea, said that you were gonna split the money three ways. What did you spend it on, Faith? And we're going to need times, places, receipts.”

“We've pulled your record—not the first time you've paid us a visit, is it? And I really should tell you
that prison isn't like juvie. Pretty girl like you shouldn't have any trouble making friends though. So, anything you want to tell us, Faith?"

In the end, it's easy to say nothing. Doesn't seem like they know about the photos and no fucking way is she going to enlighten them. Man, that's what got her into this freaking mess in the first place and she's not going to put Wes through that now.

She tunes them in and out, squirreling away the information that she needs, even though she hasn't got a clue what to actually do with it. Wes'll know, though he's taking his fucking sweet time getting here.

Seems like they went round to Liam's place after the accident and found that Peter guy climbing in through the window to get the rest of the checks. Turns out he's on parole for forging 'scripts for methadone and he couldn't open his fat mouth fast enough to land her in it.

It goes on for hours and in the end she's so damn tired that she just leans over and rests her head on her folded arms and shuts her eyes.

“Faith, this whole silent routine isn't doing you any favors,” Lockley says to her gently. “If I was you, I'd be talking loud and long and trying to convince us that you're innocent. Stupid but innocent. C'mon, Faith, everyone knows what your father's like.”

“Was like,” she croaks out and they look just as surprised as her that she's finally managed to speak. “Was like,” she says again. “Not is. Because he's dead.”

And finally they get a clue that she's having a really bad day. A metric assload of a really bad day and they stop re-enacting the Spanish Inquisition and go into a little huddle in the corner.

When they turn around, she gives a little sigh of relief because she's so tired and she just wants to go home. Even if it means going back to Darla's, which is never going to seem like home again. And she can't help drifting off into this little fantasy that after Wes has got her out of here and taken an hour or three to work off his anger that they'll curl up in bed together and…

She looks up as Park says her name.

“What? Can I go home now?”

“I'm formally charging you with one count of embezzlement, one count of conspiracy to commit fraud and one count of theft. You'll remain in custody over night until your bail hearing, which is set for tomorrow morning at nine o’clock.”

Chapter Ninety-Seven

It's just about the longest night ever.

All she can hear—over and over like a mantra in her head—are her father’s alcohol-fuelled predictions about her and they're all starting to sound like the absolute truth. Like, she really is this stupid cunt who’s totally deserving of everything she’s got coming to her. The cell is sticky hot and it’s impossible to get comfortable on the tiny pallet and she’s positive she can hear the admitting officers’ laughter ringing out from down the hall. She wishes she’d paid more attention to any one of Wes’ approximately three-hundred copies of Dante’s *Inferno* but she’s pretty fucking sure this would be her ninth circle.

When she finally falls into this fitful, intermittent sleep, she’s there, in court. She’s totally alone, and everything is dark except there’s this bright spotlight on her and this stern, faceless judge staring her
down. He’s looming over the proceedings like a Colossus until the shadow falls away and he’s wearing Wes’ face and the anger she sees there is frightening and unknowable.

She jerks awake, gasping and shaken. Wishes she could light a fucking cigarette or something but the smoke alarm would probably go off and then Park and Lockley would have her ass for that just for the sheer fun of it.

She can’t help thinking about the bail hearing. They don’t have any hard proof, right? They can’t hold her on—what’s it called? Circumstantial evidence?

God, where the fuck could Wes be? He’d said… Yeah, he’d said, but maybe this was his equivalent of going out for cigarettes. Time for a clean break. Because, yeah, she was a good fuck—but really? Not good for much else.

If she could smoke, she’d be inhaling the whole pack.

Instead, everything she’s bottled up all night starts to spill out, tears rolling unheeded down her cheeks until she starts to sob and she flops face-down on the scratchy, thin pillow in an attempt to muffle her cries. Mostly out of self-preservation because she doesn’t want the good detectives to hear. But the truth is that no one’s listening and no one cares. Her tears are met with resounding, unsettling silence.

There must be some kind-of catharsis in that because she drifts back to sleep afterward and doesn’t wake up again until there’s a sharp rap on the bars of her cell.

“Get up.”

Turns out that someone's been in and left her some clothes and for one heart-stopping moment, she feels almost giddy with relief that Wes hasn't given up on her. Then the neat bundle of clothes, stinking of cheap fabric conditioner, is pushed into her arms on the way to the shower block and before she even catches sight of that shiny TK Maxx skirt that she wore to her interview and the pale blue, itchy twin-set she wore on her first day on the job, she realizes it must have been Darla or Xander.

And even though she gets showered with some butch bull dike of a cop standing over here to make sure she hasn't got a what? A file? A skeleton key? A gun hidden up her snatch, it feels good to scrub herself squeaky clean and get changed into something that isn't a corset, a tight black dress and fuck-me heels. Because, like, if there was a book on what to wear to your arraignment hearing, they wouldn't figure too heavily.

As it is, she looks like she's on her way to a fancy dress party as a nice girl. She gets taken back to her cell and ignores the plate of congealed bacon and eggs that's suddenly appeared, in favor of gulping down the cup of lukewarm coffee in two mouthfuls and wishing for the gazillionth time she could have a cigarette.

Secretly, she's starting to feel impressed with how calm she's being. She's not scared, she's not worried; she's not even having to fight gnawing waves of rage in her stomach. But as she's cuffed again and led out to the parking lot, she realizes that numb and calm aren't the same things. She's not feeling anything because she's empty inside.

“I got nothing,” she mumbles to herself, feeling the weight of the cop's hand on her hair, pushing her head down as she climbs in to the back of the car.

Her new-found Zen state gets her through a tearful reunion with Darla and Xander who are waiting
for her by the back entrance to the courthouse.

“Faithy, baby, are you okay?” Darla's eyes are so bloodshot from crying that they're a vivid splash of color against the bed sheet white of her skin. “Everything's gonna be fine, sweetie.”

“Yeah, it's all gonna be cool,” Xander echoes, staring at her like he's just seen a ghost.

Then they're both waiting for her to say something and she can't think of a single word that will do so she just shrugs and gives them a lop-sided smile.

“Is there anything you need, Faith?” Xander asks in a worried voice and she knows the answer to this, but he ain't coming. So she goes for her second choice.

“I'd fucking kill for a cigarette,” she says quietly, then she's being led away, down more corridors and steps, to another room with a thick metal door. This time the walls are painted a dirty gray color instead of bile green and she appreciates the change in scenery.

Doesn't exactly appreciate the fresh-faced Lilah junior who comes in a minute later with a bright smile and a clipboard. What's a girl got to do to get some peace and a packet of Marlboros in this place?

“I'm Eve,” she says, holding out her hand and it takes her a moment to realize that she's meant to shake it. “I'm your lawyer.”

“Well, that's kinda freaky,” she giggles, slumping down on a hard, wooden chair. “Because there was this whole thing where I refused legal counsel and unless you wanna be paid, like, sometime in 2020 then…”

“You don't need to worry about that,” Eve assures her quickly, casting a suspicious look at the other chair and then down at her expensive skirt before gingerly sitting down. “I've been appointed by the court and you qualify for legal aid. Now why don't we have a little chat and you can tell me exactly what happened?”

“I can't say anything until I've spoken to Wes,” she says and sighs because she's fed up with people asking her stuff and then not listening.

“That's Mr. Wyndam-Pryce,” Eve replies, looking down at her clipboard. “That's a good place to start. So, was your relationship just a professional one, because you've given his address as your place of residence?”

And this chick is so fucking pushy with her encouraging smiles and her fancy, leather-bound jotter but the open page stays snowy white because all she can choke out are a million different variations on the same, tired, old theme.

“Where's Wes?”

“I need to speak to Wes.”

“Have you spoken to him? On a scale of one to ten, how pissed with me is he?”

Even little Miss Congeniality gets tired of it in the end, closing the notebook with an annoyed snap and sigh.

“Look, Faith, you need to help me to help you. Big picture: they haven't got much of a case against you, other than the fact that you supplied the checks. They're far more interested in your friend, Peter
Harper. The DA's office have already implied they're willing to consider a plea bargain. Then there's the extenuating circumstances. I've pulled some of your old files from Child Protection and if you were to tell me that your father pressurized you into helping him… If he threatened you with physical violence…"

It's like her brain was removed during the night and replaced with something sludgy. Because this is all kind of making sense and it's like there's this path that she can walk down and she can see it in her head. There's leaves and branches making everything dark so she can't see where to put her feet but right at the end, the sun is shining… but it's never that simple and every time she tries to concentrate on that little patch of sunlight, she sees Wes standing there and blocking her view.

And for someone who's always been good at lying, all of a sudden it's gotten really hard to say the lines she's been given to save her sorry ass.

Because it's her ass that's put her right here. “Yeah, Eve, see my Dad found out that Wes liked to spank me until I was begging for his cock. There were photos and shit and my Wes is a pretty big deal in this town…”

That would go down like a fucking lead balloon.

“When can I go home?” she asks because that, at least, isn't a lie. As it is, it leads to this long explanation about the arraignment and negotiating with the judge to post bail at a figure that Darla can afford if she puts her car up as collateral.

Thanks to all the legal training she's got on the job, she can nod along in all the right places, even though moving her head requires a lot of effort.

“So they read out the charges and I plead guilty or not guilty or whatever… what? Now what?”

Because Eve is looking as shifty as a little princess with the finest legal training that Daddy can buy can look.

“The judge has agreed to waive the formal arraignment hearing so the charges aren't read out in court, because, well…”

There's something wet dripping on her hand and she realizes she's started crying. “Because of Wes. Because he doesn't want people knowing that he's been fucking me,” she spits out. “I know what you're thinking! That I'm some cock-happy little tramp and that I fucked him and fucked him over at the same time. I love him and he loved me…”

And when Eve takes her tear-soaked hand, she squeezes her fingers. “I don't know what to do to make things better. I've got to talk to him. You get that, right?”

She's pretty sure that this didn't come up at law school but Eve's nodding and has upped the wattage on the encouraging smiles. “We're going to get your bail set, persuade the judge that you're a low risk to skip town, and then you can go home.”

“You promise?”

“I just need you to change your address on this form so your primary residence isn't…”

Isn't with the guy you've cheated and lied and stolen from.

And in the end, signing her name on the form with shaking hands so her signature looks like some funky kind of hieroglyphics isn't that hard.
They don't take her into a court but lead her straight into the judge's chambers. And it's so much like Wes' office with the highly polished table and the musty smell of yellowing paper and old books that she sways and is grateful for Eve's hand nudging the small of her back so she can carry on walking.

The prosecutor from the DA's office is this good-looking black guy but his gaze as he looks at her is as sharp as his suit.

And the judge looks so fucking judge-like, like he's been imported straight from the set of some black and white, 1950's courtroom drama that she wants to roll her eyes and tell someone to cut it the fuck out. He doesn't even look at her, like she's too white trash to even register on his holier than thou radar, just umms and ahs his way down her charge sheet, mumbling to himself as he goes.

“Do you understand the charges against you?” he asks in a bored voice, like he strongly suspects her of being mentally deficient.

“Yeah. Yes. Sir.” And tagging ‘sir’ onto the end almost brings her out in an attack of the giggles, but he's already moving on.

“And do you plead guilty or not guilty?”

Which is like the $64,000 question. Technically she's guilty. She's so fucking guilty that it makes her want to puke. And yeah, she did all the things that they say she's done but not for any of the reasons that they think and she's not sure what she's meant to say.

For one second she's tempted to just say, “Guilty as charged,” so they can take her downstairs and lock her up and throw away the key but then Eve pinches her thigh under the cover of the table and she squeaks, “Not guilty,” before she's even realized it.

The judge gives her a malevolent glare as she fidgets and rubs her leg but then no-one's looking at her or even that interested as they talk about her.

She listens to them banging on about this girl called Faith like they're talking about someone else. Eve's good. Like, Wes-lite good. And she plays dirty, pouring on the angst about how her dear old daddy had a history of physical violence toward his only child and anyway, he's lying dead on a slab somewhere and how she'll be such a comfort to her poor, bereaved mother with the alcohol dependency and the two beans that she can barely rub together.

It'd probably be more help if she didn't have the feeling that Eve and Charles Gunn were fucking like bunnies and that all the snapping and snarling and questions about whether she has a valid passport or a driving license weren't just their wacky, Law and Order version of foreplay.

“What's she going to do?” Eve finally asks, throwing up her hands exasperatedly. “She hasn't even got enough money to buy a ticket for the Greyhound.”

“I think the $2000 she stole could buy her plenty of ticket.”

“Objection! That's supposition,” Eve snarls. “I move that bail be set as low as possible so Faith can be with her family at such a difficult time.”

Now she's getting the feeling that the judge really doesn't like her. Probably something to do with the fact that she's wronged a member of the legal profession and she'd bet her last dollar, which is pretty much a moot point, that he's shared a glass of port and some stinky cheese with Wes at a Rotary Club dinner. Which is probably why he gives her a disdainful look like she's just peed on his rug and barks, “Bail set at five thousand dollars.”
There's more legal mumbo jumbo but she blanks it out and tries to think of a way to make her cell look more homely. Darla could just about scrape together five dollars and that would be a stretch, never mind five big ones.

“Faith?” Eve's standing up now and looking at her with one of those sympathetic glances which are beginning to royally get on her nerves. “We can go now.”

And she waits just long enough to get out of the door before she's railing on her.

“You promised! You said he'd set it low. How the fuck am I meant to get my hands on five thousand? What do you want me to do? Knock off the nearest 7-Eleven?”

Eve is hurrying her down the hall, probably so she can hand her over to the nearest cop and go and fuck her Harvard-trained bastard of a boyfriend in the nearest bathroom stall.

“Faith, you need to calm down before we post bail.”

“Are you hearing me? I haven't got five thousand dollars. The car ain't worth jackshit. So how the fuck am I going to post bail?”

“It's already taken care of,” says a voice behind her and she blinks once, twice and then she's rooted to the spot because she can't turn round. Can't even look at him but she can feel him looming behind her and her body's so well-trained, so fucking conditioned that every inch of her is straining to move.

“Mr. Wyndam-Pryce agreed to pay your bail when I spoke to him earlier,” Eve admits unwillingly. Then she's side-stepping away and says to Wes: “It's on the condition that she stays in the family home. The judge was really particular about that.”

“I don't foresee that being an issue,” Wes agrees in a voice that's etched in ice. “However, I don't recall there being any legal precedent that prevents me from driving my… secretary to her former place of residence to pick up a few personal items.”

“Well, no, but this is a very delicate…”

“Good, I didn’t think so.”

She's still standing there with her back to him, eyes tightly shut and when she feels his hand on her shoulder, she can't help the shudder that racks her body.

“Wes…”

His hand tightens but it’s slipping away so fast, she’s not sure if she imagined it. She’s looking at Wesley reflected in Eve’s face, seeing Eve’s eyes widen, pink tongue giving a nervous lick to carefully painted lips, seeing her swallow and step back.

Wes must be looking so fucking scary right now and he’s close enough that if she turns and reaches out, she’ll have him in her arms, but somehow she doesn’t think he’ll let that happen.

Eve clears her throat, gives them both a smile that’s more of a grimace and says, “Faith? I’ll be in touch. I have your mother’s phone number and you gave me your cell—”

“Yes. I guess I am.” She gives Faith a ‘what the hell do you see in him?’ kind of look and spins around, high heels clacking as she
hurries away, and yeah, she’s headed back to see the judge by the look of it.

Which means she has to turn and look at Wes and it’s the hardest thing imaginable. Kissing Liam’s dead body gets knocked off the top spot just like that. He’s moved back enough that she gets the whole picture and it knocks the breath out of her.

First glance and he’s looking pretty spiffy. Good-looking, well-dressed man, obviously successful, in his element here at the courthouse. But it’s like one of those, ‘what’s wrong with this picture?’ quizzes because as she stares at him, a dozen details leap up and down screaming for attention.

Like the way he’s wearing the suit from yesterday, which would be just about allowable if it wasn’t for the fact it had had hospital coffee spilled on it, thanks to an overly dramatic gesture from a cup-holding Darla.

And same shirt, same tie—which has been loosened and then shoved up and re-tightened over a still unfastened top button.

He’s slept in his clothes. Or not slept at all.

She’s at his tie, but she still hasn’t looked up to his face. When she does, there’s no air left anywhere because put him next to Liam and you’d be hard pressed to decide who looked the most corpse-like. He’s shaved, yes, but not very well. There’s a thin line of dried blood on his neck, and a nick on his chin.

His eyes are the worst. His lips are thinned-out and grim, but his eyes are worse. Empty, like Liam’s. No fight left, no emotion—then she says his name again, whispering it, and they flare to life, burning with an angry distaste, as if he’s looking at something disgusting, something vile, that sends her stumbling back a step.

“I don’t have much time. Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

He’s walking away before she can reply, and following him, once her feet start moving, is straight out of a nightmare, because he’s always just far enough ahead that she can’t catch up, and people are giving her curious looks as she stumbles along the corridors behind him. Guess the fact that she’s crying and looks like shit has something to do with that, but she doesn’t give a fuck what they think.

When she gets to the parking lot he’s already in his car and the engine’s running. She’s barely seated when he takes off in a screech of rubber that makes her wince. There’s no way she can hold back the tears that are seeping out of her hot swollen eyes and she gives up and lets them run over her face and drip-splash down. The silence in the car is unbreakable. Every time she even thinks about saying something, her throat closes and she doesn’t think it’ll come out right anyway so she sits and cries and Wes drives like a man with a death-wish and doesn’t say a single, solitary thing.

When she realizes that there’s going to be no proffered, crisp handkerchief, she opens her purse and drags out a crumpled tissue that’s about as much use as a postage stamp would have been, but at least she’s able to blow her nose. Her head’s aching; there’s a steady throb of pain pressing against her eyes, and she’s starving and nauseous and grubby. She sees her cigarettes in there too and wants one so desperately she’s biting her lip not to ask him to pull over, let her get out, but she’s not stupid.

Well, yes, she is. But not that stupid.

The silence starts to hurt her ears and she’s made up her mind to break it and fuck the consequences, because she can’t stand it, not one more fucking second of it, but they’re—no. Not home. They’re at Wesley’s house and she doesn’t waste time waiting for him to come around and open the car door
for her.

In the day that she’s been gone, it’s as subtly changed as he is. The air’s stale and, no surprise,
there’s an empty bottle of whiskey on the counter, alcohol competing with the acrid smell of over-
heated coffee because when he left, he forgot to switch off the coffeemaker and it’s busy turning an
inch of coffee into sludge.

She walks over and flicks the switch to ‘off’ and he turns on her with a savage, “Leave it.” She has
the feeling that when he gets chance, he’s gonna have to scrub the switch with bleach, or maybe just
toss the whole thing out now she’s contaminated it, and she feels anger stir in her, because fuck it it’s
been a hell of a twenty-four hours and if he’s just yell at her she’d know where they were.

“We…Wes, look,” she begins, and she’s not going to say something lame like, ‘I can explain
everything’ but she doesn’t get the chance to say anything because he steps back and nods toward
the stairs.

“I’d like you to go to your room,” he says and he’s got his voice back under control again.

The walk over to him is six steps and halfway there she looks at him and she can’t look away. He’s
giving her this indifferent stare, but there’s a tension to his jaw and his hands, hanging by his side,
are shaking slightly.

When she gets level with him, she pauses and he freezes her with a glance. “To your room,” he says,
separating each word and making it pretty fucking clear he’s off limits.

She walks up the stairs and makes sure she doesn’t rest her hand on the banister rail. Be a shame if
he had to, like, burn it, or something.

And she knows this anger she’s whipping up is false comfort; that it’s giving her a warmth as
transient as the flickering flames that licked around the paper she used to burn, but without it she’s
got nothing and she takes strength from it until she gets to her room and sees the open suitcase on the
bed.

He couldn’t have known the judge would make her leave, but he’s all ready to send her packing and
that’s just so fucking hurtful.

She turns and stares at him. “Wesley—this is just until this gets sorted out, right? I can come back
afterward—”

He gives her an incredulous look as if she’s just asked him to pledge allegiance to the flag, or
something. “I really don’t think so, do you?”

And that’s all she needs, because he’s talking, he’s said something, and the words flood out of her,
the way the tears did.

“We…Wes, God, Wes, I’ve been wanting to tell you, I was going to tell you, I swear it—”

He walks past her to the chest-of-drawers and pulls out the top drawer. As she watches, he scoops up
an armful of lace and satin and turns toward the bed and the waiting suitcase.

“You don’t know how hard it’s been not to say; what I’ve gone through.”

No. That sounds like whining. Wes hates it when she whines. He’s dumped her stuff in the suitcase,
unfolded, and he’s on the second drawer now and it’s as if he’s alone in the room. She tries to get
between him and the suitcase but he looks through her, standing with his hands full of T-shirts,
waiting for her to move. Which she does because he’s looking, well, fucking unpredictable what with the grim, thin lips and the wild eyes.

“Look, ignoring me like this isn’t fair, Wes. It isn’t fucking fair.” And the hell with not whining, that’s her fucking new life he’s dismantling as he goes back and forth like a fucking robot, clearing out drawers and closet as if he’s been programmed to get rid of every trace of her.

He sweeps her dress, her pretty plum-colored dress, off its hanger and forms it into a tight ball, before throwing it contemptuously across the room so that it lands on the heap of clothing and then slides, crumpled, to the floor. It’s too much. She’s not used to fights like this and it’s unnerving her, scaring her—with an inarticulate moan, she goes over to him, grabbing at his arms and finding the strength to hold him in place. He won’t look at her; just stares over her shoulder, his eyes remote again.

“Wesley, listen. Please?” She’ll beg him if she has to, but she’ll save that for later, the last resort because something’s telling her this isn’t the time to appeal to anything but the lawyer. The Wesley who loves her isn’t anywhere and she doesn’t know where to start looking.

“I took the checks—took them and gave them to Liam.” He doesn’t react to that. Well, she guesses he’s worked that out. “But you don’t know why. He’d got—he’d taken, oh fuck, Wes, he’d—”

His hand comes up and he touches her for the first time since they came into the house, shoving her away so hard she’s only saved from falling by the wall at her back. As she stares at him, he reaches into his jacket and pulls out some photographs.

With the same flick of the wrist he’d used with her dress, he throws them at her and she watches them spin through the air, flashing in front of her horrified eyes and falling in slow-motion to the floor.

“I know.” Wesley’s lips peel back in a smile. “Such a pity he died before I had chance to compliment him on his efforts.”

“You—”

She can’t form the question, but he answers it anyway, and he must’ve wanted to talk because he’s spitting out words as if they’ve been piling up behind his gritted teeth and he can’t get them out fast enough.

“Found them, yes. In his effects. Stole them, but I don’t think that’s really an issue is it?” He’s still smiling. “They were handed to me as I was leaving the hospital, after a rather disturbing phone call from the police. I thought it best to go through them, and no one objected. Why should they?” He tilts his head and stares at her. “So much you think I don’t know, that I do; so much I know, you don’t. It’s rather amusing, really.”

And he’s not making any fucking sense here, or maybe it’s just that she can’t think straight and he’s walking over to her and slamming his hands against the wall on either side of her head so that she can’t move, can’t escape, and he’s telling her things, terrible things.

“—tried to cash it, but too impatient, too greedy. The bank wouldn’t do it, called me. You remember that day, don’t you, Faith? You looked so relieved when I lied to you; did I look like that, too? When I asked if all was well and you said, ‘Yes’, when I asked if there was anything you wanted to tell me and you said, ‘No’? Did I?” His voice is getting more intense with every word but he’s barely talking above a whisper. “You never really trusted me, did you? Wise of you perhaps in some things, but this? Oh, you stupid, silly little girl.” His eyes are gleaming now and he starts to laugh, a hollow, scary fucking giggle that’s killing her to hear. “I could have dealt with him; did you really think I
“Not just him,” she whispers. “Lilah. She was involved too.” And for a second she thinks she’s reached him, because he stops laughing and steps back, but it’s not going to be that easy.

He gives her a cold implacable glare and nods at the scattered photographs. “Pick them up.”

And as she goes to her knees, fingers reaching out blindly because she can’t bear to look at what she’s touching, she hears her suitcase snap closed.

Chapter Ninety-Eight

Her hands are full of shiny paper and she can’t look at the Faith and Wes captured in all their sordid glory because she's going to be sick if she does. Gonna lean over and throw up the bile she can feel gurgling in her stomach. Because they were happy then and it was all a lie. He wouldn’t… he couldn't be like this, so hateful, so fucking unwilling to do anything to save them if he really loved her.

She raises her head and forces herself to look at him but his face is a death mask and he's yanking the suitcase off the bed with this savage jerky movement so unlike his usual grace.

“Get downstairs now,” he spits at her, kicking the closed door with one foot so it swings free and smashes against the door-frame.

It makes her wince and then she can't move, just stares at the nap in the carpet and wishes that the ringing in her ears would stop. Doesn't even hear him reach her side with angry strides, until the cruel bite of his fingers presses down on her upper arm and he's hauling her to her feet.

“I said, get downstairs,” he hisses and he's yanking her so fast and furiously that she doesn't think she touches the ground as he keeps her in a grip so tight that it's going to leave bruises and as he negotiates the stairs in a tearing hurry she's knocking into the banisters with every step.

She stumbles down the last two stairs, jarring her ankle with a pained little cry, which makes him pull her upright and then drag her down the corridor to the kitchen.

Her purse is where she left it on the kitchen table and he lets her go, quickly, like she's got a terminal case of cooties and is upending her bag and spilling out the contents before she has time to stop and marvel at what the fuck he's doing.

“Wes?” Her voice is high-pitched and quavery like she's aged sixty years over night.

He ignores her. Too busy rifling through old receipts, bits of makeup, until he finds what he's looking for and opens up her savings book.

“You made a withdrawal for $731.27 on April 21st,” he says flatly. “Did you give him the money?”

“Yeah, but…”

He's leafing back through the book, which details every deposit of birthday money, Christmas money and the monthly twenty dollars or so that she used to get from her Grandmother.

“And so you gave him the rather paltry amount that was your life savings. How very touching,” he sneers but he seems calmer. Calm enough that she approaches him warily because he's still scaring the fuck out of her.
“Look, Wes, see I tried…. I thought I could fix it…” she begins, hands stretched out in front of her in this fatal gesture of pleading.

“21st April,” he repeats. “Four weeks ago. So you've been lying to me for four weeks. I never credited you with being such a skilled actress.”

And she decides quickly that the calm is just a façade and he's slowly and carefully working up to the next explosion, which comes when his hands curl around a tatty scrap of yellow paper.

“Oh, no, my mistake,” he says smoothly, way too smoothly for her liking, when he's holding the ticket from the pawn shop aloft like it's some kind of Holy Grail. “19th April, when you sold the watch I bought you for a mere fraction of what I originally paid for it. Really, Faith, they must have seen you coming a mile away.”

“I'm sorry,” she mumbles helplessly because no other words seem able to cover it and even the ones she's chosen seem woefully inadequate.

He bares his teeth in a parody of a smile. “Well, at least I can rest assured that you weren't actually a willing accomplice. Funny how that doesn't actually offer much comfort.”

She shakes her head incredulously, unable to believe what she's hearing. “How could you think that I'd do that to you? That any of this was what I wanted? C'mon, Wes, please…”

“It's really rather amusing,” he continues in this dull voice like he doesn't think it's any such thing. “That you could credit me with such little intelligence. I knew you didn't have the watch and I actually imagined that you'd lost it and because it meant so much to you, you refrained from confessing.”

“It did mean a lot to me! I didn't want to sell it but he said that him and Lilah, that there was an affidavit that he'd sign saying that you'd been fucking me when I was a minor and I panicked…” The words are spilling out and she's trying to hold them back so they're not this frenzy of incoherence. “I wanted to tell you, Wes. Honestly! And it just got harder and harder because I kept leaving it and then there was all this stuff between us and I guess I just thought I could hold him off until we left town… I was trying to protect you!”

And she thinks this is a good sign. That he's letting her try to explain and if he'd just lift his head from the debris from her purse and look at her, really look at her, he'll know.

But her words are bouncing off him like water on oilskin and he holds up a crumpled photo that she'd shoved into a side pocket, smoothes it out so she can see them curled up on his chair, kissing. “Well, I can see why you had such a sentimental attachment to this little snapshot. And they say, the camera never lies…”

Suddenly there isn't a table between them because she's skidded across the floor so she can grab the photo from him, curl her arms round her scattered possessions. “Stop it! Stop going through my stuff and stop saying things because you're fucking angry and you want to hurt me!”

“And right on cue we have the histrionics,” he comments in a bored voice, snatching the photo back and holding it away from her grasping hands, staring at it like he's only read about it in books. “I'm warning you, Wes,” she tells him tearfully, trying to choke back the sobs as he evades all her attempts to get the photo back. “You say stuff and then you can't take it back. Not ever!”

His hand is back on her shoulder so he can keep her at arm's length but then he moves quickly, kicking out a chair and shoving her down on it.
“Who's seen the photos?” he barks at her, pulling the chair sideways and resting his hands on the back so she can't get away from him, can't look anywhere but the blazing blue of his eyes as he glares contemptuously at her.

“I don't know.” And it's true. She really doesn't know anything when he's looking at her like he wishes she'd dig a hole and crawl into it.

“Who's seen the photos?”

“My da… Liam.” Her hand brushes his arm as she reaches up to massage her throbbing temples and he flinches away. “That Peter Harper guy, he was in the bar and… I don't know, maybe Lilah.”

“Lilah.” He rolls her name round on his tongue with a sour expression. “Well, the redoubtable Ms. Morgan is easy enough to deal with if she wants to keep her license.”

And he says it with such bitter satisfaction that even though the view from where she's sitting is making her head spin and her stomach roll with wave after wave of big, sick-making fear, she's glad, at least, that she's not his ex-wife.

Then as suddenly as if someone's flicked a switch, he lets go of the chair and walks round the table so he can sit down.

“Peter Harper,” he says thoughtfully and his whole bearing has changed. He's still taut but it's the kind of tension she's seen before when he's wrangling over a particularly thorny legal point and with his attention not fixed on her, she lets herself take a few ragged breaths.

“Has anyone asked you about the photos? Have they come up at all?”

“N-no. They're more interested in making out, like, I'm some kind of criminal mastermind,” she says and then she smiles because he's smiling and she can't help it.

“How very misguided of them,” he says pleasantly and there's a dig in there somewhere but she lets it go. “Carry on.”

“Well, he's said that it was mine and Dad's idea and that… that… I was using you to get the money,” she adds unwillingly. “And you know that's not true, Wes. You know that, right? I wouldn't do that to you.”

“It's really rather Kafkaesque,” he mutters to himself. “I imagine Mr. Harper's hesitation in mentioning them to the police stems from his willingness to implicate you as some dime store Lolita…”

“Hey, I'm not…”

“Shut up, Faith!” he snarls at her, slamming his hand down on the table so she cowards back.

“Thank you,” he adds politely. “I really can't think straight with your incessant bleating. Now, there's always the possibility that you could have been a willing party to the photos, but then they'd add conspiracy to blackmail to his charge sheet, which I'm sure he doesn't want. I suppose it's a low enough risk that we needn't concern ourselves with it. Now has Eve given you any indications as to where her defense strategy may lie?”

He's gone to this other place. She can see his mind whirring, shifting into gear and sifting through any one of a number of possibilities so he's not even looking at her as anything other than a case that needs to be solved, filed away in one of the manila folders and tied with a pretty, pink ribbon.
“She asked me about my dad, whether he forced me to go along with it… like if he threatened me,” she supplies shakily.

“That’s very good,” he says warmly enough that it penetrates the deep freeze of her stiff limbs. “Now what aren’t you telling me?”

It’s just as well she’s not a spy. Because they wouldn’t even have to use electrodes or any of the other stuff she’s seen on Alias. Nope. All they’d have to do is wheel in Wes and get him to drop his voice a couple of octaves and stare at her like she’s the center of his universe.

“She pulled up… I was on the Child Protection Register,” she admits unwillingly. “When I was younger. I broke a couple of ribs… there was this thing, this fight and Mom had to take me to hospital and she… I mean, Eve, she said that if he'd threatened to hurt me unless I went along with it, that it might help.”

“How fortuitous then that I called the police that night your devoted father made us a visit.” He grins so the sleepless night slips away from his face and he's leaning toward her eagerly. “Now this is what your story's going to be. You need to listen very carefully, Faith…”

It must take an hour for him to perfect this bogus version of events about Liam beating the shit out of her and promising to burn the house down to the ground, with Darla and her in it, unless she stole the checks.

She feels like she's already in court, sworn on the Bible and all that shit as he grills her again and again. Even letting her have a glass of water and a cigarette to keep her flagging energy levels up, while he relentlessly prods and probes until he's convinced that she's not going to fuck up.

“I think that covers every eventuality,” he sighs finally, by which time she's almost managed to convince herself that it really did happen just the way he said.

Her hand creeps out to the cigarette packet and she snakes another one out and quickly lights it before he can protest.

This silence has settled over them. He's sitting there with his head in his hands and she's smoking the cigarette right down in long, nervous inhalations until she can't bear it.

“I wish I'd told you before, Wes,” she says quickly. “I knew you'd have an answer but I didn't want you to have to get involved and then it was too late. It was all messed up and I couldn't unmess it, y'know.”

He lifts his head slowly like he's only just remembered that she's still there. Her heart sinks as she sees the almost murderous anger flashing back in his eyes. But his voice is steady and cool. “Let's not labor under any illusions, Faith,” he drawls. “My main priority in this whole sordid little affair is salvaging my own reputation and ensuring that nothing jeopardizes my new job. I'm sure you'd agree with me when I say that I want nothing more than to escape this hideous little town.”

She's nodding frantically, clinging on to what he's saying. “Yeah, yeah. I know what you mean. And when we're in New York, I'm gonna make it up to you.”

And she's so fucking stupid. Even more stupid than she thought. Because she walked right into this one and he's smirking and moving in for the kill as he delivers the punch line. “You really must be more delusional than I imagined if you think that I ever want to see you again,” he says, making each word count, each word hit her like a bullet. “I'm very sorry, Faith, but you're going to have to find yourself another meal ticket. It shouldn't be hard. After all, a girl with your not inconsiderable talents
shouldn't have any trouble making ends meet.”

“What the fuck did you just say?”

“It was my poetic way of calling you a whore,” he explains with a casual wave of his hand. “But then overestimating your intelligence has been a recurring theme of late, hasn't it?”

They move at the same time, a stereophonic crashing of chairs on to the floor because she’s gonna fucking kill him and it seems like he had much the same idea because as her hands strike out ready to claw at his eyes, smash the smug smile off his face, his hands are already pinning her arms still so he can shake her so hard that she swears her teeth rattle.

“I'm sorry, do you have a problem with that?” he's screaming into her furious face, leaving tiny droplets of spittle sticking to her skin. “Months, Faith! Fucking months of being in my house, my life, my bed and lying to me every second of every day.”

“Fuck you, you fucking prick!” She's trying to wrench herself out of his death grip, kicking at his shins. “I did it because I loved you. Made myself fucking ill over it and all you can do is call me a whore. Well, if I was a whore, then you fucking loved it!”

“And were you lying then? When you let me fuck you, have your arse, have you anywhere and anyway I wanted? And even that wasn't enough, was it, you malicious little bitch? Did you find it funny, Faith, just how easy it was to get me to bare my soul, to trust you with my secrets?”

And really it's not that surprising that it's her betrayal that's hurt him the most. Not the money she took but the tiny pieces of his heart that he let her see.

So she's not trying to get at him now. Not like that. Her arms flail uselessly in his grasp and all she can do is stretch out her hands so she can touch him. “Wes, God no, Wes… It wasn't like that.”

But he's gone to this place where she can't touch him. He can only touch her with hands so cruel that her bones are threatening to give way under the savage strength of his fingers. “Really, Faith, if I'd known you were only in it for the money, there's any number of perversions we could have tried,” he tells her quietly, whispering the words in her ear so it makes a mockery of all the other things he whispered to her in the dark of the night when she was the only person who mattered to him. “I wonder what you'd have let me get away with to assuage your guilt. It's a pity that we never explored some of my wilder fantasies, maybe called a discreet little agency I know and you could have picked up some tips from one of your colleagues…”

He's too busy cutting into her to notice that she's worked one of her hands free. But he notices it plenty when she manages to punch him in the face, the ferocity of the blow not lessenened by the fact that she's backed up against the sink and can hardly move. But then he's got both hands clutched to his face and she can twist out from under him so she can beat her fists against his back.

“You're a fucking pervert! I'm eighteen!” Like, that's some newsflash. “I'm fucking eighteen, you bastard. I bet you loved that, didn't you? That you'd found some dumb little girl who'd let you play all your fucking, sick games. Dressing me up, hitting me, not allowed to move, not allowed to speak because it's the only way you can fucking get it up!”

There's this red mist clouding over her vision so she doesn’t even see that he's straightened up, just feels the flat of his hand striking her cheek so hard that she's knocked off balance, careering into one of the over-turned chairs and falling face down on the floor.

It shocks them both into silence. She lies there for a moment, the cool lino under her hands and then
tentatively puts her weight on them, bites back a moan at the shooting pain in her wrist, and pushes herself up on to her knees.

“Faith,” he croaks out and she can’t even look at him because she told him, she fucking told him about things you say that you can't take back. “Faith, for God's sake…”

But she's crawling over to her cheap suitcase, awkwardly snapping open the lock with one hand and starts pulling out all the pretty things he bought her.

“It was never about the money,” she says and she doesn't know why she's even bothering because it doesn't matter anymore. Instead she concentrates on making a neat little pile of clothes on the floor, the pink shoes resting on top. Then she hauls herself up, with one hand clutching the table and sweeps the contents of her purse into the open case. “Maybe you could sell this stuff to replace some of the money I owe you.”

She forces herself to look at him and he's standing there with one eye reddening up beautifully, his arms hanging limp by his sides like he's forgotten how to use his body. He looks so lost and frightened and she starts crying because she never thought, in all her worse case scenarios, that they'd get this broken.

“Are you hurt?”

“More than you'll ever know.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“It's not enough.”

“Which just means we weren't enough.”

And this whole stilted conversation is like a reversible jacket because when it comes down to it, they’ve both hurt each other too much to keep throwing accusations and punches at each other.

It ends with them sitting at opposite ends of the table, ice packs clutching bruised flesh that doesn't hurt half as much as the wounds that can't be seen, while they wait for the cab that will take her down the hill, back to the wrong side of the wrong side of town and as far away from him as possible.

By the time they hear the tooting of a car horn, her head's ready to burst. She scrambles to her feet and picks up her case in her uninjured hand.

“I'll walk you to the door,” he says softly, like she's just another client who's come to him for legal advice.

“Kay.”

And when they get into the hall, she wants to say something that's really deep and profound so that when he thinks of her in the future, he remembers it, rather than all the shit she's dragged him through. Wants to touch him and move him with her words so he thinks about her every day for the rest of his life.

“This really sucks, Wes,” is all she manages to come up with and he smiles faintly.

“Yes, it really does.” Then he grimaces like he hates that she can still charm him and his face tightens up as he picks an envelope up off the hall table.
“I’ve paid you up until the end of the month,” he says with the permafrost back in his voice. “I’m sure you’ll appreciate that under the circumstances I can’t give you a reference.”

She stares at him for a minute, her mouth gaping open until she shuts it with an audible snap and calmly takes the envelope from him. Girl’s got her pride, yeah, but a girl’s also got nothing to live on until she finds another job.

It’s so pathetic that it’s not even true, but as the cab drives her back into town, she’s fiercely glad that once she was out of the door, she never turned around to steal one last look at him.

Chapter Ninety-Nine

Wesley’s taken care of the cab fare and so when it draws up outside her house she’s got nothing to do but walk to the door, with the handle of her case biting into her palm and a million eyes burning holes in her back as the neighbors peek from behind pulled-back curtains.

Because she’s back, tail between her legs, just like they all expected. Just like they all wanted, because they’ve been saying she was worthless for so long, it wouldn’t do for her to prove them wrong, now would it?

She keeps her head up high, shoulders back, and, yeah, thanks for the lectures, Wes, because she’s not slouching. No fucking way.

Then the door closes behind her and she slides to the floor and she can’t move another step.

The house is silent and she guesses there’s too much fun being had gossiping to waste time on comforting Darla. Oh, they’ll have come in droves yesterday, drawn by not one, but two scandals, but today Darla’s being left to deal with her loss alone.

And when she appears in the doorway of the front room, a glass in her hand, fingers curled protectively, automatically around a brimming glass of vodka, Faith sees just how she’s dealing.

Guess they’ve both lost their second chances.

“He threw you out, didn’t he?” Darla asks, not unkindly.

“They made him,” she says, stumbling over the half-truth. “The court. Said I had to…” The suitcase pressing hard against her knee makes the lie impossible. “Yeah. He kicked me out.”

“Oh, honey.” And if Darla offers her some home-spun wisdom, some cliché straight out of the pages of one of the magazines she reads so earnestly, she’ll give in to the need to scream and hammer her fists against something she can break, she’ll take matches and burn, baby, burn until the world’s in ashes.

But Darla, for once, just cuts to the heart of it. “He’s a bastard and you deserve better, Faith. Come and have a drink with me and the hell with the lot of them.”

And she turns and sways back into the living room, a procession of one, and Faith shrugs, gets up, and follows her.

“Seems quiet around here,” she says, after she’s poured herself a vodka and topped it up with week-old flat coke because no way is she ever drinking vodka milkshakes again.

Darla snorts. “Threw the whole lot of them out the door,” she says.
“Why?”

Darla gives her a side-long look and then goes with the truth. “They were bad-mouthing you, honey. Wasn’t having that, so I set them straight.” She gives an emphatic nod and Faith gapes at her in shock.

Not because, for the first time ever, Darla’s stuck up for her instead of being the one moaning about what a worthless daughter she’s got, though the tiny flicker of warmth she gets from that’s pretty welcome. No; she’s realizing that when Wes asked her who’d seen the pictures, she’d told him the literal truth, but if he’d phrased it just a little bit differently, if he’d asked her who knew about them, she’d have had to add Darla and Xander to the list.

She tries to think of his reaction to that and cringes.

“Mom—when you say you set them straight, you didn’t—oh fuck, what did you say?”

And the small bit of comfort from coming home to a welcome of any kind evaporates as she pictures Darla telling them all about Wes’ little ways and—oh God. “Mom? Please? Tell me exactly what you said?”

“You sound like him,” Darla sniffs. “Always with the questions. I didn’t tell them about—you know—the photographs.” She sighs and takes a long gulp from her glass. “That’d reflect badly on your father and I wasn’t having them start in on him, as well.”

*Why the hell not?* she wants to yell, but she keeps it buttoned. She knows Darla when she’s like this. Volatile doesn’t come close to describing her.

“No, I just told them that he was no better than he should be, for all his airs and graces, and that you were well rid of him.”

“You mustn’t—ever—say anything about the photographs,” she says urgently. “Darla—Mom—are you listening? Not ever, to anyone. It gets out and—” She can’t find words to describe how bad it’ll be and she starts to cry. “Mom, promise me, swear on Dad’s grave, you won’t!”

“He’s not buried yet,” Darla points out, sounding, for a moment, so totally sober, sane and reasonable that it dries Faith’s tears. They stare at each other and start to laugh, tiny giggles that build and swell until they’re both in tears again, helpless and spluttering at a joke that wasn’t funny to start with and isn’t now, but they can’t fucking help it.

And they just have to toast getting the laughter under control, and from there it’s an easy step to getting drunk, or, in Darla’s case, even drunker.

“You fell in love with Liam when you met him, didn’t you?” Faith asks. “Sixteen and you knew.”

“Oh lord, you should’ve seen him! You’d have fallen for him yourself, Faith.”

“Really fucking wouldn’t,” Faith says, trying to swallow without lifting her head off the cushion and missing her mouth entirely. “Because, eww.”

“Language,” her mother says automatically. “That’s no way to speak of your father.”

“What; I should say I’d want to fuck him instead?” Faith shakes her head. “I’ve seen the yearbook; I know he was a hunk. Just hard to remember that when all he ever did was treat me like shit.”

“He wanted a son,” Darla says. “When I couldn’t—after you I just wasn’t able—it changed him. A
man wants a son.”

“He wouldn’t have wanted one like Xander,” she says bitterly, remembering the row when Liam found out Xander was gay and wanted to ban him from the house—like Xander would’ve set foot in it after Liam had called him a faggot right in front of Mrs. Harris. “And he wouldn’t have wanted one who grew up strong enough to tell him what a fucking asshole he was. He just liked the idea of it, that’s all.”

“Maybe.” Darla sighs. “But for all his faults, he was the only one for me.”

And that’s kinda scary, because if like mother, like daughter holds true then she’s met the only man she’ll ever love; met him and lost him in a few short months and at eighteen, that’s got to be depressing.

So she drinks to her life being ruined and somehow, the few gulps send her into a comfortable haze where she can see just how it’s going to be; how Wes will calm down and see that she’s been a fucking heroine, trying to save him, how he’ll be—

“Overcome with remorse,” she whispers thickly. “Yeah.”

“What’s that?” Darla asks.

“Wes. He’s gonna realize what a slime he’s been—no, not a slime, because, yeah, he got fucked and he’s got every right to be mad, but he’s gonna come here, right here, and, and, he’s going to knock on the door, and there’ll be flowers and shit and he’ll tell me he—”

“Loves you, and it’ll never happen again, and, oh Faith, don’t do it. Don’t be like me.” And Darla’s struggling up out of her chair and coming to sit beside her on the couch, smoothing Faith’s hair back off her face. “See this bruise?” A lacquered nail taps against her cheek. “Want to know how many Liam gave me? No; you don’t know about all of them. I had plenty. You think he won’t do it again? Think again. Better yet, don’t give him the chance.”

“I hit him first,” she whispers.

“And why did you do that?”

She closes her eyes. “He called me a whore,” she admits.

“And you slapped him?”

“No. I punched him so hard his eye was black before I left,” she says, and there’s a bit of pride in the admission.

Darla reaches over and grabs a cigarette and times the first long exhalation with a terse, “Next time go for his balls, honey. Then he won’t be in any fit state to hit you back.”

“I don’t want to hurt him again, Mom.” She’s weeping now, the comforting pretense that it’ll all be fine torn from her, because nothing can make it right, not ever. “I want him back, I want Wes. I can’t do it without him, any of it. I want Wes.”

And there’s nothing left but disbelieving grief and despair because she had him, two days ago, she had him, Wes, her Wes, had him curled up beside her, touching her face with gentle hands, kissing, yes, kissing just where his hand had struck her, she’s sure he did. Had him caring, had him loving her.
Then she remembers that since Thursday he’s known that Liam was caught trying to cash one of his checks and she’s sitting up and hurling her drink across the room because damn, he’s such a sneaky fucking bastard.

“Faith—”

“No! I can’t stand this! I don’t know what happened, but he lied to me too. He’s known for days, for fucking *days* and not said anything.”

And the lamp in the corner’s a twin of the one in the hotel room he took her to and she can hear him whispering to her—

“*Is there something you want to tell me, Faith?*”

“*Is there something you need to tell me?*”

“I want you to tell me if there’s anything I should know.”

Three times. Three fucking times. And just how many chances do you get?

But that’s like a complicated Zen koan that could take an entire lifetime to parse out. And anyway, she’s starting to get too pleasantly drunk to contemplate anything really so she just pours herself some more vodka and settles back down on the couch.

Darla puts her arm around her and keeps smoothing her hair back in this calming, very regular motion. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. For everything.”

Faith doesn’t say anything, just rests her head on Darla’s shoulder, something she hasn’t done for years. Longer than she can remember, anyway. She’s not sure when they became mother and daughter again, but it’s welcome, and needed, because God knows how she’d make it through this day and the next without Darla’s support, however drunken it may be. Between that and the vodka banishing the bad thoughts and easing the knot in her stomach, she finds herself drifting off to sleep—the first real, satisfying sleep she’s had in days.

She’s awakened by the doorbell. She has no idea how long she’s been out, but dark has already settled over the room. For a brief moment she’s completely disoriented—thinks she’s in Wes’ house with the curtains drawn, that she’ll roll over and throw her arm out and he’ll be there. But as her eyes adjust to the light she can see Darla still asleep next to her, fingers curled around a nearly-empty glass which is tipping alarmingly. Faith intercepts it, places it lightly on the coffee table so as not to wake her. The doorbell rings again, and it’s all she can do not to snarl, “Fuck off!” in the general direction of the door. Whoever it is, she doesn’t want to see them. Unless it’s Wes with a look of contrition and a dozen fucking roses but she might as well wish for a fucking pony while she’s at it.

She hauls herself unsteadily to her feet, feeling the twinge in her wrist as she puts her weight on it. “Fuck,” she mutters under her breath, and when she looks down she can tell it looks swollen up. Nothing she can do about it now so she just keeps moving toward the door, feeling uncannily like she’s swimming through quicksand. Her head is already pounding and hadn’t she made a solemn vow to never drink vodka again? Because now would be a perfect time to renew that one in perpetuity.

She makes it there, finally, and when she peeks through the little peephole, she sees Xander standing there with a bouquet of flowers and a worried expression.

She opens the door and greets Xander with a buoyant hello that has forced cheer written all over it. He peers carefully at her, taking in the mark on her cheek and her unsteady gait.
“Have you been drinking?”

She rolls her eyes, then looks away, a little guiltily. “Well, Darla started it.”

Xander’s look of worry deepens. It’s not an expression she’s used to seeing happy-go-lucky Xander wear too often, this mix of concern and protectiveness, and in her fragile state she almost can’t bear it. “That makes it even worse, Faith.”

“Xander, it’s okay. It’s, like, a temporary thing. She’s having a little lapse.” She waves dismissively, trying to keep things light or she’s going to have a serious meltdown. “We’re all having a little lapse. It’s the fucking season for it.”

“I think I should take you upstairs, Faith.” He starts to guide her toward the stairs but she’s resistant.

“Don’t want to go upstairs. I know!” she says brightly. “We should go out. Let’s get out of here, Xander.” Her voice is shrill and a little desperate.

“Upstairs,” he says with greater conviction and she finds herself being ushered up to her room.

It’s chaos up there—she hasn’t had the heart to unpack anything so her clothes are just strewn on the floor, her posters rolled and propped against the wall. Xander sits her down on the bed and sprawls out next to her. He fishes a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and gets another for her. He lights them both before passing one over to her. She inhales the smoke with incredible single-mindedness, like it’s the last cigarette on earth.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Don’t wanna talk about it, Xander.” She exhales a plume of smoke in his face.

He frowns. “Sweetie, you can tell me anything you want to tell me. I can’t make you.” He nudges her shoulder with his and gives her his most ingratiating smile. “But you know I’m here for you, right? And I’ll sit here chain-smoking away until you’re ready.”

She looks at him imploringly. Like she’s torn between silence and letting the whole awful story spill out unheeded.

He looks over to her. “I know, Faith. I know. I mean, I didn’t like him but I know how much you loved—”

“Not loved.” She sighs heavily, takes another drag. Lets her head rest heavily on Xander’s shoulder, because her body feels heavy and she doesn’t have any energy left. Everything is such a chore all of a sudden.

Xander runs his finger lightly along the mark on her cheek. “This is new. He hit you, didn’t he? And I don’t mean that in a fun kinky way either.”

She shrugs. “Yeah, well, I hit him first.” The cigarette is sobering her up, fast, and she’s starting to remember everything again with an awful kind of clarity. The knot in her stomach is back.

Xander looks shocked, but covers it well. “You did? I mean, you did. Should have gone for the balls. Much more direct.”

She can’t help but laugh. “That’s what Darla said.”

“I’d love to fucking kick his ass.”
“Don’t be stupid and macho, Xander. And anyway, you’re not the white knight. You’re like the—” She screws up her face in concentration, then winces. “Court jester?”

“Thanks a fucking lot, Faith. I’m also an expert at inserting my foot into my mouth. It goes over really well at parties.” He takes her hand. “Faith, you know I’m just trying to help, in my own confused, clumsy, but hopefully charming way?”

“I know, I know. I’m just… I don’t mean to take it out on you but I’m really fucked up right now.”

“I was totally serious about kicking his ass.”

“And again, I have to say—no. Your heart’s in the right place, but that’s not going to do anyone any good. Besides, I think he’s hurting enough right now. That, and I did give him a pretty good shiner.”

“I still say you should have gone for the balls.”

“Xander.”

“What? Just offering you some friendly, completely unbiased advice.”

“Uh-huh. Unbiased my ass.”

“I just wanted you to be happy with him. I didn’t mean to be such a fucking jerk about it, but again, I seem to have an uncanny knack.” He looks her right in the eyes, totally serious for once. “Believe me when I tell you that I didn’t want it to end like this. Never.”

She stubs out the cigarette in the overflowing ashtray and sighs into his chest. “What am I gonna do, Xander? Everything’s so fucking wrong. I don’t even know where to start fixing it.”

By way of response, he just wraps his arms around her and lets her unburden herself.

Chapter One Hundred

She’s never cried that hard, not ever. Not even the time that Liam ran over her new bike with his rusty, beat up Crown Vic; not any of the times stupid Buffy Summers had mocked her, tripped her in the halls, tipped her lunch tray to the floor with a cruel laugh. No, Wes was hers—he wasn’t part of the cast of people fate or destiny or whatever had pre-assigned to her life. She’d found him, she’d made him her very own, and yeah, it’s cheap and cliché but there’s a big aching hole in her heart she knows will never be filled by anyone else. She knows she’s gone beyond hysterical, running through all these thoughts, but she kind of doesn’t care. It feels good to get it out and Xander’s a freakin’ prince, really. He doesn’t complain that she's snotting all over one of his favorite shirts or anything—because she totally is.

When her sobs decline to intermittent sniffles and finally silence, she worms her way out of his arms and starts picking fiercely at a hangnail, ripping it so far past the quick that blood starts to seep out from her torn flesh. He grabs her wrists, pulling her hands apart, and that turns her stomach to ice because no one’s ever done that but Wes, and the sense memory is almost too much to process when it's Xander's hands and not his. She yanks her hands away with a glare, leaving poor Xander completely befuddled.

“Hey, I know you're completely devastated that your life's turned into a plot of a cheap melodrama, but self-mutilation is not the way to go, Faith.”

That brings on a whole new slew of tears, the laughing-but-not-laughing, choking kind as she watches the trickle of blood start to coagulate before she sticks her finger in her mouth, sucking the
wound—the blood tart and metallic on her tongue, the ripped skin stinging with a nagging, tingling throb.

“So, how about we order a pizza before you develop an unhealthy appetite for blood?” Xander says, his glibness unable to hide that he has no idea what to do for her, but hey, food’s always a good start.

They’d tucked the groggy and still mostly drunk Darla to bed before the delivery guy arrived so they could take over the living room. Since then, they’ve decimated half the molten, cheesy pizza, with MTV2 on in the background, in silence.

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Finally getting some decent, if cheap, food in her stomach is helping the whole thought process thing go a little more smoothly—too smoothly in fact.

Xander carefully finishes chewing a mouthful of pizza. “What?”

“The funeral.” By the way his mouth gapes in a weird combination of shock and astonishment, she can tell he’d kind of forgotten about that pesky little detail too. “Is anyone planning my goddamn father’s funeral?”

“Uh, looks like that might be you, Faithy.” And he looks genuinely sorry about it too.

“Yeah. Well, I guess that's something to keep my mind off the fact that I'm going on trial for embezzlement and that my fucking gourmand of a boyfriend would rather eat a whole bag of Doritos and drink a six-pack of Bud Light than ever see me again.”

“She should be worried that you just used an SAT word as an insult? Maybe it's best it's over between you guys, because your vocabulary's kind of creepy now.”

And yeah, at that moment, she's really glad Xander's back on her side. Just to make sure he knows it, she punches him playfully in the arm and calls him a dick.

Turns out she doesn't even have to call up the morgue and see what the deal was with Liam's body. The phone rings and it's the coroner's office, asking if any arrangements have been made for transport to a funeral home. Faith's got half a mind to agree to the pauper's grave option when they mention it, but they also mention they have the facilities to do a cremation, if she'd like. No fancy urn or anything. Just a boxful of ashes, which sounds like the perfect lasting tribute for him. They'd need to have a closed casket funeral anyway, and what's the difference between an expensive metal casket or a stupid vase on a pedestal in the long run? And then, after the requisite rosary and funeral mass, they could drive to the coast and sprinkle his ashes in the warm ocean and there'd never be a pesky plot to visit on his birthday or the anniversary of his death or ever. She really likes that idea, the swirling currents carrying him back up to Ireland and as far away from her as possible.

Surprisingly, Darla agrees, if for no other reason than they just don't have the money for anything elaborate, even though the Knights of Columbus from the church are calling to ask if she'll want an honor guard at the funeral and the Roncalli Society are calling too, asking if she'd like them to arrange a potluck luncheon in the church hall after the service.

It's too much to think that Wes would be at the funeral, she knows that. But she can't help craning her neck every half-minute nearly to see if he's slipped into the back of the nearly full church. Squashed in between Xander and Darla on the front pew makes that kind of difficult. She's wearing the only appropriate black items in her wardrobe, a skirt and blouse he'd bought her that she'd missed when she tossed everything else out of her suitcase. They'd been tangled up with her black Ramones
tee and a cheap black skirt she used to wear clubbing.

“I don’t think he’s coming, honey,” Darla whispers, patting her on the arm in an approximation of a soothing gesture.

“I know. I know.” She’s resigned herself to that fact already, but she can’t help but keep looking, and she almost jumps out of her seat when she catches sight of a lanky man in a perfectly cut, black suit, but when he turns around it’s just some muckity-muck from the factory, representing the management. It’s not Wes.

*And it never will be,* she thinks, knowing that’s the cold hard reality now. It’s been three days. Three days and complete radio silence, except for the dry, impersonal documents Holden’s hand-delivered to her every morning. Between planning the funeral and endless, frustrating phone calls from Eve, she hasn’t had much time for any more reflection. Except when she’s lying in bed at night, the creaking house settling around her, her hands tentatively sneaking under the covers, brushing over her breasts or lightly fingering her clit. But there’s no there there, even though there’s a nagging part of her body addicted to that routine of thrice-daily (or more) orgasms. Her brain rejects the prospect of any physical arousal, filling her sparse fantasies, teasingly, with happy flashes of memory that rapidly and inevitably spiral into flashbacks of that last fight, of him raising his hand against her in anger, not to bring them both pleasure.

The thought of that is enough to send her crying again, and she’s not sure if she should be thankful or horrified when her reverie is interrupted by the honking organ of the processional hymn and the service begins.

She tunes it all out, standing and sitting when everyone else does, even rousing from her apathy to find herself crying as she sings because it’s ‘Abide With Me’ and that always gets her, because it’s the one thing she can remember from her Granddad’s funeral, when she was five and the world was a bigger, scarier place without him there to sneak her peppermints during Mass and tell her she’s his princess.

Darla’s beside her, swaying slightly, but not from vodka. The hangover she’d had when she woke up on Wednesday morning and one look in the mirror at her face, smeared with mascara, had been enough to put her back on the wagon.

“I’m not going to do it, Faith,” she’d declared, tipping the inch of vodka they’d left un-drunk down the sink in a dramatic gesture of renunciation. “This job; the way I’ve been feeling about myself. I’m not going to lose it because of Liam. He ruined my life when he was alive; he’s not going to do it now he’s dead. God rest his soul.”

“That’s the spirit,” Faith had said dully, watching the final drops spill out and wondering how long Darla would stick to it.

The priest’s doing his best with Liam’s life, trying to spread the truth—drunken, violent wastrel—thinly so it’ll get lost among the platitudes. When he gets to the ‘loving husband and father’ part, she flinches, gripping onto her hymn book and waiting for the thunderbolt. But seems like priests can get away with lying or maybe God just doesn’t care, because Liam’s not his problem, after all.

No. He’s hers. Still fucking up her life, even if Darla’s doing a good job of wriggling free from his grip.

When it’s finally over, she lets the church empty of the crowd of Liam’s drinking buddies, the curious neighbors, and a scattering of relatives who’d been nowhere when they were needed, but today were out in force, before getting to her feet to follow Darla down the aisle.
She sees him then, sitting at the back, wearing a dark suit and a dark-red tie that proclaims he’s not a mourner. No. He wouldn’t be, would he? There’s something dream-like about it because he’s so far away from her and she’s walking so slowly that he never seems to get any closer.

Why Wesley’s come to Liam’s funeral, she doesn’t know. To make sure the bastard’s well and truly dead? Maybe. She’s got a feeling it’s the motive of a lot of the people who turned up. If it’s to see her—she can’t think of what there is to say. Not here. Not today.

When he stands, giving her a fleeting look and what might be a nod, though the inclination of his head is so slight she’s not sure, she stops dead, her hand going out to hold onto the polished wood of the pew beside her. His face is still bruised where her fist struck him and though he’s as pulled-together as it gets, crisp, just-out-of-the-box perfection, his eyes are tired and his face is pale.

He looks as fucked-up as she does and she’s glad about that, with a fierce, unholy satisfaction. She wants him to suffer, wants this to be as hard on him as it is on her. Looks like it is.

And at the same time, she wants to go to him, hold him, cradle him to her and tell him it’ll be fine, it’ll all be fine, because she’s never seen him look lonelier. She’s got Darla and she’s got Xander, who’s starting to yawn when she tells him for the twentieth time how if she’d just said this instead of that, Wes would’ve understood, would’ve forgiven her, but who’s still right there for her, and Wes? Wes has no-one.

Wes just had her.

She wouldn’t have known what to say to him here, with the incense hanging in the air like the breath of God she’d always thought it was, and the heavy, waiting silence of an empty church, but she still starts to hurry forward as he turns abruptly, leaving the pew and beginning to walk toward the double doors where the sun’s doing its best to reach into the dim, eternal dusk of the church.

She might have found the words to stop him if Xander hadn’t appeared at the doorway, looking for her.

He and Wesley exchange a look that even from yards away she can see is full of mutual loathing. Liam’d probably think a fight at his funeral was just the rousing send-off he deserved, but he doesn’t get it. Xander says something, low-voiced and emphatic, and Wesley’s head jerks back. He turns away without speaking and by the time she reaches the door, on legs that are shaking in time with her hands, he’s lost in the sea of people trying to get to the church hall so they can make inroads on the food at the wake and then make a hasty exit.

“Xander!” she croaks, her throat so dry it hurts to speak. “What did you say? What did you say to him?”

He gives her a cautious glance. “Well, it was pretty spur-of-the-moment, and the location wasn’t ideal, but I went with the classic.”

“Stop fucking about and tell me!” she hisses, feeling her heart beating in an unsteady rhythm.

He gives her a patient look. “Faith, I told him to fuck off. You want the exact words?” He reaches out and moves Faith so that she’s standing where Wesley was. “I looked that stupid, abusive dickhead in the eyes and said—Yes, Father, we’re going there right now.”

Faith cringes and turns to meet Father Gilroy’s eyes, grave but with a distant twinkle in them. “Your mother’s looking for you, Faith,” he says. “And Xander, perhaps you could remember that we’re all God’s children and ask yourself what your mother would do if she caught you talking that way.”
Seeing Xander reduced to a stuttering, blushing state of extreme embarrassment shouldn’t cheer her up as much as it does.

They bring home enough left-overs to feed them for a week—except by then Faith’s pretty sure she won’t want to see Jell-O again in her life. Darla’s full of chatter about how Cousin Sandra’s got a scholarship and Uncle Danny’s taken up golf and really, seeing her so bright almost makes the three hours of hell she’s just gone through worthwhile.

Almost.

She’s never felt like she belonged; not in this town, not in this life, but she’s never felt that she didn’t belong in this family until today. The looks she gets; speculative, nosy, grubby fucking looks from people who might not know all the details but know Faith’s been having an affair with an older man, living in sin, like half of them don’t have daughters who got married with bumps showing under the white satin. She drifts from group to group, hearing the conversations break off as she gets near; watching the heads bump together as she goes by and the chatter begins again.

She spends the last hour on the steps outside, smoking and staring at a perfect blue sky and wishing it would rain.

Darla runs out of stuff to say and goes to lie down, resting for the ordeal of going back into work the next day, because her boss rang to say he’d covered for her all week but if she wasn’t there on Saturday she could forget about coming in on Monday.

Faith’s left sitting, staring at a television she doesn’t want to watch, in limbo, because although there’s stuff she should be doing—and unpacking and starting to look for a job are starting to move onto the ‘urgent’ part of the to-do list—she can’t really do it now. She just buried—sort of—her father and it doesn’t feel right doing anything but sit around feeling sad. Which is easy, even though Liam’s death isn’t what’s making her feel that way. Unless she thinks about how nice it would’ve been if he’d died a month ago. That’s enough to bring a lump to her throat right there.

Seeing Wesley hasn’t done anything to help her deal. She misses him with a bone-deep sense of loss that’s painful. She keeps forgetting for brief snatches of time and then remembers with a jolt that leaves her breathless with the pain of it all, as fresh as if she hasn’t had days to get used to it.

She’s brooding over every memory she’s got, all those snapshot moments she’s locked away but never thought she’d need, and they’re all Wesley staring at her looking adorable, looking dazzled, looking at her as if he loves her and it’s un-fucking-bearable. She’d do anything to get him back and she’d do it in a heartbeat if she could only work out what it was she needed to do to fix this sorry, fucking mess.

The phone rings and sends her stumbling over to pick it up. It’s Darla’s, not hers, so it’s probably just Eve, who’s due to come around on Monday for a real heart-to-heart but who seems to be losing interest as Faith’s not spilling anything juicy.

“Hello?” And she’s biting back the words, ‘This is Mr. Wyndam-Pryce’s office, how may I help you?’ but maybe she did say them and there’s this weird echo or something because a high, giggly voice is repeating them back to her.

“This is Mr. Wyndam-Pryce’s office calling.”

“What? Who is this?”

There’s a squeak that goes off the scale. “Faith! It is you! You’ll never guess who this is!”
Faith rolls her eyes. Never in a million years, except there’s only one girl who manages to make exclamation points audible. “Hi, Harmony.”

“You guessed! That’s just so awesome. I never would’ve recognized you though, if I didn’t, like, know you lived there. Have you got a cold or something?”

“Something, yeah. What’s going on?”

And just to prove that, yeah, life can always get that little bit shittier, she has to endure another shrill burst of laughter before Harmony says, “Silly! I told you. I’m Mr. Wyndam-Pryce’s secretary. Well, I’m temps for him until he leaves.”

She wonders, with a detached, distant clarity, if Harmony can hear her heart breaking but no, the stupid bitch is babbling on as if she hadn’t just left Faith—who’d fucking stood up for her that time the rumor went around that Harmony had head lice and no-one would sit next to her—gutted and bleeding.

“You’re—you’ve got my job?” she whispers. “Wes has replaced me?”

There’s a pause. “Well, duh,” Harmony says, and her voice is sharper now, with the fluffy sweetness bare in spots, showing the chilled-steel Faith always knew was underneath. “You did, like, steal from him and he’s got a stack of paperwork to get through before he moves.”

Stop saying that! she screams silently. Stop telling me he’s going because I can’t fucking stand it.

“Get him to fill you in on the concept of ‘innocent until proved guilty’, ” she manages to say. “And if there’s room left in that pinhead of yours, he can explain all about slander too.”

There’s a longer pause that means Harmony didn’t get it and is filing everything she’s said in the ‘never think of again’ folder.

“Yes. Well.” The sweet, charming smarm is back. “I’m calling to just ask for a teensy bit of help actually.”

Faith nods, settling back against the couch. “I bet you are,” she says with just a hint of relish, remembering her first days with Wes. “Broken a nail on the typewriter yet?”

“Two!” Harmony wails. “Why doesn’t he have a computer anyway? What kind of weirdo is he?”

Got an hour or two, Harmony? “Yeah, it sucks, but you’ll get used to it. Just make sure you put the carbon in the right way ‘round.”

“That’s the black papery stuff, right? Because it’s all over my top! It’d better be washable.”

Faith sighs in mock sympathy. “Fraid not.”

Harmony actually fucking sniffs. “He’s so mean,” she whispers, dropping her voice as if Wes can hear her, which is probably a good habit to get into given the uncanny way he usually can. “He snaps at me like all the time and he stares at me as if—”

“Has he mentioned me?” she interrupts, and it’s so fucking lame she can’t believe it, it’s so utterly fucking desperate to be asking Harmony, of all people, to tell her about Wes, but she has to know.

“He says anything of yours I come across has to go in this box he’s put in the corner. He’s sending it to you and you’re not to come in and he won’t take calls from you, or letters, or—” Harmony’s voice
changes from a confiding gabble to a panicked squeak again. “Yes, uh, sir, right away!”

And Faith heard it too; Wesley’s voice as he leans out of his office and yells for coffee, clipped tones a little more ragged than she’s used to.

“I have to go,” Harmony said. “Oh shoot, I never got to ask you about this funny filing system he’s got; is it English or something?”

“The alphabet you mean? Dunno.”

“Silly!” Harmony’s voice is sounding a little tense. “I mean, there’re files all over the place; it looks like someone just threw them around or something.”

Faith’s eyes narrow. She’d left the office looking just fine. If it’s messed-up now, Wes did it, not her. Huh. No wonder Harmony’s freaking.

“And I’m afraid to ask—how does he take his coffee again?”

She’s so tempted but she goes with the truth. “Black, no sugar. Sometimes he adds milk, but he’ll tell you if he wants it.”

“And you must know how to get him in a good mood, right?”

“What?” She’s swallowing a giggle now, though God knows, it’s not really funny.

“Well, he wasn’t always this grouchy, was he?”

Wes with his head in the freezer at the cottage, grinning with delight as he found the ice-cream.

“No.”

“So how do I, you know, turn his frown upside down?” Harmony asks with a titter.

And this is one answer she’s not going to change as she obsessively re-writes the past few weeks in her head, because he’s put Harmony in her place and he’s throwing out all her stuff and she fucking hates him, yes, she does.

“Remember that really gross thing Billy Peterson wanted you to do before he invited you to his party?”

“Eww. Yes.”

“Works every time, but don’t try it when he’s on the phone. And Harmony?” Faith smiles sweetly at the phone. “Better swallow this time.”
Part Eleven

Chapter Summary

Faith asks for forgiveness but it comes at a cost.

Part Eleven
Chapter One Hundred and One

And there's this routine she gets into after that. Well, mostly it involves getting into bed and staying there. Which isn't difficult, thanks to her new diet of vodka and sleeping pills.

As well as the Tupperware containers of truly gross tuna casserole that people bring around as an excuse to pry into the grubby corners of her life, they bring booze. Bottle upon bottle of cheap whiskey and vodka mostly. And the minute she hears Darla leave for work on Saturday morning, she liberates a bottle of vodka from where it's been stashed in the basement (telling herself that she's only doing it to put temptation out of Darla's way because she's all fucking heart) and takes it back to bed with her.

Well, the weekend just flies by after that. She burrows down under sheets that give off this musty sour smell from her clammy flesh and obliterates everything from her mind with the sickly sting of the vodka washing down the pills that she's snuck out of Darla's bedroom.

Because there's only so many times that girl can have the same old conversations that she never had in real life. The conversation she should have had with Wes a month ago. The conversations she should have had every fucking time he asked her what was wrong.

She wonders if she should pray. That if she prays hard enough and makes a deal with God to be a good girl who eats all her greens and keeps herself chaste and pure that he'll turn back the clock so none of this shit ever happened.

Then when the pills are wearing off and she's trying hard not to wake up, she remembers that she hates him now. She hates him because he's a stone cold motherfucking bastard who's got Harmony Kendall under strict instructions to not put through her calls and then she's wide awake and grinding her teeth and she has to get out of bed for more booze and it starts all over again.

Darla pokes her head round the door a couple of times but seems almost relieved when Faith manages to croak that she thinks she's gone down with something and she's probably contagious. And if being a fucking stupid cunt is catching, then yeah, she probably is.

But Monday morning, Darla's not quite so gullible. She comes sweeping in with a perky, “C'mon, Faithy, up and at 'em” that almost threatens to perforate her eardrums and pulls back the drapes with a deafening swish.

“Go away, I'm sick.”

“It's called a hangover, sweetie,” Darla says drily and then gives a startled gasp as Faith emerges from under the covers to glare at her. Which actually requires way too much effort and hurts as her eyes meet Mr. Sun for the first time in sixty hours. “Jesus, Faith, you look like shit.”
“Feel like shit too, thanks for asking,” she mumbles, pulling the pillow over her aching head, only to have it snatched out of her hands by Darla.

“You got your lawyer coming over today and I am not having that woman tell people that you come from a dirty home,” Darla starts furiously. “I know what everyone’s saying and we are better than that. I want you up, I want this bed stripped and those boxes unpacked before I leave for work. You’ve got half an hour, girly!”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you fucking can!”

And Darla’s right, she can. Or rather she can lie in bed, until Darla gets a glass of cold water from the kitchen and throws it in her face so she’s spluttering and spitting but slowly getting out of bed because even fucking damp patches bring back the most bittersweet of memories.

“C’mon, Faith, because next time it’s gonna be a bucket.”

And by the time Darla leaves with a cheery good-bye (and she really needs to check her mom’s bedside table because she has to be on fucking Prozac), Faith's pale and shaky but showered and dressed.

Unpacking brings fresh floods of tears even though she was pretty sure that there was absolutely no water left in her body. Everything seems to reek of him, whether he bought it or not. The green T-shirt from the time he fucked her over the desk. The lace thong she was wearing the first time he brought her off with his fingers. And it's not like it was just sex and that's all she's missing. When she finds a red Sharpie buried in a tangle of socks, she's bawling fit to bust.

Bawling so hard that she doesn't hear the doorbell first time round.

Hears it plenty on the second peal because whoever is out there is leaning on the bell. And for a second, her heart leaps because it's got to be him. Going to be Wes fucking begging her to take him back. But who the fuck is she kidding?

She moves through the lounge which is looking as neat and clean as it can possibly look after Darla's health and efficiency over-drive and opens the door to find Eve standing there with a bright smile plastered all over her pretty face.

“Hi, Faith, how are you?” she inquires and Faith wonders whether some perky bug infected the whole town overnight.

“I feel like crap,” she mumbles, holding the door open as Eve trips over the threshold in her expensive sling backs and sweeps an eye that misses nothing over the lounge. Because all the vacuuming and dusting in the world can't hide the chipped furniture and the stains and dents on the walls where bottles, glasses and occasionally her and Darla have been thrown.

“Um, do you want a drink? I think we've got some coffee and if you like tuna casserole then, man, you've come to the right house.”

“No, I'm good, thanks,” Eve assures her hastily and waits for Faith to fling herself down on the couch, which squeaks in protest, before sitting next to her so she can take Faith's cold hand in hers.

“Really, Faith, how are you?”

And considering that Eve's phone calls last week were increasingly tetchy, this whole concern over
her wellbeing is a little suspect.

“I'm fine,” she says tonelessly, turning her head away from Eve's earnestly furrowed brow which is a mistake because now Eve's gasping at the bird's eye view of the bruise on her cheek. It's turned a fetching shade of purple with little dots of yellow here and there over the weekend and really adds to the whole white trash girl gone bad look she's currently working.

“So I have good news. I spoke to Charles…I mean, Mr. Gunn, and the DA's office are willing to cut a deal,” Eve says in a rush like she's been rehearsing the speech on her way over. “If you plead guilty to stealing the checks, they're going to drop the other charges and I think we can persuade them to suspend your sentence. But you'd have to be willing to testify that Peter Harper and your father planned the whole thing.”

She looks at Faith expectantly like she should be turning cartwheels and waving her pom-poms at the news. Not leaning back on the couch cushions and rubbing the bridge of her nose, which is another habit she got off Wes which she needs to lose stat.

“Whatever.” Yeah, she knows that she should be getting more excited or, like worried—worried would be really good—about this but all she can think about is the hole in her chest where her heart used to be.

And the whole Princess Perky routine was just an act because Eve loses the smile in an instant. She grips Faith's arm just above the dingy bandage she's got round her wrist and she doesn't look quite so pretty when her face is all twisted up like that.

“Look, Faith, you've got to start getting over yourself,” she hisses. “I have got a whole bunch of people way nastier than you riding my ass about this case. And Ms. Morgan has promised me that I'm going to be doing nothing but filing for the next five years if I don't get you off, so you'd better drop the attitude and…”

Oh, she's dropped the attitude. Dropped it right down the back of the couch and is staring at Eve in disbelief.

“Ms. fucking Morgan? Lilah What the fuck has she got to do with it and in what freaky hell dimension does she not want me to get sent to the big house?”

Eve's leaning in closer now, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I know. It's beyond unethical with her being Mr. Wyndam-Pryce's ex-wife but, well, I shouldn't be telling you this…”

“Shouldn't be telling me what?” she demands and she's practically straddling Eve and pushing her into the arm of the couch.

And it's so obvious that Eve is dying to tell her, dying to tell anyone, because she doesn’t even have to threaten to pull her hair before she's spilling it all out in bite-sized pieces.

“Mr. Wyndam-Pryce stormed in on Friday morning, no appointment, just strode into her office and slammed the door. They were at it for half an hour and she's screaming at him and he's all snarling and being really British. Then he storms out again and he didn’t even look in my direction but I still nearly peed my pants and then she comes out and I have had her on my back for practically every minute since then wanting to know what I'm doing to make sure you get off. She's not even satisfied with the DA's deal.”

“Wes went to see Lilah? What did he say about me?” God, she sounds so fucking high hchool.

“I don't know, Faith, but whatever it was, I haven’t see Lilah so rattled since, well, like ever.”
“I don't fucking believe him…” Because she wishes that she could still believe that he's her white knight, wrapping her up in his arms and keeping her safe from the monsters under the bed, but he's just trying to save his own neck.

“See, it's like this, Faith. I do not fail. I never fail. I was a straight A valedictorian in High School, I never turned in a paper and got less than 95 percent all the way through law school. I win my cases, and this one is not going to be an exception, so I don't know what went on between you and Mr. Wyndam-Pryce but you had better start helping me to help you because I am not letting a bitch like Lilah Morgan fuck up my career because of you. Now start talking.”

And there had been this story she was working on during her enforced bed rest. Which involved the photos and Wes spanking her every time she looked at him funny, all designed to fuck his shit well and truly up but even as she opens her mouth, she knows that a) when she tries to do anything herself it goes horribly wrong and b) she doesn’t hate him that much. Doesn't hate him at all.

Instead she's got his story all ready and it's tumbling out word perfect. Even better than word perfect because if she gets it right, maybe she'll get a prize. Maybe she'll get him back.

“And he hit me, right in front of Wes… and I couldn't tell Mom because she's still in love with him and if she knew that he was saying that he was gonna hurt her… he was so mad that I was working and that I was giving her housekeeping, it's this whole thing with the alimony…”

Eve is scribbling it all down. In fact, it looks like she's about to start having multiple orgasms there and then.

“This is great,” she squeaks. “And the checks?”

She hits her cue perfectly. “He kept asking for them but I wouldn't give them to him, I couldn’t do that to Wes. But I had to go and meet because he was threatening to burn the house down and I thought I could reason with him but that Peter guy was there too and I went to the john and it was so stupid—I know I shouldn’t have had the checkbook with me but Wes was away and I didn't like to leave them in the office—and they must have got it out of my bag. I didn't even realize they'd taken a sheet out of it, I swear and then I was too scared to tell anyone. I never thought that he'd be able to cash them, that's the God's honest truth.”

Even Wes would be impressed with the little choking sob she ends up on. As it is, the Oscar's already hers and she'd just like to thank the Academy and…

Except Eve is reading her notes back and looking like the day she's going to become the youngest woman to ever be elected to the Supreme Court or whatever is a long way off.

“Are you sure this is what happened?” she asks, with way too much suspicion for Faith's liking.

“I just said, didn't I?”

“So are there any witnesses to this?”

“Wes saw my dad hit me;” she reminds her with a glare. “And then there's my Dad but, oh darn it, he's dead. Maybe you can get him to testify from beyond the grave.”

And where Eve comes from all girls love their daddies because they don't drink and steal and cheat on their mommies so she gives a guilty start and fingers her pad nervously.

“I'm sorry, Faith,” she says contritely. “This is going to make a big difference; it would just help if I could get some corroboration on a few bits of your story.”
“Yeah, well isn’t that, like, your job?” she points out and then she remembers that actually she’s meant to be an honest but not very smart girl who’s found herself in this shitty situation through no fault of her own. “I’m sorry, it’s just all this is really freaking me out and I just want it to be over, y’know?”

“I know,” Eve says and she’s getting a hand pat so it must have worked. Or maybe not, because she’s leaning in again, eyes gleaming with curiosity. “So, just tell me one thing, because I’m dying to know. What the hell did you and Lilah see in him?”

And it’s so very tempting to channel Xander and make with the flip answer: ‘What, besides the ten-inch dick?’ but it’d be tacky (and, yeah, just a bit of an exaggeration), so she gives a noncommittal shrug instead.

“No, I’m serious,” Eve persists. “I mean—no offense, but you and Lilah have got about one thing in common, no, two; you’re female and you’ve got dark hair. That’s it.”

Dark hair. Faith wonders what color Fred’s was and if she looked like either of them. And she thinks of Harmony’s long, blonde hair and goes off into this little daydream where Wes is on the phone to the temp agency, spelling out his requirements for the perfect secretary, starting with, ‘must not be brunette’.

“Faith?” Eve’s giving her a look that’s edging over to annoyed, as if she hates the idea that her curiosity will have to go unsatisfied.

“You tell me,” Faith counters, leaning back and relaxing now they’re done with the tricky stuff. “You’ve seen him; what do you think of him?”

“He scares the shit out of me,” Eve answers, and it’s so unexpectedly honest that Faith gapes at her before laughing.

“Yeah. That’s Wes.” Faith bites her lip. Yeah. It was. He could be scary. He was so focused that he didn’t realize how that made him seem. To Wes, there was an objective, and whether it was destroying Lilah in court, slicing peppers into identical strips or making Faith come just when he wanted her to, and not a moment sooner, he didn’t see—didn’t let there be obstacles.

“But he’s good-looking,” Eve offers. “For an older man.”

Faith raises her eyebrows and drawls, “An older man?” Fuck, forget Xander; that was pure Wes. Maybe she was, like, possessed or something. “He wears me out. He’s like, good to go, 24/7.”

Eve gives a gasping little shudder, almost wriggling in delight. “Really? Because from little comments, Lilah’s made, he, ah, wasn’t entirely—but she’s still so obsessed with him that it doesn’t really—”

“You this incoherent in court?” Faith snaps, tiring of the game. “Look, Wes isn’t your type. You don’t get it, fine. I do. And I’m not gonna discuss it.”

She feels grubby now and she doesn’t look up as Eve, all business again, gathers together her papers.

“Right. Well, I think this has been a very productive session, don’t you?”

“Sure,” Faith says dully.

“And I can do a lot with this.” Eve taps her long fingernails against her briefcase. “It’ll make all the difference, I’m sure.”
You can shove it up your ass, for all I care, Faith thinks bitterly. It’s all lies, but I guess that’s not important.

Eve swishes away, letting herself out because Faith is slumped on the couch and refusing to move.

And she’s left with a day to fill, and nothing to fill it with.

It makes her realize just how structured her life had become. Wesley had pretty much controlled everything about her; what she wore, what she ate, when she got up, when she went to bed, when she came, when she didn’t, when she—

She used to do all this herself. In three months, he’s changed her life with an uncompromising hand. Yeah. Literally. She sighs and lies back. No bruises on her ass, even if her face is marked. No spankings, no teasing, no fucking, no sucking. No Wes.

She’s really not getting over that any time soon, is she?

The need to see him is unbearable. She wants to go to his office, barge right past Harmony—and God, it’d be just perfect if that bitch tried to stop her because punching her out would be, like, the perfect foreplay—and slam the office door behind her. Wes’d look up, all puzzled and angry, and she’d start to strip and watch his eyes darken and narrow. He’d order her over to the desk and she’d feel the cool wood start to warm against her skin as his hand—

Her body begins to respond for the first time in days, melting and tingling, so she shoves her jeans down and slips a hand inside her thong. The skin she’d kept smooth for him is prickled with hair now, catching at her fingers. She remembers the look the prison guard had given her bare snatch in the showers, appraising and contemptuous, and shudders, losing the edge of her arousal. Then she thinks of his hands on her and sighs, snuggling back and losing herself in memories.

She’s been masturbating for ten minutes when she gives up, slippery skin aching but not the right way, teeth on edge because fuck she needs to come, and she can if she wants to, there’s no one to stop her—and that’s why she can’t.

Dizzy from hunger and vodka, she sits up, dragging her zipper into place. Maybe he’ll have the same problem, she thinks. Maybe right now, right this fucking minute, he’s sitting in his office, hard as a rock, or in the bathroom off his office jerking off, thinking of her.

“Get out of my head,” she whispers. “Get out of my fucking head.”

The clock tells her it’s eleven and she’s spurred into action. Shower first, and though her hands are trembling too much to make a good job of it, she shaves until she’s smooth again, just the way he likes it. She dries her hair and gets dressed in something that’s not trying too hard but isn’t in your face slut either; black jeans and a dark-red silk shirt.

Then she heads over to the diner. He might have plastered ‘Keep out’ signs all over his office, and she knows without trying that he’s changed the entry codes on the house, but he doesn’t own the fucking town, and if she wants to sit and wait for him to come in for his chicken and lettuce and tomato on rye, no mayo, she can.

Pushing open the door with a hand that’s shaking, feeling her empty stomach churn with nerves and hunger, she’s all but ready to weep when she sees the chairs at the counter, the ones where they sat and shared a root-beer float. It’s as if everywhere is full of ghosts that only she can see; shadowy Wes and Faith’s wandering around in a blissful world where all that matters is that they’re together.

She orders a coke and a salad and retreats to a corner table, far back in the room, not letting herself
admit that it’s so he won’t see her if he glances in from the street.

The minutes stretch like elastic, pulled out taut as she waits and then snapping back with a vicious twang every time the door opens. It’s not him. It’s never him.

And when Harmony walks in, gives Faith a disdainful look and orders for Wesley in a loud, clear voice, tagging on, “He’d come himself but he’s, like, really busy,” she knows Wes expected this, knew she’d do it, was making sure this road to him was closed too.

And she could hang around the office parking lot to get a glimpse of him climbing into his car but that’d be so very pathetic. She’s better than that.

And if she says it often enough, maybe it’ll stop being a lie.

Chapter One Hundred and Two

The next few days just blend together into this unpleasant gray miasma. She doesn't take pleasure in anything. Even her mother's second-time-around sobriety and strangely optimistic demeanor starts to grate after the umpteenth “Faithy, honey, you’ve gotta get out of the house.”

Something is seriously fucking wrong with a world where Darla's got her life more together than Faith does. And rather than coping with the problem head-on, Faith just slumps down on the couch, flipping channels and wondering how long it's going to take Wes to come back to her. In her Technicolor-bright version, it's just another day—two at the most—before he's on her doorstep wearing a dark suit, looking impeccable. He's brought flowers, expensive ones, and she doesn't say a word—just leads him up to her bedroom with the stupid slow leak and the stupid, childish posters. She undresses him slowly and he just lets her and when they make love it's languid and sweet.

But she knows, deep down, instinctively, that's not how it's going to happen.

As soon as Darla's out of the house in the morning, she gets the vodka out of the cupboard and starts the pity party over again. Funny how it gives everything this nice, fuzzy quality and she doesn't have to think too hard about anything.

She's right in the middle of the serious quandary of choosing between Springer and Judge Hatchet when the doorbell rings. Again, she quells the “Fuck off!” that she always seems to have at the ready these days, and shuffles blearily to the door.

“What do you want?” she snarls.

Once her eyes adjust to the sunlight she sees Holden's smiling face. Great, just what she fucking needs. God, you can't throw a fucking rock in this town without hitting an idiot.

“Hey, Faith. Got a package for you this time. Better than a Manila envelope any day, right? So, uh, how are you holding up, huh? Is there anything I can do?” He actually looks sincere. Well, good for him.

She's still quelling the “Fuck off” that's been building and building, but she just smiles her best ingratiating smile and thanks him as sincerely as she can. Which is to say: not very. She scrawls her name on the little electronic pad, and he proffers a box at her.

She can see the gears turning in his optimistic little brain, searching the pitifully small amount of RAM for another conversational gambit, but she makes it easy for him by clutching the box and adding, “Thanks, Holden. I appreciate it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've gotta go.”
He looks perplexed for a second, then laughs and says, “Well, okay, then. Call me if you need anything.”

Was that a come-on? Whatever, dude, she thinks, practically slamming the door in his face. She retreats back into the house, incredibly curious about the box’s contents and dying to open the damn thing. It's really fucking heavy, and she wonders what's in it. That's when she notices that it was sent from—the address label is written in a fussy, controlled script that she'd know anywhere.

So, yeah, not exactly the flowers she wanted. Just her life, once again reduced to a box of meaningless objects. And when she drops it with a resounding thud and starts to cry again—with these great, choking sobs that she's had enough of to last a fucking lifetime—she wonders which one of them is more expert in betrayal.

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“Do you want the good news or the bad news first?” The good news must be pretty good because Eve's practically glowing, beaming like she's just been crowned Miss America or something. Of course, it could just be that it’s Friday night and she’s got a hot date with that Mr. Gunn.

“Whaddaya think? The bad news, of course.” She's still smarting big time from having every single one of her possessions from the office and the house mailed back, meticulously wrapped with what could only be seen as perverse care.

“Well, actually, it kind of goes better the other way around.”

“What, Eve. You're the one that studied rhetoric and all. Whatever works for you.” Yeah, she'd actually paid attention during one of Wes' stories about law school; what was so surprising about that?

“Mr. Wyndam-Pryce is refusing to press charges. Which is kind of putting a crimp in Mr. Gunn's case, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do know what you mean. It means you're out of this little pro bono gig without actually having to do anything. Or step foot in a courtroom with me again. Lucky you.”

“See, Faith, that's where you're wrong. That would be the bad news.”

“Ah, so I still have to go back to court then?”

“A formality, just you know, declare the charges null and void in the eyes of the law, that kind of thing.” She flashes that goddamn Miss America smile again, like she can't wait for Faith to be out of mind and out of sight.

“Right.”

“So, you know, be there Monday morning, nine sharp.”

“Sure thing, I'll be there.” She can't get out of there fast enough, and jumps to her feet as soon as it's clear she's been dismissed.

“Oh, and Faith?” The fake smile’s gone and Eve's got this weird look on her face, like the cat caught in the cream. “Mr. Wyndam-Pryce won't be there Monday. In case you wanted to thank him personally, seeing as I can't exactly forbid you from seeing him now. Just thought you might like to know.”

Damn that bitch! She really was a freakin’ watered-down version of Lilah, wasn't she? Still, she didn't quite know how to deliver the put down with the right amount of bitchslap yet. Not even close.
Which is why Faith just turns on her heel and marches right out of her office without a word.

“Hey, a thank you would be nice, Faith.” Eve's reedy voice barely carries out into the hall, but she's long gone, skipping the sluggish elevators to take the stairs two at a time.

The way Faith sees it, standing out at the bus stop, the sun shining down on her for the first time in weeks, she’s got exactly three options. She could go home and celebrate with Darla, she could dig up Xander and go out for a night on the town, or she could take possibly the most ill-advised route, and find Wes.

Okay, yeah, it's not like the best idea she's ever had, but it's worth a shot. Because if he's dropped the charges, he's not exactly fucking pissed off at her anymore, right? Maybe that ol' mercurial mood of his is starting to swing the other way, just a teensy bit. Just enough for her to get her foot in the door with a little conversation? There doesn't have to be anything physical. Not in the first fifteen minutes, anyway.

Naturally, she tries the office first, but strikes out. Not surprisingly, Harmony's of little to no help.

“Like, actually, Faith, he hasn't been in for days. Pretty much since I took your advice and offered him a you-know-what, remember? I was totally at the end of my rope! He kept slamming the door and he called me a...well, never mind. Anyway I told him what you said, and he got that weird look on his face, like when I make the coffee?” Faith can't help but snicker at the thought that Wes' rictus of horror was pretty much plastered on any time Harmony was within like, a ten-foot radius even if she wasn’t burning the coffee or offering him blowjobs. “And then he just kind of disappeared. Has me call him at home if anything important goes down. That trick must have just worked for you, I guess. I still haven't figured out what to do to make him less grumpy.”

Try getting a brain, moron, nearly pops out of her mouth, but she snaps it shut before she can actually say anything too horribly insulting. “Oh, okay, Harmony. Thanks!” And she's backing out the door as fast as possible trying to remember if the buses ran anywhere near his neighborhood.

It's not exactly the cheapest cab ride up the hill, she'd forgotten that. And shelling out the twenty bucks from her own pocket, well, that's not exactly the most prudent use of her limited funds, but it's not like she doesn't have a plan. Okay, not really a plan but maybe a little strategy that kind of solidified on the way there. And it all involves some nice flowers (because yeah, maybe she's the one who needs to show up with flowers in hand) and maybe a change in strategy.

She'd gone about it all wrong before, confronting him. Maybe it was time to appeal to him in their shared language and she wasn’t thinking of the one that had led to screaming fights and black eyes. What she needed to be was more contrite; sorrier than just words. She would offer him her body—he could punish her that way, make it right that way. And God, she hoped that'd work, because frankly, it was kind of her last resort.

She was actually surprised she hadn't thought of that sooner. Though she knows that if he takes the bait, it's going to hurt. He's had days to think up inventive ways to punish her and she's sure he has.

Then she thinks of something he could do that's both the best and the worst way possible.

And there's no denying that the cold knot in the pit of her stomach is a tangled mass of both fear and outright lust.

But it's not going to be that easy because even before she rings the doorbell, she can tell he's not there.
The house has got that locked-up tight feel about it and for one awful second, she wonders whether he's already left town. But no, this is Wes. He's got to cross the t's and dot the i's, pay off all those final bills and pack every single one of his gazillion glasses in newspaper and bubble wrap.

She gives it the old college try though, pressing on the doorbell and listening to it chime merrily away. Even peers through the keyhole of the heavy wooden door to see if he's passed out inside but she can't see jackshit, just darkness. And without the door codes, she can't even get into the garage to see if his car's still there. Then again, one thing he's taught her in spades is how to wait, so she plonks herself down on the doorstep, putting the flowers on the ground underneath her to keep them out of the sun.

Without her watch, which now she comes to think of it, has been sitting in the pawn shop for far longer than she ever got to wear it, it's hard to tell how long she sits there. She's glad that she managed to find the energy to not put on her jeans and whatever T-shirt happened to be lying on the floor when she got dressed this morning.

She's such a tragic little drama queen these days, that the thought of running into Lilah while she looked like she was auditioning for a part in The Beverly Hillbillies was too awful to even contemplate so she actually managed to wash her hair and get all spiffed up in a pencil skirt and her favorite polka-dot blouse. Still feels like shit though and as she takes a mirror out of her makeup bag, she realizes that she still pretty much looks like it too.

It takes two application of panstick to hide the bags under her eyes and the faint yellow traces of the bruise on her cheek. By the time she's stroked on eyeliner and her favorite red lipstick (and the irony of it being called Harlot is not lost on her. Nope, inside she's fucking laughing her head off), she hears the distant rumble of a car coming up the hill.

And because there's nothing to come up the hill for unless it's to see the broken man who lives here, her heart leaps into her throat and she can feel her palms getting sweaty.

But the car isn't long and black and sleek and as she sees the blue and white fender of one of the local cabs come into view, her blood pressure is already lowering gently until the car sweeps into the driveway and stops a few feet away from her.

She's already scrambling up, clutching the flowers to her protectively as the door open and Wes climbs out.

He's drunk. She can tell that right away from the exaggerated care with which he shuts the door and extracts a handful of bills from his wallet to pay the driver. But as he straightens up and catches sight of her, the stubble covering his pallid skin, the puffiness of his bloodshot eyes tells her the rest.

His jaw tightens and the blank mask of his face gives way to this ugly, twisted fury and she thinks as he takes a step toward her that he's going to physically throw her into the back of the cab and give the driver a hundred bucks to drive her as far away as possible.

But the cab is already reversing down the drive and it's just the two of them, standing on the gravel unable to tear their eyes away from each other.

And it's so fucking stupid because she can't speak or move. Like, she doesn't even have the right to say his name any more. That she took for granted all the times when she could climb into his lap or wrap her arms around him or even just gently brush his shoulder with her hand as she walked past him. Now she's not allowed to even look at him so she drops her eyes and stares at the pointy toes of her kitten heels instead.
“What do you want?” His voice is dull but savage at the same time, which is a pretty fucking cool trick and he’s jangling his door keys in one hand, like he's nervous. But most probably because he's sunk enough booze that it's seriously messed around with his motor skills.

There's a whole lot of things she wants and the list begins and ends with his arms around her and his voice whispering that everything—no, that him and her are—going to be okay.

She can't quite spit those words out of her mouth because her tongue seems to have turned into this dead, lumpy thing that's making speaking really hard. Instead she thrusts the flowers in his general direction, an already wilting bunch of daisies, even though he hasn't taken one step nearer to her.

“I got you these,” she chokes out.

“Why?” He's not going to make this one little bit easier for her and there's no reason why he should. He's edging closer to the door, eyeing her warily, and she knows he's wondering how he can get inside, get all that wood and stone in between them, without having to touch her. She plants herself firmly in his path and lifts her chin up.

“They're to say thank you for not pressing charges,” she says, trying to look him right in the eye but it's not working because her gaze is all over him at once, drinking him in for the first time in days. And it doesn't matter that his shirt is rumpled and he looks like hell, he's in front of her and she doesn't know when she's gonna get another chance to just… do this, see him.

He doesn't say a fucking word, just raises an eyebrow skeptically and then comes right at her, keys poised so she automatically steps out of the way.

He's got the door open and he's just about to step inside, shut himself away and her hand is on his arm, chewed nails against the white cotton of his shirt.

“Well, please…” Her fingers are curled and she can't let go, can feel him warm under her skin. “I know I can't explain, not how you want me to, and I can keep saying sorry but it's just words…”

And then because the only thing more out of control than her stupidity is her fucking death wish, she's pressing her face to the tense line of his back, not caring that she's probably getting makeup all over his shirt and her arms are pulling him toward her, rigid but unresisting.

“Keep telling myself that I hate you,” she mutters and he stiffens even more. “But I don't. I'm so fucking sad without you. I miss you, Wes. It's like I've got this ache right in my heart…”

It's all spilling out of her so fast, words tumbling from her mouth and he shakes loose of her grip and walks into the shadowy hall without ever looking back at her.

Her shoulder, her head, her everything is already drooping down to the ground until she realizes that he hasn't slammed the door in her sorry face and it's simple enough to step over the threshold and follow him down the hall.

Chapter One Hundred and Three

She’s still clutching the flowers and it’s out of the question to drop them on the polished hallway table, to shed petals slowly as he leaves them to wilt and wither, so she takes them with her as she follows him into the kitchen.

He’s by the sink, swallowing the last of a glass of water, and he doesn’t turn to look at her as she edges into the room, but he speaks.
“I don’t know why you’re here.”

It’s not a question; it’s not even a statement; it’s an admission, a confession even, and she has to bite hard on her lip to keep back the words she wants to say. But maybe there’s been too much of that, and if this is her last chance to reach him, she’d rather regret what she says than what she doesn’t.

“Yeah, you do. Because you’re smart, Wes, and even drunk you know I love you and I’m not going to just let you go without—”

“A fight?” he says tonelessly. “Haven’t we already done that?”

He turns, setting down the glass, and crosses his arms across his chest as though he needs a barrier between them.

“Guess we did. I’m not here for that.”

She dares to move a little closer, tossing the flowers onto the counter, though the table’s still between them so he can’t freak that she’s about to get inside his personal space, which, at this point, seems to be about a mile in diameter.

“Enlighten me,” he says, and it’s a pale imitation of his usual biting, sarcastic drawl, but it’s enough to make her swallow nervously.

“Can we—can we, like, sit down or something?”

He’s about to refuse, because if she sits, invited, she becomes a guest, and she’s guessing he wants her out of here fast and no fucking privileges, but he’s only standing straight because he’s got the counter at his back, and after a long moment he shrugs and leads her farther into the house. She knows why he didn’t just drag out a kitchen chair; that would’ve put them too close, no matter which end of the table he chose; here in the front room he can take a chair that leaves her no option but the couch, a long stretch of carpet away.

She perches on the edge of it, feet tucked neatly to the side, hands in her lap, just as she used to sit when she was taking dictation, but there’s no pad and pencil to hold, just her fingers, cool and damp, twisting nervously.

He’s giving her this bored, detached stare and it’s fucking intimidating but she’s seen him use it as a mask way too often for it to work as well as it used to.

“I meant it,” she says, forcing herself to start talking when all she wants to do is crawl over there and weep silently against his knee until his hand comes down to touch her hair and still her sobbing. “I wanted to say thanks.” She pauses. “Why did you—I mean, I told Eve what you wanted me to say, so—”

He lifts one hand and lets it fall back to the arm of the chair. “It’s quite simple. I realized that it would serve no useful purpose to pursue the case. The money was never the issue; your father’s beyond my reach, and that pathetic creature he enlisted to help him isn’t worth any effort.”

“And me?” she whispers. “What about me?”

“Tempting though it is to want to see you pay for your misdeeds, I think we both know that’s impossible without far too much light shed on aspects of my life I’d rather were kept private.”

The skin around his eyes tightens for a moment and she gets a look at the agony he’s been in, picturing himself exposed, open, vulnerable to a scrutiny that would be mocking at best. Word got
out how he liked to play and she’s guessing in this town the shoulders would be turning, the fingers pointing. Hell, he might even get the classic villagers with pitchforks and flaming torches storming his castle, not that the people here don’t have their own dirty, nasty little secrets, far worse than his.

He’ll do anything to keep that from happening, she thinks dully. Nothing to do with wanting to spare her. “That’s it? That’s the only reason?”

And she’s just handed him a knife and he gives it right back to her, slamming it home and twisting it viciously hard.


“Two weeks ago? Yes,” she says, refusing to flinch as he pours scorn over every word. “Now I just feel—” She glances to the side, her fingers clenching into fists. “Wes, I’m going to talk, and I want you to listen. You owe me that.”

“I owe you nothing,” he spits out and then gets himself under control though his eyes are hard, glinting with an anger just waiting to spill out. “You, on the other hand, owe me two thousand dollars, which I’ll let you get away with as you’re currently without means of support, and an apology, which you’re unable to make in the least convincing or adequate because what you did—” His voice; level, brittle, hard, cracks just a little, but he finishes his sentence. “It’s unforgivable.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” she says, helpless in the face of his bleak stare. He shakes his head and sighs, looking away, and this time the weariness doesn’t look fake. He’s at his limit; shoved there by so many nudges, so much pressure; every drink he’s swallowed, every memory of her that’s surfaced—and she’s not resenting the fact he sent back her stuff now, because it was probably killing him to look at it.

She’s running out of time.

“Wesley, I love you,” she says, and her voice steadies, though her hands are like ice. “I love you so fucking much I can’t stand it, not seeing you, not being with you. If I didn’t make you see that before—but you knew. You had to. You know everything about me. And when you said you loved me, that wasn’t a lie, so don’t even try to fucking deny it.” Her voice is starting to rise in the face of his stone-faced reception of her words. “And you know what? I’m not going to apologize. I’ve been through hell this past month and I was all by myself—”

“Which, let me remind you, was your choice,” he interrupts. “I believe I made it perfectly clear that you were to come to me, that I wished you to confide in me—”

“I was too ashamed!” The words fall into a silence that’s tight with tension and she leans back, running her hands through her hair. “Wesley, you’ve given me so much. I’m not talking about the clothes and stuff, you know I’m not. I’m talking about the way you made me feel—”

“How did I make you feel?” He sounds distantly curious as if the answer’s not really relevant to him.

“Special,” she says after a moment’s thought. “You were, like, a chance to be something else. Something better.”

His lips twist in something that shouldn’t be called a smile. “How very nice of me. And here I was thinking I was simply availing myself of your undeniable charms.”

“Wes, you fucking say that again, and look at me when you do it!” she demands furiously. “Because it’s not true! Never was, not even at the start.”
“Well, it was a little,” he says surprisingly. “I had no intention of falling in love with you, Faith. Or, to be more accurate, I’d ceased to believe it was an emotion of which I was capable.”

Only Wes can be that precise when he’s drunk, but his fingers are curled around the leather of the chair arm and his nails are digging in.

“Yeah, well it kinda snuck up on me, too,” she mutters. “But I did fall in love with you and it was working. For the first time in my stupid, pathetic life, I’d done something right. And then he called and I went and he had those—oh God, he had his hands all over them, spoiling it all, fucking it all up.” She takes a deep breath. “If I could’ve done it, I’d have killed him. I haven’t shed a single tear for him. He fucking tortured me with them and I couldn’t tell you, I just couldn’t.”

“Why?”

She’s gaping at him, struck dumb by the simplicity of his question.

“Why? I told you. I was—”

“No! Christ, Wes, it’s not that! Not saying I want the whole world to know—” She sees his jaw tighten and hurries on, “but I wouldn’t have told Xander if I felt that way. No; it’s—” She shakes her head in frustration, trying to find the words to explain. “I’m ashamed of my family,” she says quietly. “Always have been, ever since I can remember. Oh, Darla’s pulled out of the drinking right now and she’s been, well, she’s been nice, which is totally freaking me, but it doesn’t make up for—”

“Faith, I’m tired, I’m drunk and I’m not in the mood for a sob-story,” he says harshly. “If it will save time, I’ll grant that your motives in attempting to handle blackmail, extortion and fraud single-handed were well-meant, if hopelessly flawed. You’re stupid, not culpable. Are we done now?”

She’s left speechless for a moment. “No!”

“I thought it wouldn’t be that easy,” he says dryly.

“Okay, you tell me what’s pissed you off,” she snaps. “Because there’s something wrong, over and above all this shit.”

He smiles. “How very acutely observed.” He shrugs, “I’m afraid you have Lilah to thank for my mood being slightly less than pleasant.”

“What did she do now?” The words burst out of her, and she’s surprised at how bitter they sound. “And did she tell you she was the one pushing Liam to sue you, putting ideas in his tiny fucking head?”

“She touched briefly on her involvement when we met last week,” he says, “but today she was less inclined to propitiate me—I really was rather annoyed when I called on her—and more in the mood to gloat.”

“She touched briefly on her involvement when we met last week,” he says, “but today she was less inclined to propitiate me—I really was rather annoyed when I called on her—and more in the mood to gloat.”

She’s about to ask exactly what Lilah said that drove him out of the house and diving head-first into a bottle, but something occurs to her and she sits bolt-upright. “And if we’re talking about unforgivable,” she hisses, “mind telling me what the fuck you think you’re doing putting Harmony fucking Kendall in my seat, behind my desk?”

It’s his turn to give her an uncomprehending look and then it melts into a smile that makes her want to whimper with relief, because if he can look like that, maybe—
“Does that really bother you so much?”

She nods emphatically. “Really does, Wes.”

He purses his lips. “She’s the most incredibly stupid girl,” he muses. “Do you know what she offered to do—” The smile vanishes as his eyes narrow. “But of course you do,” he says silkily. “Because you told her to do it, didn’t you, Faith? Was that just, like, the best fun ever?”

And she’s not sure if he’s mimicking her or Harmony but he’s looking well and truly pissed.

“It was a joke!” she says. “I never thought even she’d be dumb enough to think I meant it. And I was —hurt.”

The animation vanishes from his face. “I really don’t see how it’s any of your business,” he says coldly. “You’re no longer in my employ.”

And that’s the first thing he’s said that hurts enough to make her eyes fill, because she might have loved being with him as his girlfriend, but she was fucking proud of being his secretary and he’s stripped that away from her without caring and for a second she hates him.

“Faith, if you cry, you leave,” he warns her. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Fine. I’m not crying. See?” She scrubs her hand across her eyes and shows him a dry hand. “No fucking tears.”

“Less swearing would be rather nice, too,” he says pointedly, and for a second he sounds like the old Wes, getting snarky over her appalling behavior.

“Don’t push it, Wesley.”

“I rather think I’ll push as much as I fucking like,” he says deliberately. “My house, my rules. And my patience is nearly exhausted.”

“Yeah, funny that,” she says quietly. “Because usually when it’s a question of rules, you’ve got all the patience in the world.”

“Tell me what you want.”

“Besides you? Besides a second chance?”

“Yes,” he says flatly.

She stands up and there’s something—is it disappointment?—in his eyes. “You think I owe you. I think I’ll do anything it takes to get you back because I don’t have any pride when it comes to you, Wes. I’ll beg and I’ll kneel naked when I do it if that’s what you want, but I want you back. No, I want you to let me back in, instead of pushing me away like this. I didn’t betray you, what we had; everything I did was to protect you, but I guess you’re too angry to see it so I’m gonna help you.”

She starts to walk toward the door and he’s struggling to get up. “What are you doing?”

She’s running now, light-footed and fast, running up the stairs, and he’s closing on her so she runs faster, snatching at the handle to his bedroom door and running into the stale darkness of a room where the curtains have been left drawn for days and the bed’s a tangled mess of sheets.

She’s just got time to find what she wants, and she’s kneeling in front of the chest in the corner when his hand closes on her shoulder, fingers bruisingly tight as he snatches at her.
“What the hell are you doing?” he says, his voice bled dry of anything but anger. “How dare you come in here—"

He drags her to her feet and she looks over his shoulder and sees what he’s trying to hide; the shirt, button missing, that she wore that first night—lying across the bed, crumpled by his hands.

She hadn’t needed anything to lend her strength because she’s so set on this nothing could stop her, but that gives her hope.

And it lets her meet his eyes, furious, blazing blue, scary eyes, and say softly. “I want you to punish me, Wesley. I want you to hurt me just as much as it takes for us to be even and then I want you to fucking hold me and kiss me and fuck me until I’ve made you believe I love you. Until you trust me again. You can do anything, Wesley. Anything you’ve dreamed up while you’ve been hating me, anything at all.”

She stretches out her hand, unwavering and steady, the switch lying across her palm.

“And I want you to use this.”

Maybe it's because she's been apart from him for so long, but every tiny movement, every tic, every mannerism is outsized and heartbreaking.

His eyes widen almost comically even as his mouth compresses into this thin, tight line before he snatches the switch away from her like it's a motherless child he's sworn to protect.

And then he does the one thing that she never expected him to. He starts laughing.

But it's not a happy sound, not an amused sound, when it's being wrenched out of him and his hand is on his chest, like it hurts.

“Lilah,” he bites out. “It's really rather ironic. She seemed to think that a scenario like the one you’re suggesting had already taken place and I was so overcome by the overwhelming charm of spanking you hard enough that you couldn't sit down for a month that I dropped the charges. Though, strangely, I find little comfort in the fact that you and my ex-wife think I'm so easily swayed.”

“This has got nothing to do with Lilah. It's about giving me back all the pain I put you through. Making us even.”

“You stupid, stupid, little girl,” he says through his cat that got the canary grin. “You think it's that easy?”

And she tries to tell herself that she wanted this as he's pressed up against her with one step, his hands biting into her upper arms, the switch cutting into her bare flesh, so he can sear her flesh with angry eyes.

“I want things to be better,” she cries helplessly, shifting tighter into him so nothing can come between them. “I want it to be like it was. Just do it, Wes. Hurt me like I hurt you…”

This is getting painfully familiar too—the way he suddenly gets all fucking mercurial, face crumpling, hands losing their grip so he can push her away so hard that she's stumbling, falling backward until he yanks her upright again and then lets her go like he can't bear to touch her.

“If you knew how angry I was with you, if you could even begin to imagine… then you really wouldn't be putting such ridiculous ideas into my head,” he spits out, crouching down to pick up the switch.
“It's not ridiculous,” she insists, watching him place the thin length of wood back in the chest. “Not if it's what you need. If it makes you stop looking at me like I'm a piece of sh…”

“Don't,” he mutters, sitting down heavily on the edge of the bed and rubbing a hand over his eyes like he hasn't slept in weeks. “Don't talk about yourself like that.”

It's the easiest and most natural thing in the world to drop to her knees in front of him and clutch onto his hands so tightly that her knuckles are white from the effort to stop him shaking free.

“Listen to me. I'll do anything, Wes,” she says and her voice has never sounded so deep and dark and desperate. “I'd let you lock me away from the rest of the world, keep me naked and I wouldn't speak, wouldn't do anything until you told me I could and then you'd know…”

“And what would I know, Faith?” he spits out. “Other than the fact that playing the martyr would only serve to make you feel better?”

She ignores that because it's kinda true even if it is kinda off message. And there's something else that's way truer than all the barriers he keeps trying to throw in front of her.

“You'd know that I love you,” she says simply. “And if I thought that you didn't love me anymore, that it was all completely fucked-up between us, I'd go. I swear, Wes. I'd be out of that door and you'd never see me again.”

The tears are spilling down her face now, which means he's gonna show her the exit pretty soon anyway but his hands have slackened so she can curl her fingers through his and she looks into his eyes so she can see his soul. But it's hard through the sheen of her tears.

“What makes you think I still love you?” he asks and there's a finality to it that has her crawling backward to get away from all his rigid fury.

“You love me,” she insists but it's coming out wrong because she's sobbing now, even though she promised she wouldn't. Because she breaks all her promises to him. “And nobody in the whole fucking world will ever love you as much as me.”

He gets up so he can stand over her while she's crouched in a huddle of misery on his carpet. “I don't love you any more for the simple reason that you destroyed it with your lies. I gave you everything I could possibly give you and I got nothing back in return.”

“I didn't ask you to keep buying me things…”

“It's not about the fucking money!” he roars and she's clamping her hands over her ears because he never shouts and swears and this is just a double whammy of agony. “I let you into my home, my heart,” and his voice has dropped to a hoarse whisper. “I trusted you, Faith. And you took everything you could get your greedy little hands on and didn't give me anything of you in return.”

“It's not true!” She's wrapped around his legs now, tear-soaked face upturned so she can stare at the granite lines of his blankest stare. “I tried to tell you a fucking million times but I loved you so much I didn't want to spoil what we had.”

“I was a better fuck than those filthy little boys you used to pick up,” he informs her harshly over her squeals of protest. “You're young and foolish, which is why you confused sex with someone who could actually make you come, with your immature notions of what love is. Now, get up.”

He pries her fingers away from his legs and she's so far gone now that just to have him leaning down, his face inches away from her, is all she needs to yank on his shirt, try to kiss him because
then he'll know. Kisses don't lie.

Her lips bump against his in a clumsy mockery of what they used to have and he's flinging himself away from her.

“I love you. I fucking love you. Gonna keep on saying it until you believe me.” And the part of her brain that was so set on being rational and calm is trying to bitch slap the other part of her brain which is stuck on the hysterical setting.

She hauls herself to her feet and stands there sucking in deep breaths which make her shudder. He's leaning against the wall looking ready to bolt if she makes any sudden movements.

“I'd like you to go and wash your face,” he says calmly like he hasn't just cut her heart out and stamped all over it. “I'm going downstairs to call you a cab and then I hope that you have enough regard for me to believe me when I say that I don't want to see you again. Do I make myself clear, Faith?”

She nods because there's nothing left to say and already she's overcome with nostalgia. This is the last time he gives me an order. This is the last time he clarifies that order. This is the last time…

Just the sight of all those gleaming white tiles makes her cry again. Because even bathroom fittings can make her ache with all that she's lost. The sight of his shaving kit makes her moan out loud and she's glad that he walked out of the room before she came in here because he'd probably storm in and demand that she revoke it.

By the time she's splashed her face with cold water and got rid of the black streaks of eye makeup that would win her first place in an Alice Cooper lookalike competition, she's back where she was when she first rang his doorbell.

The white-faced girl in the mirror lifts up her chin and fixes her with a steely glare. “You gonna let him feed you all that 'I don't love you' bullshit, Faithy?”

“He sounds like he means it.”

“Then you're even more fucking dumb than you look. You can fix this. You have to fix this. Now get your ass downstairs and make it right.”

He's waiting at the foot of the stairs for her, her Emily Strange backpack dangling from his fingers.

She's not even reached the bottom when he lifts his hand up so when she gets to the last step, he can tuck a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. It's a small gesture, one he's done a hundred times before, and it still makes her heart bang painfully against her chest but for a hundred different reasons.

“I'm so sorry, Faith,” he murmurs and his eyes are the color of bruises. “But I can't love you anymore.”

She takes her hands from behind her back and pushes the shirt with the button missing and the switch into his hands. “Yes, you can,” she says.

It's a fucking great exit. Like, she's some chick from an old black and white film. It wasn't whiny or teary, just all kinds of sassy but with this heartfelt inner core.

And it wasn't fucking enough. She should have come down the stairs stark naked with Mr. Bunny (who seemed to have gotten lost in the move) clutched in her hand. Should have just bent naked over
the hall table and begged him to hit her, to fuck her. Should have sucked him off so many times that he didn't have the strength to throw her out.

She's a weeping, wailing mess right on cue as the cab pulls into the curb outside her house and the driver doesn't say anything as she fumbles with the door handle and practically falls out onto the sidewalk. Whatever Wes is paying the local car company it isn't enough.

Darla's still at work and her latest hiding place for the vodka is so lame that Faith's found it within five seconds. Like anyone but Darla would hide two bottles of Smirnoff in the breadbin that they never use.

She chugs down a quarter of the first bottle before she does anything else. Then she's closing the drapes, stripping off her clothes, and climbing into bed.

It takes a sleeping pill and a few more slugs before her sobs have muted down to a few faint whimpers and sleep is smoothing over all the jagged edges. She falls headfirst into its arms.

And then she's climbing out again to find the room pitch black because it's dark outside and the insistent ringing of her cell phone is stopping her from drifting off again.

It finally fucking stops and she's curling back under when it starts again. Stops. Starts. Stops. Starts, and then she's snaking out a hand and fumbling in her bag so she can tell whoever it is to go fuck themselves.

“What the…?”

“Faith.”

If she lives to be a hundred, which is a moot point with her new life as an alcoholic pill popper already mapped out, no one says her name like him. Like it's a promise. Like it sounds so fucking good in his mouth.

“Wes?”

“Did I wake you up?”

He sounds different. Or rather he sounds the same, like he used to.

“Yeah, but it's okay. I should probably get up now anyway. Look, I'm sorry about…”

He sighs down the phone and she shuts up instantly. “It occurs to me, Faith, that I may have been hasty, and your tenacity is rather…endearing. Certainly, it's hard to ignore.”

She's too fuddled with sleep to be anything other than grateful that he's talking to her so she can clutch the phone like it's a life-raft when she's been cast adrift in a sea of tangled, tear-stained sheets. “I'm so glad you called,” she whispers. “I didn't want it to end like that.”

“I have to know, Faith, if your offer was merely a gesture or a sincere attempt at reparation,” he continues and she can feel every word vibrating with tension.

“I meant it,” she slurs fiercely. “I want to hurt like you're hurt so we're the same again.”

“It will hurt, Faith, which is why I'm only going to give you ten strokes as a gesture rather than a punishment. Ten strokes as a symbol of your contrition. No more, no less. And I want you to think about it very carefully before you agree.”
She counts to thirty in her head so she can listen to the slight hitch in his breathing because she already knows what her answer is going to be.

“Yes, I want that, Wes. I know it's not going to make everything, like, magically…”

“Very well.” He cuts right across her babble. “You're to get up and have a shower. Please ensure that you're perfectly smooth. Then I want you to dress in your work clothes. All your work clothes. I want your hair neatly pinned back, no makeup. I'll send a cab to pick you up in half an hour. Is there anything you'd like me to clarify?”

She's gone from the pits of despair to the penthouse suite of the Hope Hotel in two minutes and she can't hide the relief in her voice. “No, Wes. It's all fine.”

There's a pause and then that fucking lovely drawl is back where it belongs. “I beg your pardon?”

“No, sir, I understand.”

“That's very good, Faith,” he practically purrs and she's smiling for the first time in days. “But I'll ask you again. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“It is. It really is.”

“Then I advise you to start getting ready because the cab will be there in twenty-eight minutes and I'll be most displeased if you're late.”

One Hundred and Four

The line goes silent and she just sits there for a moment—not moving, just listening to the strangely comforting, steady hum of the dead connection and trying to will her brain to work so she can start processing what the hell just happened.

Twenty-eight minutes she's got to get out of bed, shower, get dressed—when fuck, she can barely scramble for the light switch before her poor head starts to protest. She's blinking furiously against the light, trying to coordinate her uncooperative limbs even though she can barely untangle herself from the sheets.

“Goddamnit! Fucking motherfucker,” she mutters—as though getting the swearing out of her system now is gonna spare her ass later. She finally kicks aside the morass of sheets and quilt and succeeds in standing up, albeit with all the steadiness of a newborn foal. She still feels drunk, not to mention a little nauseous. She's placing a mental bet on the shower sobering her up or else she'll be in real fucking trouble. Lord knows she doesn't want to face a now-sober, angry Wes on a stomach filled with Liquor Barn's finest and little else.

The hot water feels good, though. She turns it up so it's nearly scalding-hot, which is damn effective at shocking her out of her alcohol haze. And yeah, that shade of pink it's coloring her is kinda familiar too. Her stomach is still in knots and unsettled but at least she doesn't feel like she's going to hurl its paltry contents any longer.

So far, so good. Sorta. But now she's at the serious hand-eye coordination part of this enterprise, and she doesn't exactly have the steady hands of a surgeon. She does the best she can under the circumstances, with her pink Daisy razor and some foul-smelling fakey raspberry-scented shaving cream that Darla must have bought (oh, how she loved the alcohol-cloaking scents). God, if the initial shock of the hot water hadn't sobered her up, that stench would have.

She tries not to think of the care and deliberation he took doing the same task that first night she was
in his house—or of the intent look on his face, followed by the slight softening of his features when
he was finished and could finally look upon his handiwork. She doesn't have the luxury of enjoying
it this evening—it's strictly a rush job, performed perfunctorily so she won't displease him. But really,
she's got so much else at stake that this is way down on her by-now epic list of misdemeanors.

She turns off the water and forces herself out of the comforts of the shower. She's so fucking nervous
but exhilarated too, and she feels even more so when she steps into her work uniform, which has
been rendered unfamiliar with disuse. Her fingers skim over the collection of wool and silk and lace
and she has to stop herself from being flooded with memories, good and bad. Again, she doesn't
have the luxury. It's funny though, because for all her ambivalence about wearing them, she feels
imbued with confidence from the moment she begins to carefully draw the nylon stockings over her
calves, or when she smooths the black dress over her body. She's no longer this foolish, fucked-up
girl; the woman she sees in the mirror is standing up straight and tall and looks like an Amazon, or a
movie heroine from one of those snappy comedies from the thirties. She smiles for the first time in a
long time, and this woman she barely recognizes smiles back.

She's his secretary again.

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She can hear the fucking cab starting its infernal honking in front of the house. She barely has time to
grab her purse, tuck an errant lock of hair behind her ear, and run out of the house—all done as
quietly as possible so Darla doesn't wake up.

She runs down the steps to see a by-now familiar blue and white cab. Suddenly she feels more cheap
hooker than elegant lady, but she's not going to let that keep the self-assured tone out of her voice
when she gives the cabbie Wes’ address.

“Right away.”

It's a long trip down winding, dark roads, and even though she's slept fitfully if at all for the past few
days, she's wide awake with anticipation now. She tries not to think about what's waiting for her,
fixing her eyes on the faint glow of the new moon and the beautiful gnarled trees.

She zones out for a little while, in this little reverie, when the squeal of brakes snaps her out of it and
she sees Wes' house. The second floor bedroom light is on, but the rest of the house is dark. There's a
figure silhouetted in the window. When she gets out of the cab, the figure disappears.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out some cash for the driver. She doesn't have much, but it doesn't
seem to matter, because he waves for her to put the money away. “I've been remunerated, thank
you,” he says politely. And she does a fucking double-take because since when do cabbies talk like
Wes? Unless this was an hallucination and she'd actually banged her head getting out of the shower
and was lying on the bathroom tiles at home, out cold. That would explain it, right?

But the cabbie seems real enough when he nods to her, then drives off down the road. She just
stands there watching, like she's afraid to turn and face the house, knowing he's waiting for her there.
And watching. She feels a sudden chill.

Where did all that confidence go? It was there—and now it's not.

“Pull it together, Faith,” she mutters to herself as she squares her shoulders, straightens her back and
turns with a look of determination toward the house.

Her hand reaches toward the bell, at the same at the outside light snaps on and she's standing there
bathed in its luminous glow when he opens the door.

It's like the rumpled, whiskey-sour man from earlier never existed. He's impeccably dressed in his darkest gray suit. Shirt impossibly white, tie impossibly straight. He's shaved and if he looks a little pale, a little wary then she's not going to get too bogged down in the small print because he's making the effort to do this properly.

And it should be stupid that they have to dress themselves up in costume but it's not. Actually, it's kinda comforting because right away she knows that he's cast her as his leading lady for tonight anyway and all she needs to do is follow his directions.

“Faith,” he says, like they've only just been introduced and his smile, because this time round she's deemed worthy of his smile, is vague and impersonal. But it's still a smile. “Please come in.”

Her heels click against the parquet in a steady rhythm as she follows him down the hall and into the study.

The smells of beeswax and old books, all that polished wood gleaming in the lamp light, the creak of his leather chair as he sits down—it's like she's come home. Even the switch placed diagonally across his blotter pad looks kind of welcoming and she can feel that familiar tingle of anticipation and fear and lust slowly unfurl in the pit of her belly.

His eyes are sweeping over her as she stands there, shoulders as far back as she can get them, hands neatly clasped together and he smiles properly now. The lines of his face ease away like someone's taken an eraser and rubbed out all the tension.

“I'm glad you came, Faith,” he says softly. “And I'm glad that you've followed my instructions. I trust that you followed all my instructions?”

And it's easy because he's given her a script. “Yes, sir.”

“Good, that's very good.” His hands are stroking the thin length of the switch and she's sure that he doesn't even realize what he's doing but it's like she can feel the corresponding movements of his fingers on his skin, tracing the thrust of her breasts, the jut of her hips, the sweep of her spine. “I think it would be best if we established some ground rules first, though. Would you like to sit down?”

No she wouldn't. She likes standing in front of him, feet placed slightly apart, her posture picture perfect. “No, sir.”

He gives her a thoughtful look then pushes the switch away from him, smiling slightly when her eyes follow the movement. “This isn't about apportioning blame, Faith. I'm sure that neither of us have any desire to rehash the whys and wherefores of recent events. Both of us have been thoughtless, lashed out at each other with accusations and insults, and there's no place for that anymore.”

She's nodding frantically because it makes sense and anyway she just wants to cut to the chase, feel the sting and burn of the switch and then his arms around her, his lips on her and his voice whispering in her ear that everything's going to be all right.

“I need you to obey me unquestioningly,” he says abruptly, straightening up and fixing her with unwavering blue eyes. “You're to answer me with either, 'yes' or 'no'. And there's one other word I'll permit you to say; would you like to tell me what it is, Faith?”

“Neruda, sir,” she whispers and she can't look at him now because she's remembering the only time she's ever had to use that word. And hey, isn't that funny? Because he used the switch then too.
“Ten strokes, Faith, and if you want to stop at any time, then I expect to hear the name of our favorite poet on your lips, yes?”

“Yes, sir.” And she's smiling at him, surprises a sudden grin out of him too, because they have a favorite poet and they have lots of favorite things like doing the crossword in bed on Sundays and drinking red wine that costs more than twenty dollars a bottle and holding each other after they've made love and they're both within touching distance of them again.

“Is there anything you'd like to ask me? Anything that needs clarifying?”

And she breaks out of her rigid posture, takes a step forward and forgets about the 'yes sir', 'no sir', so she can murmur throatily: “Everything's gonna be like it was after this, isn't it? We'll be even?”

He swallows hard and it's so tempting to just fling herself at his feet, beg for forgiveness one more time but this way is better. It's both of them back in the game; ritual, rehearsal, routine.

“I hope so, Faith,” he says and there's a slight catch in his voice which makes her frown but the moment's gone because he's getting up and walking toward her and he's, yeah, God yeah, he's touching her. “Your hair, always so unruly,” he says quietly, smoothing back the stray wisps that have escaped from the topknot which she'd assembled with more enthusiasm and hairpins than actual skill.

And from her hair, it's a short path for his fingers to take before he's tracing her cheekbones, feathering along the bridge of her nose until he sweeps his thumb across the curve of her bottom lip and she knows for certain that he still loves her.

She's opening her mouth, not even sure what she's going to say, but he taps her lips with a finger. “I didn't ask you a question, Faith, so there's no need to say anything.” He takes a step away from her and folds his arms and he's hard and she's wet, soaked right through her black, satin panties but that doesn't really matter because he says, “I'd like you to take off all your clothes. Apart from your stockings and your shoes.”

She can taste the tension in the room; it's thick and sweet. Because as she unzips and unclips and frees herself, he walks slowly around her, his eyes not missing a single inch of skin that's slowly revealed. He takes each piece of clothing from her; her dress, her corset and places them neatly across the back of a chair.

Sometimes she thinks that she's spent more time naked in front of him than she has dressed. But she's never felt this naked, like she's revealing herself to him for the very first time. And he's never seen her nipples peaked and aching, never seen the flush that pretties up her skin. He's clothed and she's half naked and it feels shockingly, excitingly different.

His fingers brush against the small of her back before they curl round the waistband of her panties.

“Now these.”

It's so quiet that she can hear the hitch in his breathing as clearly as a gunshot as she slowly pushes the black satin down over the curve of her ass, unpeels the material away from the wet heat of her cunt and slides them down her legs.

“Give them to me, please.”

She bends over, legs braced and there's another tiny gasp from him before she straightens up and places the damp scrap of material into his outstretched hand. He gives them such a fond look, touches the strip of soaked satin that rested against her pussy before folding them up and placing
them on top of the neat pile he's made.

He walks over to the desk and beckons her with one crooked finger. “Come here, Faith.”

Her hips sway gently as she moves and it feels like she's wading through molasses. Takes her an age to get to him but then it seems like it takes her no time at all because the switch is in his hand and he's tapping it lightly against his palm, testing the springiness of the wood and she can't take her eyes off it.

“Look at me, Faith.” And she said that she'd obey him so she tears her eyes away so all she can see is blue and he's never looked at her like that. Like, she's good and evil and all fucking points in between.

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

She's never been more sure of anything her whole sorry life. “Yes, sir.”

The switch makes a hissing sound as it arcs through the air and lands in the center of his palm. He flexes his fingers before he turns to her with a completely unfathomable expression on his face.

“Assume the position, Faith.”

And is it so very wrong of her to hear those words as, ‘I love you’? She lets them warm her as she leans forward, as she's done so many times for him, lets them ease this transition from expectant to waiting.

She knows exactly how he wants her, could move her feet to precisely the correct distance apart, arch her back just so, until her ass is curved, presented, but she doesn’t. Instead, she leans forward, forearms flat and fingers spread against the deep sheen of the wood, but she keeps her feet close together and her back straight.

It’s partly for him—Wesley won’t permit anything but a perfect stance, but he likes her to achieve it through his instructions—and partly for her, because she’s hoping—

Yes. There’s an impatient click of tongue against teeth and he’s crouching slightly and tapping his fingers against the tender skin just above the inside of her knee. Touching her.

“Wider than that, Faith,” he says in just the right tone of voice, a mixture of indulgence and irritation. She’s missed his orders, missed being told what to do so simply, so firmly, with no room left for her to argue or misunderstand. It’s what he does. He makes life simple, and she sighs out something that must sound enough like, ‘Yes, sir’, to pass muster.

His hand lingers against her leg as she edges her feet wider, placing them so that he’s left with nothing to do but straighten and say, with a harsher note now, as if he regrets that he allowed her that minor disobedience, “Have you forgotten how you’re to be when I discipline you, Faith?”

The edge of the desk digs into her stomach and the points of her hipbones as she achieves the desired position and she murmurs, “No, sir.”

“Good.” His voice softens for a second and she can feel his gaze skimming over her, from the smooth glide of her back to the upthrust curves of her ass and the long stretch of her legs, muscles taut to the point of pain because it’s not easy to hold this position and she can already feel the tension along her calves, the pressure against the soles of her feet.

The switch slashes down against her skin without warning, without giving her chance to prepare,
and her body jerks and jolts awake in a rush of sensation. Pain, instant and immediate, splashes over her in a searing rush. She’s not sure if she speaks, if she cries out, because all she can hear, faint and far-away, is Wesley’s voice whispering ‘One’ with a calm that’s almost ominous.

She fights to breathe steadily, eyes open and fixed on the row of books on the wall behind his desk and waits for the second stroke, thinking that it won’t be as bad because now she knows, now she’s prepared.

The switch is laid across her skin, in exactly the same place as it hit, not a stroke because there’s absolutely no weight to it; he’s just resting it on her ass as he starts to speak.

And if she’d thought this would be over quickly, an intense minute or two, no more, she realizes she was wrong.

“That was your third stroke from this cane in all, wasn’t it, Faith?”

He waits and she swallows, trying to reach the words that are jumbled in her head. “Yes.”

“And now you’re remembering the other two, even though they were weeks ago.” His voice is still calm, each word deliberate, but he sounds almost dreamy as if he’s lost in memory too. “I always used to, anyway.” He moves his wrist and the switch slides away from the weal it’s left across her skin, caressing the unmarked flesh in a promise. “I’ve certainly never forgotten the first time this was used on me.”

Her fingers spread wider, clutching for support and finding none, and she can only listen because she’s not allowed to speak, though she’s fairly sure she’s permitted to scream.

“I was ten; deemed old enough to graduate to this form of chastisement. I’d—now what was it?—oh, yes, of course. It was the day I’d lost my nerve riding. I should have spurred my horse faster at the gate and I did the exact opposite, bringing the horse to his knees and sending me flying over his head to land in an ignominious heap. I don’t think Father would have cared quite so much were it not for the fact I did it in front of his friends. He told me I was a coward for pulling the horse up—made me take that jump at a gallop over and over when I was able to sit a horse again —”

And she’s not seeing a small boy perched on top of a horse, reins wrapped around his hands, she’s seeing Wesley driving at a speed that would be near-suicidal if he wasn’t always so in control. Another tiny piece of the puzzle, another—

“Two.”

She cries out this time. It shouldn’t have been unexpected, but it was and she’s sobbing as she gulps air to replace the breath driven from her body with that fierce crack of wood against skin.

She hears him take a shuddering breath—and is that her name spoken faintly, whispered into the splintered silence?—and squeezes her eyes shut against the guilt that fills her. She’d suggested this and never thought how it would affect him, thought that she’d be the only one suffering. Thought, God, yes, that he’d even enjoy it. Somehow she’s not so sure he is.

The switch isn’t touching her anywhere now; it’s hovering behind her, like a wasp about to sting, and she tries to concentrate so she’ll be ready. She thinks that’ll make it easier to bear, and she listens though the blood pounding in her ears, for the hiss of parted air that signals the down stroke.

It doesn’t come immediately. Instead she gets his fingertips trailing with a delicate touch across the two marks and no matter that the touch is so light it’s barely there, she’s whimpering, and half of that’s arousal because he’s taught her that pleasure follows pain, and her body, stupid, hopeful,
starved, is clamoring for release.

As if he’s well aware of what she wants, his hand slips between her legs. “You’re so wet,” he murmurs. “Do you like this, then?”

And she’s expected to answer because he pauses the exploration of her slicked, swollen cunt and waits.

“I don’t know,” she says and really, she should’ve known that temporization would earn her instant retribution and his fingers disappear and the switch cuts into her a bare inch beneath the previous stroke.

“Three,” he says in an ice-edged voice. “Now answer me as I instructed you.”

And it’s not fair, because he knows not all questions fit the only answers he’s allowed her, but fairness isn’t a concept either of them is familiar with, so she tries to think.

And really, there’s only one answer after all, because though, yes, this isn’t something she wants the way she wants his hand on her, spanking her until she’s burning and hot, it’s going to get her Wesley back, so she says, “Yes!” and this time she hears the switch rushing at her and God, she was wrong, it’s worse, when she knows, because it takes an endless time to fall through the air, driven by every ounce of strength his arm possesses and there are three lines of agony throbbing away already and they hurt more when the fourth lands and this time she screams, a choking, raw-throated scream that smacks against the book-lined walls.

He waits until she’s silent, if gasping panting shudders count as silence, and says, “Four.”

And she starts to move then, in a protest that’s not about the pain but about the way his voice holds such a dark satisfaction now he’s got her to scream, curling in on herself in an instinctive need to hide, look smaller, so her hands come together, squeezed against her breasts and her legs are so tightly clenched against each other she can feel knee and ankle bones touch.

“How dare you move?” he whispers and there’s a menace to the way he says it that frightens her more than anything else. “Do you know what happens to boys who move?”

Boys? And she’s shaking her head as she tries to return to the correct position but her legs are trembling with strain and arching her back splits the skin on her ass in four places, she swears it does, and she moans in anguish.

“You—will—stay—still,” he says and the three strokes he gives her as he pants out the words send her into a place where there’s nothing but pain and there’s no room to scream but someone is.

And it must be her, because Wesley’s crying.

She struggles to turn her head and what she sees has her breaking position, and stumbling the three steps it takes to bring her to his side. He wards her off, one hand lifted and she freezes, hands falling back, dizzy with pain but not caring because Wesley’s hurting worse than she is.

He braces himself against the desk, one hand still clutching the switch and his head is bent down so she can’t see his expression but what she saw when she turned lets her guess. Tears spilling out, the grudging, difficult tears of a man, forced on him by a body with no other way to deal with the tumultuous emotions inside him. Lips tightly compressed but not tightly enough to stop the sounds that are welling up inside him and won’t be left unspoken.

Though they’re not words, not really, though she thinks she hears him whisper ‘no’ and she’s sure
her name’s among the sounds, though it’s hard to tell.

She can’t leave him alone in whatever darkness has engulfed him and she tugs him up and into her arms, kissing him frantically until his mouth stops moving, stops shaping words she doesn’t want to hear and kisses her back; desperate, passionless kisses. His face is hot against hers but the hands that are cupping her face are icy and the inflexible length of the switch is between them still.

He calms enough to move back and stares at her with bewildered eyes. “Faith?”

“I’m so fucking sorry,” she says, “I’m so sorry, Wes.” She’s babbling apologies that stop meaning anything because his face closes up and he’s retreating again even as she watches. He pulls out a handkerchief, hesitates because for once they both need it, and then, with a hand that’s shaking slightly, he dries her face and hands it to her so she can blow her nose. Then he takes it back, finds a clean spot, and scrubs his face dry with a rough carelessness that’s foreign to him.

She’s expecting—oh, she doesn’t know what the fuck she expects but it’s not what she gets.

Three words, in so exact a replication of tone that she shivers.

“Assume the position.”

And she’s shaking her head, eyes wide in horror but he bends forward and kisses her, a hard, painful pressure. “Do it, Faith,” and it’s a plea she can’t ignore, impossible to refuse. She has to trust him, has to believe he knows what he’s doing, because it’s Wesley and he needs her, oh God, he needs her to have faith in him, the way no one ever has.

She turns away from him and her safeword’s filling her head, sounding so loud she must have said it, but his hands are on her, pushing her into position with a clumsy haste, so she can’t have.

Because if she’d said it, he’d stop, wouldn’t he? All this would end. But the desk’s against her skin again, fitting against the nascent bruises on her hips; her fingers are spread, her back is arched. It’s not over.

And her ass is something she doesn’t want to think about because it’s hurting so much she’s close to throwing up, hurting with a pain so intense and all-encompassing now she’s bent over like this, that it’s unbearable.

“I’m going to ask you if you’re ready, Faith,” he says. “If there’s something you want to say. Remember what I told you that you could say?”

And there’s a pleading note that she can’t understand because the room’s starting to gray out at the edges, shrink and shimmer as she blinks at the books she’s been staring at forever and she’s doing it, isn’t she? Doing what he wants.

And he hasn’t really asked a question, so she doesn’t answer, and he sighs and whispers, in a low, dragging voice, “Are you ready to continue? For the next stroke?”

And her lips shape a word that’s got more than one syllable but that’s all they do, and when she speaks aloud she says, “Yes, Wesley,” and his name’s enough to make it easy, so that when the stroke lands and it’s a whisper-brush against her skin, no more, she cries out in shock, not relief.

“Eight,” he says, his voice wearied and full of a distaste she can’t understand. “Are you ready?”

And she’s saying ‘yes’ before he’s finished and waiting, heart hammering because now the relief’s there, soothing her because it’s Wes and he’s found a way to finish this that doesn’t break the rules
but doesn’t hurt her any more.

But the next feather-stroke doesn’t fall and she doesn’t dare turn to look, though she can feel the tension in him, because his hand’s stroking her tumbled, fallen hair, smoothing it off her burning face and his fingers are unsteady so he has to try again and again until it’s tucked behind her ear, lying against her back. Then the switch whistles through the air and she’s crying out in alarm but it pauses, with the savage cut halted inches from her skin, and she feels the cruel, soft tap and she’s crying because she’s not sure now—she doesn’t know—doesn’t trust—

“Nine.” And his voice is tight, achingly tight. “Faith, this can end. This should end. I don’t want—”

“Ask me.” She has to clear her throat and try again because that didn’t come out right, not at all. “Ask me, Wes.”

In a toneless whisper, he says, “Are you ready?” and she’s barely finished saying yes when she gets the final soft touch from the switch.

“Ten,” he says and it’s a disbelieving, furious question. “Ten fucking strokes and you never—why didn’t you —?” The switch hisses down, slamming into the desk, inches from her spread hand, marring the polished surface and making her whimper in shock and pull back her hand. Maybe he hadn’t hit her as hard as he could, because if he had, that would mean her skin was more than reddened, more than bruised.

He’s still talking, harsh, labored breaths punctuating the words. “You can’t—expect me not to—when you won’t—can’t know what you’ve done—no. No.”

She twists around too fast, crying out as the pain grabs and shakes her, and stares up at him, puzzled and confused. “Wes?”

He’s glaring at her as if he hates her and the switch is still in his hand. He sees her gaze drop to it and raises it to his face, the anger draining as he turns it to the light. “Your blood is on it,” he says, examining it with an odd, wondering curiosity, eyes wide as if he’s seeing nightmares. “It’ll need cleaning now.”

And when his face twists like that she knows she’s not the only one close to throwing up.

He walks over and places the switch back on the blotting pad and yeah, he’s right, she can see the dark flecks against the darker wood and she stands up, moving back from the desk, away from it, but not from him, and that grayness is back and her legs aren’t doing such a good job of holding her up, but her hand reaches out, groping for the edge of the desk, and that helps, a little.

He’s coming around the desk to her and there’s a sick, shamed look in his eyes that’s scaring her because it’s over, they can be happy now and he shouldn’t be looking like that. Why is he looking like that?

Some instinct makes her reach behind her and she touches wetness, sticky and warm. She doesn’t need to look at it to know what it is; his face tells her, horrified and guilty. She tries to tell him she doesn’t feel so good, but the words are lost in the roar and rush of blood in her head and it doesn’t matter; she knows he’ll catch her, because he always does.

Chapter One Hundred and Four

Everything’s dark for what seems like a long time. When she’s out, she’s out—dead to the world, a dead weight. She doesn’t dream, or think, or move. There’s just this pervasive quiet that’s wrapped around her like a cocoon.
When she finally starts to emerge, it’s a slow process. Her limbs don’t seem to respond the way she wants them to, and the air feels heavy, making her feel as though she’s moving through quicksand. And when she tries to turn onto her back, she’s met with a searing pain that shoots through her like wildfire and jolts her awake.

She’s gasping from the pain, and thanks to the adrenaline rush her mind is racing even though she’s not yet fully awake. She’s trying desperately to remember where she is, and what happened, when an unsteady hand reaches out to still her.

“Stop that, Faith. I’m here.”

Right. She’s in Wes’ house and that should be—oh.

She remembers now.

One whisper is all it takes for the memories to start rushing back—fragments and flashes so vibrant that they almost seem unreal. But she knows better. She closes her tired eyes, hoping that’ll do the trick and banish them until she’s ready to deal. But she doesn’t have to make the effort, because that’s when his hands are turning her ever-so-gently back onto her stomach—and it’s such an incredible relief to have his hands upon her body again that she forgets everything but the immediacy of tactile sensation. It’s such a simple, caring gesture, but circumstance makes it complicated and bittersweet and God, it’s everything she wants. He’s touching her again, and she can’t contain the feeling. Tears are welling up in her eyes and she blinks them back furiously. She brushes the back of her hand over her eyes, and Wes notices.

“You need to stay still now, Faith,” he says somewhat tersely, before adding a ‘please’.

She’s going to obey, of course, not just because she’s beyond exhausted, but because he asked. She feels she owes him something—an explanation? Something. But her brain can’t seem to form anything even approaching coherent.

“Wes, I didn’t know—I mean, I didn’t mean to—didn’t want this to be—” And she’s so frustrated, wanting to explain to him why she thought this was going to make things right between them, when really it was the most fucked-up thing she could have asked of him. Why can’t she have the gift for distilling her jumbled, chaotic thoughts into one of those crystalline, perfect sentences that he seems to have perfected? It’s funny how far away from him that makes her feel—she’ll never have that assurance. But then she sneaks a sideways glance at him and it’s plain from his demeanor that he doesn’t have it either, not exactly. It’s a good front, but when it comes down to it, they’re a fucking matched set—broken beyond repair. And that’s another thought she’d like to banish for good. They can’t be, they can’t—

And he’s staring at some point on the wall beyond her, eyebrows knitted together and mouth downturned. He opens his mouth to speak and closes it just as quickly. Finally he says, simply, “I know. You don’t need to say anything.” And he’s touching her again with tentative fingers and that’s enough. “If anything, I need to—”

It’s an effort to speak but she tells him, “No, you don’t. No.” She swallows audibly. She wants to say more but it doesn’t come. She tries to shift her position—she wants to be facing him—but she aches all over and there’s white-hot pain washing over her in waves. So she just lies there quietly and for a moment the silence between them is deafening.

“Wes?”

“Mm?”
“How long was I—?”

“Not long.”

“Would you—” She can barely force the words out, but then again, she can’t not say them. “Would you lie down with me? Please?” She doesn’t mean it to sound so childlike and needy, but she doesn’t have the reserves of strength to say it any other way.

This storm cloud passes over his features, for the briefest moment, and then he tries to school them into some semblance of neutrality. “No,” he says curtly, but then his expression softens and he adds, “I’d like to get you out of bed—see how bad that looks.”

How bad it—? Oh. She remembers that too.

She tries to lift her head, but the room starts spinning. She grabs hold of his arm in an effort to steady things. At least he doesn’t flinch from her grip like she’s a fucking leper. That’s got to count for something, right?

“Oh, no way. Not with the way her stomach's feeling now, like she's been out on a quintessential bender and heaved a Technicolor rainbow in the ratty bathroom of a downtown club, the tile cold and sticky under her knees. Except she's pretty sure she hasn't puked yet, but if the room doesn't stop spinning like that, she can't promise anything.

“Can't eat. No way.” At least that comes out somewhat succinctly.

He gets that look, the Don't mess with me, Faith, I know what's best for you look, lips pursed in a thin line of dismay. Like she's doing this just to be difficult or something.

“Perhaps just some dry toast...” He trails off when she screws up her face into a disgusted grimace. “You must eat something. You haven't eaten a proper meal in days, have you?”

Oh, yeah, she's forgotten about that. He knows the territory of her body all too well, knows when she hasn't been eating; knows what it means when the rounded contours of her hipbones are more pronounced, when her elbows are more knobby.

“Just the usual liquid diet, vodka and more vodka.”

He's so obviously peeved at that response he doesn't even bother to cluck his tongue at her, or dish out any of those sweetly charming admonishments like before. He just looks darker—if that's possible. “You shouldn't drink like that,” he eventually says, simply and tonelessly, looking at his hands.

“Yeah, well. They say it's genetic.” Even through the bleary lens of pain and dehydration, she can’t help but be flip. The words are supposed to come out light, but instead they go over like a lead balloon. Because he lets out the mother of all heavy sighs and curls his hand over her cheek, brushing her hair away.

“Have some water, at least.”

She doesn't argue, considering her mouth is pretty nasty and pasty. Booze, tears, and not to mention getting so damn turned on—she’s so wrung dry it’s amazing she’s even managed to speak at all. So she just lets him tip her chin up to meet the lip of a small glass of cold water and tries not to gulp it
down too quickly. Which isn’t too hard, because each swallow provoking the dull throb of every muscle below her waist into a sharp twisty stab of pain.

He doles out little sips for her, until he's satisfied that she's had enough, which, not surprisingly, is exactly right.

“Better?”

She licks her lips, slowly; raises her head again, slowly. The room's no longer revolving around her, and that's a relief. “Yeah, actually.”

“Good. Have some more.” She can tell it's taking every fucking square inch of his self-control to do this; his fingers twitch nervously against the glass. She can read his little signs too; she wants to remind him of that. Wants to tell him he doesn't need to make everything orderly now, but knows that would be like ripping a lifejacket off a drowning man and leaving him to founder in the waves.

It doesn't take as much effort this time to swallow each sip of water down, and he manages to get her to choke down a horse pill of a painkiller too. And she knows it can’t be kicking in that soon, but with each stroke of his hand against her hair or her flesh, every fingertip that grazes her cheek or traces the edge her lip, she's a little more relaxed, the knots in her stomach untangling and unclenching.

“Wouldn't mind that toast now, Wes.” She smiles faintly, the thought of food much more promising now. “Gonna get crumbs in the bed, though.”

He smiles for the first time in—well, forever, and her fucking wrung-out little heart does a leap. Flesh wounds make her really fucking sappy, apparently. Who knew?

“That doesn’t matter,” he tells her quietly, before getting up to fix her something. She closes her eyes and tries not to drift back to sleep.

She can feel the warm waves of oblivion licking at the edges of her mind again and it takes all her energy to stretch out her hand and touch his leg where he's solid and real.

“No gonna leave me,” she mumbles and she doesn't care that it's not a question. Just a statement of fact. His warm hand covers her icy-cold fingers and she's clinging on with a strength she didn't know she had. “Don't leave me, Wes. Hate it.”

“For a little while,” he says and his voice sounds like it's coming from such a long way away. “I'm going to make you some toast.”

But she can't let go because it always comes down to the simple truth that he's made her hurt in so many different way and only seven of them are responsible for the throbbing, seething mess of her ass, and he's the only one who can make the pain better.

“Just stay with me,” she begs and she doesn't know exactly what she means either but he's gently uncurling her fingers from their death grip on his hand, bending his head to kiss each one when she whimpers.

She turns her face from him when he stands up but she can still hear his sigh as he walks across the room. “Try to stay awake, Faith,” he advises her. “You'll feel better when you've eaten something,” he adds doubtfully and then he's gone and she's not going to fall asleep because he's coming back and she needs to talk to him. Needs to make sure that everything's going to be okay. Needs to make him keep touching her and talking to…

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“You need to wake up, Faith,” says a voice in her ear and there's this feather-light touch on her neck, brushing her hair out of the way so she can open her eyes and stare up at him blearily.

“You came back?”

“I only went to the kitchen to get you some food,” he says, just pissy enough to make her smile because he sounds almost normal. And she doesn't know what that pill was, but she reckons she could get twenty bucks for it at the Alibi because it's kicking in and her body’s so numb that she feels like she's been wrapped up in industrial-strength cotton wool.

“God, I feel so fucking out of it,” she murmurs happily. “This is some serious shit you gave me.”

He sits down next to her and she peers at the plate on his lap without much enthusiasm. He's made toast, buttered it, and cut it into tiny little pieces. Smells good, but she can't quite work out how to get them into her mouth and just thinking about it makes her head spin.

“Feed me,” she says and she sounds so much like that freaky plant in Little Shop of Horrors that she starts giggling. “Feed me, Wes.”

And he does, just like he's fed her so many times before. And even though the toast feels weird in her mouth and she's almost deafened by the sound of her chewing, he brushes the stray crumbs away from her lips and tells her that she's a good girl and he's proud of her when she manages to clear the plate and take a few sips of the sweet tea that he's made.

“You're such a brave girl,” he tells her softly, getting the intonation in his voice so right, so fucking tender that she doesn't protest when he gets up and leaves her again. It's gonna be all right because he's only going to the bathroom and she can just about turn her head and see the shadows he's making as he moves across the floor.

When he comes back to her because she's singing her siren song of need, just by lying on his bed bleeding and needing him, he's carrying a basin in one hand and cradling a whole medicine cabinet of bandages, tubes and bottles against his chest.

She makes a sound of protest, because if there’s one thing a lifetime of bumps, bangs and crashes has taught her, it’s that nothing hurts more than the clean-up afterward, and antiseptic anything stings like a bitch.


“I’ll take back the part about you being brave,” he says dryly and somehow that pushes the worry away. She might have woken up feeling as if her ass would never be the same again, but if Wes can be that snippy, it can’t be as bad as she thought. And it's hard to remember the pain now. Hard to remember anything but the fact that she’s home again.

“You gonna tell me this’ll hurt you more than it hurts me?” she says in a voice that’s got more slur than snark to it. Her words have turned slippery-slick, like the last piece of pasta on the plate and she’s chasing them around and around and—“Oh, you fucking bastard!”

That was a mistake. His hand pauses so the cloth he’s holding, the drenched-in-acid cloth, drips liquid fire on her ass and takes her breath away.

“Wes!” She’s struggling, but he must have her tied up again because she can’t move. She squints at the headboard but, no, nothing’s attached to it. No Faith, spread-out and waiting. Then she realizes that her arms are folded beneath her chin and sighs.
“I’m not making sense,” she confides.

“You said I was a bastard. I think you’re remarkably lucid.”

He sounds resigned; his voice all flattened out, and it’s important to explain to him that he has to be happy, but that’s way too difficult so she gives up.

He brings the cloth back to her skin and now the first shock’s over it doesn’t feel as bad. She can feel tight skin loosen as he bathes it with lukewarm water and when she moans, his free hand comes to stroke her hair and curve reassuringly around her shoulder.

When he’s finished bathed her ass, taking away the dried-on tightness of something she’s not letting herself think about, he sets the bowl down on the bedside table.

“It’ll make a ring,” she says in a moment of clarity. “Need a coaster.”

He doesn’t even turn his head. “It doesn’t matter.” He twists the top off a bottle and tips it up into a square of gauze. She knows that smell. Oh, fuck, she hopes he can bear one more scream from her.

His hand slips past her ear and covers her mouth. Startled, she parts her lips and he wedges the side of his hand against her teeth. “Bite down,” he says tersely and fucking drenches her ass in mercurochrome.

She doesn’t take advantage of his invitation at first, because her mouth opens wide on a yell, but when her teeth snap back together, she gets a grunt of pain from him. Biting the hand that just fed her isn’t such a good idea though and she relaxes enough that he can draw his hand away, indented with her teeth-marks.

“They banned that stuff you know,” she mutters, blinking back tears.

“Unfortunately for you, I stocked up,” he says. “And that’s the worst over, Faith.”

It is too. There’s the softest of dressings laid over her and taped in place and then he clears away the debris and comes back to sit beside her.

“Was I brave again?”

“Very much so,” he assures her, although it sounds mechanical.

“Then I get a kiss better?”

She’s able to watch his face close down and it’s fucking fascinating if you like that sort of thing.

“I think it’s been damaged enough for one night,” he says.

“Didn’t mean kiss me there,” she protests.

There’s a tiny hesitation and then he leans forward so his face is beside hers and kisses her lips, as if he knows—oh, of course he knows—that she doesn’t want his mouth anywhere but there. He pulls back and she gets strength from somewhere and shifts enough to free her hand, reaching out and grabbing his collar. “Again?” she pleads.

“How can you want me to kiss you?” he says sounding so fucking sorrowful it makes her next breath hurt.

“Don’t think I’d ever not want you to kiss me,” she whispers. “Early on, I’d dream about that as
much as you fucking me.”

He swallows and brushes his lips against hers again, in a stiff, awkward parody of a kiss before pulling away from her. “I can’t,” he says. “Please, Faith.”

As she watches him in dreamy astonishment, he moves away, pushing up the pillows and leaning back against them, his eyes closed and his arms wrapped around his bent knees, folded tightly in on himself.

That’s...okay, that’s not good.

“Wesley?” she says cautiously. “I—I’m staying the night? You’re not going to make me go?”

It rouses him from his absorption, but his answer’s not what she was hoping for.

“If I sent you home now, I’d be both cruel and stupid,” he says. His gaze meets hers. “You’ll stay here until you’re well enough to go home.”

And that’s so silly, because she is home, and she’s not going anywhere if that’s where he’s sending her. It’s not often Wesley gets something wrong so she’s smiling with a drowsy satisfaction as she murmurs, “You got it wrong. All wrong.”

There’s a silence that’s loud enough to make her twist her head to catch sight of his face. His eyes are still closed, but his face is taut with strain and she doesn’t know why.

“I did, yes,” he says heavily. “I’m sorry. You’re being so very—” His eyes open suddenly and he says, “Promise me something?”

“Anything,” she says with as much eagerness as she can force into her words, which are starting to wriggle away from her again. God, she’s going to have to ask him to tie her to the bed, because she’s sure she’s floating and wouldn’t want to hit her ass with the ceiling, oh, no.

His hands slam down beside him, rocking the bed and making her whimper as her position shifts abruptly and her ass pays the price. “No! For God’s sake, Faith—”

And now she’s whimpering again, because he’s angry and that’s not fucking fair when she’d just been doing what he asked. “Why are you mad at me?” she asks in a stricken whisper.

“Because you’re not waiting to see what it is,” he says, going to his knees beside her. His hands are trembling and his voice is rough. “And you’re not to do that anymore, you understand?”

She can’t nod, not the way she’s placed, but she tries. “Yes, Wes, I won’t, I promise.” She frowns. Was that right? “No, Wes?” she adds uncertainly.

He sits back on his heels and looks up at the ceiling. “Oh God,” he says quietly. “I can’t do this. Not tonight. Faith, we need to sleep. I’ll—”

“You’re not going!” she says, panicking. “Please, Wesley, please. You don’t know what it’s like trying to sleep without you. It’s horrible. I can’t do it again.”


He drapes the cashmere throw across her and she feels his hand linger against her arm as he tucks it in.
“You're coming back?” she says, luxuriating in the feeling of being surrounded by something that’s got his scent on it.

“Yes.”

It’s all she needs to fall asleep.

Chapter One Hundred and Five

Jolting awake, on your stomach? So not cool. That's the first thought that crosses her mind minute her eyes snap open, quickly followed by do not scratch that itch, Faithy.

Better to get her bearings first before making any hasty movements though, because her ass, in addition to itching something wicked, is also still home of the dull throb. That's not even factoring in the whole did someone kick me in the kidneys or what? feeling in her lower back. In short, she's pretty sure jumping out of bed and dashing to the bathroom is kind of out of the question. Which sucks, because she's really got the need.

She peers out of the folds where the blanket meets the pillow. It's eerily silent in the house, even though sunlight is pouring through the gap between the curtains. There's no clanking of breakfast dishes, no whiff of coffee wafting upstairs.

Which is all understandable when she sees Wes is curled up on his side of the bed, about as far as he can get from her without sliding over the edge, and still sound asleep.

And that makes sense, because she's sure they didn't fall asleep—or well, she didn't fall asleep anyway—until the very tiniest hours of the morning. Her money's on the fact that he didn't exactly crash immediately after either, though that's mostly given away by the half-drained glass of scotch on his bedside table that she's pretty sure hadn't been there before.

She can't help but want to reach out and pull him closer, but she definitely doesn't want to wake him because he really does look so damn pretty like this, even with the purple-dark circles under his eyes, the slightly etched crow's feet, the tiny lines pulling down the corners of his mouth. And it occurs to her: He's far off, out of the reach of her outstretched arm, because he didn't want to risk rolling on to her in the night, she's sure of it.

It's disgustingly endearing until the hazy memory of their last exchange flits through her memory. The tired, blunt words, exasperated and terse. But he'd said he knew. Knew about sleeping alone, knew he didn't want that anymore. That is what he'd said, wasn't it?

That nagging thought's forgotten when he sighs, eyes moving under their lids. He’s dreaming, and she's all melty all over again. He's so rarely still, and it's even rarer that she's awake and he's not, even with the way she can coast in and out of sleep on a dime, that's canceled out by that miraculous teenage ability to sleep half the day away if she wants to. Which, yeah, she most often does.

Time's stretched out thin with long sweeping seconds and minutes full of memorizing every square inch of his face all over again. After a while, though, she's starting to telegraph wake-up vibes because damn, she'd sure love a good-morning kiss, some coffee, and maybe even a shower—even though a cranky pang of stiffness through her calves makes that last option seem more daunting than anything else. And even though she's remembering his reluctant kisses now and hopes that was just a last night thing and that maybe he'll be back, that they'll both be back to their normal selves when he wakes up.

Again, she fights the urge to reach out and touch him—to pull him close, tell him it’s going to be all
right. On a more prosaic note, she’s gonna have to wake him soon because she’s reasonably sure she can’t get to the bathroom unassisted. How’s that for romantic?

She doesn’t shake him, just rolls gingerly onto her side and whispers in his ear. “Wes? You awake?”

He’s still curled on his side, eyelids twitching but otherwise there’s no sign that he can hear her.

“Wes? Wake up.” Louder this time. She doesn’t want to touch him—she’s just not ready to, not if she can help it. Why should wanting to reach out to him feel strangely like a temptation she needs to resist? That’s just—so fucked-up and weird. But she feels like, she wouldn’t just be reaching across the expanse of empty bed between them but this wide gulf of emotions so complex she doesn’t even want to start parsing them out. Can’t. Right now she just requires things to be simple and immediate.

She’s not sure why it’s this weird point of pride with her, but it is.

So, yeah. She’ll wait patiently if she has to.

But he starts to shift restlessly and she can see him struggling against waking up. Finally his eyes flutter open. He doesn’t say anything at first—just stares at the ceiling—and she wants to fill the silence.

“Hey,” she says, trying to sound more chipper than she feels.

Finally he turns to look at her. And she can’t breathe for a moment because he’s fixing her with that intense blue stare. Or maybe it’s just because that miracle-worker of a painkiller is finally wearing off.

She’s not sure what she expects him to say, but she’s surprised by his quiet “How are you feeling?” There’s an unusual tentativeness in his voice.

And the question is a relief, because it’s one she can answer—despite the fact that the inside of her mouth still feels like it’s made of cotton-wool.

“Okay. I mean, considering.” He flinches a little at that, and she starts to do the furious backpedaling. “I mean, better. I wouldn’t refuse another one of those pills, though.” Because, yeah, her ass is starting to throb in a soon-to-be-more-than-merely-unpleasant way. She looks at him somewhat imploringly. “And I really, really need to pee. So, like, could you—”

“Oh course,” he replies curtly, not waiting for her to finish her question. She knows that his flash of annoyance isn’t because he doesn’t want to help her, but because her immediate neediness is another reminder of all the unspoken stuff between them. And they’re both exhausted, and the lack of solid sleep certainly isn’t helping matters.

He peels back the sheets so gently, wrapping his arms around her back, being careful not to touch anywhere that she might be sore. He gets her sitting up, which hurts like a bitch, but thankfully it’s only momentary as he pulls her cautiously onto her feet.

He shuffles and she hobbles and somehow they manage to get to the bathroom. Every step she takes sends a warning twinge across her buttocks and down her legs but she bites her lip and concentrates on what really hurts.

And that’s his hand resting so lightly on the small of her back that she can barely feel it. It’s the way he holds his body stiffly so no part of him can touch any part of hers that isn’t strictly necessary and it’s weird to have the cool tiles under her feet because she fucking swears she’s walking on egg shells.

Can’t.
He leads her over to the john and her bladder is sending such urgent messages to her brain that she practically skips the last few steps and plonks herself down on the seat with more haste than caution.

“Fucking son of a fucking bitch,” she howls as the welts on her ass let her know exactly how pissed off they are and he's backing away so fast, he almost trips on the bathmat.

“Sorry,” she hisses, gripping the seat with her hands and lifting herself up a couple of inches.

And why the fuck is she apologizing? Okay, they don't pee in front of each other, which actually she's kinda glad about because Liam would always bust the lock on the bathroom door when he had a belly full of beer and someone had the nerve to be in the shower. That's when he didn't decide to just piss in the kitchen sink.

That repulsed expression on his face has got fuck all to do with the fact that she's hanging over the can and trying to relax all her muscles which are locked on the 'clench' setting so she can go. It's to do with her. That he doesn't want to look at her. Or touch her. Or speak to her because she's hurt him and he's hurt her back and now he can't get her out of his house because she's this gaping mass of cuts and mercy.

“C'mon, Faithy,” she mumbles under her breath and he's sliding through the open door at twice the speed of light.

“I'll just… I'll just go...somewhere,” he stammers and she gives a little sigh of relief and pees for, like, fucking ever.

She manages to heave herself upright and stagger over to the bathtub. Her ass has quieted down to a mute roar and while a shower on even the gentlest setting is going to feel like stabbing needles, she reckons she can handle a bath.

She's just deciding whether to go with the bergamot bubble bath or the citrus, when he's back.

“What on earth are you doing?” he asks in an appalled voice. “Scented products are just going to aggravate…” He tails off and yeah, he's not looking at her just hurrying over to adjust the temperature because she's not even capable of running a bath without him.

“You don't need to do this,” she says in a voice that only quavers a little. “I'm gonna have a bath and then I'm gonna go home. And I'm not saying that so you feel like you have to ask me to stay, just this is all so fucked-up and neither of us know how to unfuck it and…”

For a second she thinks he's just going to ignore her. He's way too engrossed in rummaging around in the bathroom cabinet.

“You don't… I don't want you to go home,” he says finally and he's looking at her now. Really looking at her as she clings to the towel rail and tries not to look completely pathetic. “I'd like you to stay and I'd appreciate the chance to make up in some small way for what happened last night. I'm sorry, Faith, so very sorry…”

And the weird thing is that she feels so naked in front of him that she has to yank a bath sheet from the rail and hold it in front of her. “You don't have anything to say sorry for, Wes, because I'm fucking glad that you hurt me.”

His face is crumbling right before her eyes, like someone's swept the rug out from under him.

“Please, Faith, don't…”

“No, Wes. Only thing I'm sorry about is that you ended up getting hurt again. So I've got a sore ass
but it was worth it if you’d just fucking tell me that things are all right between us now.”

“You're always so brave, Faith,” he says gently, leaning over to turn off the taps. “Things are different between us now, but I still love you. I think I always shall.”

And while she's reeling from that little announcement and trying to get her brain working on actually processing it, he's coming toward her and plucking the towel out of her hands then guiding her over to the tub, arm curved round her shoulder now, hand at her elbow.

Once she's settled on her tummy in the not too hot, not too cold, just about perfect bath, she rests her arms on the lip of the tub and gives a soft, little sigh as the water laps over her ass. “This is so nice.”

He gives her a tentative smile and crouches down so their faces are almost level. “We'll have a wonderful weekend together, Faith,” he promises. “I'm going to go out and get some food and you'll have to tell me what DVDs you'd like to watch because I'm sure my choices would be lamentable and then we can curl up in the den. You'd like that, wouldn't you?”

“So are we okay, Wes? Like, really okay?” she asks throatily.

The kiss that he presses against her mouth is sweet and lingering and when it's just a faded memory, she gets another one and another one. She gets his hands stroking the hair back from her face and she's been starved of his touch for so long that she closes her eyes, leans forward so the ends of her hair are trailing in the water and completely forgets what the question was.

There's another teeth-gritting session with the antiseptic and the dressings but then there's more toast and another mofo of a painkiller and she's drifting off to the sound of his voice telling her that he won't be long and that she's to phone him if she so much as gets a shiver.

It doesn't seem like she's shut her eyes for more than five minutes before he's back, lying on the bed next to her so she can nestle against him, head on his chest, and feel his arms around her.

“You should go back to sleep,” he whispers.

She yawns in cooperation. “You could have a nap too and then when I wake up you'll still be here.”

“I'm not going anywhere the whole weekend,” he assures her, smoothing her hair behind her ears, fingers seeking out all the sore spots on her neck and rubbing them away. “And I bought you ice cream and also a quite revolting confection called a Ding Dong.”

“What else did you get? Stinky cheese, I'll bet.”

“I got all your least favorite stinky cheeses too including some Brie that's so ripe it will practically slide off the plate,” he tells her and she can hear his smile. She doesn't know how they got here but they are here and she's starting to let herself hope that she's bled out enough pain for both of them.

The house seems strange to her as he leads her through it, though nothing’s changed while she was away. Maybe it’s the faint layer of dust. He’s supporting her with his arm around her waist, more because the painkiller’s left her legs feeling wobbly than because she can’t walk alone. The bath’s helped and she’s starting to feel as if she’ll be able to sit on her ass before the day’s out, though that might be just the drugs talking.

He settles her in the den, lying on her side on the couch, with an assortment of cushions to support her head so she’s in the perfect position to watch TV, but when he offers to let her watch whatever she wants, she shakes her head.

So he sits on the floor, leaning back on the footstool he’s placed at right-angles to the couch, so his head’s by hers, and she can kiss him and touch his face and just generally go to town. He lets her do everything she wants. Lets her push her hands through his hair and rumple it up. Lets her trace his eyebrows with lips and fingers, lets her follow the jerk up and down of his Adam’s apple as he swallows, lets her kiss him until she feels a twinge that’s a different sort of pain and slides her tongue into his mouth, tasting him.

His head jerks back and he’s looking at her all wide-eyed and she’s about ready to fucking cry because if she can’t even kiss him.

“Wesley—”

“I’ve been most remiss,” he says. “I promised you ice cream and failed to deliver.”

He stands up and he’s gone before she’s had time to finish telling him that she’s not fucking hungry for anything that isn’t Wes-flavored right now. Not that she’s up for more than kissing him. Not right now. But looks like she’s not even going to get that.

By the time he gets back with a bowl of Cherry Garcia big enough to make even her eye it nervously, she’s made up her mind. She lets him feed her some of it because it gets him close and he’s got that adorably intent look in his eyes as he fills the spoon with precisely the correct amount and gets it to her mouth without a single drip.

“Full now,” she says, batting her eyelashes in a way that should have had his eyes narrowing and his hand flexing, because they never did agree on when she’d had enough to eat.

He hesitates, staring at the half-full bowl and then sets it aside. “Then I’ll put on a movie, shall I?”

“No, you’ll stop avoiding anything like a conversation and talk to me,” she says. It’s not easy sounding determined when you’re lying down, naked except for a Wes T-shirt that’s way too big, but she manages it.

“Of course,” he says smoothly. “But perhaps that could wait until you’ve spoken to your mother?”

And just like that he’s deprived her of speech. Shit. It’s, like noon, and Darla would be freaking, because no way would she believe Faith had got up early, and—

“She’s working today,” she tells him. “Won’t have missed me. I’ll leave a message, tell her I’m—”

She looks at him. “What shall I tell her, Wes?”

And that’s put him right back on the fucking spot and he’s squirming and flustered and she fucking hates it.

“You—that is—” He stands up abruptly. “Faith, it occurs to me that this situation is one you might feel tempted to take advantage of.”

She gives him a lazy smile. “Might do. And you just ended a sentence on a preppy-thingummy.”

His eyebrows shoot up faster than rockets on the Fourth of July. “Faith, if I might finish?”

It’s still not right, it’s still not his normal drawl, but she’s not inclined to criticize.

“Yes, Wesley,” she murmurs, all meek and mild again because she knows it’ll get her that look,
yeah, *that* one where she starts to shiver and get wet on a good day, which this isn’t, but the general effect’s the same.

"I’ll be frank with you," He folds his arms and stares down at her. “While you’ve been away I’ve had very little with which to occupy my time.” And, God, she wants to know every detail of how he did. “I fell victim to the allure of that time-waster.” He nods at the TV and she snickers, composing her face quickly as he glares. “As you’ve declined the chance to be the one to choose what we watch, I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with whatever I choose.”

He picks up the remote and presses buttons with a competence that proves he wasn’t lying. The screen goes green and she blinks at grass and a roaring crowd. “Wes? This is soccer.”

“Football,” he corrects her, shifting the footstool and sitting on it. “It’s coming up to the end of the season, so it’s all very exciting.” Someone hacks someone else on the shin and brings him down in a crumpled heap and Wesley gives an anguished squawk. “Dive! That was a bloody dive! Good Lord, is the ref blind?”

She’d like to think it was an act, but he knows the name of every player and he’s boringly detailed about just what the defense is doing wrong.

“Kinda had you down for a cricketer,” she murmurs when it goes to half-time and his absorbed interest flags, because no way, no how, can the commentators in the studio know any better than him.

“Father played cricket,” he says without turning, as if that answered her, which she guesses it does. She wonders if Roger and Liam are sharing a room in hell and gets a kick out of the idea for about a second. Then she reaches out and kisses the back of his neck, making him shiver with surprise. “Is this a, like, really sadistic way of punishing me?”

He goes rigid. “What?”

“My ass is off-limits,” she says. “Least for a while. So you’re making me suffer this way? Gotta say you’re inventive.”

He turns and his eyes glint at her. “Watching football is not a punishment, Faith, and I’m hurt that you think I’d do that to you.” He grins.

“Yeah, well. If I’ve learned anything in my short time on this earth, it’s that deep down all men really want is a few brewskis and a sport to watch. For you it’s *soccer*.” He tries to interrupt, to correct her, but she plows on. “Next thing I know, you’ll be sending me to the kitchen to grab you a fancy microbrewed beer and a bowl of peanuts.”

“Oh, would you mind?” How the hell does he do that without cracking up? His voice is perfectly serious, but she can see the teasing glint in his eye.

“Always happens when the shoe’s on the other foot, doesn’t it?” She tries to keep a straight face too, but has a little more trouble with it. ‘Tired of being at my beck and call?’ She tries not to think about the fact that he’d been more on the preemptive side, because that would distract her from the fact that they’re actually engaging in some freakin’ banter, the lighthearted kind. For the first time in like, half a millennium.

“’Fraid so,” he says. “You really didn’t take advantage of it at all. Such a pity.” He smiles at her. “You know, you look very pretty in that shirt.”
“Oh please, don't even pull that line with me. Isn't there an oh-so-important game you should be watching?” She points to the screen, and sure enough, on cue, the players are returning to the field for the second half. “You'll get some of this action if your team wins. That seems fair, doesn't it?” It's hard to flip her hair over her shoulder coquettishly in this position, but she actually pulls off a pretty good approximation of that page from the naughty girl's playbook.

“Are you bargaining with me, Faith?” His eyes narrow suspiciously, but he's not cutting her off or shutting her off, so she blindly plunges forward.

“Maybe.” And the look on his face after that single word made her little gamble worth it. Oh yeah, it was nice to be back in familiar territory, even if they were standing on a shaky ground.

“I see.”

“If your team wins, I expect a cozy little make-out session, at the very least. But nothing too...”

“Strenuous.” He's not completely on board, she can tell. But he's trying, he really is.

“Right.”

“And if they lose?”

“I have to... I mean you have to wait until tomorrow. Seems fair, right?”

And oh, he makes her wait even then, while he thinks it over, and she can't really tell if he's faking that indecision or if he's really not sure; she's almost kind of certain it's a little of both.

“Well, I can't deny that the thought of making you wait is always a pleasurable one...” There's a tiny crack in his voice as he trails off.

“But?” He looks at her blankly. “C'mon Wes, I hear a 'but' coming.” She almost laughs at her unintentionally lame-ass pun, but he's got that distant, pained look again. Dammit, since when did he get an all-day ticket to ride the emotional roller coaster? That was her job.

He shakes his head, as if to clear away nagging inner voices or some cycle of circular reasoning.

“Right then, yes. It's a deal.” His smile is wan, but there're good intentions behind it. That's plain in his eyes, which as far as she know, could never really lie, or not convincingly, anyway.

It's funny how when you actually have a wager riding on something, it's suddenly much more interesting. Which is how she finds herself suddenly getting an impromptu lesson in football. Though he's struck speechless when she asks which one's David Beckham.

“He plays in Spain, for Real Madrid,” he hisses when he's regained the power of snark. “Really, Faith!”

“Huh? But he's English!”

He makes this strangled kind of gulping noise and then starts to laugh, and he won’t tell her why. His shoulders relax though and he reaches over to take her hand, holding it in his, with his thumb stroking it gently.

Until there’s nearly a goal by his team and he lunges forward to study the slo-mo as if the ball’s gonna go in if they slow it down and show it, like, five times.

It looks good at first, her team—yeah, his team's her team now, too—score a goal right off at the
beginning of the half, and she's feeling very smug until one of the big goons in the back trips up one of the little skinny ones that do all the running, and Wesley's yelling a blue streak of profanities at the humorless referee on the screen, and there's players removed and a penalty kick and suddenly they're both silent, because the score's flip-flopped, and the opposing team's gained the lead.

“There's not enough time for our guys to catch up, huh?” She tries not to sound too beat-up about it, but fails miserably.

He sighs heavily and strokes her hair out of where it's fallen over her eyes. “They could still pull it off. It's very unlikely, but I've seen some strange things happen in the last five minutes of a game.” He doesn't sound very convinced either.

She's not sure how five minutes can stretch into twenty, but they do. Added time for stoppages, whatever the hell that means, and then it's all over.

“Tomorrow it is, then,” she says. “Sorry they didn't win.”

He puts up a brave little half-smile, leaning over to kiss her. She's expecting another chaste brush of his lips over hers, and she's pretty sure it surprises both of them when it's anything but that. She's breathless and wild-eyed when they pull apart, searching his face for any clue, any indication of what it was that had changed the tide.

“Tomorrow then,” he says with an enigmatic smile that tells her everything and nothing.

And she pauses for a moment—just to stare at him, trying desperately to figure out what it is that's going on in his head because it sure as hell isn’t clear to her. She suddenly remembers this old saying of her grandmother's, “You’d make a better door than a window,” and yeah, that describes Wes to a fucking T. It’s also just about the only funny thing her grandmother ever said. But it’s not so funny in this context, really. Because she’s mystified and a little scared and she wants things right again but doesn’t have a fucking clue where to start. And, sure, maybe watching some silly game on TV is a pretty good one, but it’s not a means to an end.

“Turn the TV off,” she says suddenly.

“What? I thought—if you'd rather watch something else, I can—” He reaches for the remote.

She shakes her head vigorously. “No, Wes, that’s not it.” She squares him with an intense look she’s seen him give her a million times. It seems to have the desired effect, because he drops the remote and gives her his full attention.

“You don’t have to do this, you know? Don’t have to—indulge me. Or whatever this is. I mean, I appreciate it. And, like, my ass appreciates it.” She giggles. “And you’ve been so sweet. But, like, I don’t know how to—” She stops, frustrated by the imprecision of her words. Instead, she reaches out to touch his face, and, to her surprise, he leans into her hand. She closes her eyes. “Just want that, Wes.”

“I know,” he whispers. He’s got this faraway look in his eyes as he says it and it’s not reassuring her.

“We can just be quiet, just—here.” Again, she’s not even sure if that’s what she wants to say. But then, there’s just too much to say and it’s like this all or nothing proposition. She doesn’t want it to all spill out in this flood because she’ll fuck everything up somehow, make it all worse. She doesn’t trust words like he does.

She raises her other hand to his cheek, pulls him close. It might as well be their first kiss because she’s got these butterflies in her stomach. She looks at him from under her lashes. “Nothing says we
have to wait until tomorrow.”

“Are you saying that rules are made to be broken, Faith? Because that’s a position that would require vigorous defense.”

He sounds so much like the Wes of old, like her Wes right then—voice all velvety, dark promise, that she tries not to squirm, because she knows damn well her ass is going to protest. “Yeah, well—maybe? This one time. Special, uh, circumstances?” she queries, flashing him her most enigmatic smile. Like, she could give the Mona Lisa pointers.

“By that standard, they’re all arbitrary.” So now he doesn’t look like he’s going to kiss her anymore, but rather like he’s ready to lecture her on the casual flaunting of rules, which they’ve covered, like, three million times.

She’s not going to let that happen. She shakes her head in frustration. “Dammit, no. I mean, this is all just—it’s like when you’re little, and you have to go to bed and you don’t want to. So you ask for a glass of milk. Once you drink all your milk, you ask for a cookie. And after the cookie you want some more milk. And by that point it’s like an hour past your bedtime.” She pauses. “That’s us.”

Now he looks really fucking bemused. “We’re up past our bedtime?”

She sighs. “I know this is gonna be a slow process, Wes, but I just don’t want you to think…” She kisses him lightly, cautiously, and then again, with more feeling behind it. “Not gonna break, Wes,” she whispers. “I promise.”

“Don’t promise,” he whispers back, and sounds so solemn, all trace of amusement gone in a flash.

She leans against the cushions and pillows that are propping her up. “What else am I supposed to do, Wes? I don’t know. Tell me.”

He looks as unsure of the answer as she does. And his silence isn’t fucking helping. And then another, possibly ill-advised, question is out of her mouth before she can stop it.

“Why’d you go to my father’s funeral?”

For a moment it just hangs there, unanswered in the silence. She tries to cover up with a breathless rush of words. “Knocked the breath out of me to see you standing there, really did. Then Xander had to go and fuck it up.” She smiles sadly. “Maybe that was for the best, though, y’know? If you’d come over to me I think I really would have lost it. Not over Liam, but just from seeing you there, when I thought—I thought you hated me. Thought you were going to leave without—”

He cuts her off abruptly. “I had no intention of saying a word to you.” He looks right at her when he says it and she can’t breathe again.

“Then why go?” It’s hurtful, yes, more than she can say, but she needs to hear it. She blinks back the tears and holds onto him because it’s all she can do.

There’s silence again, but she can see him, frowning, trying in vain to put this into words.

“I didn’t go to my father’s funeral,” he begins, but that’s not the explanation, just a statement of fact. “When he sent me away it was a relief, in a way. It was deeply cowardly of me, but I was glad to have an out, some reason I didn’t have to deal with my familial obligations,” he says in a voice dripping with derision. “I didn’t understand them and they certainly didn’t understand me. Leaving, cutting all my ties to them—wasn’t it just easier that way?” He sighs heavily. “I thought so. And all that drinking I did certainly made the decision easier. I couldn’t wait to have an ocean separating us
from one another.”

He halts again, but she squeezes his hand by way of encouragement.

“My mother tried to reach me, many times. I didn’t answer her calls, sent all her letters back unopened. Knew that if I heard her voice, even once, my resolve would weaken. I was too angry to let that happen.”

“I know what that’s like, Wes, you shouldn’t feel ashamed—”

“Ashamed? I wasn’t ashamed. I was deeply arrogant, and younger than my years. I thought the path of least resistance was the best thing for everyone. It was quiet that way, discreet. And I was content with being the black sheep of the family, the one talked about in hushed tones, the one who got away.”

His face looks strained, weary. She knows how difficult this is for him, which doesn’t make it any easier to watch. “I didn’t call her even when I knew he was dying. She wanted me to be there, at his side, even if he didn’t. Maybe he did and was too stubborn and proud to ask her.” He pauses for breath, for composure. “I couldn’t go. Couldn’t see him in the end. Couldn’t face putting up this great façade of caring when I wasn’t at all sorry to see him go. Didn’t want to lie to family friends—gritting my teeth and paying lip service to grief I didn’t feel. I certainly didn’t want to listen to my father’s colleagues, ruddy-faced and tipsy on port, reminiscing drunkenly, their nostalgia like so much salt in a wound.”

He turns to look at her, and lets her see all the regret he’s feeling. “But I left her to face all of it alone. That’s the one thing I can’t forgive myself for.” He’s hurting, but she’s almost afraid to touch him again for fear she’ll break the spell, make him go silent. “She never called me again.”

It’s all he wants to say and once she realizes that, it’s easy to shift forward and put her arms around him, hugging him with a grip so fierce he yelps a little.

“Sorry. It’s just—” She relaxes her hold on him and gives him a smile that’s wobbly because she thinks she’s about to burst into fucking tears or something. “Wes, you break my heart, you know that? You’ve just—all this shit that’s happened to you and you’ve had to deal all by yourself. Me, I’ve always had someone. Xander, and these days, Darla—which still feels majorly weird—” She takes a breath. “And now you, most of all. God, I’ve cried on you so often—”

He disengages her arms from around his neck and somehow they end up holding hands. When he does that it’s almost like being kissed, because his hands are warm and strong and God, what haven’t they done to her?

“So going to my dad’s funeral kinda made up for missing your father’s?” she asks, a little doubtfully.

His lips quirk in a rueful smile. “Not exactly. If I told you I wanted to make sure the bastard was dead, would that anger you?”

She grins. “Think that just puts you in the same boat as half of the people who showed,” she confides. “Including me.”

He stands up, letting her hands go with a swift, reassuring squeeze. “Wait here.”

“Like I can do anything else?” she says, but he’s already gone. She tries moving as soon as he’s disappeared up the stairs, and it’s not too bad. With a caution that proves to be unneeded, she sits up, after making a nest of the softest pillows to cushion her ass. It’s not totally comfortable, but being able to sit up is worth it.
Wes comes back with two crystal tumblers, each holding an inch of whiskey. “Faith, you weren’t to move!” he snaps and it’s kinda funny how, when he doesn’t think about it, he drops right back into the good old ways.

“It’s fine, doesn’t hurt,” she tells him. “And you look weird sideways. It was giving me a headache.”

He purses his lips and, because this is still a freaky day, lets her get away with it. “Well, if you’re certain you’re not in too much discomfort.” He sits on the footstool and passes her a glass. “Here. I think I should have done this a long time ago, and you’re welcome to join me.” He raises the glass, face determined but the lines of stress smoothing out. “To my father, may he rest peacefully in hell.”

She thinks about it and clinks her glass against his. “To a matched pair of fucked-up men who should have had their balls cut off at birth.”

He winces and then shrugs and tilts the glass back, swallowing the whiskey in a gulp. She follows suit, though it’s not really her drink of choice.

“So, do we, like, smash them in the fireplace?” she asks.

He gives her a horrified look. “No, we most certainly do not! They’re part of a matched set of twelve that belonged to my grandfather.” Her glass gets swept up and placed out of reach.

“Now, where were we?” he says, making it clear that they’re all done with the walk down a memory lane that’s overgrown with brambles and probably has quicksand too.

“I was about to ask you to read to me,” she says, which she wasn’t, but she means it now. She settles back and watches him look at her warily. Clever Wes. Because he’s right, there’s more to this than he thinks. “And I want you to do it in the library, with us sitting next to each other, and I want it to be all dark—”

“That might make the primary activity a little difficult,” he says dryly.

“Apart from a lamp,” she hisses indignantly, because he’s just being so fucking picky now. She gives him a level look. “And I want you to read the hottest book you’ve got, Wes. You can’t touch me much, but my ears aren’t bruised and I want to come. I won’t feel like I’m back until I have, and I couldn’t when you weren’t there.” She gulps, because that’s total share-mode, but she doesn’t look away. There’s so much indecision in his face and she wants to wipe it away, wants to see him thinking about nothing but her. “All this time, I couldn’t, no matter how I—And I wanted to. I thought about you and—” She bites her lip. “You gonna make me beg, Wes? Or are you going to read to me until I’m so fucking turned-on you stop making sense?”

There’s a disquieting gleam in his eyes now, but it’s better than panic. “I see. You really do delight in setting me the most difficult of tasks, don’t you?”

She holds out her hands so he can help her up. “Wes, if I didn’t think you could, I wouldn’t ask.”

“I said I’d do anything you wanted today,” he murmurs. “I suppose this counts as indulging you.”

“Really does,” she says.

“My reading to you is even better than ice cream?”

And there’s a touch of vanity there that she doesn’t mind stroking. “Way better than ice cream,” she assures him.
He smiles and it’s better than the painkillers for making her forget the way her ass is still throbbing.

“You pay me the oddest compliments, you know.”

“If this is about me calling you pretty...”

They argue about that all the way to the library.

Chapter One Hundred and Six

It feels like months since she's been in the library, but it hasn't been, really. It's still the same: warm and red and inviting and smelling faintly of musty books, and of him, but in a totally good way. A comforting way.

He makes sure she's settled in on the cushy love seat in a nest of pillows before becoming completely engrossed in the contents of a particular set of shelves, tipping a few books out by a few centimeters from their orderly positions.

“This really is quite a challenge,” he says, more to himself, she thinks, than directly to her. “A great number of these books have moments of pure genius; a particularly vivid description, a particularly creative sexual act, well-drawn characters that seem to come from your own life.” He turns around, and all she can focus on, besides his mesmerizing murmuring, are his hands; he's unconsciously stroking the embossed crimson leather of a small volume. “There's so much subjectivity involved in choosing the best; what I think fits the bill may do nothing for you.”

She doubts that entirely, and says so, with an encouraging smile. “Doesn't matter, Wes, as long you're reading it.” Besides, she's deadly curious to know the one volume in this room, the set of pages, the string of erotically incendiary words that make him hard, make his cheeks flush and goose bumps crawl up his forearms.

“Ah, yes, you say that now, but you may not feel that way were I to read to you from a particularly vivid section of Sub-Umbra, or Sport Among the She-Noodles.”

And yeah, she can't help but laugh at that. “You're kidding, right?”

He's smiling too. “I admit, the title is a bit ludicrous and misleading. It was a novel serialized in the Victorian journal 'The Pearl'—but it has its moments, including liberal use of the word 'fucktious,' which is particularly delightful.”

“UH, fucktious?” The word rolls clunkily off her tongue. “It's like, how they say things like 'frig' and 'cunny' and 'love dart' and all that.” And she's giggling and blushing at the same time because just saying the archaic words makes her feel a little ridiculous.

“Yes,” he drawls it out, in the precious way he does when he's thinking and being officious at the same time. “We may have hit upon a self-selecting factor here. Reading the Victorians aloud is quite another prospect entirely from reading them alone.” He turns back to the shelves and tips a handful of books back in place.

“Now, an obvious choice would be Anais Nin, or Henry Miller, or D.H. Lawrence.” He's back to telling this to no one in particular, and she actually doesn't mind that this is turning into a guided tour of his library, and she's grinning like a fool just to hear him speaking for any length of time without tripping up over his obviously conflicted emotional state. She just closes her eyes, lets his voice wash over her, and concentrates on the way the cool, smooth cotton of his shirt that she's wearing oh so gently slides over her peaked nipples, because, oh yeah, if he keeps talking like that, going on and on about his dirty books, she may not need him to read anything to her after all.
"Faith? Have you heard anything I've just said?"

Her eyes snap open. "Of course." Which is to say, she heard the words, sure—but she didn't really absorb them. "Uh, you were talking about Anais Nin, and uh, poetry? And how when she wrote for her mysterious patron, he demanded she get right down to the sex and skip the poetics. That sounds kind of lame, actually."

"Another candidate that's extremely good for solo wanking. You have a very good point, I'm not sure if her words really hold up when read aloud," he says as he replaces three slender volumes.

"And hey, Wes, aren't the naughty bits of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* kind of boring too?" At least, that's how she remembered it anyway, skimming the marked, dog-eared pages of a copy Willow Rosenberg had passed around their fifth grade class. She'd expected it to be dirtier, but instead, it was just really wordy.

"I admit, Faith, I'm rapidly running out of viable candidates, what with the both the Victorians and all the influential erotica of the early twentieth century out of the running." He's dismayed, and in the dim light she can't tell if it's a put-on or for real. "And I'm afraid we'll have to relocate to a more uncomfortable location if you'd like me to consider post-WWII pulp novels."

"There's more beside what's in here?" She's not surprised at that, really. "In the library? In your study?"

"No, in a storage unit off highway 95."

"Okay, then." She wants to give him more crap about that, but he's gone back to studying the shelves and muttering something she can't quite make out.

Titles, authors, and snatches of his musings meet her ears: "Trocchi's Helen? Southern's Candy? Ballard's Crash?"

"I liked that movie," she pipes up, and he whips around, startled.

"What? I didn't realize I was speaking aloud." He's charmingly befuddled, and crosses back over to her side of the room and perches on the edge of the cushion, leaning in to plant an indulgent kiss on her forehead. "Which movie? Candy? Or Crash?"

"Crash. That James Spader, he's creepy, but totally hot."

"Hmm, I see." She knows that's not a flicker of peevish jealousy in his eyes just then—or was it? "I must be failing you, Faith, if you're sitting here thinking about other men." His hand glides up the inner edge of her thigh, and her sharp gasp at the shock of his touch prompts a sly smile and a cocked eyebrow.

"Uh, Wes?" His fingers brush feather-light, back down the length of her thigh, leaving his hand resting heavily and promisingly on her knee.

"Yes, Faith?"

"Maybe we could just skip the whole reading thing."

*And way to give him a weapon, Faith,* she thinks as he starts to shake his head in pretended dismay. She knows just what he’s going to say, and the fact that his thumb is stroking the inner curve of her knee as he speaks doesn’t make his words any less uncompromising.
“I think not. Faith, you’ve cajoled me, much against my better judgment, into setting aside our little wager—you’ve enticed me here and allowed me to spend at least ten minutes browsing through my books—”

“Which you totally got off on doing,” she says indignantly because they got more touching than she has and he’s always so fucking gentle with the paper and leather and ink.

“It’s always pleasant to recall old favorites,” he admits. “Even though I find myself at a loss for the perfect book to read to you, but that’s irrelevant. You wanted to be read to, and I’m very much afraid that no matter how prettily you plead, I won’t omit that preliminary.”

And if she wasn’t still sore, still stiff, she’d have spread her legs wide and let him see for himself just how far past foreplay she’s gone, because she’s waited too long and it seems that he’s been frustratingly out of reach forever.


His hand moves, with a breath-taking assurance, along her thigh and strokes the damp heat between her legs. “So I see.” One finger goes to her clit and unlike every other hand beside hers that’s touched that small, concentrated source of pleasure, he doesn’t fumble, or press down an infuriating eighth of an inch off where he needs to be. Not Wesley’s style at all. It’s a perfect touch, in the perfect place, and her hips lift, her mouth sighs and she winces and whimpers a second later, because she just can’t wriggle and grind her hips and expect to get away with it today.

The smile that flickers across his face isn’t smug, it’s wistful. “I thought you might be rushing things a little,” he says regretfully.


“On edge. Aroused.” He might as well be reading off a shopping list as far as emotional goes, but the blue in his eyes is deepening. “Demanding.”

“Yes, and when I’m better, you can make me pay for all of it, but right now, Wes, right now.”

And she can’t stop reaching out for him, clutching at his arms and fuck, she must look desperate, but she doesn’t care.

“Faith, stop it,” he says and he’s standing up, breathing fast. Her eyes drop and, yeah, he’s hard.

Well, she’s half-naked and begging him to fuck her, and it’s been nearly two weeks since—

“Wes, these last couple of weeks, you didn’t—I mean—”

She’s floundering now and he’s frowning, but there’s less tension in the way he’s standing and he comes to sit beside her, a cautious distance away. “You’re being particularly hard to follow,” he complains. “Did I what?”

“Not going to ask if you managed to come solo when I couldn’t—” she says, though she’s dying to know, “but did you—was there anyone else?” He’s giving her an incredulous look and she pushes out her bottom lip in a pout. “What?”

“You seriously think that the state I was in, my primary concern was going out to find a replacement for you? That despite the fact that I’ve gone months without a—partner in the past, I couldn’t last twelve days without—” He runs out of words and just stares at her looking well and truly pissed off.

“You might have done it to get back at me,” she says in the tiniest of whispers. “I’d understand that.”
He reaches out and tips her chin up, holding it steady so she’s got nowhere to look but at him. “Is this an interrogation, or a confession, Faith? Because if it’s the latter—” There’s a dull resignation in his eyes but his fingers are still soft against her face. “Well, I’ll understand too. And, no. There was no one. After you, how could there be? You really don’t appreciate how—”

And normally she’d let him finish, because when he tells her she’s special, when he tells her he loves her, she could listen for hours, but she can’t wait a second when he’s thinking that she’s gone out and fucked the first warm body she’s found. “Wes, there wasn’t anyone! Fuck, how can you even ask?”

She’s scrambling into his lap and pressing a dozen kisses onto lips that are trying to say something, but she’s not letting him talk, not letting him do anything but kiss her back. And he does. Proper kisses, cradling her to him so her ass isn’t touching anything but air, kisses where his tongue’s tasting her and his hand’s moving on her back in these jerky, frantic movements that tell her more than anything how much he’s missed her. If she’d been up to it, she thinks this’d be one time when she’d have got fucked fast and furious, because now they’ve crossed the line there’s a hunger for each other that’s almost frighteningly intense.

“I thought of you every moment,” he says and he’s biting down, not gently, on her neck, sending shivers over her body and making her press against him, seeking a contact she’s only felt in dreams these last weeks. “Reminded of you in so many ways, so angry with you and so very lost without you there.”

“Me too,” she whispers, tugging his shirt free of his pants and raking his skin in a possessive caress that makes him groan softly. “God, Wesley, missed you so fucking much. Wanted to see you, hear you. Driving me crazy knowing you were sitting in your office, or this house—”

“I—” And he pushes her away, just a little, eyes searching her face. “Faith, I need to know, want you to tell me—”

She’s running her hand down the side of his face compulsively, feeling the slight drag of stubble against her hand, the sharp, clean line of his jaw. “Tell you anything, Wes,” she whispers. “I won’t ever keep secrets again, I promise.”

There’s a shadow darkening his eyes at that but he kisses her before he carries on, a sweet, long kiss that ends with their faces still close enough that all she can see are his blue eyes. “What?” she asks dreamily. “Ask me what?”

“Hmm? Oh—” He hesitates and then says gently. “Last night—why didn’t you ask me to stop? Use your safeword?”

And it’s such an intrusion into the warmth and closeness they’ve got that she shivers, because she doesn’t want to think about last night. Not now. Not yet. “Couldn’t, Wes,” she says finally, frowning, because he has to know the answer already, so why is he asking? “You wouldn’t have let me come back if I had. You said you wanted to give me ten strokes and that was the deal, right? And I trusted you, like always.” She gives him a kiss, but his mouth’s still under hers and she sighs and carries on talking instead. “And you did it; you worked out a way to make it ten without it hurting.” She squirms and gives him a rueful smile. “Much.”

“You trusted me,” he says, and he’s staring down at the floor now, not meeting her eyes. “You gave me that switch when you knew how angry I was, you put yourself in my hands and you trusted me.”

She’s starting to get impatient now. The slow burn that’s replaced the heat of a few minutes earlier isn’t any easier to deal with and she’s sure if she can just get him to come, they’ll be half-way back to
normal.

“Yeah, Wesley, I did. Always do. That’s good, right?”

He’s a long time in answering, but when his head lifts, he’s smiling. “Of course it is. And now we’ve got that sorted out, there’s the little matter of the somewhat imperious commands you’ve been issuing.”

She lies back on the cushions and gives him an innocent look. “I was only asking.”

“No,” he corrects her and fuck he’s rolling up his sleeves and that shouldn’t send a quiver right through her, but it does. “You were demanding a release from a tension I share, I assure you, which means I’m feeling very sympathetic for once.” He slides to his knees and places his hands on her knees. There’s an agonizingly long moment when he’s holding them together as he stares at her but she must be looking fucking pitifully needy because he relents, spreads her wide open and leans forward.

She nearly comes just from seeing his face as he tastes her in a delicate sweep of tongue over glistening, sticky-hot skin and glances up at her, eyes half-closed. “You’re so very beautiful,” he murmurs. Then his eyes sharpen. “But you’re not to move, Faith. You’re to remain very still, or I’ll stop.”

And he fucking would and they know it, so she makes sure she’s as open as she can get without it hurting and reaches down to touch his hair. “I’ll be good,” she says.

He chuckles with his lips on her and she fights to keep still as her skin prickles and tingles with heat. “Will you?”

His fingers slide into her without warning and she cries out, feeling her cunt clutch eagerly at them, blindly craving, but she doesn’t move. “See?” she whispers triumphantly, almost giddy with relief, because she’s done what he asked. “I can do it.”

“My good girl,” he says even as his fingers plunge inside her, nearly enough because they’re part of him, though she misses the stretch of his cock, the weight of him on her. “My beautiful girl.”

And she thinks she could come just from that, just from the love and the approval in his voice.

And that's not an exaggeration because she's gotta concentrate really hard on not coming right then, with his fingers crooked expertly inside her, with his mouth finally, finally against her, his tongue flicking, teasingly over every part of her open and exposed pussy, everywhere except her now-throbbing clit.

“Damn, you’re such a fucking tease,” she mutters, breathlessly, as he finally swirls his tongue in the right spot but quickly pulls away, dragging his lips along the edge of her inner thigh, and he's chuckling again. She's got half a mind to grab him by the hair and reposition him exactly where she needs him to be, or tip her hips just a teeny bit and shove her snatch right into his face. But fuck, no. That would make him stop, and that's the last thing in the world she wants.

And just when she's about to scream and shift just a teeny bit, every muscle taut and burning, he finally relents, slipping his tongue languidly over her clit, sliding along the side to that perfect little spot that's twitching like a little ticking time bomb, and it's such a relief, she can't even say.

Then again, maybe the strangled little half-cry that escapes her lips says as much.

And with his tongue hitting the right spot over and over, his nose gently bumping the sensitive
boundary of flesh between her smooth pussy and the hot pinkness beneath, and his fingers still inside, barely moving, she starts to relax, letting the pressure of his free hand still resting on her thigh gently push her into the yielding cushions.

He pulls back with a start and nearly slips his fingers out too, leading her to respond with a raspy shriek of frustration.

“You moved.” His voice, a terse whisper really, thunders in her ears.

She doesn't give a crap that she's nearly gracelessly grunting in annoyance now as his fingertips circle slickly over the inner edge of her cunt. “Didn't. Didn't move, Wes. You pushed me.” Her voice is faint and distant, like it's not even coming from the same room.

He doesn't reply, and when she opens her eyes to stare him down, he's ready for the challenge and playing dirty because his pinkie is slipping over the tender flesh between cunt and asshole, never fully penetrating either.

“Are you sure?” He almost sounds bored, detached—as if he's questioning a recalcitrant witness that's quietly refusing to relent to his not-so-gentle prodding on the stand.

“Didn't move,” she repeats, nearly on the edge of begging. “I swear. Please don't stop. Please?”

His other hand's raking along her inner thigh again, but gently, barely touching her, really, as he makes her wait, silent as stone, his flinty gaze slicing right through her.

“If you're sure, then.” He slides his fingers back inside her aching cunt while shoving her shirt up with his free hand, leaning in to take one of her stiff nipples in his mouth, tonguing it gently before snatching it between his teeth.

“Y-yes. Sure. I'm sure.” Damn him for making her talk now, because the part of her brain that makes the words is sludgy and it seems like every other available neuron has just gone euphoric over the slight pressure of his teeth on her tender flesh; her cunt's gone back to clutching at his fingers and her speech dissolves into a throaty moan.

“Good, then. Stay still, Faith—I don't want to stop again.” The words are a relief when they fade and fall away as he returns his attentions to her pussy, but it's a short-lived reprieve. He's all tease again, tongue reaching everywhere but her clit, until she's nearly gnashing her teeth in frustration; the cozy hum of desire that's running through her body's turned achy and near-painful, and behind her eyes, screwed tight, pink chrysanthemum fireworks flicker in time with her hammering pulse.

The words tumbling out of her mouth between the guttural cries of frustration are senseless, a mindless jumble of pleas and half-formed words, until, with exquisite timing he twists his fingers deeper inside, nearly pulling her up off the cushions while tracing tiny circles 'round her clit. But it's when he moves to heartily sucking on it that she's coming with such force she nearly slams her knees into his head as the wave of pleasure rocks through the lower half of her body. She can't help but move then, sending one of the cushions dragging with a slight friction over her ass that sends her bucking and screaming a second time as his fingers stroke that central, aching spot deep inside her cunt; his tongue relentlessly flicking over her clit until she's grasping at the slippery velvet upholstery, fingers scrabbling for anything to hang on to because she's swears she's totally about to slide bonelessly off her nest of pillows and right to the floor.

Everything she’s feeling—from the accelerated thrum of her heart pounding in her ears, to the involuntary shiver that jolts through her, even the renewed throbbing in her ass—is so fucking welcome. Just to feel—something, anything, after all those weeks of numbness. She just lies there,
not saying a word, catching her breath and smiling like she hasn’t a care in the world.

And maybe she doesn’t, not when Wes is looking down at her with such devotion. It’s so good to see him smile. So good, it’s almost too much. Can a heart break from happiness? And oh God, she’s putting that thought away, because it’s just too fucking sappy for words.

She doesn’t have more time to elucidate that particular train of thought anyway, because he’s sliding his T-shirt up over her head and pulling it off her. “You were wearing far too many clothes,” he whispers, grinning now, and mmm, his fingers are tracing an absentminded, sinuous line across her breast, each feather-light touch electric on her still-sensitive skin.

She doesn’t want to let on how much she longs for him take off all those frustrating layers; much as she loves him buttoned-up and impeccable, it’s time to get him rumpled and undone, even the score a little. “Could say the same about you, Wes.”

“You could, couldn’t you?” And damn it if supreme self-possession isn’t a really good look for him. She raises her head to look at him—the time away has made him new again. Not that she was ever used to him, really. But she feels the same sense of incredible anticipation akin to when she first found herself in this room. And it’s been so long, she almost seems as though she’s never touched him, never seen him unclothed, only imagined it.

And she just looks at him imploringly. “I can’t undress you, Wes. Feeling poorly and all.”

“Yes. All that recent exertion.”

She swats at him. “Now you’re just being a jerk.”

“I am, rather.”

“Wes, please. You must want to—” She reaches out to touch him, gingerly, as though he’s going to vanish into the ether if she actually succeeds. He’s taught her a certain kind-of—precision?—about her wants, and if she’s going to get him naked, wants to get him off, she’ll have to be more sophisticated about it. It’s obvious, really, once she thinks of it. Now it’s her turn to smile deviously. “So, what is it that you want, Wes? Tell me.”

If he’s a little surprised, he doesn’t let it show, just lets his restless fingers come to rest between her legs again. Her desire must be plain to him—she’s obviously still wet and wanting—but the opposite isn’t patently true. Well, of course there is certain evidence—he’s been hard ever since they’ve sat down—she wants to hear it, hear it all in that seductive voice of his. Because every word out of his mouth is a promise to her.

God, how she’s missed his voice.

“I don’t—I can wait,” he says, and suddenly his self-possession’s gone and he’s moving back a little, as if he thinks she’s just gonna let him get away with that. “Really, Faith. There’s no need to reciprocate.”

“Do you think that I’ll let you stay like this?” she says, and she’s outraged because she knows how she felt—still feels—when the need clawing at her was so intense it hurt. She’s lying there in front of him, naked and wet and fuck, if he isn’t aching for her, she’s going to cry on general principles.

“I can take care of myself,” he says a little stiffly, as if he’s hiding the fact that, yeah, that’s freaking him a bit to discuss.

She settles herself back and, you know, her ass doesn’t seem to hurt as much. Must be all the
endorphins racing and rushing around in her blood. “Sure you can, Wes,” she murmurs. “If you remember I helped you out with that once. ‘Course you were a few thousand miles away then, so I only got to hear you.”

There’s a hectic flush rising in his face and he swallows once, hard, before starting to speak. “Faith —”

“I’d like to see you,” she murmurs, gazing at him through her eyelashes. “You’ve seen me come.”

The calm returns and he gets this faraway look in his eyes. “Indeed. Some of my favorite memories involve watching you pleasure yourself. For me.”

The last two words give it all away and she can’t help the delicious shiver that has her rubbing her hands along her arms to drive away the chills. There’s something about the idea that every climax she has, he’s claimed. Every gasp and whimper aren’t just for her ears, but to arouse him.

“You, like, totally get off on...” She hesitates. She doesn’t want to say ‘owning me’ because that’s just a little too far down the rabbit hole, but damn, sometimes it feels as if he does. Own every breath, every word.

“On loving you, Faith,” he says. “Yes, I suppose I do. You’re such a—” He leans forward and kisses her with a gentle pressure that has her lips parting under his in an unhurried surrender. “Joy,” he whispers as the kiss ends.

“You trying to make me cry again?” she says, matching his hushed voice and stroking back his dark hair. “Because I will if you say stuff like that.”

“My darling Faith,” he says and it’s just about the most romantic moment ever but Wesley isn’t about to drop to his knees to do anything except what he did just do and she’s cool with that. He’s close enough now that she can reach for his cock, trapped and hidden away from her and she makes a little mewling sound of frustration.

“I want to make you come more than I wanted to.”

“You say that now,” he points out dryly. “I can’t help feeling you wouldn’t have been quite so unselfish five minutes ago.”

And maybe, but it doesn’t matter. Right now she’s passionately determined that he’s going to come and she’s not going to give way on that.

She’d like nothing more than to have him inside her but she’s reluctantly aware that she’s not up for that. Not today. Maybe tomorrow; but she’s not exactly helpless, and every passing hour is helping. Her ass wasn’t the only part of her that got hurt; there are bruises, blue shadows, across the tops of her thighs where the edge of the desk had punished her flesh, and every muscle feels tight and sore, as if she’d run for miles, pushing herself far beyond her limits. But that’s wearing off now and she’s too caught up in the moment to care about anything but him.

She moves around so that she’s sitting sideways on the couch and pushes him so his back’s against it and he’s facing forward. “Faith?”

She ignores him because she’s busy; busy with buttons and zippers and—

“I won’t allow you to do anything that might aggravate your injuries,” he warns her, mouth set in an inflexible line. She doesn’t want it like that; lips tight and straight. Wants it open on a gasp, lips soft with pleasure, bitten as he tries—and fails—to hold back a groan.
“I’m not going to be doing anything but watch,” she tells him, settling back comfortably after she’s left him exposed; shirt unbuttoned part-way and folded back so she can see the dark line of hair pointing the way down to his cock, like she needs any help finding that. He’s so hard already and he gives this little grumbling sigh as though he’s decided to humor her, and pushes his pants down just a little so the angular sharpness of his hips frames his erection.

She wants to slide forward, lie supine and weightless over him and draw his cock into her mouth, wants to feel it quiver and jump as she explores it with tongue and teeth. She wants to swallow as he comes, wants that moment when his body succumbs in a surrender that’s inevitable and for a while, for an instant, he’s lost and utterly open and it’s because of her.

But that’s going to have to wait.

“Show me,” she says and she’s already breathless with the ache of need that’s rising within her so her voice is this husky, throaty murmur that doesn’t sound like her. “Tell me. What you’re thinking, what you wish we could do.”

The room’s shadows gather and wrap around them as he stares at her and there’s an intensity there that’s almost frightening. “Nothing held back,” he murmurs. “You never do that, do you? Every emotion, every reaction. I see it on your face, in your eyes.” He smiles and brushes his thumb over her mouth. “I’m not so used to that.”

She captures his thumb between her lips and kisses it, a wet, soft kiss, with her tongue flickering against it.

“Maybe it’s time to learn,” she says. She wants to watch his face, but she decides to make it easier on him and nestles against him, with her head on his shoulder. She reaches out and takes his hand, bringing it down to his cock and wrapping it around his erection with her hand keeping it in place.

“I don’t think you have to instruct me,” he says with a small smile. “I’ve done this before, you know.”

She bites his earlobe hard enough to make his fingers curl tightly. “Very funny.”

He lifts his hand from where she put it and she’s all set to pout when he brings it to her breast, pinching her nipple. “But usually the only stimulus has been my imagination or a book, a picture,” he says and he’s sounding thoughtful. “I find myself curious as to the difference it’ll make having you to hand, so to speak.”

“You think too much,” she says and it’s close to a wail because he’s not letting go of her nipple and the attention it’s getting is making her body forget it just came.

“Do I?” He sounds interested, as if he’s genuinely curious. “But it’s worth some thought, don’t you agree?” He shifts away from her a little and yeah, this might have been her idea, her game, but all of a sudden it’s Wes in charge again.

He’s got both hands free now and his right hand goes to his cock, holding it with an assured grip that makes her realize any hesitation he’d shown wasn’t because he was shy, while his left begins to move over her body.

He half-closes his eyes and begins to talk. His voice—and yeah, it’s the accent but there’s more to it than that—always sounds good, but when he’s saying stuff like this it’s like being touched. She swears he could talk her into coming when he starts to drawl out his words, lingering over them like that.
And when his hand skims down her stomach and her legs part for him she wonders who’s going to come first. She’s practically in his lap, one arm around his shoulders, half-kneeling on the couch so her ass isn’t touching anything, and as she rocks her hips against his questing fingers, gaze fixed on his hand as it does a really fucking expert job of getting his cock to sit up and beg, she’s getting dizzy with need.

“The day you came for your interview,” he says, and he takes his hand away from her and brings it to his mouth, studying the sheen of wetness on the two fingers he’s had inside her cunt and then lifting them to her lips so she can taste herself, before he pushes them back inside her slowly. “I was hard when you left. It was painful.” His fingers aren’t moving and when she catches her breath on a sob of frustration, grinding against his hand, he turns his head and bites down on her nipple, a sharp, intense jolt of pain that only makes her want to writhe more. “Stay still, Faith, or I’ll make you watch from the chair, hands at your sides,” he whispers. “I had work to do, a client expected. I couldn’t take care of it and I didn’t want to.” His hand’s cruelly tight on his cock now, squeezing it but not moving. They’re poised, waiting and they’re listening to his voice, as if it belongs to someone else, someone controlling them both.

“I didn’t want to let you have that effect on me. I was caught between wanting you and being terrified. I gave you the job and yet if you hadn’t shown up the next day, I might even have been a little relieved. Reality doesn’t mix well with dreams and you’d been in mine for some time by then.”

He starts to move, slackening his grip a little so his hand can work his cock in slow, lazy strokes, placing his thumb against her pulsing clit so that every breath she takes gives her a faint, slight pressure that’s maddening and never quite enough, but even so, even so...

“How long was it before I approached you? Ten days, I think. God, Faith—” He turns his head and there’s the memory of those days in his eyes and they’re haunted and desperate. “Every night, I’d do—this—” His hand blurs on his cock, jerking off faster than she ever did when she was doing it to a boy because she’d always worried she was gonna hurt them. But Wes doesn’t look as if he’s in pain, even though his teeth are gritted and he’s breathing with shallow, fast sips of air. “Or go to the city and find someone who didn’t look like you, ever, because that wasn’t what I wanted, and I’d charm them and seduce them and they were never—” He makes this frustrated sound. “That first time I hit you, it was because I’d seen you with Xander,” he whispers and he’s fucking her with his fingers now, so she has to gather a fistful of his shirt in her hand and concentrate hard on staying still as he’s told her.

“Every idea I’d had about you—us—they all seemed so pointless. You were with him and you looked so happy, so relaxed. I—gave up a little. And I was so angry, with you, with myself for being so stupid.”

She’s supposed to just be listening, but she can’t help it, she has to lean in and kiss him, soothe away the hurt. “Not stupid,” she whispers. “Wes—”

There’s a faint smile on his face as she leans back and she gets his idea of a reward she guesses, because his hand shifts and a slick fingertip circles her clit and brings her so close to coming that she starts to panic but she can’t move away. He eases off and carries on talking, eyes on her now, and though his cock’s sliding through his fingers and it’s wet-tipped and God it’s killing her not to touch it, she finds herself meeting his gaze and she can’t look away.

“I had nothing to lose, so I gave into temptation. And you were tempting, Faith, even as unkempt and disheveled as you were that day.” There’s an echo of his past disapproval in his voice and that just gets her wetter because she’s remembering too. “That first time—” he whispers and his voice is getting ragged now and his eyes are burning, blazing blue. “You turned and you looked at me and I
waited for your shock to turn to anger, disgust, for you to scream at me, leave, but you didn’t.”

No. She didn’t. Because she’d never been so turned-on in her fucking life and he’d taken the chaotic confusion that was her life and made it simple in the split second his hand met her ass.

“I still couldn’t quite believe it.” His head falls back and his eyes squeeze shut and she glances down. His hips lift in a movement she makes herself when she comes as though, even alone, her body needs to clasp and clutch at something.

She wants to come, but she wants to watch him more. Reaching down, she circles his wrist and tugs his hand up to her mouth, sucking his fingers again with an urgency that’s rooted in the need to share this with him. He gives a guttural moan and his hand speeds up. She lets his fingers slide out of her mouth and brings them to her breast, crying out because there’s nothing gentle about the way he touches her then and she wants, she wants—

He starts to come. She can see the first, thick spurt and then his hand moves up and curls around her neck, and she looks up, startled into his wide open eyes.

He doesn’t say anything, just lets her see him come, face tight with strain, eyes wild—and as soon as he’s finished and his shuddering has calmed, he pulls her to him and kisses her and there’s still enough need in the kiss to make her wish it was tomorrow, or the next day, or the one after that because this isn’t enough.

He breaks the kiss and glances down then meets her eyes with a smile that’s back to being relaxed, assured. “I think you’ve just made sure the next thing I do is shower,” he says softly.

She hasn’t come, but she doesn’t mind somehow. “Wish I could scrub your back,” she answers, kissing his cheek and taking a moment to appreciate the fact that she can again, that he’s hers.

“Tomorrow,” he says, and there’s as much longing in that word as it deserves to have.

Chapter One Hundred and Seven

He'd told her to stay put when he wandered off to the shower, but after a few long, dull minutes half-dozing on the couch, she's bored and hungry and above all, restless. After all that lying around, the short walk to the library has served to remind her that she is really starting to loathe all this enforced bed rest—no matter how much she needs it.

She scrabbles back into his shirt that ended up wadded in a corner of the love seat, wedged in between the cushions, and tentatively gets to her feet, hand gripping the curved, plush armrest for support.

That endorphin high must still be on because it doesn't hurt nearly as much as she'd expected it to, but getting to her feet still gives her the mother of all headrushes. It takes a few moments for her gritted teeth and grimace of resolve to fall away as she takes a few cautious steps toward the door, but she's walking and not stumbling or swaying to the floor, and that's a good sign.

The kitchen's her shiny goal of triumph, and she manages to reach it by taking one tiny step after another until the pull of the healing flesh on her backside isn't so much an annoyance but a physical reminder of all the reparations achieved so far. It's barely mid-afternoon. The thought of what the night might hold, not to mention all of Sunday, and the promise of a hearty breakfast at Wes' favorite diner and a drive to the shore, or something suitably low-key, leaves her daydreaming and smiling like a fool.

She's gulped down two glasses of water, fast, and is making headway with a crispy, tart apple with
gusto when between crunches she hears the faint but familiar bleat of her cell phone from inside her
Emily Strange bag, still sitting where she’d left it on the kitchen table the day before. Seemed weeks
ago, really—like she and Wes had crossed over from some fucked-up dimension where things were
all very, very wrong to one where things were right as rain.

The odds are even that it's either Xander or Darla on the other end of the ringing, though she's pretty
sure it's the latter, considering that Xander was probably still asleep, it being Saturday afternoon and
all.

She can’t exactly hustle to grab the phone, but she does reach it before the fourth ring starts to fade,
right before it rolls over to voice-mail. The glowing green display flashes Darla's number, and she
sighs and hits the green 'talk' button, knowing it's best to just deal with her sooner rather than later,
otherwise the phone'd be ringing off the hook for the rest of the day.

“Hey Mom.”

“God, Faithy! I've been worried sick about you! Where have you been?” Darla's near-hysterical but
there's no boozy slur underneath, which is more comforting than she'd ever expected it to be.

“It's okay, it's okay. Chill. I'm at Wesley's house.”

“Oh, honey, are you all right? Is he all right? You didn't hit him again, did you? Not that he doesn't
deserve it.” If only she knew, but best not think about that or all the wrong words would come
spilling out.

“No, Mom, I did not engage in any physical violence,” she says, a little primly. Which wasn't too
much of a fabrication. “I just dropped by yesterday afternoon to thank him. He dropped the charges.”

“I know; Eve called here this morning looking for you before I left for work. I just assumed you
were out with Xander, but when I couldn't reach him I got worried. Why didn't you call me?” It was
nice there were a few things still constant in this world, she thinks. Darla's self-absorbed simpering
would never fade no matter how long she was off the booze.

“Well, we...uh, well...” Why does she always find herself having to reveal way, way too much about
her sex life to people? Especially her freaking parents?

Parent, corrects an inner voice. Your mother, Faithy. Just her now.

It's then that the full gravity of what's transpired hits her like a ton of bricks, nearly makes her knees
buckle, even. The lies, the deception, the nightmare are all over. It was really all over. Mostly.

“Kissed and made up did you?” She's jolted out of her reverie because Darla's whine has turned to a
good-natured tease, a tone so rare Faith can count on one hand the number of times she'd heard a
sober Darla giggle.

“Uh, yeah. Something like that.” Goddamn if she isn't blushing up to the ears. God, she hopes they
never, ever have a conversation like this one ever again. “Look, Ma, I'd really rather not talk about
that, you know?”

“Just being nosy, baby. I'm sorry.” Darla laughs again, a peal of giggles that turn to a dark guffaw in
a split second. “Don't give him too much too soon, honey. Make him work for it.”

“I have,” she says, maybe a little too curtly, suddenly wishing very much she could tell Darla all that
had transpired, ask her for help. Then she pictures it: Hey, Mom what do I do with a man who's still
fucked-up because of something that happened years ago with a girl he loved who betrayed him, just
like me? And what if I can't exactly shake my ghosts either? “But I think...I think I'll be going with Wes to New York after all.”

“Oh baby, that's exactly what I mean. It's only been a day and you've forgiven each other for everything, then?” Darla's heavy sigh rattles some static in the phone line. “And he's asked you back?”

Come to think of it... “Well, not exactly.” There's a disapproving sputter from the other end of the line, but she just talks over it. “But I know him. I know Wes. We're gonna be all right now.”

Especially if she says it enough times to convince herself that it's true, just in case her still-smarting ass, or the memory of his face as he came for her, or the way his endearments have filled her heart to bursting aren't enough to buoy her hopes.

“Oh, Faith. If I had five bucks for every time I'd feel that way after making up with your father... Well, let's just say I'd have that condo by the beach by now.”

“Wes is different, Mom. He's not like Dad.”

“No, he ain't, and I won't argue with you there. They couldn't be more like night and day, those two.” Darla's harsh laugh blasts her ear again. “But they're both men, honey. And at the end of the day, they're all lying and cheating bastards. Can't help themselves. Trust me on this one.”

Hot tears of protest are stinging her eyes, each word coming down the crackly phone line a little dagger in that big aching hole in her heart that was just starting to heal up again too, even if it is still a little tender and bruised too. “He's different, Mom. He's not gonna do that to me. He's not.” But she can't deny the hot tears spilling over her cheeks and sniffles loudly.

“Oh, Faithy, don't cry. I didn't mean to make you cry.”

“It's okay, Mom. I'm okay, really.” She wipes her face with the back of her hand, shoving the tears away. “Look, I need to go.”

Another melancholy sigh fills her ear. “I'm just a bitter old lady now; don't listen to anything I have to say. Or at least take it all with a big grain of salt.”

In spite of herself, Faith laughs. “For eighteen years and counting, Mom.”

“But you know you can call me if you need anything, baby—right? Anything at all, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you, Faithy. Be good, all right?”

“Love you too, Mom.” The words come right out of her with no sarcasm or bitterness, probably for the first time since she was able to walk, practically.

She's barely clicked the phone off when the floodgates really burst open and she's gotta hang on to the edge of the table because her sobs threaten to send her sinking to the floor, which is really the very last place she wants to be.

And just when she was starting to think she’d cried everything out, that she was bled completely dry —These tears are more out of relief, than anything else, though. She still can’t quite believe the tumult of the last twenty-four hours, never mind the past two weeks. Add to that Darla acting all responsible and even motherly and it’s too, too much.
She just lets everything out with the wracking sobs she can’t really control and doesn’t want to. And it’s amazing how cleansing it is, how good it feels. Her sobs have slowed by the time she hears the water shutting off on the other side of the house and she wonders with a start if she can make herself presentable by the time he gets downstairs. She wipes the tears away roughly with the back of her hand and hobbles slowly to the kitchen sink to splash cold water on her face.

And yeah, she feels so much better, but she’s willing to bet she looks like she’s been put through the fucking wringer. No mirror handy but she can picture it: eyes red and puffy, skin pale, the bruises she remembers getting and quite a few she doesn’t, hair’s probably a mess. She runs the water as cold as she can and gives herself another invigorating splash. She uses her wet hands to pat at her hair, in the probably vain hope that’ll tame it a little.

When she hears his footsteps on the stairs she straightens, rushing to dry her face on a clean dish towel. She sits down carefully, grabs her half-eaten apple off the table where she left it, and takes a big bite out of it. Crosses her legs and tries to look fucking well-put together and not like someone who’s just cried until there aren’t any tears left.

He pauses in the doorway, looking at her with this slight, enigmatic smile on his face—as though he’s surprised to find her there. His face still looks a little worn around the edges, but he’s wearing a crisp black button-down shirt and jeans. Barefoot, he moves silently over to her, crossing the room in long, purposeful strides. He rests his hands on her shoulders and kisses the top of her head.

“Hey,” she whispers.

He glances at the nearly-decimated apple. “You must be hungry. I think you should go and watch some more brain-rotting television while I cook us something for dinner.”

She smiles brightly, her momentary misery banished for now. “Real World marathon, here I come!”

“I have no idea what that means, and for that I am thankful.”

She slowly inches out of the chair and half-turns toward him. “There won’t be, like, cheese involved, right?”

Now he just looks devious and impassive. “Your curiosity shall be rewarded.”

“Goddamn it, Wes,” she snaps, only half-kidding.

“Go on then. Out.”

“Thought you were going to teach me how to cook?” she says and, yeah, fresh from Darla, that’s a question with a double-whammy attached.

“Not today,” he says, and there’s no hesitation or awareness of anything significant in his voice, so she settles for dropping the apple-core on the table and winding her arms around his neck. One kiss that qualifies as a smooch because it’s just so fucking sweet she wants it for dessert, and she leaves him to his chopping and stirring.

After just long enough that she’s started to miss him, he appears with a glass of wine for them both. “I thought you might like to try this,” he says. “It might not travel well, so it needs drinking.”

Before they pack up the house and head north. There’s a blissful sense of security combined with excitement. New York by herself is enough to make her tummy flutter a bit—hey, she’s a small-town girl—but with Wes there it loses every shadow and it’s bathed in the pinkest of rosy glows.
She stares at the glass, sloshing the wine around until he whimpers in anguish. “Not like that!”

Then it’s a five-minute lecture before she’s allowed to even touch it, and truthfully, after all the crying her nose isn’t clear enough to get any of the burned toast—or was it burned caramel and buttered toast?—she’s supposed to be smelling, but when she’s finished swirling it around her mouth, lips parted a tiny bit so she can suck in some air, and she actually gets to swallow, she has to admit it’s—

“Nice?” He gives her a horrified look. “Faith, it’s a 1990 Chateau Gruaud Larose!”

She gives him an apologetic look and takes another sip. “Very nice?” she hazards.

The lines on his face deepen but it’s because he’s chuckling so she doesn’t mind.

They eat—he’s placed a cushion on her chair so she’s wobbling but comfortable—and she tells him Darla rang but doesn’t go into details. He says all the right things about how he hopes she’s coping, without ever tipping them into dangerous territory, and when she’s full of an omelet, stuffed with nothing that looks suspicious, and fried potato slices, crisp and slightly garlicky, he takes her back to the couch and hand-feeds her raspberries until she sticks out a deep-pink tongue and tells him to stop.

“Very well,” he tells her, setting the bowl down. He strokes her hair back from her face and gives her a smile. “Are you sure you’re full?”

She pats her tummy. “Really am,” she assures him. “All I’m good for now is—”

“Yes?” he prompts her, as she hesitates and gives him a cautious look.

“It’s going to sound weird, but did you—I left my hairbrush here, didn’t I?” she asks. “The one you got me?”

He tenses up. “You did, but I don’t see—”

“Missed you brushing my hair, Wesley,” she says and somehow they’re holding hands now and she’s never seen his eyes look bluer.

“I’ll—it’s in—” He stands up after bringing her hand to his lips for a gentle kiss. “I’ll fetch it.” He pauses in the doorway. “I missed that too,” he says without turning. “Taking care of you.”

He’s gone just a little too long and she wonders if she’s pushing him too hard, too fast back to their version of normal, but when he returns, there’s nothing in his eyes but a calm happiness.

“I’d like this off,” he tells her, settling beside her on the couch and tugging at the hem of her borrowed shirt. She skins out of it obligingly and then he pushes her forward. “And these too,” he murmurs, peeling off the tape that holds her dressings in place. “You should let the air—”

His voice drags to a halt and she twists her head trying to see her ass, which gets her a crick in her neck and a reproving tap on the arm. “Please don’t,” he tells her. “It’s—healing well, I assure you.”

And she knows it feels easier but what with all that’s happened she hasn’t had chance to see it and curiosity’s replacing squeamishness.

“I want to see it,” she protests.

“Then look when you’re alone,” he says and there’s ice coating his voice but it’s cracking and she knows why.
“Sorry,” she whispers and she kneels on the couch, her back to him, and waits.

He slips his hand under the fall of her hair and scoops it aside so he can kiss her back, high up. “Such a neglected area,” he says, and there’s nothing but faint amusement in the words. “Hidden from view and severely under-kissed.”

“Is that, like, a word?” she giggles, because he’s kissing it a million times, fast little pecks that tickle.

“That should bring it up to quota,” he says, finishing with one warm, lingering kiss on the back of her neck that makes her nipples harden in a reaction she’s sure he anticipated. “And now—”

He never rushes this. The only time they were ever late for work because of him was when she’d gone to sleep with it damp and woken up with it in a tangled snarl. He’d insisted on teasing each tangle out with a patient, painstaking care—and then tucked the brush into her purse. She’d spent her coffee break over his knee getting fifteen slow, hard spanks from the brush; one for every minute he’d been delayed.

He starts at the top, sweeping the brush down in unhurried strokes that can be ruthlessly thorough until her scalp’s tingling, or barely there, so the bristles feel as soft as his hand would be. She sighs and arches her back, feeling pampered, cherished and adored.

They don’t often speak when he’s doing this; it’s a ritual completed in rapt silence. He usually does it with her seated in front of a mirror and she loves watching his face, absorbed and intent, waiting for the moments when she catches his eye and he smiles at her before returning to his task.

No mirror—Wes to watch and smile at tonight, but she can almost feel the tension leave him as he draws the brush through her hair.

“It’s very beautiful,” he says seriously, finally stopping with her hair silk-soft and tangle-free. “I hope you never cut it short.”

“I won’t if you don’t want me to,” she says, wondering why he’s telling her, because she can imagine his reaction if she did anything that drastic without discussing it first, and she’s brave, but not that brave. He can’t see her so she grins. “How do you feel about me getting a tattoo? Maybe a piercing?”

He reaches around and rolls her nipple between his fingers, biting down gently on her earlobe. “I don’t know, Faith,” he murmurs. “Suppose you tell me how you’d think I’d react?”

“I—” It’s not easy trying to think, or speak, when he’s doing that and his shirt’s brushing her back and he’s so close to her. “I don’t know,” she discovers. “You might get a kick out of it.”

“I might, might I?” he asks dryly. There’s a silence long enough for her to think the conversation’s over because he’s tasting her skin with hard, hot kisses, until she’s trembling, and his hands are both on her body now as she kneels beside him, never dipping between her thighs though she’s long since spread them in an invitation he’s ignoring.

“I don’t believe I’d care for it,” he says finally and his fingers find her clit and she gives this breathy little moan.

“Fine,” she says. “Never said I wanted one.” Which was a lie; she’d just never had the money and Xander had told her enough cautionary tales to stop her from going to the cheap places. She tries not to pout and it’s easier than usual because he’s spreading her legs just a little wider, with his palms flat on her inner thighs, and if she tilts her head back so it’s against his shoulder, she gets to kiss him, and no one kisses like Wesley.
He doesn’t break the kiss as his fingers slip inside her, just matches it with his tongue, soft against hers.

Just in case she's forgotten he can render her into a quivering, babbling idiot, he's done a fair job of reminding her without even needing to relocate the action from the sofa, where she's still splayed out.

She yawns enormously and stretches, all feline. “What time is it? I feel like it's gotta be like, past midnight, but I know that's not right.”

“No, it's only just past seven.” He smiles up at her from his seat on the floor, one arm draped over her belly, the other reaching up to brush her rumpled bangs away from her eyes. “Perhaps you should get to bed, soon, though. You could certainly still use more rest.”

Carefully rolling over onto her side so as to present her upturned face for a kiss from his still-moist lips, she's all giddy smiles. “Not tired, Wes. Haven't had enough of you yet.”

“I'd forgotten just how energetic you are,” he drawls, drawing his fingertips gently along the curve of her back. “Even if you are still slightly incapacitated. It would appear that it doesn't take long for me to go out of practice in keeping up with your youthful energy.”

“Oh please, Wes. You totally outlasted me plenty of times.” She smiles at the memory of the evenings that ended in the wee hours leaving her barely able to keep her eyes open. She knows some of those times he’d tiptoed out of the bedroom to read in his study or just stayed up watching her sleep. She knows because she'd only pretended to be asleep some of the time, finally sent off into dreams knowing his gaze was still locked on her face. Come to think of it, he'd probably known she was faking.

“Faith, did you just hear a word I said?” His tone is sharp, but still mostly teasing.

“Mmm? You said something?” She blinks lazily at him, confused.

“I have a pile of films due back at the video store tomorrow that I never got around to viewing. I always seem to rent more than I end up watching, for some reason.”

“Well, if you weren't like, watching those soccer games that last all afternoon, you wouldn't have that problem.”

“Criticizing my couch potato habits are you?” He's archly serious, but he can't quite suppress the mirth in his voice as he rises wobbly to his feet and offers a gallant hand to assist her. “For your information, Faith, there were films made before last year that are worth watching.”

She lets out another wail of complaint, full-on bratty. “I don't wanna watch a movie. I wanna stay here and look at you and talk.” She narrows her eyes suspiciously at him when he doesn't budge, arm still outstretched and waiting for her hand. “You prolly rented a bunch of those fussy, long costume dramas, did you?”

“Guilty as charged, I'm afraid.” She rolls her eyes and finally allows him to help her off the sofa. “Still, I'm sure there's something that will meet with your approval. I think I picked up a quirky independent or two. And at least one loathsome teen film.”

“Were you expecting me back or something?” she teases, then immediately regrets it, but she can't read his expression because he's turned to pick up the hairbrush from where it's fallen, knocked under the sofa.

He's mostly composed when he turns to look at her, only his gaze is slightly chilled, betraying his
still-warm voice. “Is it so outlandish that I would find the oeuvre of Kirsten Witherspoon a charming diversion? I'm especially fond of that Election film.”

His malapropism is enough to shove the conversation past that rough spot, as she nearly collapses back to the sofa in a pile of giggles. “Might believe you if you got the names right, Wes.”

Before he can bite back with a tart retort, the phone rings and he hustles her off in the direction of the den, and she's actually kinda grateful for a chance for a pit stop, in case he like, rented some three-hour epic or something.

Turns out he'd gone for the whole panorama of the human pain experience in his doldrums. There's a stack of DVD cases she hadn't noticed before on the side table, and she's still going through them when he enters, two glasses of wine in hand.

“Man, Wes, did the place have like, a shelf devoted to bleak movies or what?”

“Really, Faith, you may recall that I wasn't exactly in the most cheerful frame of mind before yesterday.”

“Well, yeah, but usually when people are depressed, they rent things that will cheer them up. Written on the Wind isn't exactly high on that list. And, I mean, did you really need to rent three Scorsese films? Mean Streets, Taxi Driver, and The Age of Innocence?”

“I found all the violence vaguely cheering,” he says tonelessly, setting the wine stems on a side table.

She purposefully ignores falling into the trap of asking why, because she's pretty sure she won't like the answer. “There's no violence in The Age of Innocence.”

“Not the physical kind, no. Emotional violence. Obfuscation. Thwarted love. All under a thin veneer of propriety.”

She's actually been leaning toward suggesting they watch that one, but thinks the better of it, returning it to the pile. “I'd forgotten about that,” she says weakly, feeling rather small now, until she flips another case open to find it contains Heathers. She can't help but let out a huge guffaw and he looks up, startled.

“Big Winona Ryder fan, Wes?” she asks, waving the box at him.

Not meeting her eyes, he stammers out a muttered, inaudible retort, digging around in the pile for another box. “How about The Royal Tenenbaums, then?”

“Way to avoid the question, there,” she says, plucking the box from his fingers and hitting the eject button on the DVD player. “But whatever. I'll let it slide...for now.” He gives her a look of mock-horror that only does a fair to middling job of covering up the fact that he's a little jarred from keeping up with the see-sawing mood of the conversation. “Anyway, yeah, this is perfect.”

She really hopes that it'll always be like this, curled up under a soft chenille throw, her head resting on his knee, watching a perfect movie. And just when Gene Hackman's totally chewing up the scenery, yelling about the missing javelina trophy, she remembers something.

“Who was on the phone?”

“Hmm? Faith, must you insist on chattering through one of my favorite scenes?” he murmurs, stroking her hair off her cheek and tucking it behind her ear.
She lets that go, and, yeah, she has a feeling she’ll be doing that a lot over the next weeks, because she’s lost ground and she knows it. If she stops to think about it, this, all this, Wesley close enough to touch, fingers gentle on her hair, is more than she deserves so it’s wrong of her to mind that the two weeks they were apart she missed more than she’ll ever be able to recapture.

“She?” she says as the credits roll. “On Monday—at the court—you—”

He seems to know what she’s having problems saying and he stands up, gathering their empty glasses. “I won’t be able to be there, no.” He walks away and she scrambles to follow him, wincing slightly because she’s stiff from sitting, but catching up with him as he reaches the kitchen.

Over the noise of the tap as he begins to rinse the glasses, she says. “I don’t mind, Wesley. I get it.” She reaches out and pats his arm. “It’d be—awkward, right?”

He glances at her and his expression is so remote she feels a chill. “Awkward? Well, yes. Trust me, Faith; it’ll be far better for you if I’m not there.” He hesitates. “In any case, Monday is going to be a rather busy day, actually. I have a lot to see to.”

She nods, trying to look all understanding and inside she’s starting to panic. Suppose something goes wrong and they’ve found out—something. Suppose Lilah’s there, looking for blood, for revenge. Suppose Eve and her judge pal have—

“You always do,” she murmurs and it takes no time at all for the kiss she gives him back to turn serious until they’re locked together, making little desperate noises, hands everywhere, which, as she’s still wearing nothing but his T-shirt, isn’t hard for him. Even the throb of pain as his fingers brush over her tender ass does nothing but make her hungrier for him.

“Fuck, Wes,” she says, in what’s perilously close to a whimper. “I can’t—don’t want to wait.”

And she doesn’t. Arousal, intense and sudden is ripping through her, leaving her trembling and so fucking wound-up she thinks she’ll scream if he stops touching her. She’s been waiting for this since she knocked at his door, no, since she picked up the phone and heard him order her to get ready, to come to him.

She’s been waiting and tomorrow is too far away.

There’s a terrible longing in his eyes and she can see him hesitate, about to tell her she’s not ready, it’s too soon, although she doesn’t need his cock hard against her body to know he’s as eager as she is.

“Want you to fuck me, Wes,” she whispers, and it’s really that simple. “Please?”

Darla always told her it was the magic word and she was right, because it unlocks the place he’s retreated to and he pulls her inside, with him.

The bedroom might as well be on the moon. No way can they get there, when they can’t stop kissing for more than a few seconds but they don’t need to. He leads her back into the library, or maybe she’s tugging him, and he closes the door behind them so they’re in this space of his, warmed by the red walls and the memories. Without taking his eyes off her, he strips; swift, impatient movements that have him naked in moments, and it’s about all she’s willing to swap for his mouth on hers, the sight of his body again. Too many nights spent remembering it, but the reality is better, immeasurably
so, although, like her, he’s looking thinner.

“I should tear this off you,” he says, in a voice that’s not quite steady, bunching the T-shirt she’s wearing in his hands. “But I don’t think I could destroy it, ever.” It’s pulled off over her head pretty fast though and he sinks down to his knees in front of her.

Wesley kneels to her so many ways. Out of practicality, out of desire—he can make her feel worshipped without ever losing the edge of control she needs him to have. Tonight he’s doing it because it’s the fastest way to get his mouth on her and his fingers spread her wide as she sways and catches hold of the back of a chair.

She’s dizzy and aching, grinding against his tongue and teeth and moaning because it’s good but it’s not enough, not even when three fingers, pressed tightly together and stiff plunge inside her again and again.

“Need more than that,” she says and it’s a wonder he can understand that croaked whisper but he does and even like this, with her heart thudding painfully and warm blood tingling inside her, fizzing and sparking until she’s ready to tear at her skin to get to the itch, she knows this is going to hurt.

He moves, rocking back on his heels and shifting until he’s lying back, half-propped up against the front of the couch.

“Come here.”

And she thinks this can work but by the time she’s straddled him and his cock’s nudging inside her, just the tip of it, she’s back to feeling as if she’s going to die if he doesn’t just fuck her already, so what difference does it make if her ass comes out of this a little more the worse for wear?

The urgency’s left him, though, as if now she’s there, hovering over him, with her breasts full and soft for his mouth to kiss and tease, he can wait all night. His hands slip to her hips, curving around them reassuringly lightly and he’s nowhere near the seven stripes on her ass but they’re singing and stinging and it feels kinda good, the way it does when he’s spanked her so hard and so long that the heat swallows the pain.

“You’re to tell me if this hurts,” he says in this hoarse voice that’s practically fucking begging her not to because he’s gonna die too if they don’t, she knows he is.

She can’t stand it any longer, and if he’s still capable of talking she’s doing this wrong, so she slams down on him and watches his head fall back and every muscle lock so she’s going to have finger marks all over her but she doesn’t give a fuck because he’s in her, every inch she can get, and fuck he feels so good.

She can’t ride him the way she normally would, rising and sinking, grinding and squirming, but it’s almost enough just this, the sense of emptiness being filled which has fuck-all to do with the physical this time and everything to do with the way he’s looking at her now, all wondering eyes and bitten-lips as she lifts just a little and eases back down.

Maybe this was too soon. Her ass is burning, skin stretched taut and the pain’s enough to turn her a little sick but call it interest on a debt because she’s not leaving him like this.

But if he was fucking her in the proverbial cellar at midnight he’d be able to tell the difference between her face screwed up in pain rather than ecstasy and before she’s got time to splutter more than, “What the hell?” he’s lifting her off him and he’s all closed-off and distant again.

“That was unforgivably stupid of me,” he mutters, not meeting her eyes.
She hits him. Not hard and she’s shaking so much from frustration it’s this weak little flap of her fist against his shoulder, not the thump he deserves but it brings his head around.

“It’s my ass,” she growls.

He holds up his hand. “And it’s bleeding,” he says tiredly.

It’s a smudge, that’s all, the tiniest smear of red, and she’s not happy about it but she’s got other things on her mind and one of them’s right there, still interested even if Wesley looks as if he’s three seconds away from hitting a cold shower and shrinking it down to size.

With an evil look at him, because damn, he can be stubborn when he’s protective, she jabs her finger into his chest. “Fine,” she hisses. “But you’re going to come in me, one way or another, Wes, or I’ll —”

Words waste time, she decides, giving up on arguing with him. She moves between his legs, spreading them wide, and shifts backward so that she can lie out full stretch with her head level with his cock. It’s not the ideal position, but her ass appreciates it and once she’s resting her arms on his thighs it’s not too bad.

“Faith,” he says, and there's this exasperated yearning in his voice. Talk about mixed signals.

She ignores him and when he doesn’t struggle away she gives his cock a gentle, approving kiss, right on the top, and hears his breath suck in with a satisfyingly ragged moan to follow as she dips her head slowly, lips parted so he slides into her mouth.

At this angle, it takes every effort not to gag a little as she relaxes the back of her throat, taking in the length of him—slowly—dragging her tongue along his hot shaft. She can feel his thigh muscles tighten under her hands, and this almost pleases her more than his soft moans that echo each time the head of his cock bumps against the furthest edge of her soft palate.

And now that she's settled in place, one hand slithers up over his inner thigh, curling around the base of his cock, her pinkie lightly stroking his balls as she works her mouth and hand in tandem, his hips bucking slightly in counterpoint.

She can barely breathe through her nose, but it's worth it; the lightheadedness makes it easier to take him a teensy bit deeper in every time he thrusts against her. Lips taut and slick, she slips up and down in a furious rhythm for a few moments before slacking off. He whimpers needily as she nearly slides him completely out of her mouth before clasping her hand tightly 'round, squeezing and jerking him off, all the while lapping at his dripping head teasingly with the soft tip of her tongue.

His hands twist into her hair and for a moment she thinks he's gonna shove her back down, force her to take him fully back in her mouth again, but instead he holds her there, gasps of pleasure interspersed with her name repeated in a whispered raspy blur and she can feel him holding back, waiting. Not so much making himself wait as making her work for his come, and she only too gladly obliges, inching him farther and farther into her mouth so very slowly, until she's taken him in as far back as she possibly can, her hand now gently cupping his balls as she takes to working up and down his shaft, pulling hard with her tongue to create little bursts of extra suction over and over and over again.

He shifts his hips ever-so-slightly and she lets up again, just for a moment that drags out interminably, lolling her tongue lazily up and around, just teasing him for once. Only he's nearly begging her to not to stop, and she's only too happy to oblige.
Until the moment his fingers curl around the back of her neck and she only needs to lightly, oh so lightly tighten her lips around his cock again and gently pull him out, the action of her tongue working in resistance, and he comes, filling her mouth with salty, hot spunk that she greedily swallows down. Her tongue's swirling around the head and she lets him do the work, thrusting into her yielding mouth until the final shuddering spasm fades and she swallows down the last drops she's sucked from his throbbing head.

She wants to stay with him in her mouth like that, just for a few more moments, but he's pulling her up fast and she scrambles to her knees as he dips his head down, snatching her mouth in his for a possessive, hungry kiss. His hands are still tangled in her hair and he won't let her go, won't let her break away until he's finished, his tongue sliding along hers until the taste of him fills both their mouths.

She's seeing stars by the time she's able to breathe properly again, still on her knees. He's pulled her close, his arms wrapped around her protectively, his breath soft and hot on her ear and for a moment she thinks she just may come too, her burning cheek pressed against his chest, his heart hammering in her ear.

They stay like that a long time, until her knees go numb, her ankles demanding a reprieve. She doesn't want to move, but she's afraid she might collapse and slide out of his grasp if she doesn’t.

Tilting her head up to meet his eyes, she's almost startled by the raw intensity of his gaze locked with hers, and by the way he markedly shivers in her arms, she knows he sees the same thing looking back at him.

“Love you, Wes,” she whispers, so low there's barely any sound that makes it past her lips.

Pulling her close again, he murmurs against her ear. “And I love you, Faith.” The sound of her name sends tight prickles of headiness straight to her overloading brain. “More than you'll ever know.”

“Doubt that, Wes,” she says, twisting her head 'round to plant a soft kiss on his lips. “Think I've got a pretty clear idea right now.”

She doesn't argue when he insists that she have another hot bath before she falls asleep, and the whole trip from den to bathroom to bedroom all runs together in a blur until she's on her stomach in the bed, his hands working to unclench the strained muscles in her neck, whispering poems that make her heart squeeze up and set her warm, soporific limbs tingling before she finally slips in to dreams, carried there on the soft cadence of his voice.

Chapter One Hundred and Eight

And his voice is the first thing she hears when she finally manages to unpeel her eyelids.

“Wake up, sleepy girl,” he says and all her senses come alive because he's stroking his fingers along the curve of her spine, dipping into the dimples just above her buttocks. And there's sunlight flooding every inch of the room so she has to squinch up her eyes and the smell of chocolate and caramel is making her nose twitch.

She might be still stupid with sleep but the smell of chocolate and caramel can only mean that Wes went out to get her breakfast.

“Hmmm, did you get me a caramel latte?” she mumbles. She rolls gingerly onto her side and hey, what do you know? Her ass is feeling way better. Like she's gone a dozen rounds with Wes and her hairbrush, but that she can live with. And he's sitting on the edge of the bed, looking like he's been
back-lit by God's own cinematographer and if she moves her head just a little bit to the right… Disco! There are pastries on the plate that he's placed on the night stand.

“Good morning, Faith,” he says, his hand brushing back her sleep-tangled hair from her face and she's leaning into his touch and holding her face up for a kiss that's sweeter than all the caramel lattes in the world.

He gives her an approving smile when she finally pries her arms from around his neck and sits up without even a wince. “I take it you're feeling better?”

“So much better,” she agrees, reaching for the caramel latte, which he's decanted into one of his heavy china mugs. “You didn't have any plans for today, Wes, did you because…”

She doesn't get any farther than that because his eyebrows are shooting up and he's doing a good job of looking scandalized. “Please, Faith, if you're going to suggest what I imagine you're going to suggest, may I remind you that this is meant to be a day of rest.”

And she's never going to take this for granted again. Not the smooshing or the way he gives her perfect Sunday mornings or how they're getting back to this place where he can tease her so she bumps her shoulder against his and giggles when he gives a frantic little moan as her latte sloshes dangerously close to the rim of her mug.

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“Dunno what's going through your mind, Wes, I was just gonna say if you want me to help you start packing, I'm feeling up to it,” she tells him smugly and he bites his lip because she knows that he's as desperate to be inside her, properly inside her, as she is. “I could start in the study, while you did the library.”

“It can wait,” he says firmly. “I've already planned to spend every moment of the day lavishing attention on you, looking after you, touching you. I don't want you out of my sight for a second.” And he sounds so fucking serious about it, like he's just daring her to say that she'd rather go to the Monster Truck Rally that's happening in the next town. His hand is already sliding under the sheet so he can cup her knee, just in case she thought he was joking.

She's needy, She knows that. Been so long, like eighteen years too long of being the girl who got used and abused and laughed at. But he takes her need and makes it all right. Makes it okay that she craves his attention as much as he loves giving it to her.

“You just don't want me whining about getting paper cuts,” she blurts out because she's about to get dragged under by a tsunami of raw emotion and it's the worst thing she could have said because paper cuts bleed and…

But he's smiling gravely and she didn't think that was possible until she met Wes. “And then I'd have to kiss every one better and I doubt that either of us would get much packing done so it's simpler to stick with my original plan, don't you think?”

His original plan involves feeding her breakfast. Tearing off ragged chunks of pain au chocolat and almond croissants and not even pursing his lips at the flaky crumbs that are adorning the sheets. Then there's another bath where she lays in the scented water, languidly lifting each limb ready for his attentions until he tells her that she looks like some dissolute empress. He even shaves her; legs, armpits and even though it's practically baby's butt smooth, he spends what feels like several millennia on her mound until he isn't even using the razor, just running his fingers over her as reverently as if she was the rarest of rare books.

“You're so beautiful, Faith,” he tells her when she finally complains that the water's getting cold and
she's standing patiently on the bathmat while he dries her. “You quite make me catch my breath sometimes.”

And she can feel herself pinking up under his gaze because since she met him, she does feel beautiful. She feels softer and prettier, not like the girl that the boys would call hot because they thought that was a good way to get into her pants.

“So are you,” she mumbles quickly. “Not trying to get you pissed, Wes. You are and one day you're gonna realize it too.”

“Well, I suppose beautiful is slightly more poetic than that other adjective you're so fond of,” he drawls but there's this grin threatening to crack across the tightly drawn lines of his lips. “What? You mean fucking?”

“I'm not even going to dignify that with a response, Faith,” he says, rising slowly and walking over to the counter so he can pick up the bottle of moisturizer that he's probably going to spend the rest of the day rubbing into her skin, but he's smiling properly now, eyes dancing with delight.

“Oh! You mean pretty,” she exclaims like the light's suddenly dawned, and he's been away from her forever. Because five seconds is too long and she's hurrying over the tiles so she can press herself against his back, standing on tip-toes to press a frantic line of kisses against the back of his neck. “You're so fucking pretty, Wes and I love you so fucking much.”

And the walk back to the bedroom is this entwined stumble of lips and hands getting in the way and it was dreamy and slow before like she was still asleep. Now it’s urgent and she's wet and wanting him so badly that she sprawls on the bed, thighs spread, and throws him a beseeching look.

“We could spend the day in bed,” she pleads even though the hungry way he stares at her cunt makes her think she's not going to have to beg too long. “You could lavish attention on me and touch me in bed, Wes. Want you to.”

But he doesn't answer for the longest time and she watches in fascination as this flush stains his face and his hands twist nervously like they've never wielded a razor or a belt so assuredly. “That sounds lovely,” he chokes out. “And from the way you flung yourself down, I assume that you're on the road to recovery.”

“Really am…”

He's kneeling at her feet in an instant but his fingers aren't gliding up the taut muscles of her legs but clutching at her hands. “I'd like… that is… this is very awkward, Faith and I'd entirely understand if you didn't want to…”

It doesn't matter what he wants. He could slather her in chicken liver pate and make her stand there for half an hour statue-still and she'd do it. Especially when he doesn't order, just stammers and falls over his words.

“Anything, Wes. You know, I'll do anything,” she assures him eagerly and his grip tightens almost painfully around her wrists, shadows darkening his eyes to the deepest navy.

“You shouldn't agree to things so easily,” he bites out. “I don't expect you to willingly comply with my every demand, do I?”

Somehow they've managed to crash through the door marked 'don't go there' and she drags him back, leaning forward to pepper his face with kisses. “No, no! Wes, I didn't mean it like that. Don't
be mad at me. I just want us to be all right. I've been good, haven't I? Done everything you wanted me to because that's what I wanted to."

“You've been delightful…”

“So don't go changing the rules on me, Wes, I just want us to be happy.” Her fingers are clutching his shoulders so tight that she's going to leave bruises but she has to look long and hard into the stormy blue of his eyes so he can see her. Believe her.

“I don't want you to get hurt,” he whispers and she almost laughs in relief.

“Then don't be angry with me,” she says simply. “That's what hurts the most.”

“I'm not angry with you. Not anymore and not ever again.” His voice has got this dull, heavy tone to it like he's trying to bite down whatever he's feeling. “It's forgiven, Faith. It's forgotten.”

The tears are prickling at the back of her eyes. “I'm so sorry, Wes. You know that, right?”

“You crying didn't figure too highly during my plans for a perfect day,” he says with a shaky smile. “So I'll be most displeased if I have to kiss them away.”

“Not crying but you could still kiss me.”

It's not until she's got her legs wrapped round his chest so she can yank him in closer and tighter and maybe not ever let him go while he fists his hands into her hair so he can tip her head back and sink even deeper into her mouth, that she knows she's going to get fucked. Not some gentle rocking with her on top but him pinning her down and slamming into her.

“Do you wanna fuck me, Wes?” she hisses when he lets go of her mouth so they can both take ragged breaths.

He gives her this sibilant 'yes' in reply that's dragged so hard out of him it sounds like it hurts.

“Want you to fuck me hard,” she tells him fiercely and his hand is already snaking between them so he can rub his palm roughly against her clit. Then he's pushing her down on the bed and hauling himself to his feet.

“I want a picture of you,” he barks suddenly as she raises herself up on her elbows. “Like this. When you're so wet and needy for me.”

She freezes up because there's these crumpled black and white images rushing through her head and the room's spinning so she shuts her eyes to make it stop. But when she opens them all she can see is him and the longing in his eyes makes her heart hitch and then beat out this maddening rhythm that makes her feel giddy.

And even as she croaks out “why?” she's parting her legs even wider just to hear that tiny little gasp he always makes and then tries to hide.

“Because I love to see how beautiful you are, how much you want me. Even when I was away, remember? How I'd bring myself off and think about you. And a photograph wouldn't be the same, wouldn't be so delectable, so wanton, but it would always be… As if I'd captured a tiny part of you that you only let me see,” he finishes in this inelegant rush and now all she can see is other photos of her all pink and pretty and her fingers and her cunt, how the shiny photographic paper would glisten and he'd have them spread out on the bed in some sterile hotel room while his hand was wrapped round his cock and it'd be like she was always with him.
“So you wouldn't show them to your lawyer buddies then?”

“Faith!” He's not faking that utterly appalled top note and she grins and she's getting wetter because...

“What if it wasn't just one photo?” Her voice is thick and husky like her tongue's turned to cotton wool. “What if I let you take pictures of me while I did this?”

Her index finger is circling her clit, tracing a path to her aching cunt so she can dip inside and show him just how much she wants him.

And he doesn't say anything. Kinda hard to when he's growling.

His knuckles are white as he grips the chest of drawers and his face has blanked out, shut down because no one will ever know him like she does. “If you did something for me I'd even let you take photos of me coming” she says sweetly and pulls her fingers away from her dripping pussy. Then she sits up and gives him a demure smile. “You gonna let me tie you up, Wes?”

He regains some of his composure at that. “Rhetorical questions are such a waste of time, don't you think?” he murmurs.

“Wasn't one,” she says pertly but with the hope that she's ever going to get him naked, bound, and at her mercy, flickering and dying, because if he won't agree to it on Indulge Faith Day, when will he?

“Let's pretend it was, shall we?” he suggests pleasantly. “If you're adamant that your agreement requires a concession from me, well, I'm sure we can come up with something else.”

She gasps with indignation. “Like you're not as desperate as me!” she says. “Wes, once you're in me, even you wouldn't be stopping to tease and drag it out. Not this time.”

Which, okay, not the most sensible thing she could've said because now he's looking all challenged and insulted and fuck, if he dreams up one of his, Faith doesn't get to come for an hour, scenarios she's gonna be kicking herself.

Then his face relaxes and he chuckles. “Perhaps you're right,” he concedes. “I'm certainly very eager.” He gives her a reproving look. “Not desperate.”

'Course not. She gives it one last try. “I'm, uh, negotiating from a position of strength here.”

His eyebrow shoots up and she bites back a giggle. “I beg your pardon?” he drawls.

She traces a circle around her nipple so it hardens as he watches—because he's watching in fact—and gives him a slow, sweet, utterly not-budging smile. “I want you naked, Wesley. Want you lying here in front of me, all mine to play with, for...” She thinks about it. “Half an hour? And you get the same amount of time with the camera if you need it and I'll pose any way you want me to, doing anything.”

Linking it so he cuts down the time he spends bound, and loses at the other end of the deal is a stroke of fucking genius, she thinks and it's working because he's looking all kinds of conflicted even as his tongue is wetting his lips because the bait she's dangling is just so fucking tempting, she can tell.

“Very well,” he bites out. “If you're resolved on this, I really have no choice, but, Faith, I don't think I need to tell you that I'll be most displeased if you in any way overstep—”
She yawns and studies her fingernails and he glares at her. “What?” she says innocently. “Wesley, I know what you get off on and what you don't. Stop fussing.”

He's lost for words, but guess he doesn't need them, because he's sliding off the bed and walking around to where he keeps the scarves she's felt against her wrists and ankles so many times. She watches him pull out the drawer and rummage inside it, his face slightly grim.

And she'd feel kinda bad about this but it's something she wants to do and she's got a suspicion that deep-down he's almost glad she's asked for something big, because he's still got this idea that what happened between them didn't balance the scales the way they'd intended—that he owes her.

And yeah, apart from the tingles she's getting just thinking about what he'll look like, she wants to see if he trusts her again and she can't think of anything that would prove it better than this.

Of course, now he's started to undress, his eyes on her as he unbuttons his shirt with unhurried, casual flicks of his fingers, she can't think, period. He takes away everything that isn't him when he looks at her like this, when he's stripping bare for her.

She gets off the bed as he places his pants on the chair, folded neatly, and kisses him, feeling his mouth soften under hers. Her resolve wavers because his cock's hard against her and she just knows she could get it inside her in thirty seconds if she asked.

Stepping back from him takes all her willpower but she manages it. “Want you on the bed, on your back, Wes,” she says, trying to capture some of his assurance.

He purses her lips and studies her before giving her an odd little smile and a nod. “Of course,” he says silkily. He tilts his wrist and looks at his watch, then unfastens it and straps it to her wrist. “Thirty minutes,” he says, picking up the heap of black silk and handing it to her without commenting.

“Well, and they've already started,” she says, closing her hand on the scarves which feel so heavy suddenly, “so why are you still standing?”

He sits on the side of the bed and twists to the side, bringing his legs up and shifting to the center in one smooth movement that might look unconcerned if not for the pulse hammering away in his throat. This is fucking killing him, not least because of the fact that his cock's rigid and she's as good as told him he's got half an hour to get through.

“Would you like me to tell you the best knot to use?” he asks politely as she kneels beside him, a length of silk trailing from her hand.

“Xander was a Scout for six months,” she says. “Know 'em all, don't worry.”

If anything the slight frown deepens. “Could I just—”

She nods at the headboard without speaking and sees this fucking beautiful look of indecision on his face before he swallow heavily and extends his arm up and to the side.

She runs her finger across the crease of his wrist and watches his fingers curl inwards and then relax. “It feels cool at first,” she tells him as she slips the scarf under his wrist. “The silk, I mean. You can feel it, every inch, and it's not like a bracelet. You know it's something meant to hold you and I don't think it matters if you use silk, like this, or cuffs, or chains, or rope.” She attaches one end of the scarf to his wrist and says, “I don't want you to look, Wesley. Eyes on the ceiling.”

His head moves back into position with an effort and she smiles and wraps her hand around his
wrist, pulling it into position. “No, it doesn't matter at all. They all do the same job, right?”

He nods slowly as she finishes fastening his hand in place. “Yes.”

She clasps her hand around his bound wrist. “Feel warm yet, Wes? Feel part of you, so you forget it's there until you try to move beyond what you're allowed?”

His eyes close for a moment. “It—yes. Yes, it does.”

His voice is tense, almost panicky, as if he's already spread out and helpless and she leans over and kisses him, feeling the way his mouth opens and he strains up to reach her because he doesn't know how long she'll stay and he has to make the most of her because he's not going to have any say in if she stays or goes.

She realizes, with a flash of insight, that she'd be so fucking turned-on by that. There's something about the combination of need and helplessness that gets her every time when it's Wesley looking down at her with a frowning, thoughtful intensity, because she loves him, and she trusts him, so there's never any risk, any danger of him not delivering.

Got to be difficult for Wesley though. She's not sure he's ever got to that place with anyone and the way she's fucked stuff up with him recently she doesn't need the swift glance down to see that he isn't totally happy with this, though the whole naked and no-fucking-for-two-weeks is on her side.

It's gone on long enough, she decides, kneeling back on her heels. “Wes?”

Staring at her with carefully-blank eyes he raises his other hand above his head and twists his fingers into the metal frame of the bed. “I'm ready,” he tells her.

There's a second where she's so fucking tempted. This is one image she doesn't need to record anywhere but burned into her memory. The muscles in his arms are taut and all the delicate, tender soft skin she doesn't get to see and touch half enough is exposed and waiting to be kissed, to have her nails rake over it and leave faintly scarlet lines that sink back into the skin only to be called out to play when she does it again.

“Want to make sure I tied it right first,” she says. “Suppose you try pulling on it?”

There's this look of relief that he gets to try and break free but it's chased away by the realization that he's going to have it well and truly rubbed in that he's tied-up. He deals with it, shoving it down as she watches, and then he takes a quick, shallow breath and tugs sharply.

The scarf, tied in a loose bow, slips free of bed and wrist and his head jerks to the side to stare at it. “I thought you knew how to tie knots.”

She scoops up the scarves and tucks them away in the drawer. “Just wanted to see if you'd do it, Wes,” she says gently. “And you've got guts, because you didn't like that one little bit, did you?”

He gives her a look that's almost angry. “I don't find this amusing, Faith,” he begins, starting to struggle up.

“Wasn't meant to be,” she says. “And you're not off the hook, Wes, so stay right where you are.”

His lips tighten but he does as she tells him. “I'd appreciate it if you told me exactly what you have in mind,” he says.
“Bet you would,” she says dryly. “Deal's this, Wesley; I won't tie you because that's, oh, it's like zucchini sex for you, right?”

His lips twitch in a small smile. “No one but me would understand that reference, you know.”

“No one else needs to,” she tells him tartly. “That's, like, one of those memories you take to your fucking grave without sharing, okay?”

“Agreed,” he says and the smile she gets melts her a little because she's starting to think she's gone too far but he's still happy with her if he can smile like that.

“But I still want to just, you know, have you to play with,” she says, hurrying on as his lips part on what has to be an objection at the very idea he's her personal GI Wes. “So I'm gonna give you a safeword—” Now he's looking as if she's lost it, totally, “—and kinda put you on your honor not to move.”

“My honor.”

He's sounding bemused now and she nudges his leg impatiently with her knee. “Right. You've got to promise not to move unless I tell you to. And you don't get much time to decide because this is all on the clock here, remember?”

There's nothing but amusement and love in his face now. “Faith, this is—it's not what I expected.”

"Tick-tock,” she says with a pointed look at his watch.

“I agree,” he says softly. “I promise to behave as if the bonds are real and if even that becomes too arduous, I'll ask you to stop.”

“Word?” she snaps out.

He hesitates, his eyes clouding over in thought, then he gives her a wicked grin that vanishes in an instant, so his face is perfectly straight as he says, “Courgette.”

“So gonna make you pay for that,” she mutters. “And I've got twenty-one minutes to do it in.”

He doesn't wait for her command, just spreads his arms and legs wide, holding onto the headboard again and, yeah, he's back in the game again now.

It's such an overwhelming image, she's not quite sure where to look first. She's glad this is happening now—with the mid-morning sun spilling through the windows still giving the whole room a dazzling golden glow that seems to both be radiating from him and lighting him up at the same time—glimping off the hidden gray bits of his hair, which she still finds completely adorable.

Rocking back on her heels, hands pressing into her thighs, she slowly counts to thirty in her head, as she imagines he must do when their roles are reversed—when he's itching to touch her, but holds back. Or does it just come so naturally to him and he doesn't need to keep close track of the time, instead bending it to his will, making moments drag or speed up or stop entirely? She's not sure she can match that.

And to say the possibilities presented her at that moment are overwhelming would be an understatement.

She can feel his eyes on her, but she doesn't meet them, instead lets her gaze wander from one tightly clenched fist to the other, his fingers curled around the headboard, the tendons in his wrist slightly
raised with the effort. The line of his neck where it meets his shoulder; the soft shadows of his rib cage; the fine, soft hair that trails down his belly; the way his still-stiff cock gently butts against the scallop of his hipbone; the impossibly long lines of his legs that end with his bare feet, finely boned as his hands. And she could be mistaken, but she's sure she sees one toe twitch, in that way she knows wayward limbs and digits will when you're trying to hold perfectly still. Soon after she's enraptured by the way his thigh quivers ever so slightly when she nearly reaches out to run her fingers along his pearlescent flesh.

Snatching her hand away and deciding starting so close to his cock would be a little too hasty, she evaluates all the bits of him that are screaming out at her to be touched, finally deciding to run a solitary fingertip along the inner edge of his arm, wrist to bicep and back down again with the back of her fingernail, smiling faintly at the curl of goose bumps that spring up.

“Woah,” she breathes, suppressing a hysterical giggle, a little stunned because she'd almost forgotten the feeling of watching the near-imperceptible effects her fingers have on his smooth, pale skin. Leaning in to run the tip of her tongue along the same line, she's doubly pleased to hear a hitch in his slow, even breathing. His skin's slightly salty and when she's this close, faintly redolent of his usual sandalwood and bergamot scent that makes little bits of her, deep inside, immediately clang madly at the sense memory.

It clears the haze of desire in her brain, though, suddenly realizing that she's already lost track of time and she must have wasted precious minutes marveling over just a tiny portion of him, and is almost pissed off until she realizes that's exactly what she's supposed to be doing, mapping her way around the territory of his skin. And she proceeds to do just that, running fingers and tongue over all her favorite parts of him, finally planting a light kiss on the protruding wrist bone of each arm, her hair and breasts swinging teasingly over his surprisingly blissed-out face as she leans over to reach the one furthest from her.

And yeah, she's more than pleased to see him actually relaxing now, stock-still except for the occasional slight quivering of his cock—so pleased, in fact, she knows it's time to dispense with the feather-light touches and sweet kisses, dipping her head down and dragging her tongue along his neck and down his chest, circling each of his nipples in turn, feeling him fight the urge to move. Oh yeah, that's some heady stuff, that power and all of a sudden she's pressing the heel of her palm to the shallow divot where hip meets thigh before swinging her leg over him, the outer edges of her slick, hot pussy rubbing along the length of his cock, pinning it between them.

“You're not to move, Wes,” she warns him as she feels his hips shift under her, his cock quivering and twitching and she knows damn well that's an involuntary reaction that he can't control, just like he can't do anything about the mottled flush that's pinking up his skin. “I'm gonna stop if you do.”

She's feeling all kinds of generous, which might have something to do with the way that the twitching length of his shaft is rubbing against her clit so she doesn't point out that the way he narrows his eyes to give her the mother of all glares technically counts as moving. Instead she slides herself an inch forward so she can get more of the wriggling undulations of his cock against her.

“I'm sure that your half hour's up,” he snaps with a petulant bite and with a grin her eyes shifts to the clock on the nightstand. Her meter ran out three minutes ago but it's not like he knows that.

“Nuh-huh, Wes. Still got a good while yet. Unless you want to use that little word you got if this is too much for you. And I don't mean to get all pernickety but all those filthy looks you keep giving me are just adding more minutes on to your running time.”

And payback is so fucking sweet because he opens his mouth to snap out some dire threat but she's
already swooping forward, locking her fingers around his wrists and invading his mouth like some conquering army. Because she'd promised him this, before she got too carried away with her evil plans to have him all splayed out and at her mercy. Now that she's got the reality of it, all that smooth skin and tightly corded muscle spread out beneath her like a fucking gourmet dinner, she doesn't want all the things she promised herself. Doesn't need ice cubes or belts or anything like that. Because she promised once that she'd give him six minutes of serious smooching if he ever let her do this and she's made a solemn vow that she's always going to keep her promises to him.

She's so busy getting a high from the taste of him, running her tongue along the roof of his mouth and the top of his teeth that it takes a little while to realize that he's not kissing her back. In fact, if it wasn't for the near constant wet caress now of his cock between the sticky lips of her cunt, she'd bet that he'd died of outrage.

“You're meant to kiss me too, you know,” she hisses indignantly against his frozen mouth.

“Wouldn't that count as moving?” he inquires archly and she's this close to rethinking the whole ice cube and belt vow.

“Six straight minutes of smooching,” she echoes from their other perfect weekend. “And I'll cry if you don't kiss me back.”

“Well, in that case…” He gives her a secret little smile then purses his lips so they're just the right shape for her kisses.

It's six perfect minutes of being sprawled on top of him, the smooth wall of his chest sliding against her aching breasts as she tries to get enough of something she'll never be able to get enough of. Because even though she's drunk on his kisses—could just about fucking die from the slide of his tongue in her mouth—she's rapidly reaching the stage where she's gonna die for real if she doesn't get his cock inside her soon.

As it is, the frantic circling of her hips and all that wriggling around gets the head of his cock nuzzling right against the slippery heat of her hole and she's pushing herself forward, tormenting the pair of them so he's groaning into her mouth every time she lets him gain an inch and then slips back.

“I think you can move now, Wes,” she chokes out and his gaze follows her, flickers to the clock and then back to her, his eyes promising all sorts of wicked things.

“Forty three minutes,” he murmurs to himself as his fingers slowly uncoil themselves from the bed posts and he stretches his arms over his head. “Remind me to take issue with you about your deplorable time keeping after we've fucked.”

“You in the driving seat then, are you?” she asks, like she doesn't already know the answer from the way he's pushing her upright so he can cup her breasts and rub the pads of his thumbs over the stinging tightness of her nipples.

He's already in motion, planting his feet flat on the bed so his legs lift up and she's tilted backward against his thighs. “Do you even need to ask?” he purrs with a grin that's an eighth of an inch away from malevolent. “Now put me inside you.”

The moment her hand clutches greedily around the throbbing, wet length of him she's sending frantic messages to her ass to behave itself. And as she scrambles up on her knees and treats herself to just one, no two, what the fucking hell, three sly swipes of her clit against the leaking head of his cock, she can't feel anything but the slightest twinge of heal skin, which is nothing compared to how much her cunt aches to have him inside her.
“No dawdling, Faith,” he says with a delicious taunt to his voice and she's greedily slipping his cock home in one clumsy lunge because it's been so long and now the wait's over and her cunt is clutching him tight, walls fluttering around him and if she leans forward, rests her shaking hands on his shoulders and puts all her weight on him, she can feel him pressing against her sweetest spot, the base of his cock rubbing at her clit and she's swooning, mouth open in a gasp that she can't quite get out.

It takes one tiny thrust of her hips and she's coming already with those little ripples of sensation that she always thinks of as a prelude to the main event.

And the main event is seconds away because the sense memory of the bite of his hands on her hips is replaced by the real thing, and he's lifting her up so she can sink back down. “That's my girl,” he groans, eyes tight shut before they snap open. “You're all right?”

And if she said she wasn't, she thinks he'd cry like a little baby. As it is she gives him her most beatific smile and rewards his concern with an evil twist of her hips that has him snarling and his head thrown back.

“A fucking okay, Wes,” she assures him sweetly before she finds a resolve she never knew she had and raises herself up so she's open and empty and lying back on the bed next to him while his face screws up in confusion. “You gonna fuck me or what?”

“I thought that's what I was doing?” he grits out because her fingers are dancing over his cock.

“More like I was fucking you,” she pouts. “And I'm exhausted from all my recuperating and topping you and stuff.”

“I'm sure I could find some part of your anatomy to give a good spanking to or have you developed an unprecedented level of restraint in the last fortnight? And you were not topping me; I was allowing you the illusion of control, which is an entirely different…”

“Oh stop being so snarky,” she sighs, letting go of his cock and tugging at his arm. “Up, Wes, want you to fuck me.”

God, he wants it too because he's shifting fast, looming over her to spread legs that are already parted for him before hesitating. “I'm not sure that this is the most comfortable position for you, Faith.”

She doesn't reply because actions speak louder than words and she's scooting down the bed and lifting herself up so her knees are around his ears and her legs are draped over his shoulders. “If my ass touches the bed then you'll be the first to know.”

His hands are moving to support her even as he's turning his head to press one sweet but totally unnecessary kiss on the inside of her knee, where the skin's tender and smooth.

“Faith,” he murmurs, and she doesn't know what he was going to say because his hips are moving forward and she's not sure he could have stopped that first deep stroking thrust if he'd tried, and once completed, the second, third, and all the rest of them, are as inevitable and welcome as sunrise and sunset.

There's this instant though, when he's first in her, deep and hard, and he pauses, staring at her, his expression almost imploring because she might not have made him beg—not that she'd tried—but she'd brought him to the point where this, just this, was enough to make him need to stop because he's so close to coming he has to.

She holds still, perfectly still, and she's way better at it than she was, but the faint tremor that runs
through her body as he starts to withdraw is all it takes. He makes a sound, too harsh to sound familiar on his lips, and his eyes squeeze closed, face contorting. She can feel him struggle to regain a swiftly slipping control and then he relaxes, opens his eyes and smiles at her, looking fucking wild and not a little scary.

But if there'd been a mirror around this time, she knows her expression would match it.

“Fuck me,” she says without moving, each word deliberate and clear. She can feel her lips peel back in a challenging smile. “Hard.”

She doesn't have to ask again. Her legs slip down into a more comfortable position and she gets that second stroke, gets the third, and then he's just fucking pounding into her in an onslaught that, right then, is exactly what she wants, what she needs.

Later he can take all the time he wants; spin it out, twist them from one position to another as the fancy takes him, make her plead, make her please him—he can do whatever the fuck he wants, just as long as he fucks her now, just like this.

She's making a sound, full-throated and wordless, every time his cock slams into her and his hands are cupping her ass, holding it so that she feels as if she's floating, anchored to the bed by his body.

By the time he comes they're wrapped around each other and Wesley's head is cradled against her shoulder. It's a long time before they speak, even longer before he slides, reluctantly, out of her and rolls to the side, pulling her into his arms.

“I don't think I've come that fast since I was a teenager,” he says reflectively. “I'd apologize for being so precipitate were it not for the fact that—”

“I was coming pretty much the whole time and I'd have been fucking furious if you'd even tried to stop?” she asks wryly. “Not gonna get any complaints from me, Wes. That was perfect.”

“Perfect?” There's a faint surprise in his voice. “Oh, I can soon change your mind about that, Faith. You're too easily satisfied by far.” He snuggles his head into the pillow and sighs. “Just give me a few minutes to recover.”

She snorts and it turns into a grin when he laughs back at her. “I'll give you a few hours,” she says, punching him lightly on the arm. His hand slips down her back to her ass and it's still tender enough to make her lips tighten, just a little, in anticipation of pain, though it never comes. That's enough to get Wes freaking though, and the smile drops off his face.

“On your stomach,” he orders. “I want to see if that rather energetic bout had any less pleasant after effects.”

She lies there as he peers at her ass and can't help wriggling as his finger prods at her skin. “Hey! That tickles!”

“As long as that's all it's doing,” he mutters. “It looks fine. You do heal quickly.” His hand comes to rest against her skin. “I don't—” He clears his throat. “I don't think it will leave any—lasting marks, Faith.”

And she can't bear not to see his face, though when she turns and she does, she wishes she hadn't. That closed-off, shamed look is back and he's staring down at his hand as if it's not fit to touch her or something.

She gets inside the circle of his arms, forcing him to hold her, and presses fierce, hard kisses on his
mouth. “Don't, Wes. Just don't. Not saying to forget about it, because we can't and we shouldn't, but
don't go all sad on me. Please?”

His face warms a little. “You love to make things simple, don't you?” he says softly.

She frowns. “That's what you do, Wesley,” she tells him, puzzled. “I'm the one with the complicated,
fucked-up life; you're the one who makes me feel all safe and—” She waves vaguely. “You know.”

“Not exactly,” he says, “but it seems we both see each other through a roseate hue, doesn't it?”

“Speaking of seeing,” she says, eager to change the subject. “While you're recovering, guess you
could take those photos?”

“Oh, yes,” he says reflectively. “The ones I bought at such a high price.”

She pouts. “Can't tell me you hated it, Wes.”

“It was. “ He stares at nothing and then gives this brisk shake of his head. “Illuminating. I discovered
that you're remarkably gracious when given the upper hand—”

“My pleasure,” she says, giving him a wicked grin, because if he thinks she had all these evil plans
and let him off easy, well, she's not going to tell him she did exactly what she'd wanted to do.

“And have an exceedingly odd notion of what constitutes thirty minutes.” He reaches out and
unbuckles his watch from her wrist with a stern glance. “Thirteen minutes extra is well outside
allowable limits, Faith.”

And, face it, for Wes, thirteen seconds would be, so she hangs her head and tries to look penitent
when there's this fizz of anticipation building because sooner or later she'll pay for those thirteen
minutes and she can't fucking wait.

“Yes, Faith, that's charming,” he drawls, not sounding fooled. “You look delightfully contrite, but,
sadly, not at all convincing.”

She lifts her head and dimples at him. “Spent six of those minutes kissing you, Wes. You can't
expect me to regret that no matter what you do to get me back.”

“I'm flattered,” he says, his eyebrows rising slightly. “Let's hope you still feel the same way when
you're actually experiencing my wrath.”

“It's not gonna, like, involve tickling is it?” she asks cautiously.

He gives her an infuriatingly smug smile and gets off the bed. “I do so love it when you make my
task easier,” he tells her, leaving the room before she's got chance to start arguing with him about
how that just isn't fucking true.

Left alone she takes the first real chance she's had to look at her ass, scampering over to the long
cheval mirror and peering over her shoulder. She sucks in a breath. It's not—no, it's not as bad as
she'd thought, but it's still a mess. She can count each welt, thin dark lines of bruise-surrounded flesh,
but the skin's whole and the bruises are edging away from spectacular now.

She hears Wesley's footsteps and by the time he comes back in, she's just where he left her, heart
thudding guiltily, even though he hadn't told her not to move.

He gives her a speculative glance and a small smile. “I told you they were healing,” he says mildly.
“Fuck, Wes!” she says, disgusted at how transparent she seems to be. “Do you have superpowers or something?”

“Just excellent hearing,” he says. “And when you hurtle across the room and fling yourself on the bed, making as much noise as a herd of baby elephants, if I can quote my nanny, it's not difficult to work out your prior actions.” He walks over to the bed and studies her. “This will do,” he says, with a decisive nod.

She's never seen a single photograph of him on display all the time she's been here, and he didn't take a camera along on their trip to the beach, so she's not sure what she expected a tech-phobic Wesley to have in the way of a camera. Whatever it was, it's not this sleek silver Polaroid.

“Where'd you get that?” she asks curiously.

He sets it down on the bed beside her and goes to the bathroom to fetch his robe, finishing tying the belt just as she's starting to press buttons.

“Stop that!” he barks, taking it from her with a possessive grab. “It's, well, technically it's office property.”

There's a slightly embarrassed flush on his face and she narrows her eyes. “Did you, like, appropriate it, Wes? For your own personal use? Tsk, tsk.”

He tightens his lips and gives her a curt nod. Trust Wes to get all freaky over something other people would do without thinking twice. “I needed some photographs of certain valuable pieces in the house—for insurance purposes,” he explains stiffly. “And I omitted to return the camera. It's really not important; I've never had occasion to use it, and—”

“Chill, Wes,” she tells him, grinning. “We're back on the clock, remember?”

Which they're not, because he can take as long as he wants, and they know it, but it gets him relaxing again and his eyes skim over her with a familiar gleam. “Well, since you're so amenable to the idea, perhaps I should expand on my original plan of just a few, simple snaps.”

And he can expand on it all he wants, but there's something she wants first—

“Wes? Let me take one of you? Just your face, nothing else?”

He blinks and there's a refusal all set to pop out of his mouth when he hands the camera to her with a sudden capitulation.

“I can't imagine why you'd want—but very well. Just the one, though.”

She takes him sitting on the edge of the bed, his face turned toward her with a half-smile lighting it, the robe open at his throat. She lowers the camera and props the photograph on the night table to develop.

Then there's this moment when they're just staring at each other and she's thinking she could take a thousand photos and never catch each mood, each favorite expression he's got.

Doesn't need to. They're all safe, locked away in her heart, and fuck, she's so close to crying now that thought's crossed her mind that it's almost a relief when he picks up the camera and edges the mood away from the sentimental to the seductive.

“I want you exactly as you positioned me,” he says with a cool nod at the headboard. “To start with
at least.”

And it feels as if the metal’s still warm from where his hands gripped it and there’s a matching heat in his eyes as she spreads her legs slowly for him, never looking away.

She notices his hands are a little unsteady when the silver camera enters her field of vision and she remembers what one of Xander’s starving artist photographer friends said once, not to look directly into the camera—so she doesn’t move. If he frames her properly—which, this being Wes and all, he eventually will, even if he’s not completely comfortable using the camera—then she won’t look like a deer in the headlights. She’ll totally look mysterious or seductive or something. Especially so, she’s certain, after she hastily moistens her lips and freezes them, slightly parted, in what she hopes is her most enigmatic smile.

The camera’s gone, and she’s back to looking at him, that tender look replaced with a steely glare. “Take that ridiculous look off your face.”

So much for looking like America’s Next Top Model. “Hey, I was working something there!” she snaps in a huff, sitting up. “That’s my seductive look, in case you were wondering.”

“It was completely unnatural and wholly unseductive. You looked like some slack jawed tart in a low-rent lad rag.” Of course, she should have known he wouldn’t exactly want her looking like some vapid TV starlet of the week in an “edgy” Maxim spread. And he’s his face has hardened into that patented Wes-look-of-doom that no amount of eyelash batting can soften, so she just hides behind the curtain of her hair, scrubbing her hands over her face and running her fingers through her hair, which she’s pretty sure is gonna accentuate the freshly fucked, birds nest-y look she’s going for now. And she’s sure as hell not smiling when she leans back and curls her hands around the headboard again.

He nods curtly. “That's better.” And his face is gone again, hidden behind the camera.

She can’t help but be fascinated at the way he tilts the camera slightly this way and that and how his perfectly manicured fingertip hovers ready over the shutter, poised to mash it down at the perfect moment. Her eyes start to get watery from not blinking for ages when he finally makes a sibilant sound of approval and the blinding flash makes all that worrying moot, because she’s pretty sure she just ruined that shot—her eyes snapped shut, she’s sure of it.

The little square of film is wending its way noisily out of the bottom of the camera and she pops up in a split second, there to snatch between her fingers it before he can reach it.

“Faith.” he says, hand extended, palm up. “Give me the picture.”

She shakes her head vehemently. “I totally blinked, Wes, take another one.”

“This film isn't cheap, Faith—I can't have you squirreling every shot away because you're convinced you'll be unhappy with it. Furthermore, I believe I have final say over whether the picture's a good one or not, don't you think?”

Of course she can’t argue with that logic. She shoots him an icy look but hands him the picture anyway; it's already started to develop, and the white of the sheets is already coming through, surrounding a big greeny-gray blob she hopes is a gorgeous shot of her unblinking self.

He places it on the night table next to the one she took of him and shoos her away because she’s hovering close, hoping to catch a glimpse of both, or either.

“You can't see them until I'm finished. You're self-conscious enough now as it is.”
“I am not! I just thought I blinked is all.”

“...and I can't have you contorting yourself into any more ridiculous poses because you think they'll make you look better...”

“I'll show you self-conscious!”

Leaning back a lot less carefully this time—okay, yeah, she flops back to the bed, actually, propped up on one elbow—she slips her hand between her legs, drawing up the sticky and slick mixture of their commingled come that's still inside her, gently circling her fingertip over that extra-sensitive spot that he hits sometimes—a bulls eye with his tongue, because he's Wes—but she always knows exactly where to find it, and fast. Her clit's still tender and throbby, protesting at being prodded at again so soon, but she's soon breathless from the ribbons of heat radiating from it, spreading right to her core.

“Isn't this what you wanted, Wesley?” she says, voice nearly unrecognizably low and husky. “You want one of me coming, don't you?”

He doesn't answer right away, just unties his robe and kneels between her legs, expectant. Aiming the camera again, and the flash pops blindingly again, twice, and he carefully sets the two pictures aside on the edge of the bed.

“You're to tell me at the exact moment you begin to orgasm.” And though his voice is low and quiet too, it hasn't lost any of its authoritative edge.

Only he could take a moment she was sure she'd had in her control, and completely turn the tables with one sentence.

“You mean you won't be able to tell by the look on my face?” she says, more tartly than she'd expected to and he's snapped another picture before she can rearrange her features into a sweeter look.

“You've forgotten, haven't you?” he smiles, sweetly condescending. “Don't you remember our little exercise with the mirror?”

How could she not—but she can't remember exactly what she'd looked like, no—only that feeling of delirious joy as she watched them both come together. “Yes,” she says, hesitating.

He leans back, framing her at a different angle, and catches a shot of what she's sure is a look of gaping bewilderment, and oh, won't that be attractive.

“That was only one orgasm of the hundreds I've seen you have. You couldn't possibly know this, but you look different every time you come, Faith. I would hate to be sure you'd achieved your goal, only to discover that a face I thought I'd recognized as one of climax was merely one of slight euphoria?”

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“I'll tell you exactly when I start to come. Which shouldn't be long now, actually.” The little twinge deep inside signaling that the goal's in sight has long passed, and nerve endings all over her body are tingling and ready.

“Not yet, Faith,” he says and she's about to grumble something about how that's never fair, the way he makes her wait, and how she should be able to say when for once, since yeah, that's what he'd ordered her to do just a few minutes before—when he leans in to the inclined angle of her torso, steadied on his camera-less hand, curling his lips around one hard nipple, than the other, dragging teeth and tongue over each in turn.
“I don’t want to sound ungrateful for the assistance, but if you don’t pay attention, Wes,” she pants, “you’re totally gonna miss it.”

Pushing himself back upright, camera balanced in one hand, he manages to aim and shoot as he glides the pads of his fingertips down her thigh, narrowly avoiding a collision with her busy fingers. Slipping two of his inside, he whispers, “Not if I do this.”

She can’t help but screw her eyes shut tight and whimper faintly when he easily twists his fingers back to bump the tingling bits that are also demanding attention. “You're really gonna miss it now,” she breathes, voice nearly gone. Behind her closed eyes, she discovers that that flash is still really freakin’ bright, and she's pretty sure that's gonna be the worst shot ever, opening her eyes only to give him a narrow look of annoyance.

“Faith, your lack of confidence in my abilities is quite worrisome. I seem to be managing just fine, don't you think? But if you're that concerned.” His eyes are all smiles as he quickly slips his fingers out and leans in again, snatching her mouth in his for a greedy, needy kiss that's all tongue and very little sweetness.

Pulling away and nuzzling her neck, he whispers in her ear, his breath sending a brigade of goose bumps across her scalp and down her back, even though his breath is far from cold. “Anyway, I should imagine you'd be nearly ready by now.”

She resists the urge to scream that she's been ready for quite some time, thank you very much, and instead concentrates on the steady rhythm of her fingers, still circling the same spot of tender flesh.

And she's secretly pleased that he's ready and waiting, hovering above her with the camera positioned perfectly, so that there's hardly a split second between the flash and the moment she hoarsely whispers, “Now, Wes. Coming now.”

When she comes, it's always like her brain shuts down so she becomes this thing, this boneless, breathless mess of sensation. But now she's aware of more than just the waves of heat and color smashing into her and she can feel her feet pressing down hard on the bed, her hips thrusting against the insistent movement of her fingers, which are still relentlessly rubbing her clit.

And even more than that—more than her frantic, panting moans and his hovering presence by her tightly curled toes—she can hear the click and whirr and pop of the camera as he keeps shutterbugging until her poor clit starts protesting and she's pretty sure that she's never going to be able to come again.

She manages to unwind the hand that hasn't been busy from the headboard and flops back onto the pillows with a tiny little sigh. He's kneeling at the foot of the bed, slotting another cartridge into the camera and he's so intent on his task that he seems startled when she nudges his shoulder with her toes.

“Hey, sorry Wes, but I'm all orgasmed out,” she murmurs and he gives her a disbelieving look. Disbelieving and just a little bit disappointed. “I'm not, like, the Duracell bunny. Think I just put my clit out of action for the rest of the day.”

“Yes, well, you were rather fervent in your attentions,” he says with this dreamy little smirk, almost as if he's already reliving her thrashing and writhing though it was only a minute ago. He finally puts the camera down so he can stroke his fingers in soothing circles along her inner thigh. “Maybe I should take a quick look to ensure that there’s no permanent damage?”

“Maybe you should,” she says with just the tiniest hint of a challenge because there ain't no way in
the world, despite all his best intentions and she knows better than anyone just how good they can be, that she's going to be clutching the sheets and screaming out to God and Wes for, ooooh, at least a couple of hours.

She's still open and wet, the lips of her cunt glistening with her juices, his spunk, but for all his neat freak tendencies she's never known Wes to worry about that. Just like he's not worrying now but staring appreciatively at the sticky mess between her legs as he taps his finger lightly on her swollen, tender clit so she hisses at him.

“Wes, it's sore,” she whines and it's good that she can have one part of her anatomy hurting that he's not going to get all shame-faced and distant about. Instead he places warm fingers on the span of her thighs so he can push them farther apart and lowers his head.

“Maybe I should kiss it better then,” he purrs so his warm breath stirs her right there and she shifts under his hands.

“Be gentle,” she warns and he is, placing tiny, tickling kisses against her clit and finally snaking out his tongue and smooching her right there like it's her mouth.

He's not trying to make her come and she really, really couldn't anyway. He's just making her boo boo better and by the time he lifts himself away with one last lingering kiss, she rewards him with a lazy smile.

“Thanks, Wes. Maybe you should have been a doctor instead of a lawyer because I think you've got the healing touch.”

He wipes an unself-conscious hand over his wet mouth and grins at her, which makes her heart flip over a few hundred times. “I rather think my bedside manner would have me struck off the register, don't you think?”

She pretends to consider it for a moment. “Well, I think your version of a pelvic exam might raise a few eyebrows, Wes, know what I'm saying?

And he looks so thoroughly offended that she can't help but giggle especially when he says really huffily. “Faith, I always know what you're saying. And you look revoltingly smug right now,” he adds, snatching up the camera and aiming it at her gleeful face.

“No! Don't take any more pictures of me,” she squawks because she knows for sure that her hair looks like a family of weasels have been using it as a lair and now that she's not all horny and desperate, it just feels kinda awkward to be butt naked while he's snapping away.

“Yes, that's it, Faith,” he drawls, leaning in closer. “Give me another outraged glare.”

She wipes that off her face in a fucking nanosecond and tries to pry the camera out of his snap-happy hands but he clings on tight and she has to satisfy herself with poking her tongue out at him and then pouting when he clicks the button.

“Man! You are so not going to jerk yourself off to that, are you?” she snarls and gives him the finger, the middle one, which he deems worthy of another picture for the family album and she can't help it. He's so fucking strange sometimes and she loves it, just like she loves all the other bits of him. So all she can do is scramble up on her knees so they're a matching pair and beam at him. And the undeveloped pictures are falling between them on the bed and she's giving him an exasperated look, which she knows is way too tender to have any bite to it.

“Hey, hey,” she says softly, because there's no film left now and he's still holding that fucking
camera up to his face. And this time when she pulls it away from him, he lets it go from nerveless fingers and he looks so sad, so lost that she's starting to panic. “Don't look at me like that, Wes. Thought we were going to have another perfect day and you looking like your whole world's turned to crumbled cookies is against the rules.”

His hands cup her face and he's gazing at her so intently and he is... thought it was just a trick of the light but he's got one tiny, little tear trickling down his face which she kisses away and wishes she could kiss all the hurt and pain away just as easily.

“Don't, Wes...”

“It's just I missed you so terribly,” he tells her in a broken whisper. “And now you're here and it doesn't seem quite real, that you're not just some fever dream which I'll wake up from and you'll be gone...”

“Not gonna happen,” she say fiercely, leaning up so she can run her hands over his chest, his face because she can't quite believe that he's really there too. “Can't live without you, Wes, you know that.”

His arms wrap round her and he buries his face against her neck and she's squeezing him so tight that her hands meet around his back. He mumbles something against her sweaty skin, but she can only make out “Sorry...”

“Stop it, Wes, just fucking stop it.” She's tugging at his hair now so she can stare into his wild eyes. “I know we've got an assload of work to do before it's like it was but haven't I been good? Done everything you wanted me to and I haven't argued with you and that's how it's going to be from now on. I'm gonna trust you, like, like, implicitly. Always gonna obey you...”

It's not working. He looks like he's gonna bolt at any moment, trying to twist himself out of her embrace.

“That's not what I meant, Faith,” he says desperately. “You don't have to...”

And she shuts him up really easy just by kissing the words out of his mouth, putting everything she is into her lips and her tongue.

“You've made me all messy,” she tells him in a hushed whisper like they're in church. “You wanna take pictures of me in the shower?”

And Mr. Fucking Mercurial shakes his head. “I think the steam would have a detrimental effect on the film,” he says frowning like that's the only thing that's bothering him. Then he starts gathering up the Polaroids, barely glancing at them.

He's gone away from her, back to being that distant Wes that she can never figure out, even when he's naked on his knees in front of her. “Wes?” she pleads. “You could just watch me have a shower or you could, like, join me?”

At least he nods gravely and by the time they're standing under a blissfully hot jet of water and he's sliding his soapy hands into all those hard to reach spots, neither of them want to ruin a good thing by talking about things best left unsaid.

She's wrapped up in one of the towels and sprawled back on the bed, yawning when he emerges from the bathroom dressed in just a pair of jeans.

“Just gonna have a little power nap,” she says sleepily, already rolling over so she can snuggle
against the pillows. She doesn't know where he got them from but they're, like, the plumpest pillows in the world.

“I'd like you to stay awake,” he says sharply enough to make her eyes snap open in protest. Then he's striding over to the bed and sitting down so he can turn her over so she's lying on her back and glaring at him. “I'm afraid that sleeping through the better part of our perfect day is completely unacceptable, Faith.”

“We haven't eaten yet,” she points out.

“No, we haven't.”

“So you could, like, make us something and I could have a little snooze while you're chopping and fricasseeing and whatever,” she says smugly but he's already scooping her up because it's obvious that her ass is well enough to be carried.

“I'm not letting you out of my sight for a minute,” he says, shouldering open the door. “I'm certainly not running the risk of you dreaming of people who aren't me.”

“I so would dream of you,” she exclaims and he kisses the tip of her nose.

“That's very sweet of you, Faith, but I really can't allow the vague possibility that you might not. Wouldn't you like to know what I have planned for this afternoon?”

She nods eagerly because she really fucking would. He's concentrating on taking the steps carefully so he doesn't answer until they get to the bottom. “We were rather rushed before, circumstances being what they were, so I'm going to spend hours making love to you.”

“Hours?!” she snorts inelegantly. “No fucking way, Wes. It just isn't possible.”

He smiles thinly and she can tell from the steely glint in his eyes and the determined tilt of his chin that if he says he's going to spend hours doing stuff to her willing, naked body, then he means it.

“I assure you it is, Faith,” he says breezily, setting her gently on her feet and slipping a cushion on to one of the kitchen chairs before pressing her down on it.

“Okay, an hour maybe,” she concedes as he opens the refrigerator door.

“An hour will only suffice for kissing every inch of you, starting with your feet,” he explains, his voice muffled. “And that doesn't even begin to cover how long I aim to spend bringing you off with my mouth.”

Her mouth is hanging open so wide she swears her bottom lip just brushed the flagstones. “Well, I guess it sounds like an interesting way to spend the rest of the afternoon,” she says feebly.

He gives her a bland smile. “I thought so. Now are you in the mood for chicken or steak?”

Chapter One Hundred and Nine

It's barely light when he wakes her and he doesn't say a word, just kisses her and while she's trying, through a muzzy fuzz of sleep, to kiss him back, he rolls her to her back and slides inside her.

As good mornings go, it's hard to improve on, but she's too sleepy to do more than make a surprised little murmur of pleasure and arch up her hips to meet him. He's fucking her with an edgy urgency that's a little hard to understand after the day before.
He'd made good on his promise in a way that had left her wrung-out and trembling, aching and sore, but she'd shaken her head every time he'd murmured a questioning, 'Should I stop?' in her ear and he'd carried on, until, yeah, she really doesn't think he missed a spot because his mouth had traveled over her body again and again and his fingers had followed. He'd reduced her to sighs and moans, made her come until each climax blurred and she could only remember the way he kept telling her he loved her, over and over, until she drifted off to sleep with his arms tight around her, his lips against her hair.

She pulls her mouth away from a kiss and bites down on his shoulder, crooking her fingers and raking his back gently with her nails, just hard enough to make him surge forward a little bit faster, a little bit harder.

Still half in dreams, she wants something sharp, something real to puncture the drowsy haze she's in, and she gets it as he pauses and dips his head to lick and bite at her nipple, bringing his hand up to cup her breast and hold it in place. The sharp flash of his teeth digging into her snaps the room into focus and she's abruptly aware of him.

“Wes—”

“Good morning, Faith,” he says without raising his head. “I trust you slept well?”

She gets a swift upward glance from him at that, blue eyes gleaming, and she smiles.

“Wore me out, Wes. Got aches and pains all over.”

“Oh dear,” he says without an ounce of concern, pulling out of her the barest inch. “Perhaps I should stop then.”

She curls her hands around his ass and tugs him back inside her, so he's as deep as he can get.

“Yeah, Wes, you do that.”

There's a stand-off for about fifteen seconds as they stare at each other, narrow-eyed and perfectly still, then he gives this little whimper because she's clenching around him with everything she's got in the way of internal muscles and her hands are still on his ass.

“You win,” he whispers and he gives her this smile that's got to be the reason the sun comes up and the gray light in the room turns pink and gold, before starting to move again, with a slow, leisurely thrust that sends a tingle of warmth through her as if her body was waiting just for that to start to come again.

“Love you, Wes,” she tells him with a certainty that's just that. “Love you—”

He doesn't take her eyes off her and this close she can see the darkness along his chin that scraped her breast as he kissed it, the faint wrinkles around his eyes, the sweetness of the smile that he saves just for her, that she doesn't think he even knew how to do until she taught him.

She can feel his skin turn warm under her hands, smell him, for once just smelling purely male, all sweat and come and yeah, he smells of her. They'd fallen asleep without managing more than the briefest of clean-ups and though she knows he'll have these sheets swept off the bed and into the laundry pretty much the instant she crawls out of them, for now they're wrapped in the memories of one hell of a lot of sex.

She gives this little shimmy of her hips, and hauls him down for a kiss. “Not gonna break, Wes,” she pants against his cheek. “Want to feel you—”
The gentle rocking of his hips continues for just long enough to make her pout then he gives her a grin and speeds up, lifting her ass up from the bed and tilting her so each stroke grabs a different whimper from her, a different sound of need.

He pauses just as she's about to come and turns her over, ignoring her protests. “Shush,” he says, positioning her on her hands and knees. “I just want to—”

Wants to slide his fingers deep into the sticky heat of her cunt until they're coated and slick, wants to rub them over her asshole, which he hadn't fucked last night with anything but his fingers and tongue, even when she'd begged him to, because she'd missed that, until the need for more is killing her and she's writhing against his fingers, trying to get them deeper inside her, wants to bring his hand down against her skin, once, twice, three times, striking her with a stinging slap on the back of her legs, well away from where her skin still bears the marks he left.

Wants to tease her with his cock, rubbing it against the open folds of her cunt and her tender, pulsing clit, and letting it slip an inch inside her, no more, while she trembles and tries to stay still, hands clutching the sheets she's kneeling on, crying out in relief as he slams into her finally, over and over again, hands hard on her hips. He's silent until close to the end when his grip on her loosens and his hands run up over her back and he bends and kisses her shoulder. She thinks he says her name but she's so caught up in the demanding insistence of her body, clamoring for an end that's so close she can taste it, that she barely hears what follows that, though it sounds as if he's telling her he's sorry, and she's not sure why until she remembers those three slaps and the sound of his breath catching after each one.

He comes with an anguished, heartfelt groan, as her climax hits, and they collapse, still linked, to the mattress. She can feel his hand stroking back the tangled mess of her hair so he can kiss the side of her face but the rest of her is this distant tingle.

“I lied,” she manages to say in a groggy whisper. “Wasn't worn out before. Am now.”

“I'm sorry,” he says again, but this time there's nothing but amusement in his voice. “If it's any consolation I think I'm incapable of anything more strenuous than a shower, breakfast and—”

“Oh shit,” she says, remembering what's lying in wait on this bright, sunny Monday morning. “What time is it?”

His hand comes to her shoulder, holding her in place as she starts to get out of bed. “It's still early. You can't possibly think I'd allow you to be late?”

“Wish I could be,” she whispers, burrowing into the warmth of his body. “Wish I could miss it and just stay here with you all day.”

“Well, I wish that too,” he says, and there's a heaviness to his voice. “But once put in motion there're some things that can't be halted. You have to be there. It has to be dealt with.”

“Yes, Wes,” she says meekly, because if it's the last thing she has to do before this is really over, then she'll do it. Got no choice.

“Good girl,” he says and lets her slip out of his arms and head to the bathroom.

And God, the hot water feels good. She knows she needs to wake up—to get ready for what is sure to be a difficult day. But it's a slow process. She hasn't even been outside all weekend, just spent every minute of it in a delirious haze of acute want and need and her body feels it. She aches all over and she's bone tired but as she leans into the spray and feels it wash everything away it takes her
exhaustion with it. And it's so good to feel her body again, to be in the moment, rather than surfing another endless wave of vodka-induced numbness.

Life feels full of possibility again. Yeah, court date looming, but she can handle it. Things are going to be okay. Yeah.

She's just standing there, letting the water pressure pound into her back, her skin getting pinker and pinker with each passing second, when the shower curtain opens and Wes steps in.

“Thought you were gonna have your coffee, shower after me.”

He kisses her shoulder. “Didn't want to leave you for a second,” he whispers.

She smiles blissfully at that. And when she moves to give up her spot under the water he just wraps his arms around her and pulls her back, holding her to him, so the spray hits them both, washing them clean.

She's wandering around her room and marveling at the way everything she'd hurled out of her suitcase the day he—no, not gonna think about it as the day he threw her out—has been replaced exactly where it belonged.

It means she's got a choice of stuff to wear that'll hopefully make a better impression on the judge than her last outfit did. Maybe it'll even get her a smile from Charles Gunn, now they're not exactly on opposite sides, though if he's still going to be playing snark-'n-smooch with Eve he probably wouldn't notice if she showed up just like she is; damp and pink and naked, with her hair a wildly curling mess.

Well, maybe he'd notice that.

She does her best with her hair but there's no way her mouth's going to look anything but kiss-swollen and her eyes have got this tell-tale satisfied glow to them. She gives her reflection a smug grin and then yanks the brush ruthlessly through another tangle.

When she's dressed in the same outfit she wore to watch Wes demolish Lilah in court, hoping it's a lucky suit, she goes back to Wesley's room. She can smell coffee so she knows he's been downstairs, which explains why she's ready and he's still knotting his tie, lips compressed slightly as his fingers twitch and tweak the slippery silk into place.

There's a neat stack of photographs on the bed and she stares at them. Yesterday he'd whisked them out of sight before she'd had chance to look at them and now, hell, she was nervous.

“Did they—did they turn out okay?” she asks. He gives her a terse little nod, softened by a slight smile. “Oh shit, I don't want to look!” she wails, feeling a flush creep up her face.

“Then don't,” he says briskly. “But I assure you that I'm very pleased with them indeed. They're just what I wanted.”

Curiosity wins out over embarrassment and she goes to them, turning her back on him as she skims through them, eyes widening because shit, they're so very...

“Wesley, I told you I had my eyes closed!”

His hand reaches out and plucks the photo from her fingers. “Indeed you did.” There's a limitless satisfaction in his voice. “Look at it, Faith,” he says, his breath warm as he leans closer, holding the picture up in front of her face. “See how beautiful you look? See how you're so perfectly positioned,
just as I'd told you to be? I love the way the sunlight's falling across your breasts.”

She sneaks another look at it. Well, maybe it's not too bad, but fuck, the ones where she's glaring at him, hair all over the place, lips clamped together in a sulky pout—he can't possibly want those!

“Wes, these are just—let me toss them, okay? We can do some more, and this time I'll smile.”

“Absolutely not,” he says firmly, taking them from her. “I want them all. Every one.” He flicks through until he gets to one that puts a genuine, unstudied grin on his face. “Oh, you're so very open with your emotions, Faith. You hold nothing back. That's so very refreshing. And helpful.”

“Helpful so you can torment me!” she hisses, digging a finger into his ribs until he makes a protesting sound and steps back.

“Really, Faith,” he says. “I can assure you my intent has never been to do anything but make you happy.” His hand comes up and cups her chin. “There's nothing that's more important to me than that.”

She drops her eyes because, hey, it's barely 7.30 and he's looking so earnest. “Coffee would make me happy,” she says. She glances up at him under her lashes. “Maybe a cigarette, too?”

“I wish you wouldn't,” he says, frowning. “It's not good for you.”

Maybe not, but the cigarettes she's managed to smoke over the weekend, hanging out of a window, have been few and far between and she wants one right now because she's starting to get jittery.

“Just one,” she pleads. “And maybe I'll, like, give them up for Lent or something.”

His eyebrows snap together. “That's conveniently far away,” he says dryly. “Off you go, then. I'll be down in a moment. The coffee should be ready.”

She winds her arms around his neck and kisses him. “Love you.” Something occurs to her. “Hey! Where's the one I took of you?”

He looks positively shifty. “It didn't come out very well at all. I think your hand jiggled a little.”

“Wesley! Give!” she demands imperiously, holding out her hand.

“I slipped it into your purse,” he says, giving her a goaded glare. “If you really insist on having it, fine, but I don't want to see it.”

“That's fine,” she coos, planning on framing it and putting it on her desk. Unless it really did turn out all wrong, in which case she's totally making him sit still for another.

The jitters come back after breakfast when Wesley's wandering around picking things up and placing them back with a fidgety care, sneaking looks at his watch until her nerves are on edge.

“Look, let's just go, shall we?” she says finally, the words bursting out of her. “Rather be early, I guess.”

“We've just got time,” he says. “I want you to come into the garden for a moment.”

He takes her hand and leads her through the house and into his little garden in the trees. The water of the fountain is running clear; the sound it makes a continual rush that blends with the rustle of breeze-blown leaves above it. All around her the flowers of late spring are showing bright colors and there's a green, fresh smell of earth and plants.
“Will you miss this place? In New York?” she asks him haltingly, because he's holding tightly to her hand and looking so bleak that he belongs in winter and seems out of place in the garden he's created.

“I'll miss a lot of things,” he tells her somberly. “I still miss the place I grew up in, even with all the less pleasant memories attached to it.” He glances around and then says, “We should go now.”

“Yeah,” she says, with a sigh. “Guess we should. Leave the garden and go and meet Eve. Maybe I should grab an apple?”

That makes him laugh, just as she knew it would. “There may be one in the fruit bowl,” he says, “but I'm not sure who to cast as the snake.”

She can think of a few candidates herself and even knowing Liam's dust and bone doesn't stop the fierce flash of anger at the memory of what he did to her.

“I'm scared, Wes,” she confesses a moment later as he holds open the car door for her. “Suppose something goes wrong and they just, God, sentence me or something?”

He gives her an incredulous look that's more comforting than a hug. “Faith, I really don't think you pay the slightest attention to me. I've told you—”

She snuggles back in her seat and listens to his voice explain just how impossible it is and how he's sorted it all out, hiding a small smile.

Never gets tired of Wes taking care of her.

Chapter One Hundred and Ten

What he's saying makes sense as he takes her through the procedure and reminds her that she's to speak clearly, no mumbling, and certainly no slouching.

But court appearances have never held any happy memories for her, apart from maybe that time when she got to watch Wes absolutely decimate Lilah, yeah, that one's right there on her all-time Top Ten of Fucking Good Days. Her tension is telegraphing itself to Wes so even though his hand is resting on her leg like it always does when he's driving, his fingers curl tightly around her knee and she concentrates on that, the bruising grip that keeps her grounded, keeps her reminded that she's got one really unpleasant hour to get through before she can finally put all the shit behind her.

“Can't wait until we get to New York,” she tells him feelingly. “Gonna be just you and me and I'm not going to let anybody fuck that up for us.”

He keeps his eyes on the road and clears his throat nervously. “Well we seem to do rather a good job of that ourselves, don't we?”

“Not anymore,” she insists and shoots a look at his clean profile, the slight flare of his nostrils as he takes a corner too fast. “Everything's different now, Wes, you know that.”

The grip on her knee upgrades to bone crushing and she can't help the squeak that escapes from her mouth and immediately his hold turns from painful to soothing.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, running the tip of his finger over the loose bit of cartilage that floats just left off her kneecap after a serious bike collision with Xander when she was five.

“S'okay,” she says, squeezing his hand and fuck, she's so nervous. “So, like, when we're in New
York, I'm gonna have all these projects while you're doing the legal eagle thing. Gonna learn to cook so I can make you these three course gourmet dinners when you get home and I'm gonna get a job because I'm not sponging off you and maybe go back to school part-time and…”

“It will be all right,” he says softly and she knows he's not talking about her plans to be a genuine Manhattan girl. Because he always knows everything about her. Like she can't stop running her mouth off when she's scared shitless.

“But what if it isn't, Wes?” she gulps nervously. “You've been weird all morning and what if the whole weekend was just to give me enough memories to keep me going because they're going to clap me in irons the minute I get into the courthouse and then they're gonna send me to prison and I'll end up being some butch Momma's bitch?”

He'd been looking all kinds of shifty as she started her Big House speech but now he's giving a startled shout of laughter and throwing her an incredulous look. “Really, Faith. You have a quite worrying propensity for melodrama. Not to mention a particularly lurid imagination.”

He's pulling up outside the courthouse now with a flagrant disregard for the 'no waiting' sign and the minute he switches off the engine, she's unbuckling her seat belt.

“Man, I just wanna get this over with,” she mumbles. “What a way to start the week.”

“You'll come to the office when you're finished,” he says and it's so Wes to make it a statement of fact, rather than a question but she's swiveling round so she can give him a surprised smile.

“You're giving me my job back?”

He's staring out of the window on the driver's side, hands twisting in his lap and she guesses that despite all his talk about legal procedures he's a little nervous himself. “I think after all you've been through lately, you should have a little time off. But there is something I'd like you to do so I'll expect you after you've been exonerated of all charges.”

“You promise, Wes? About the whole exoneration thing?” she asks frantically.

He finally turns to look at her and there's something about his eyes, something wrong that she can't quite place or put a name to that her hand's grabbing at his and she's clutching his wrist.

“Faith, stop it. It will be fine. You'll be free of all this, I promise you.”

And he never breaks his promises. If he says he's going to make her come so hard that she'll see God, then she does. Though God always ends up looking just like him. And if he says that she'll like chicken cacciatore, then she ends up asking for second helpings so she's nodding and managing to find a shaky smile from somewhere.

“Oh, okay. I'm getting out now,” she says determinedly. “Sooner I get in there then the sooner this will all be over.”

Got her hand on the lock already to slide it open when she feels his hand on her shoulder, the warmth of his skin seeping through her blouse and warming her chilled flesh.

“It's early, we're too early,” he whispers. “These things never start on time. Give me a kiss, Faith.”

She doesn't need to be told twice. She's already scooting across the seat so she can get to his lips but his hand clamps down on the back of her neck so he can drag her closer and force her mouth open so his tongue can flicker against hers.
For one split second she's worried that the judge, who already seems to hate her, might walk past and see her necking with a member of the legal profession in full view of anyone but then Wes' hand is cupping her breast, thumb rubbing firmly over her peaked nipple and he's fucking her mouth with his tongue like the whole weekend never happened and he's gonna die if he doesn't get inside her.

“My sweet girl, my darling Faith,” he breathes when he finally lets her come up for air, fingers pressing against her kiss-swollen lips. “I'm so sorry for everything I put you through, you know that, don't you?”

“Yeah and you know I'm sorry too,” she chokes out because having him this close again, this fucking devoted, is still too new, still hard to believe.

“It's in the past and it never stopped me loving you,” he sighs, running the back of his hand along her flushed cheek. “You'd better go now before you really are late.”

Her hands are trying to calm her hair back into some semblance of order when he drags her back into his arms so he can give her one last soft, sweet kiss, his teeth clinging onto her bottom lip for one small moment that seems to last for an eternity but is over way too soon.

In the end it's her that pushes him away with a giggle. “Jeez, Wes.” She grins. “We're gonna get arrested for public indecency in a minute and you won't even be able to represent me.”

He gives her a rueful smile and she wishes they still had the Polaroid camera with them because the light's hitting his face, making him soft. Or maybe that's the tender way he's looking at her, like he wants to freeze everything about her from the way she's biting her lip as she jabs the last hairpin in place, to how the stretch of her arms above her head makes her breasts thrust out and she knows that the sheer weight of how much she loves him is shining in her eyes.

“Good luck, Faith. You'll be fine. Just don't slouch or mumble,” he orders her.

“Oh, whatever, Wes,” she hisses, fumbling with the lock. “Right, I'm gonna go and kick some judgely ass. Any more words of wisdom from Mr. Wyndam-Pryce, Esquire?”

He doesn't say anything, just takes her hands off the door so he can kiss her knuckles and then gives her a little push. “Just remember that I love you and you'll knock them dead, Faith,” he says quietly and that's worth the tiny frown he gives her as she quickly plants an exuberant smacker on his lips before she's climbing out the car for real this time.

“See you in a couple of hours tops,” she reminds him, before she slams the door. He gives her a half-hearted little wave but she's already made him half an hour late for work so it's no wonder that he almost floors the car as he pulls away from the curb and drives off.

Chapter One Hundred and Eleven

The distance from the curb, up the white limestone stairs to the front of the courthouse seem impossibly far, like there's no way she can do it alone. But Wes' parting words light a fire in her belly, pushing her up the stairs and by the time she practically leaps off the last step, she's striding with purpose, head held high, toward the heavy wooden doors. Yeah, she'll knock 'em dead, all right, she thinks, smiling thinly in thanks at the doddering old lawyer who holds the door open for her.

The close, stuffy air inside the crowded foyer nearly snatches all that confidence away though, but she manages to press her way through the throngs of random people and pass through the metal detectors without incident. She even manages to flash a beaming smile at the sour-faced security
guard that's still plastered on her face until she spots Eve hovering near the entrance to a conference room, Darla and Xander chatting quietly, heads tilted toward each other conspiratorially.

“Faith!” Eve picks her way through the crowd, her delicate yet surprisingly strong hand snatching Faith's elbow like a vise, steering her toward Darla and Xander, who jerk to their feet and huddle around her, arms open for embraces and pressing kisses to her cheek.

When she finally disentangles herself from Xander's bear hug, Eve's off a few feet down the hall, chatting with Mr. Gunn—and what seems to be a flirty conversation turns in a split second to a defensive one. Even though she can't hear them over the din of the crowd in the echoing marble lobby, she can't help but feel a little sick when Eve takes a step back, shaking her head, mouth soundlessly flinging what looks like a churlish comment in Gunn's face.

“Hey, Faith. Hey!” Her attention snaps back to Xander and she forces a shaky smile. “So you and Wesley made up, huh?”

“Something like that, yeah.” The thought of seeing Wes again that afternoon steadies her nerves considerably, and she swallows thickly. Her heart is hammering somewhere in the vicinity of her throat, but she manages to choke out some small talk. “You have a good weekend?”

“Oh you know, the usual.” He waves carelessly. “Too many pretty boys with too many issues. Thank goodness for sympathetic bartenders, right?”

She nods distantly, still watching Eve and Gunn have it out of the corner of her eye until Darla starts in on her. “Honey, you look just lovely today.”

“Thanks for coming, Ma. You're looking pretty good yourself.” Which is mostly true—Darla's hair is a little rumpled and her handbag doesn't quite match her shoes, but she looks generally presentable if you look past those nagging little details.

“We'll just see about that!” Eve's voice rings in the air, temporarily shutting down the din of the surrounding conversations until she turns on her heel. Gunn just gives a heavy sigh of resignation, probably because he's used to her outbursts, and disappears around a corner.

“Eve! Is everything all right?” Clearly everything is not all right and Darla's flustered exclamation is already starting to grate on Faith's rapidly fraying nerves. Without prompting, Xander's grabbed her hand in support as Eve sniffs disdainfully.

“The hearing's been postponed.” Darla gives a little squeak, rating a sharp look from Eve. “Look, it's not going to be long, Faith—a few hours, at most. Some “administrative” snafu on the DA's end. They're claiming they're missing key documents from Mr. Wyndam-Pryce, but most likely Mr. Gunn's paralegal misplaced them. I was told they were in order yesterday after noon and I can't imagine how they could become out of order by this morning.” Her voice drips with sugar-coated venom, and Faith has no doubt that this paralegal's been a point of contention in the past, and not just over missing documents.

“I only got off work until eleven,” Darla wails.

“It's okay, Mom, really. I'll be fine here. You should get back to work. And I'm sure Xander needs to get back too.”

“But I wanted to be here, baby. Wanted to hear with my own ears that this whole mess is over.”

“It is,” Eve says, rifling through her briefcase, digging through sheaf of folders. “Completely over. This is just one last bullshit hoop to jump through. Aha! Here it is!” She brandishes a sheaf of papers,
yanking them from a meticulously color-coded manila folder. “I knew I had this fax. We'll have this finished in to time flat, Faith. But for now, I need you to wait for me in the cafeteria for now. Get some coffee or have a smoke on the patio or something—I'll come get you when it's show time.”

Turning to leave, Eve flashes what seems to be her best approximation of an encouraging smile—which, to be honest, is a little on the cold and fishy side and doesn't exactly leave Faith brimming with confidence. And apparently not Xander either, because he's got one hell of a death grip on her hand.

“You're sure you can get this all sorted out?” He's got that protective, brotherly note in his voice—only this time she's all too grateful for it.

Eve just nods primly and disappears around the same corner that swallowed up Mr. Gunn.

“I think I need to sit down,” Darla sighs, sinking back down to the bench.

“Look, I'm sure she's right, I'm sure this will be wrapped up before lunchtime.” Her stomach's churning, but thankfully she's managed to swallow the wobble that threatened to crack her voice into a sob. “Xander, can you get Mom back to work?”

“Sure, Faith. Sure. I may be able to get someone to cover for me at lunch and I can come back then.”

She shakes her head, a little more forcefully than she intended. “No. I mean, really, you guys, I'll be fine.”

“If you're sure, honey.”

“Xander,” she hisses, under her breath, shoving him toward Darla.

He rolls his eyes, but finally gives in. “C'mon Darla. Our Faith's a big girl, and I'm sure she'll be just fine here without us.”

Half a pack of cigarettes, three cups of coffee, and a stale donut fill the next three hours. She even broke down and stole the Arts and Leisure section of the Times from someone's table when they got up for a refill on the coffee and manages to fill in most of the clues with a leaky ballpoint pen she borrows from the cafeteria's cashier.

Eve doesn't show, and worse—doesn't answer her cell phone or call back on the six snarky messages she leaves. And it doesn't help that when she finally breaks down and calls Wes' office, Harmony's still there—twittering something about how he's out for the day, and unreachable, and like, wasn't he getting a ton of calls this morning, or what?

And the longer she waits, she's more convinced that something else is wrong and she's just not being told. Maybe they've had to drag Wes in and he's upstairs somewhere, trapped in some judges' chambers, explaining for the millionth time that yes, he really didn't want to press any further charges, and that it was up to the prosecution to complete the appropriate paperwork for a timely release of the accused. And that's when she decides it's way better that she's trapped in this dim, low-ceilinged cafeteria for a few hours than in a holding cell in the county jail. Sometimes it's the little things that get you through the rough patches.

Eve finally appears after the lunch rush, all apologies and cold smiles, but Faith's almost in a charitable mood because she looks frazzled and pissed off to boot.

“I'm sorry I've made you wait,” Eve says, not exactly apologetic. “I was in judge's chambers the whole time. Someone forgot to tell me that Judge Manners doesn't exactly care for Mr. Wyndam-Pryce—something about a case gone awry a few years back. Anyway, he wouldn't take my copies
of the documents in for consideration and we had to wait for the courier to deliver them from Mr. Gunn's office.” She sighs. “We're taking a break for lunch while the judge looks over the papers one last time. You'd think it would be easier to get a case dropped, but no. Everyone's suddenly all touchy about the stupidest details—so what if Mr. Wyndam-Pryce's signature wasn't legible on the photocopies.”

“The brown ink.” She smiles, because it's just Wes' damn brown ink that's holding things up. His brown ink that doesn't photocopy, that brown ink that demanded he sign every document individually, instead of resorting to a signature stamp.

“He's so impossibly English sometimes, huh? How do you put up with that? It'd totally break my last nerve.”

Faith's look of death is enough to shut her up for a while, a prolonged silence during which they pick at their wilted chef salads and Jell-O parfait.

Eve's no help again when it comes to the last two clues of Friday's puzzle. Mercifully, the recycling bin hadn't been emptied over the weekend and she was able to dig out all of last week's puzzles, all of them blank except for Wednesday's.

“Tell me again how you get through both college and law school with such an abysmal vocabulary and no absolutely no grasp of popular culture?”

Eve's look of death is almost as potent as hers, she notes, returning to the puzzle, deciding to break down and check the answers, printed to half scale below today's installment. Wes wouldn't approve, but it's starting to look like she's gonna be trapped in this basement for the rest of eternity anyway, so what did it matter now?

And honestly—when the call comes in that the judge is finally ready as she's carefully making her final cigarette last for ten minutes—everything after that is a blur.

Eve and Gunn are still fighting over some technicality, which means they're both rapidly falling straight on to Judge Manners' shit list faster than a brick out the window of a twenty-story building.

But then he's banging the gavel and adjourning and Eve's limply shaking her hand while making Bambi eyes at Gunn until she sees him relent to her cheap and tawdry charm.

And at five o’clock on the nose, she's finally sprinting out of the courthouse, heels and stripped-off stockings in one hand, her handbag slung over her shoulder and banging at her hip with each stride, all the way back to the office.

And yeah, she could have taken a cab, but she's in no mood to sit idle for another half hour in the standstill of downtown rush hour traffic. She really needs to run.

Chapter One Hundred and Twelve

It's fourteen weeks to the day since she first walked through this door, rain dripping off her, nervous and bored at the same time. Not that long ago, not really—but long enough for everything to change in her world.

She eases her shoes back on and takes a minute to bring down her heartbeat because she can just imagine Wesley's face if he saw her walk in barefoot and breathless. Especially when he's not going to be able to do more than glare at her for another week or so at least.

When she's ready she pushes open the door, feeling like a queen reclaiming her throne because she's
so gonna kick Harmony's ass out of her chair and the hell with Wes telling her she needs a break.

Speaking of which.

“Faith! You look—” Harmony gives her a swift up-and-down look, standing up quickly as if she senses Faith's intentions. “Really nice,” she says eventually, the note of surprise robbing the compliment of any value.

“Thanks,” she says, staring around the office. It looks different. Bare. There are light rectangles on the walls where Wesley's pictures had hung, boxes all over the place.

“Guess the packing-up's started then?” she asks.

Harmony nods. “I've been so busy. You wouldn't believe the hours I've been working. Past six some nights!”

“Slave labor,” she says. “You should, like, leave.”

Harmony titters. “Well, I am, silly! This is my last day. In fact I'm going right now.” She waves an envelope. “Mr. Wyndam-Pryce gave me a bonus, though he didn't have to, me being a temp and all. I guess he came to appreciate me, after all.”

“Guess he did,” Faith says, with a false, fake smile. “He's in his office, is he?” She was wondering why he hadn't come out, but she thinks she knows why; not like she's gonna be able to stop herself from giving him a victory smooch and he'd be totally freaked if she did that in front of Harmony.

Harmony's forehead creases in puzzlement before she realizes what she's doing to her pampered skin and smooths it out. “No. I told you; he's gone for the day. Told me to tell all callers he was unreachable and not expected back. He came in this morning but he was only here for, like, ten minutes.” She leans over and stirs her fingers through the clutter on the reception desk. “He locked his office. Said I was to give you the keys, all of them, and you'd lock up when you were done.” She gives Faith the keys and a pointed look. “So I can leave early for once.”

She starts to bustle past but Faith puts out a hand to stop her. “Wait. Wes said he was busy today. Way busy. What do you mean; he's not expected back? Why didn't you tell me that?” She'd been so wound-up she hadn't really processed what Harmony had told her in the phone call; just been disappointed that she hadn't got to hear Wesley's voice drawling out a reassurance that it would all be fine and assumed he'd stepped out for something.

Harmony tries to break free, but Faith's clinging on and won't let go. “Hello? You didn't ask? I told you he wasn't here, and he isn't. I don't know where he went. Not like we actually, you know, talk to each other about stuff. I'm just a piece of the furniture to him.” There's affront but no regret in her voice, as if she knows even a chatty Wes and her would have zero to talk about. “He came, he said good-bye, he went.” She succeeds in her attempts to pry away Faith's hand and gives her a glare. “And he looked awful. Did you two make up again?”

The implications of that aren't lost on Faith but she figures she's got all she can out of Harmony so she settles for a cool smile. “Looked fine when I saw him last, Harmony. Guess the sight of you first thing was just a bit too much to take on an empty stomach.”

“Well, aren't you good at channeling your inner bitch?” Harmony says with a sniff. “I'm leaving.” She casts a contemptuous look around. “And my next job better be somewhere that's actually heard of the twenty-first century.”

The door slams behind her and Faith's left alone.
Something's hurting her and it takes a moment to realize that she's clutching the key-ring so tightly that she's left deep indentations across her palm. She stares at them, transferring the keys to her other hand. The silence that surrounds her is absolute, thick and airless, so that she finds herself conscious of every breath she's taking and they're hurting too because her chest is tight with a growing, unreasoning panic.

Wes should be here. Should be ready to whisk her off, not for champagne, no, because there's no real victory in her freedom, to the ending of hell of the last couple of months, but to hold her and kiss her and tell her he loves her. It's all that's kept her going through the endless, horrible day; knowing that she's got him to go to.

She shakes herself free of the dark thoughts. He's busy, but he hadn't actually said it was here at the office. He must have a million things to do, connected with the move, and he'd expected her hours before this.

There are holes in the logic of that, gaping holes, but she doesn't poke at them, just starts to walk down the corridor, forcing herself not to run. The door's not locked often so the key's stiff and hard to turn. Wrestling with it, and breaking a nail so she has to take a moment to bite it down to a ragged edge, calms her a little but when she pushes the door open and the room's empty it's still a shock.

The desk, his chair... Everything familiar. Nothing in this room has been touched and it's like walking into a half-forgotten dream. She closes the door with a backward push of her hand, the customary creak barely registering, her eyes fixed on the desk.

In the center of the blotter there's a large envelope, bulked out by something rectangular but it doesn't look like a present exactly. She approaches it warily, circling the desk; her fingers trailing over the polished wood, and sits in Wesley's chair.

She looks up and sees herself walking toward this desk, teacup or writing pad in hand, dressed in her office clothes, expectancy brightening her eyes. She's missed that so much. Never knowing if Wes would take the cup with an abstracted word of thanks, his gaze barely lifting from the papers in front of him, or take it and stare at her as he sips it, making her stand, straight and still as he decides how he wants her, so that by the time she's tipped over his knee, or bent over the desk, by the time his fingers touch her, she's wet, a heavy ache of want weighing her down so she moves slowly, perfectly for him.

Empty of his presence, the room feels chill and unfriendly. Without him, this is just one more place that she doesn't belong.

She stretches out her hand and picks up the brown envelope, bulky and heavy, with her name written across the front in his handwriting. She touches her fingers to the ink feeling a comforting warmth fill her just at the sight of it.

She takes every care imaginable as she peels open the flap with an eagerness only he's managed to channel into patience, but it still tears, just a little. Reaching in, she pulls out a book.

“It's not just any book, Faith. It's a limited edition of the love sonnets of Pablo Neruda. Illustrated with hand-cut, hand-printed, tipped-in plates. There were only two hundred made, the year he died.”

She's smiling for the first time since she walked into the office. Their book. Their memory. She flips the pages, intending to turn to the seventeenth sonnet, and like magic the book falls open there and there's a letter folded between the pages.
She pulls it out and taps it against the desk, her smile growing as she imagines what it says; maybe directions to a restaurant where he's sitting waiting, maybe a list of instructions, meant to be followed to each crossed 't', that will leave her stripped and bent over this desk for five minutes, ten, until he comes to find her, reward her, love her.

She unfolds the thick creamy paper and starts to read.
Part Twelve

Chapter Summary

Life goes on...

Part Twelve

Chapter One Hundred and Thirteen

May 24, 2004

My darling girl—

By the time you read this, I'll be on a plane to New York. Alone. I'm not going to send for you. I'm not going to write to you. I'm not going to have a moment of weakness and wire the money for you to join me. It's over.

You will want to know why, given that I love you with all the passion of which I'm capable, I'm on my way to a life that will be spent without more of you than a handful of photographs and a thousand memories.

You have to believe me when I say that it's not because I stopped loving you. I will never stop loving you and it's because of this simple tenet that I've had to leave.

You've made me so very happy. These last few months sometimes felt as if my life could simply be divided into the gray moments when I wasn't with you, couldn't see you or touch you and those when you'd appear and it was as if the monochrome had vanished, swept away in a blaze of color and you were all there was. More than that, you are the only person who has loved me after knowing me; something I would never have believed possible.

Which is why I've spent far too short a time on my knees to you.

You gave yourself so openly to me, but you must know how difficult it was for me to give to you in return. I am not generous or kind; my eccentricities are not merely charming. Faith, I'm a frustrated, lonely sadist, twice your age. And just as I once said to you, I preyed on your youth and your inexperience. Took advantage of how you've suffered throughout your life through the actions of all those spiteful fools who made you feel less than you really are. And God help me, Faith, you've continued to suffer so beautifully at my hands.

I enjoy hurting you. I'd bruise you and mark you and it made me hard. Your whimpers and sobs were like a symphony to me. I don't think you ever realized how much power you had over me. I'm weak, so hopelessly weak. Not ever as in control as you thought. Instead I relied on you to set limits and boundaries that you had neither the experience nor the maturity to dictate. I'm not any of the things that you seem to think I am. I lulled myself into thinking that I was the man you imagined me to be; that I was wise, that I knew what was best for you and I think we were both blinded by the weight of our passion.

In truth, your willingness to let me drag you down with me, to help me plumb the depths of my depravities excited me and repelled me in equal measure. Which brings us neatly, or not, to what
transpired on Friday night. When I accepted your offer, made with all your customary generosity and, yes, naivety, I did so hoping that once more you'd found a way to make it work between us, as you'd done so many times before when I'd faltered, lost the way.

Faith, did you not hear me tell you that you were allowed to say 'yes', 'no' and your safeword? I told you; I gave it to you as an option. You could have ended that punishment after one stroke, after none—you had that power because I gave it to you, and you didn't use it because you don't understand how this works and you never really have.

You want to please me. I know it and I glory in it but I cannot trust you to set limits for me and I have none, do you not see that?

Now I find that I'm able to summon up the strength of mind to do what I should have done a long time ago and get as far away from you as possible lest I drag you down with me.

I have no friends. I have no family. There's something terribly wrong with me, right at my core, in my soul and I have no wish to burden you with it any longer. I fooled myself for too long that I was lifting you up, making you realize your potential, showing you just how beautiful and special and brilliant you are. But I was just another one in a long line of people who've hurt you and, though I know you'll find it hard to believe right now, I'm doing this because your happiness is all I care about.

I fear that there's nothing for us but a future where you'd try to save me from myself time and again, only to the detriment of your own growth and your own safety both physical and mental.

You're not safe in my arms Faith—no matter how often you think you are. I'm like a child told to be careful with a fragile object who smashes it to pieces in order to test the veracity of the warning. I've grown weary of my now-predictable ability to take all the beautiful things I encounter in life and subject them to the same treatment.

And it shames me to admit it but Faith, I barely scratched the surface of my darkest desires. I could have done—wanted to do—so much more. When you came to me, repentant, on your knees, and told me you'd be willing to let me lock you away from the rest of the world, keep you naked and silent and obedient—I—God help me, Faith but for a moment I wanted to say yes. It wouldn't have been real, it wouldn't have been right, but I wanted you like that, mine, utterly and completely.

If I was ten years younger, I believe that I'd be able to change, to transform myself into the kind of man you deserve. And if you were even five years older, you'd never have given me a second look, not least the myriad of second chances that you saw fit to bestow on me.

But I'm not that younger man. I won't change. I can't. There's something very restful about recognizing with a clarity given to few exactly where one's proclivities lie. Mine lie in pain, in control, in the giving of pleasure through those avenues. And at the start between us, that's all it was—pure pleasure. It wasn't as if I had much competition; you'd been fucked by boys, clumsy and selfish, as young and untried as yourself. I cheated, Faith. Channeled your passions so they flowed beside mine and made you think that it was the only way for you.

It's not.

I'm not.

I have to apologize for my treachery in pretending that I wanted to give you a perfect weekend,
knowing full well that I was leaving and that what you thought was a reconciliation was me carefully snatching a few more golden moments with you and hoping that they will be enough when distance finally keeps us apart because we can't do it for ourselves. I must also apologize for the dreadful day you've just had. I'm afraid that the interminable delay at the courthouse was directed by my hand so I could steal enough time to make good my escape.

Stealing—I don't think this needs to be said, Faith, but for the sake of clearing up any question in your mind once and for all, this is absolutely not about the money. Despite all the heartache and angry words that were thrown about after the fact, there's something heartening in the fact that you were too proud to come to me for help, embarrassed as you were by your father's actions. One fear I had is that I'd isolated you from your former life and friends; made you overly reliant on me, but I think that showed how independent you are and, I hope, will remain.

If you still have any respect or affection for me then I beg you to obey one last order and let this be done. It would be so easy to try and reason this out together, to let myself be swayed by the unequivocal force of your passion, your generosity of spirit, your blind and dogged devotion. But it's over. I beg you, Faith, not to try and contact me ever again. I've made it easy for you by leaving no forwarding address and changing my phone numbers.

I want to come back to you, Faith, want to hold you, brush away every tear I've caused, cherish you, protect you, keep you safe. I want to fuck you, want to feel you move beneath me, want to spank that pretty arse of yours red, tie you up, hold you down with a word. I want you, Faith because I love you so very much, and I'm not going to do any of that because of that love.

I know you'll think this is cruel. That maybe it's another one of my games. A final test. But it's not. Just a clean, brutal break that both of us will recover from given time. You're strong and determined and so much more capable than you even realize. You don't belong in that town and I have no doubt that you'll get out, move on to something better—to someone better. You deserve to be with someone who can love you with all the honor and respect that you're due. Who doesn't constantly wish to test the strength of your love. Who'll never hurt you either with his hands or his heart. And though I long to be that sweet, kind, unselfish lover, more fervently that you'll ever know, I can't. Not even for you.

I'm just going to ask you—beg you—to forgive me. I'm neither a good man nor an honorable one but this is the first honorable thing that I've done since I met you.

There's nothing else to say. Just I love you, I love you, I love you. But love from a man who doesn't know how to is no gift at all.

Wesley

Chapter One Hundred and Fourteen

The room is darkening in a haze of twilight, and his words blur together and fade. She's hardly been able to read them properly anyway, not since tears filled her eyes when she read the first sentence. The thick cream bond paper is crushed in her hand, crumpled along the edges. After the third reading she'd nearly wadded the whole thing up, meaning to fling it across the room.

She's already done that with the book, hurling it with all her might. It had hit the opposite wall with a satisfying smack and crashed to the floor, the binding twisting and the soft pages bent under the weight of the pretty gilt cover. She'd sent a brass paperweight after it for good measure. It was heavy in her hand and left a dent in the wall before it too fell to the floor, rolling under a chair.

But she can't bring herself to stop reading the letter, no matter how hard she tries to push it aside or
rip it to shreds. His voice echoes in her head as she combs through line after line, looking for a clue, a sign under all his circular reasoning that he will come back for her. Come striding through the front door, all the way back to the inner office, sweeping her up in his arms to take her back home.

“This is just another game,” she whispers to herself, fingertips blotting the teardrops that have landed on the page, threatening to smear his crabbed, clear handwriting. “Isn’t it, Wes? It is a test. It is.”

She finally sets the letter down, carefully and deliberately smoothing the wrinkles out, pages stacked perfectly.

“No tears, Faith. You know he hates that. Can’t be crying when he gets here. Can’t,” she mutters, slowly pulling each desk drawer open until she finds what she’s looking for. Because she knows they’ll be there, even though she’s not exactly sure where. Most of the drawers are empty, just a few odd items rattling around inside. A half-used roll of stamps, a pair of scissors, a box of unsharpened pencils. But she’s right; there in the second drawer from the bottom on the left. His secret cache of handkerchiefs. Perfectly folded into fourths and crisp with a light starching.

She carefully dabs at her eyes, wrinkling her nose in annoyance when she sees the long black streaks from her mascara smeared across the fabric.

But she can’t stop crying. Won’t, maybe.

“Fucking uptight frigid motherfucking bastard,” she hisses, the words hanging heavy in the air. “I hate crying as much as you do, asshole. Bet you never knew that.”

The ticking of his three damned clocks provides an off-rhythm counterpoint to her sobs.

_He's not coming back, you idiot_, chastises a voice in her head. _He's not you know. It's all right there, all spelled out for you._

She tries to blot out the nagging voice with the thought of him brushing her tears away with his warm fingertips, tucking her wayward hair behind her ear, whispering “I love you,” over and over again, breath hot on her neck. It doesn't work.

Not coming back, not coming back. Gone. Forever.

She knows what’s in the bottom drawer on the left. The one she didn't open. The tumbler hanging over the neck of the bottle of scotch clanks like a demented bell as she slowly pulls the drawer open.

She stares at it for a long time, deciding whether or not to engage in the politeness of pouring herself a glass, or just start chugging his expensive booze straight from the bottle.

_Don't_, says a voice in her head. A new one, a nicer one, a quieter one. _Not now. Not this time._

“Right. Because he'll be here soon. Wouldn't do to be trashed out of my skull, now would it?” she says aping his accent and slamming the drawer shut, the sound of the bottle banging muffled against the heavy wood.

She rests her hands on either side of the letter, which is perfectly centered on the blotter, which in turn is perfectly centered on the shiny, polished surface of the desk. Waiting. It gets easier the longer she sits there, stock still.

Her tears have dried up long ago, leaving her eyes prickly and hot. The voices in her head tired of whispering. The clocks still carry on their delicate ticking, lightly chiming out the hours. Hours she's lost track of long ago. She'd stared straight ahead, eyes locked on the empty doorway, not allowing
her gaze to slip to the edge of the desk in front of her. Every time she does, her brain fills with quick-cut flashbacks, on a loop over and over—overwhelming, nauseating—a front-row seat to every act that had ever transpired there. So she just stares through negative space inside the door frame, not focusing on anything but the soft glow light from of the reception area at the far end of the hallway. Waiting.

She doesn't remember drifting off to sleep, her head resting on her still perfectly-positioned hands. But she does know what rouses her. It's the click of the front door opening, confirmed by the inevitable squeak of the hinges that she'd always meant to take some WD-40 to. She smiles, pulling herself up and shaking the hair out of her eyes. She's glad she never got around to it.

Otherwise she wouldn't have known. Wouldn't have been ready, bright-eyed and smiling when he walks through the doorway. And it is him, negotiating the dark hallway, slowly. That is, until it isn't him. Tall enough, sure. But much too broad across the shoulders.

"Xander?" she rasps as he stumbles through the doorway, the faint light from the streetlight lighting up his face, concern writ large across his knitted brow. "Not supposed to be you. Where's Wes?"

"He's not coming, Faith."

She shakes her head. "No. He's coming back. He is."

He crosses the room in a flash, wraps his arms around her stationary body, ramrod-straight spine unyielding to his embrace.

"Faith, he called me. Called me and said to come look after you. He knew you'd still be here."

"Course I'm still here." Her voice cracks a little, still stiff in his arms. "Where else would I be?"

"At home. I've come to take you home."

Her face brightens a little at that, and she finally turns to look at him. He's so close they're nose to nose. "Will you stay there with me tonight? It's so lonely, that big house, when he's not there." Her voice takes on a rushed, high-pitched lilt. "There's a TV now. With satellite. We can get totally stoned and watch "Pimp My Ride" and order a pizza and..."

"We can't," he stammers, pulling her closer to him, the chair wobbling on its castors.

"Sure we can! Just as long as we clean everything up before he gets back from New York. Spray a little air freshener around, open a window or two. He told you when he'd be back right? Tomorrow? The next day?"

"Faith, we're going to your house."

"I know! That's great!"

"No. Listen," he says a little too sharply, and her eyes widen, startled. "No. I've come to take you back to Darla's house," he mutters at a quarter of the volume, looking ashamed of his sudden outburst.

"But I don't live there anymore," she says simply, turning her head back to face straight ahead. "I live with Wesley now. Big house, high on a hill, great views? You've seen it."
He sighs, exasperated, leaning his head against hers. “Faith, stop it, okay? Stop it. He told me what's going on. He told me about the letter.”

Her hands slide over the cool paper, and she methodically begins to fold it into eighths without looking down.

“Right, the letter.”

He grabs her by the shoulders, gives her a little shake, forcing her to look him in the eye. “Faith, we need to go. You're exhausted and totally delirious. You need to eat something. And the movers are gonna be here to pack up all this stuff in the morning.”

“He wouldn't leave without me. He wouldn't,” she whispers, shaking her head. Impossibly, there's a fresh round of tears welling up in her eyes, spilling out despite her best efforts to hold them in. Still clutching the tightly folded letter in one hand and the wadded, streaky handkerchief in the other, she finally wraps her arms around him, face buried in his shoulder. “I can't do this, Xander. I can't be without him. Not again.”

“Yes you can. And you will.” He holds her tight for a few long moments, then pulls away, planting a chaste kiss on her cheek. “Shit, you didn't get mascara on my shirt, did you Tammy Faye?” She shakes her head, unmoved by his jest. “Well, thank goodness for that. Now, come on, Faithy. Time for the tough love,” he says, trying to pull her up, but she hooks her feet under the edge of the desk and refuses to budge. “Get your ass up out of that chair and let's get the hell out of here.”

“I'm not going anywhere. Not until he comes back.”

“Which would be never,” he tells her. “Faith—God I hate that bastard for what he's done to you, but this—yeah, it's for the best. Fucking typical of him to not have the guts to face you though—”

“Shut up!” She's screaming at him now, feeling dry lips crack and sting as her mouth opens wide. “You don't know him! You don't know anything about him and you don’t—you don’t—”

He lets go of her and walks away, one step, two, running his hands through his hair. “I'm telling you what he said, Faith. Not me saying it, it's him. It's what he told me.”

“I want to know every word he said,” she says, her voice calm again, inflexible, the voice Wes uses when she's begging him for something and he's not inclined to give it to her.

Xander turns and looks at her. “Why? What good will it do?”

“Tell me.” She's not sure how much longer she can keep up the pretense of calm rationality but she has to know. Somewhere in what he told Xander there's a clue, right? Something only she'll understand, something that will lead her to him, where he's waiting, that smile on his face that he gets when he's proud of her, when he calls her his good girl, when he—

“Faith!”

She blinks at Xander. “What?”

“You just—you zoned out there.” He peers at her, sighs and perches on the corner of the desk. His hand's warm against hers when he starts to talk and she's trying so hard to concentrate—

“Wait,” she says, getting up way too fast, so the room spins and whirls.

“You want to go?” Xander's sounding all hopeful now.
“No. Just need something.” She walks out of the room quickly, snapping on lights as she goes, driven by an urgency that gives her a fleeting strength.

Her desk's a cluttered mess and her lips tighten as she looks at it but there's no time to restore it to how it should be. She sits down, wrinkling her nose because she can smell Harmony's perfume, cloying and sweet, and pushes aside the scattered papers until she finds what she needs. She stands, preparing to go back to Xander, and then notices a folder labeled 'Letters for Typing' in Harmony's ornate, virtually illegible handwriting, all loops and swirls.

It's too thick to be empty and she flips it open, eyes narrowing as she stares at the sheaf of papers covered with shorthand. The dates go back to before the weekend and she guesses Harmony's been letting them stack up because Wes wasn't around. Bitch.

Tucking the folder under her arm, she goes back to Xander who's prowling around Wesley's office, looking at all the ornaments with his hands behind his back, as if he's scared he'll break something.

“I'm ready,” she tells him. He turns and she holds up the pad and pencil, dropping the folder onto the desk. “I need to take notes, Xander.”

“Jesus, Faith!” He's looking at her as if she's insane. “You don't think this is just a little bit much?”

“No.” She wants to sit where she always does, but she can't bear the thought of Xander in Wesley's seat, so she takes it instead. The pad fits neatly into her hand and the pencil's satisfyingly sharp—just how she likes it. “I might forget if I don't. I can't do that. It's too important.”

She gives Xander an expectant look and when he's silent, staring at her with his mouth hanging open in almost comical dismay, she changes it to a glare. “Xander, will you just fucking tell me?” she hisses. “Word for word.”

It takes him three steps to reach the desk and slam his hands down on it. “For the record? You've lost it, Faith. Totally lost it. You fell for that freak and he's turned you into a freak too.”

Her hand meets his face and the sound it makes is one this room's heard before. Hand on skin. Smack-crack-echo.

Xander draws back, eyes wide with shock, the shape of her fingers already starting to flush to life on his cheek. “I can't believe you just did that.”

She picks up her pencil again and stares at him, unyielding and unapologetic. He gives her a disgusted look and begins to talk, the words hard as hail, stinging and cold.

“Right. Every fucking word from his fucking mouth. That's what you want? Okay then. The phone rings and yeah, thanks for waking me up you shithead when I've just come in off a shift but he's not wasting any time on apologies. Guess that's something else you've picked up from him. So he says, 'Xander?' and I can barely hear him, he's talking so quiet but I know it's him. How many other uptight Brits are gonna be calling me at two in the fucking morning?”

Faith carefully writes down 'Xander?' and waits.

“So I say something like—— And she needs this exactly, but she lets him get away with that as it's only what Xander said and that's not really important. “Yeah, what is it?’ and he says—— Xander's voice wavers a little and he steps back, drops down in her chair with his hand rubbing absentely at his face. “He says 'Faith needs you. I hurt her' and I think my heart stopped fucking beating because I knew this would happen, I knew it and I say, 'What did you do to her, you fucking piece of——’ Well. Guess you don't want to write that down, do you? You don't like people calling him names. Right.
So he waits for me to take a breath and his voice is stronger now and he says, all cold and shit, 'I left her. I'm calling you from New York.'"

There's a silence then as she writes that down and stares at it. Wesley doesn't lie. He evades the truth because he's a lawyer and he's good at that, but he doesn't lie. So she has to look beyond that.

She thinks about the letter. He'd said a lot of things he wasn't going to do (I'm not going to send for you. I'm not going to write to you. I'm not going to have a moment of weakness and wire the money for you to join me) but he'd never said flat-out that he wasn't coming back.

So he's gone, yes, and he's in New York, fine, but he's coming back. As soon as she's worked out the puzzle, he'll come back.

Xander's voice has died away and she gives him a bright, encouraging smile, ignoring the way he flinches. He swallows dryly and carries on.

“So I say, 'Left her where?' and I'm so fucking terrified he's going to tell me where he buried your body or something because he sounds empty, hollow. Like he's dead himself, but he just says, 'I told her to go to my office after the hearing. I left her a letter there. If you haven't seen her—' and I say, 'No', and he just carries on talking as if he didn't hear me, like he's a fucking recording or something. '—then she's still there. Waiting for me to come back. Thinking it's a game.'"

Xander's lip curls. “You play games like this often, do you, Faith?”

She thinks of Wesley dropping candies onto her breasts and murmuring love poems to her as his tongue flickers over her cunt, feels the blindfold soft against her eyes as she types a phrase over and over as he watches her.

When she doesn't answer, he finishes. “And then he just whispered, 'It's not. It's over.' and put the fucking phone down.”

She reads over what she's written and shakes her head. “You missed out something.”

“Yeah. The bit where he says this is all a joke and he's heading back with roses? That he loves you? That bit?” Xander shakes his head. “No. I gave you what you wanted, Faith, now you do something for me. You get up and you come home. You cry, yeah, and you can even take another swing at me, if it'll help, but you get out of this place.”

She's waiting for the tears but they're not there. Nothing is. No emotion, not feeling, nothing. She stretches out her hand and picks up the folder. “Can't, Xander. Not yet.” She starts to sort through the letters. “These should've gone out today,” she murmurs. “Wes is going to be so pissed.”

“I really don't give a shit about them,” Xander says, wrenching the folder from her. “Just you. Even if you've changed so I don't know you anymore. I still love you and you're scaring me acting like this.”

She's on her feet and he's backing away from her. “Give them to me!”


She snatches them out of his hand. “So I can type them, Xander. It's what I do. I'm Wesley's secretary and I type his letters.”

It takes her three attempts to get the paper lined up perfectly, because her hands are trembling, and the diatribe from Xander as he tries to persuade her to leave isn't helping, but she blocks him out,
swivels her chair to the proper height, and begins.

The keys are cool and hard under her fingers and the strike and tap of metal on paper is staccato at first, as she's rusty after weeks of not typing. But even the inaccuracies of Harmony's shorthand aren't enough to stop her body remembering. The taps speed up, punctuated by the whir of the carriage return, and she feels a familiar warmth course through her because her ass is throbbing slightly and isn't that just like normal? Sitting here, expected to work when he's made sure all she can think of is him, his hands on her.

She finishes the first letter, takes it out of the typewriter and stares at it. The words are fuzzy somehow and she holds it out to Xander. “Read it. Tell me if I made any mistakes.”

“How would I know?” he protests, but he takes it and scans it. “Looks fine,” he says, far too quickly.

“It has to be perfect,” she says, sitting up straight, not slouching, hands folded in her lap. “Make sure.”

He reads it again and then says reluctantly, “You spelled his name wrong, didn't you? There's no 'h' in 'Wyndam'.”

She's nodding frantically; smiling even though the tears are falling now because she's remembering so much.

“There isn't, there really isn't, and I always do that, I don't know why. I did it on purpose once, just to get him to spank me, but this time I wanted it to be right, I swear I did.”

She holds out her hand and takes the letter from Xander and then reaches out for the red Sharpie. It makes a protesting squeak as she draws a neat circle around his name and she starts to giggle.

“Faith?” Xander sounds so fucking alarmed now and that's even funnier so she can't stop laughing, not even when she's slamming her fists against the wall behind her, hammering at it until the pain in her hands starts to equal the agony inside her head as she begins to believe that he's gone.

It's the sight of her blood, oozing from skinned knuckles, that finally stops her. Because Wes doesn't like it when she's bleeding. Not that that really matters because he isn't here. He's…

“Xand?” She turns to where he's standing helplessly next to her and raises her stricken face to him. “He's gone, hasn't he? He's not coming back?”

“Oh, Faith, baby.” Xander breathes out, soft and slow, then his arms wrap tight round her and it's not right because it doesn't feel like Wes, and he doesn't smell like Wes. “Are you gonna let me get you to Darla's?”

And he doesn't call it home anymore and she supposes she should be grateful for that but she's clinging on to Xander. She wants to stay here a little bit longer because this place reeks of him. Maybe if she squints extra hard through her swollen eyes she'll see the ghost of a hundred Wesleys.

If she wishes enough then she'll walk back down the corridor and he'll be sitting at his desk. And when she comes in, he'll look up and give her one of those sudden smiles that's like Christmas and her birthday and Thanksgiving all rolled into one.

“Take a letter, Faith…”

“You're making me wait right now, Faith…"
And, God yes. “Assume the position, Faith…”

The moan that escapes out of her makes Xander stiffen in her arms because she sounds like some small animal caught in a trap with no other option but to bite off her limb to get free.

“Can't leave, Xand,” she mumbles brokenly, wishing he smelt of citrus and bergamot instead of laundry detergent and cigarette smoke. “Don't you get it? Once I go, I can't come back. Not ever.”

“Look, sweetie, the movers are gonna be here in, like, four hours and…”

“Wes would want me to be here to make sure they do stuff properly,” she pleads, because Xander's disentangling himself and placing a hand at the small of her back to give her a push toward the door. And any second now he's going to upgrade it to a full-on shove because she's clutching at the rim of her desk. “He'll get really pissed if they break anything.”

Xander's face shifts from concerned into this ugly, twisted mess of snarling mouth and narrowed eyes. “And that's meant to be a bad thing? You know what, Faith? I hope they break every single fucking thing in this place and send it to him at great expense in those crates with the little pieces of polystyrene snow.”

“Don't say stuff like that,” she snaps at him. “Just because you didn't get Wes. Never fucking did.”

“What's there to get? He's a sick fuck who's just left you without even the guts to say good-bye to your face.” Xander's ranting while that very face is crumbling and the tears are spilling over again, stinging on the way down.

“How could he leave me?” she begs piteously, collapsing into her chair so she can rest her chin on her hands. “I did everything he asked me to and he kept changing the rules without even telling me! Fuck! He's a fucking bastard!”

She can feel the rage welling up again but it's not whooshing around her insides this time. It's tight and slowly uncoiling so her blood feels like it's itching in her veins.

“He is a bastard, Faith,” Xander tells her in a strained voice. “Glad you finally got the memo.”

“I typed the fucking memo,” she spits and her gaze skitters over the letter she whisked out of the Selectric not ten minutes before and she's snatching it up and tearing it into tiny little pieces which she rains down like confetti on the floor. It's not enough. Not nearly enough. Just as well there's a whole folder full of paper.

“Are we going to have to stay here until you've finished typing them?” Xander asks nervously and her face is splitting into a grin, which makes her muscles ache because they're getting used to the fact that she's probably never going to smile again.


“Okay, Faithy, you're officially starting to freak me out or maybe I was asleep that day but what's so ironic about being fired?”

She yanks open one of her desk drawers and scrabbles around until her fingers close in on the flimsy plastic of one of the lighters she'd bought by the dozen when Wes'd confiscated her Zippo.

Then she catches Xander's eye and holds it as she reaches for the folder of notes that Harmony left and pulls out the top sheet of paper.
“Used to be pretty good at this,” she says conversationally. “Bet I haven’t lost my touch.” And she hasn't. Just holds the flame against the corner of the sheet and watches as a sooty black line begins to mar the white and then gets chased away by the orange glow. Then she drops it on the floor and reaches for the next piece of paper.

“Jesus!” Xander yelps and he's trying to stamp them out as fast as she can watch them burn and then let them go. “Do you want to add arson to your rap sheet?”

“I haven't got a rap sheet,” she reminds him sweetly. “Because good old Wes looked after things. Pity he isn't here to look after his office because I'm going to burn it down to the fucking ground.”

Now that she's got a sense of purpose, she feels calmer. Or maybe it's because she's allowed to burn stuff because Wes isn't here to tell her she can't. It used to help before. But she was just singeing the small stuff. This isn't small stuff. It's immense. Bigger than she can carry in her bleeding hands and she's gonna need a truckload of matches and maybe a can of gasoline.

“Where do you think I should start?” she asks Xander who's still jumping around on charred paper and looking at her with bug eyes. “All those books in his office are gonna go up like the Fourth of July.”

“Faith…” he begins but she's jerking to her feet so suddenly that it makes her feel dizzy and she brushes past his outstretched hand like it's made of air.

She's back in Wes' office before Xander can even take two steps and filling her hands with files. All those neatly assembled words, marching across the paper. How many fucking blows did she get for each of the letters she's crunching up? And why did she even bother because all it got her was fourteen weeks of some bullshit illusion?

“Okay, he's a bastard, I'm completely down with that but I am not letting you torch the place.” Xander pants as he skids into the room. “He's not worth going to the big house for, Faith.”

She pauses briefly from dragging down the big, heavy reference books from the top shelf of the bookcase. “I need to do this, Xand. Because either I start burning this stuff or I go and throw myself off the top of the nearest tall building. Your call.”

He tries to tug _Drafting Patent License Agreements_ out of her hands but she clutches the book tight to her chest and stamps on his foot while he tries to twist away from her.

“I'm warning you, Xand,” she snarls, kicking him hard in the shin with the toe of her pointy shoe and feeling glad, so fucking glad when he squeaks and his eyes water because it means that she's not the only one who's hurting. “Going to have myself a big conflagration as dear old Wes would say if he hadn't gotten his fucked up ass as far away from me as possible. He's left me. Left me. And I can't fucking stand it!”

Xander lets go of the book so suddenly that she almost falls over. She staggers a few steps and then drops the book on the little pile she's assembled with a satisfying thud.

“You know what I say?” Xander suddenly giggles like her hysteria has become contagious. “Burn, baby, burn.”

“All right, Xand! Good to have you in the game. You wanna start on that cabinet over there while I get the stuff out of the desk drawers?”

Been a while since her and Xander got up to some seriously bad shit together. And the gleam in his eyes has her dancing over to him so she can seize his hands and spin them round until the walls and
the floor are rushing to meet them and she's throwing her head back and laughing.

“Gonna burn him out of my fucking life,” she promises and she's starting to sound as manic as she feels. “Now where did I put my lighter?”

It takes a good ten minutes of rummaging through the mound of paper and books. Then another five minutes pulling out her desk drawers and leaving them on the floor before she whirls round to where Xander is hovering and fixes him with a steely glare that Wes could take notes on.

“Give it back right the hell now.”

“I'm not going to let you fry this place extra crispy,” he begins reasonably but she left reason, ooooh, about ten thousand miles back.

“You said! God, you're so fucking chickenshit, Xand. Man, I should have known that you'd wimp out on…”

Xander holds out his hands in the universal gesture for “stop acting like a demented, crazy lady.”

“This place got a backyard?”

“Why? So you can go and hide until it's all over?” she asks nastily and she's going to punch him until he hands over the lighter. She's already lost Wes. Losing Xander too would be like a free gift with purchase or whatever.

“No, so we can have a nice, controlled blaze and you can get the fuck over yourself, Faith,” he spits right back at her. “You start lighting matches in here, I give it two minutes tops before it's like a remix of The Towering Inferno and the police are on their way over.”

And he's got a point. Not like she wants to listen to it but it's a point all the same. So with shoulders slumping all the way down to her knees, she follows him back to Wes' office and even though she's being a bitch on wheels he doesn't even thin his lips when she forces him to make ten trips outside with armfuls of the heaviest reference books.

Wes has taught her loads of useful stuff. How to prepare the perfect cheese plate. How to spell 'precipitancy' and, like, what it even means. How to hold back an orgasm for an hour so she's shaking and screaming but not coming until he's told her that she can. But he's also shown her how to build the perfect fire. She's trying not to think about that, all those cozy evenings in the den watching him carefully arrange balls of paper and chunks of apple-smoked wood into a perfect pile so he could pull her down and make love to her in front of the roaring blaze. So it's kinda fitting that she's using her expertise to construct this neat little structure that's going to turn to ashes all his books. All he ever knew came from a pile of moldering old books.

“Give me the lighter,” she orders Xander as he steps through the back door with the last of the copyright texts and she sounds so fucking scary and resolute that he's dropping the books and handing over her cheap, plastic Bic without a murmur.

She's soaked the bottom layers with Wes' bottle of Macallan and they catch immediately. Orange and red and yellow columns of flame snaking their way right into the heart of the stacks she's made out of his life. All those years poring over torts and depositions so he could avenge other people's wrongs instead of dealing with his. Xander's right. She really needs to get the fuck over herself.

“It's pretty,” she murmurs as she takes a step back and lets Xander snake his arms round her waist and rest his chin on her shoulder.

“It kinda is,” he agrees. “But if I'd known we were having a bonfire, I'd have bought
marshmallows."

It's okay while she's staring into the fire, watching the patterns it makes, which disappear so quickly that she doesn't have to think too hard. The sun's creeping up in the sky, turning everything except the charred, smoldering clumps of paper and cardboard a hazy pink and now what, she thinks? Now fucking what?

“I can't go home,” she says almost to herself. “I don't know what to do.”

Xander's hand squeezes hers tightly. “We could get some breakfast. You hungry?”

She shakes her head decisively. Just the thought of food makes her want to puke. “I could stand a cup of coffee though.”

He gives her a tired smile. “Cool, you have coffee and I'll have a valium chaser. Wanna throw in this last pile of books for the road then?”

His last load is still lying on the ground where he dropped them and she watches dispassionately as he crouches down and begins tossing them into the dying fire.

“Don't think they're gonna burn,” she sighs. “Let me use the lighter.”

And she's just flicking the wheel, relishing the heat on her thumb when that stupid sun that doesn't know when it's not wanted glints across the gilt cover of a crumpled little volume that he's pushing right into the middle of the smoking debris and she's launching herself at Xander, mouth wide open on a scream.

“Oh no! No! No! NO!”

“Faith! What the fuck?”

She doesn't feel a thing as she falls to her knees and shoves both hands into the blackened, flickering mess until her blistering flesh closes around the heated foil cover and she's pulling it free.

The spine is buckled and torn from where she threw it against the wall and although the edges of the pages are already singed, it's safe.

“Huh? What did you just say, Faith? Jesus, your hands…”

“I love you as certain dark things are loved,” she whispers brokenly because it's open at Sonnet 17 and yeah, it's in Spanish but she doesn't need a translator to spell out the words that are carved deep into her skin, her cunt, her heart. “Secretly. Between the shadow and soul.”

“Faith?”

She's stretched out on the ground, like it's a grave, and the sun can't warm her and Xander's hands gathering her up so he can rock her in his arms can't comfort her. He's gone. And now she knows that, she doesn't know anything else.

“Xander, I want to go home now.”

*Home.*

What a loaded word. But where else can she go?

Xander drives her. He helps her inside, quietly, so as not to wake Darla. Puts antiseptic ointment on
her damaged hands and bandages them carefully up before dosing her with half a Codeine-laced Tylenol and helping her into bed. Everything is as she left it—the sheets all scrunched up in one corner of the bed, pillows askew; there’s even an empty vodka bottle on the floor by the bed—but Xander smooths out the sheets, plumps up the pillows, and eases her gently down onto them.

Yeah, she’s home. She’s been running away from it her entire fucking life. But as she wraps her quilt around her and closes her eyes, it feels like a haven, one she’s grateful for. She’s even thankful for her silly, shabby little room—with its posters and stickers and all the accoutrements of her not-long-past surly teen years—and her stupid stuffed bunny, the one that’s missing one button eye, that her Gramma gave her when she lost her first tooth. She clutches it tightly to her chest while Xander tucks her in carefully, like she’s a three-year old. Maybe she’s regressing. For a brief moment that sounds like the greatest idea in the world, until she remembers the hell that was her childhood and decides to take her chances with the present—which, thanks to Darla’s not-so-secret secret stash of pharmaceuticals, is looking rosier than it has any right to look.

Through the wonderfully gauzy drug haze, she whispers, “You gonna read me a bedtime story, Xand?” He shakes his head ‘no’, and kisses her forehead. “I’ll read to you tomorrow. You get some sleep, honey.” He sits with her, holding her hand, until he thinks she’s well asleep. That’s when he turns out the light, tiptoes downstairs and out the door, quieter than a church mouse.

And for a while she does sleep like the dead. No dreams, just darkness. It’s when that Codeine begins to wear off that she starts to toss and turn, reaching instinctively for Wes only to find the other side of the bed is cold, empty. She needs the warm reassurance that his body offers—craves it—but knows, knows with a sick-making, heavy dread that he’s gone. She reluctantly forces her eyes open and just lies there, staring at the ceiling.

Gone. He’s not coming back. Not now, not ever. Fucking coward didn’t even say it to her face, didn’t give her any of that famous fucking courtesy did he?

She doesn’t want to cry then, but she does. Wants to scream, “How could you do this to me? To us?” but she’s like a broken fucking record and the sun’s coming up on a new day and it’s high time to get out there and move the fuck on. Somehow.

He can ruin his life with something approaching practiced perfection but she’ll be damned if she’s going to let him ruin hers.

Chapter One Hundred and Fifteen

Every morning when she wakes up, she gingerly prods the gaping wound. Like it’s a tooth that’s been yanked out without anesthetic and she can stick her tongue in the hole and wiggle it around. It's always the same when she opens her eyes to the sun streaming in through the chinks in the window. Everything feels all right for one second, then two seconds, then three seconds until it all comes crashing back in glorious Technicolor and she knows that nothing is ever going to feel good again.

There’s a hole where her heart used to be.

Still, she’s gotta find another song. And with Xander’s help she gets a job at the diner, the same one she and Wes used to frequent. The lunch shift is just busy enough that she doesn’t have to think about anything, and that’s good.

Some days she’s just on autopilot. She measures out time in stubbed-out cigarettes and endless cups of coffee. They keep her distracted, and that’s about the best thing she can say about them. It’s only when she crawls into bed after a long day that she lets herself remember. Doesn’t want to forget a single moment, no matter how painful. Not even the acute sense memory of his fingertips brushing
along her stomach, dipping down between her legs, so she almost cries out. But she doesn't—can't —relieve all that frustrated, pent-up desire. Is it a point of pride with her? Maybe. All she knows is that every morning she makes the bed—all crisp hospital corners and pillows perfectly aligned—thinking how much he'd approve.

Not too sure that he'd be down with the shadows under her eyes, which are engrained so deep that she's not sure they'll ever fade away. She's got other scars to remember him by though. Despite his assurances, there are four faint lines on her ass like someone's drawn on her and then tried to rub it out with an eraser. It's not right but she's pleased that they're there. She earned those lines. And she's damn proud of them. Keeps herself shaved and smooth too because that's not something she's ready to give up just yet.

It's like she knows he's not coming back. Yeah, she really does. But if he did, then she'd want it to be perfect… she'd want to be perfect for him. She'd take out one of the pretty dresses he bought for her (which turned up the next day, all neatly packed in tissue paper and which have been shoved right to the back of her closet, still in their boxes), put on her pink heels and the red lipstick that he used to like so much and he'd wonder why he could ever have left her.

Gradually, though, she begins to learn the notes to her new song. Even though her morning cereal still tastes like cardboard and she's taken the shine out of her hair because she can't bear to brush it herself. Life isn't brighter, but it's… manageable.

She and Darla take turns cooking dinner. She manages to improvise some good stuff with the canned, boxed, vacuum-packed junk she finds lurking in the pantry. She even gets Darla to lay off her unfortunate fixation on Lipton Onion Soup Mix and has added some fresh vegetables on to the menu. Xander comes over on Fridays and they rent trashy weepies and eat lots of ice cream and M&Ms until they can barely move. When Darla goes to bed they break out the weed and watch *Jackass* reruns.

She’s got her routine and yeah, it's okay. But she wants more. But what? It’s not until she takes a new route walking home and passes the library that she realizes: she misses Wes’ books and his library. And not just for the serious bouts of fucking that went on there. She hadn’t even realized how much she’d come to enjoy having all those wonderful volumes at her fingertips. She loved their gilt-edged, cracked spine imperfection, and their musty, comforting smell.

She starts going to the library every night when her shift is over. It’s quiet and free of distraction. It feels like home too, somehow.

Deciding on the first book is difficult, but she manages. Brontë seems a good follow-up to all that Austen.

In the dusky light of late afternoon, she opens the book and begins to read.

And once she's done with Brontë and way over-identifying with the mad chick in the attic, there's other books waiting for her. Other lives that are as lousy as hers; Holden Caulfield, Esther Greenwood, Emma Bovary all become her new friends. And she's starting to get why he wrapped himself up in books because it was a different world to live in. A world that he didn't have to control, because the writer had already done that for him. It's such a relief to take time off from being a coffee-pot-toting automaton and lose herself in someone else's pain because she's heartily sick of her own.

On Sunday afternoons, she takes the bus to the bottom of the hill on the other side of town and slowly walks up the steep incline. She doesn't linger by the locked gates, just checks that the For Sale
sign is still there and carries on walking.

There's this little grassy nook at the summit and she can curl up under a tree so she doesn't get burned
by the fierce glare of the sun and read her latest book. Every now and again she'll glance down. She
can see the drooping leaves of the willow tree in his back garden and if she really cranes her neck,
she can just make out the back window that she'd hang out of when she was sneaking a sly cigarette.
It's kinda weird that she never used to give it a second thought when she'd tap her fingers over the
electronic keypad and gain entry to a house that's now barred to her. That everything changes so fast;
how you live, how you love and then it's all different.

Like it's different the Sunday that she comes up the hill to see a Sold sign planted firmly in one of the
flowerbeds, which accessorizes nicely with the contractors' vans parked outside. Her hands are
gripping the metal posts of the entrance gate so hard that it takes a moment to unclench them when
the front door opens and she watches a man and woman stroll out, arm in arm. Watches them walk
around the front of the house, gesturing to each other until the man looks down at the woman with a
smile on his face and kisses her cheek.

It takes her two minutes to run down the hill, her bag bumping against her legs, eyes blinded with
tears because she knows she can never go back there. It's not their house any more. Not hers and
Wes'. It belongs to other people who are gonna make new memories there, until their presence is
banished from the house and the walls aren't going to be able to tell their secrets.

So she finds a new place to go on Sunday afternoons and learns a few more notes to her song. Even
tells Xander she might go clubbing with him again if he promises not to leave her alone for, like,
even one second because she's getting better, yeah, but she's not ready to get down on her knees in a
bathroom stall like ever again.

By the time it gets to early September and the town is getting emptier because all the students have
fucked off back to their colleges, she thinks she might almost have her groove back. Though it's a
quieter groove than she used to have. She's standing behind the counter on a quiet Wednesday
morning rolling her eyes at Billy Blim, the short order cook, who's trying out some really lame pick-
up lines on her when the bell above the door jangles and she looks up just in time to see Lilah walk
in.

And the diner, like all diners everywhere, nearly, has that one rule of seating: If there's a table open
or an empty seat at the counter, it's yours.

Faith knows Lilah's never really one to look out of place anywhere, with her self-possessed airs and
all, but it really is almost funny the way she contemplates a booth by the window or a seat at the
counter, like she's choosing between diamonds and emeralds at Harry Winston or something. She
finally settles on the booth, carefully arranging herself on the squishy seat and brushing invisible
crumbs off the table before consulting the menu.

“Hey Faith, you use Windex to wash your clothes? Because I can totally see myself in your pants!”

“Yeah, that's a great one, Billy, but I'd only give it 6.5 for artistic merit,” she yells over her shoulder
as she heads to Lilah's table, glass of water in one hand, coffee pot in the other, because she can see
that Lilah's already tipped her cup upright in its saucer. She looks like maybe she's been pulling too
many late nights preparing for a case or something—which is to say, she kind of looks like crap—
and Faith sure as hell doesn't feel one ounce of sympathy when that thought crosses her mind. But
she's not getting any majorly hostile vibes off Wes' ex-wife for once, and hey, if Lilah's here to pull
any shit, she can always go all The Big Heat on her ass, toss the coffee in her face or something
equally melodramatic. She's secretly pleased at how that thought straightens her spine and lengthens
her stride as she weaves between the tables to reach Lilah's booth.
“Seems that young man in the back is sweet on you, Faith,” Lilah says, looking up from the tattered menu, sliding it back between the crusty ketchup bottle and the napkin dispenser. It's also almost funny how her insults always sound like a hollow echo of Wes’ best tart remarks.

“Billy's relatively harmless. A big talker, mostly.” She plasters on her best fake waitress smile, sloshing coffee into the cup, careful not to let any splash into the saucer. “So, Lilah, didn't ever think I'd see you in this part of town ever again.”

“Client consultation.”

“Big case? Late night?”

“Something like that,” Lilah says with a sigh, brushing her perfectly highlighted and coiffed hair off her forehead.

Billy rings the bell in the service window. Table three's order is up and it's the sound of salvation from what's rapidly turning into one of the most awkward conversations she's ever had. “Not to rush you or anything, but you gonna order, or do you need some time?”

“Coffee's good for now,” she says with a thin smile. “I have something to discuss with you, Faith. Do you have a break soon?”

“Don't really have anything to discuss with you, Lilah,” she hisses, lowering her voice so as not to disturb the three other customers in the diner. The weekday breakfast crowd's been a little sparse lately. “So you can just put that idea right out of your head. I'll pour you coffee and wait on you this one time, but I want you out of here as soon as you pay your bill, and I really don't want to see your uptight ass in here on one of my shifts ever again. Is that clear?”

Lilah's face is completely blank, so what she says next is a little startling. “I came to apologize, Faith.”

“Really?” She peers at the older woman suspiciously. “That's not like you at all, Lilah. Suddenly, after all these months, you're feeling some remorse? You think that an apology is just gonna make everything all better? Take back everything you did to sabotage what Wes and I had? Bring him back from New York; bring my father back from the dead?” She laughs harshly, setting the coffee pot down on the table so hard Lilah flinches, plainly expecting it to shatter. Billy rings the bell again, a little more insistently this time. “On second thought, scratch that last part. They should both stay right where they are.”

Lilah actually grins at that last part. “Good, you're still angry. I was worried you'd just become complacent, taking a job in a place like this.”

“Of course I'm still fucking angry,” she sputters, frustrated and confused. Actually, she hasn't felt much of anything in months, sequestered away with her books and her routine. But she's sure as hell getting angry now and she pushes out a frustrated sigh because Lilah's still looking up at her with a serenely malevolent face. “Look, I've got an order up. I can take a break in about half an hour; things are slow before the lunch rush starts. If you wanna stick around, we can finish this conversation then.”

“I can wait.” Lilah casually dumps two packets of Equal in her coffee, gives it a quick swirl with her spoon, and takes a sip, nose wrinkling in distaste. “By the way, Faith, this coffee's a bit burned. You may want to brew up a fresh pot.”

“Right, I'll do that,” she says bitterly, turning on her heel and flashing an apologetic smile at her
regulars at table three before hurrying back behind the counter to retrieve their breakfast, right as Billy decides to bellow out another tired pick-up line for her approval.

Half an hour later, as she'd predicted, Lilah's the last customer left in the diner, scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad and brusquely fielding calls on her cell phone.

Armed with her cup of coffee, Faith slides into the other side of the booth, feeling ridiculous in her crisp uniform with the ruffled apron, Peter Pan collar, and tacky etched nametag. “I really shouldn't do this, but like I said, we'll be pretty dead for the next hour or so.”

“That's how you look.” It's said softly and Faith's not sure she heard it right. There's something in Lilah's eyes that might be pity, but then it's drowned in a sparkle of spite. “Trust Wes to tarnish the shine, hmm?”

And Faith's remembering Lilah's fingers, tipping up her chin as they had that brief confrontation in the office, when Lilah had asked her if she loved Wes, and when she'd said yes, giving her this sad little smile and telling her she was stupid. It's that same mix of concern and cruelty fighting it out, and with Lilah the cruelty usually seems to win.

“What do you want, Lilah?”

“You want to just skip the small talk? Okay. Whatever you went down between you and Wesley must have been pretty bad. He didn't leave town when we split, that's for sure.”

“Great way to cut to the chase, there.”

Lilah cuts her off with a wave of her hand. “Look, I can't say I know what you've been going through, but I have a pretty good idea. Wes is a past master at cutting his losses when the going gets rough.”

“You could say that, yeah.”

“I've been thinking about you, Faith. Yes, I know; I'm only supposed to think about number one, but contrary to what he might have told you, I do have the odd moment when I resemble a human being.”

There's enough hurt there to make Faith wince a bit. She's never going to forget what Lilah did to fuck Wes up, but now she's been on the receiving end of his attempts to make things better, she's willing to admit if there was ever a man to inspire extreme reactions, it's him.

“I don't—look, what went on between you two; I've only heard his side of it, but you weren't exactly nice to him, even cutting you all the slack in the world, so why are you even here?”

Lilah looks out the window, avoiding the question, letting a long silence swallow it up and erase it from the conversation. “I know you won't believe it, but I was a wreck when Wes and I split up.”

“Really? I had no idea,” Faith spits back, sarcastically. Oh, she'd heard how much of a 'wreck' Lilah had been, how she'd done stuff that made that little bonfire action pale in comparison. Hell, she'd seen some of that residual bile up close and personal, even.

“You have every right to be angry with me, you do.” A cold smile crosses her lips. “But I want to make things up to you.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that, but like I said, I'm a little unclear how that's gonna happen.”
“You're too good to be working here, Faith. You're a clever young woman, pretty and sharp—you've got a great future ahead of you. For all the nonsense that went on in that office, Wes trained you well. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to find competent legal secretaries these days.”

Just for a second, she lets herself believe it—that she's better than this, that she can go back to making something of herself, maybe even take some classes, pass some exams, the way Wes always said she should, but the table's slick with years of grease beneath her fingers and she can see her reflection in the napkin holder. She's a world away from the young woman who walked, back straight, head high, around Wesley's office, demure black dress concealing wet-dream undies. She's back to nylon and cotton now, not silk and satin, and her eyes are tired, older eyes.

She's starting to look like her mother.

“Uh, thanks—but no thanks. No way. I'm not working for you, Lilah.”

“Oh no!” She's laughing, actually freakin' laughing. It's sharp and hardly mirthful, but it does soften her face a little, Faith notices—makes her look a little more pretty. “You wouldn't be working for me—I really don't think we'd last a week in close quarters, do you? But there's more than one lawyer in this town, and with Wesley gone, this particular one's benefiting. Seems Wes told most of his old clients to go to him. Can't imagine why he didn't recommend me, but there you go.”

Faith's nodding now, remembering some of the letters she typed for him just before—

“Mr. Rosenberg, right? He's the grandfather of someone I knew at school. She was—well, she hung around with some girls you'd really get on well with, but she was never quite as a big a bitch as them.”

“That's him. Sweet old guy. It held him back but I don't get the feeling he ever wanted to go anywhere, so no loss.” Lilah tilts her head. “And that nice man's swamped now. Too sweet to turn people away, but he's not a firecracker like our Wesley—”

“Don't call him that.”

Wes might not be hers, but he sure as hell isn't Lilah's and never really was.

Lilah's lips thin in a smile. “My, we are touchy, aren't we? Anyway, he's not the sort to work late and weekends, like some people we know, and he needs some help. He asked me if I knew anyone and what can I say? I thought of you.”

“So what's the catch?” She's back to peering suspiciously at Lilah, but she's even more impossible to read than Wes ever was. She can't believe that she's not entering into some sort of Faustian deal here, with Lilah coming to collect the marker on her soul in a few years or something.

“No catch. Just a job. If you don't want it, I'll understand—and you'll never see me again.”

Well, that's a tempting offer as well, she thinks, but Lilah does have a point. She's coping, she's getting by, but she's bored to tears. Even though Lilah hasn't mentioned the salary, she has no doubt that she'd probably make enough money to start putting something aside again to replace her savings—and in her relocation fund as well. She'd been thinking about trying LA or Seattle or Chicago— pretty much anywhere but New York, really. Anywhere but this godforsaken town that was too full of memories and ghosts and snotty girls from high school who came into the diner just to point and giggle and leave crappy five cent tips on their bottomless cups of coffee and slices of mediocre, warmed-over pie.

“I'll think about it,” she says, letting caution guide her.
Lilah stands up. “Sure. You do that.” She hesitates. “Look, I'm probably going to regret this—”

“Lot of that going around.” Faith says sourly.

“I'd like—” Lilah's flushing now, natural color rising up under the perfectly-applied blush. “Could we talk maybe? Somewhere that isn't here?”

Faith frowns. “About what? I've said I'll think about it. I know where his office is; I'll maybe go over; I'm off tomorrow. Not promising—”

“About Wesley.”

“What?” Faith's on her feet now, glaring. “What about him?”

Lilah's control snaps back into place. “I'm really not going to go into it here.” Her eyes stay on Faith's as she pulls out a card from her purse. “Here's my address. If you want to come by around eight, say, I'd be grateful. I've just done you a favor; you owe me one.”

“That's the way it works for you, isn't it?” Faith says. “Never something for nothing.”

Lilah smiles. “Wes was always the one who did the pro bono, if that's what you mean. I like a check, not heartfelt thanks.”

Faith stares at her and Lilah reaches out and pats her arm. “You know you'll come.”

“Why?” It's getting hard to answer Lilah because she's saying Wesley's name too often and each time she does, it hurts, it stings.

“Because you want to talk about him as much as I do.” Lilah doesn't make it sound even vaguely like a question. “And who else have you got who wants to listen?”

Darla's eyes glazing over when she mentions him. Xander's endless supply of cutting remarks. How long has it been since she's done more than whisper his name in the dark? And it hurts to say it, hurts to hear it—

“Nine.” Faith meets her eyes and nods slowly. “I'll come at nine.”

Because Wesley's taught her that pain isn't something you hide from, isn't something you fear, and something in her is flushing warm, burning bright at the prospect of finding out more about him.

She takes care dressing for the first time in a long time, slipping into clothes that still, if she brings them close to her face, smell of Wesley's home. She's not trying to do more than look presentable; not trying to compete, or seduce, the way she normally is when she dresses up, but it's a little like preparing for battle. Liam used to always laugh when Darla was getting ready to go out—hey, a happy memory of her dad, who'd have thought it—and say she was putting on her war-paint, and Faith had peered at the shabby cosmetics bag, wide-eyed and confused because the worn down lipstick and bright-blue eye shadow didn't look like paint.

She gets it now. It's armor, it's a shield. It, like the plum dress, is something to hide behind.

She doesn't wear the pink shoes though.

Lilah's home isn't just in the good part of town; it defines where the good part is. She's name-checked through a reception area by a security guard whose eyes look as if he wants to find a reason to strip-search her, though his mouth calls her 'Miss' politely, and ushered into an elevator.
Lilah lives high, penthouse high, in a loft apartment, all pale wood, glowing in the light of a few scattered lamps. Empty spaces and shadows create an effect where other people would have hung paintings, put up shelves.

There's a small oasis of plush, deep sofas, angled for conversation, and a low table between them set out with small bowls of nibbles. Faith doesn't do more than glance at them. Her stomach's churning with nerves.

“Look, maybe this was—”

“A mistake?” Lilah shakes her head. She's dressed in soft, old sweatpants and a simple white tee and Faith, wrong-footed from the start, smoothes down her dress defensively. “Second thoughts aren't usually the ones you should go by.”

“My first and second thoughts were not to come,” Faith tells her. “Still not sure what good you think this'll do.”

Lilah shrugs. “I'm not, either. Call it an impulse. And after all—” her eyes gleam with amusement, “let's face it, you can't hate me more than you do right now, so what do I have to lose?”

Faith studies her. She can think of a few things but she's not sure how to cope with Lilah in this mood.

“I need a drink,” Lilah says abruptly. “Somehow Wesley and alcohol go together, don't you think?”

She's said his name and it's all that's needed to have Faith drift over to one of the couches and sit down.

“Guess they do.” She pauses and then says, offering it up just to see if she'd got this right, if this was what Lilah wanted—”I once made him drink a chocolate vodka milkshake.”

She has; it is. Lilah snorts with sudden, delighted laughter. “No! Oh God, I'd have paid to see his face! Once this client came over at Christmas with a bottle of sherry because he said Wes, being English, would love it. It was sweet, cheap stuff and he drank two glasses smiling all the time—”

“Yeah. Too good-mannered not to,” Faith says softly.

“It was a big account,” Lilah says dryly, “and the face he pulled as soon as the man left; you'd think he'd been forced to drink lemon-juice.”

A straight swap of memories and a silence falls, still awkward but guarded, not unfriendly.

“What can I get you to drink?” Lilah asks. “Not sure I can manage a milkshake—”

Faith shakes her head. “Don't want one.”

Lilah nods, going over to an impressive row of bottles. “I know. It reminds you of him, so you stop eating it, drinking it, wearing it. With me it was a restaurant; the one where he proposed. Can't walk past it without getting a cold shiver.”

There's a fierce pang of envy at that. Not that she'd ever thought that far ahead and she wasn't sure she was cut out for tacking 'Mrs.' onto her name, but still... “I'll have a vodka tonic,” she says.

Lilah sighs. “He drinks those,” she says patiently. “Can't you even come up with a drink of your own?”
Faith's on her feet. “Look, just give me a drink, will you? No, don't bother—”

She's halfway to the door when the pop of a can makes her turn. Lilah's pouring tonic into a tumbler frosted with ice, garnished with lime. “Oh, come back and stop being dramatic.”

It's a long walk home to an empty house and Faith sighs and kicks off her shoes before curling up on the couch again. “What the hell.”

Lilah waits until Faith's glass is at her lips before raising hers in a toast. “Bottoms up,” she says, eyebrow quirked, a sly smile on her face.

Faith chokes as the double meaning hits her, vodka forced into places it was never meant to go. “You're a bitch, you know that?” she says, but as Lilah carries on smiling, she can't help grinning back because, yeah, it is kinda funny.

“That was the trouble with Wesley,” Lilah says, fishing out her slice of lime and nibbling away at the sweetly-tart flesh. “He takes everything so damn seriously. He's got a kink; fine—who doesn't? I could tell you stories about some of the men—and women—who run this town that'd make the games you two got up to look tame. But no, he's all determined to see himself as the only freak and get a kick out of that as well as, well, out of everything else he does.”

Hard to argue with that, though Faith's wondering just how much Lilah knows. The way Wes told it, she'd never gone along with it, just found out and reacted really badly.

“You never guessed? Before you got married? When you were fucking?” she asks, taking refuge in deliberate crudity.

“What turned him on?” Lilah shook her head. “He got a little rough at times, but—” There's a secret, remembering smile on her face and Faith looks away. Too much. Too intimate. “I like that. Don't want a man who's afraid to touch me, and Wesley—God, the things he can do when he's in the mood!”

“He's...” Faith grinds to a halt. She can feel Wesley's mouth on her, feel his hands. “Oh God, I miss him so much!”

“Now, see, I don't,” Lilah says, her voice cool enough to freeze-dry Faith's tears at source. “Seeing him around—and a place this small, that happened way too often—well, it just reminded me of what a fool I'd been, falling in love with him.” Her gaze sharpens. “Did he tell you what I did when I found out?”

She feels disloyal even nodding because she can feel his hand gripping hers tightly as he chokes out the words, tears wet on his face.

“That was me feeling hurt,” Lilah confides. “I don't deal with rejection well.”

“Never would've guessed,” Faith mutters.

“I heard about the mess you left at his office, Faith, so don't get all holier-than-thou on me,” Lilah says snidely. “Think that's one thing we've got in common, don't you? We know how to hurt him. You destroyed his books and me, well I tipped gallons of his wine down the sink.” She takes a slow, reflective sip of her drink. “I lined up all the empty bottles, nice and neat, just the way he likes things, and when he walked in and saw them, I tipped one over and watched them fall.”

“What did he do?” Faith asks curiously. There's a difference between Wes in a mood to spank and Wes stone-cold angry.
Lilah shrugs. “Wasn't much he could do, was there? Just gave me only of those fucking *English* looks; *you* know—” Yeah. She does. All tightly-buttoned up and you can feel the heat simmering beneath the frosty-cool crust. “—and says, ‘You always did have excellent taste in wine, Lilah. Judging from the gaps on the shelves you chose very well. Very well indeed.’ Then he nodded and said in this creepy, quiet voice—” And, fuck she knows that one too—"'If you're still here when I've finished cleaning this up, Lilah, I'll break you as you broke these bottles.'"

Lilah finishes her drink and stands up, reaching out for Faith's glass. “Bastard made me believe it too.” She walks over to mix up more drinks. “Did he ever scare you? I mean, all the stuff he did—he tied you up, right? So you were helpless and all at his mercy and you never once got worried he'd do something, go too far?”

“He didn't—” Faith hesitates. “I had—there was this word...”

Lilah's eyebrow arches. “Well, yes, I imagine there was. But this is Wesley we're talking about. He can give you a chance to escape just because it's so much fun when you try and use it and find it leads to nowhere. Bet you never used that nice shiny word of yours often. He wouldn't have liked you spoiling his fun that way.”

This is getting too much and Faith backs off a little. “You married him. Why?”

“Why not? Saves paying two rents.”

Faith shakes her head. “No. That wasn't it. If you're going to play this game with me, you've got to tell me straight.”

“Oh, we're playing, are we?” Lilah purses her lips. “He attracted me. Mysterious, foreign—God that voice of his—”

“Fuck, yes,” Faith says, rolling her eyes. They share a look.

“And who doesn't want to be the one who glues a broken heart back together,” Lilah says lightly. “I'm assuming if you got all the dirt on me, he was equally forthcoming about Ms. Burkle.”

Their eyes meet and they chorus, “Stupid bitch,” and dissolve in giggles only partly vodka-induced although Lilah's mixed them strong and Faith's already feeling a buzz.

“I mean,” Lilah says, “can you imagine? She had Wes in love with her. Totally devoted, head-over-heels and she just—” She makes a 'pfft' sound and downs half her drink.

“When do they do that?” she asks Faith. “Why do they fall in love with those faux-naive little tarts who don't know a good deal when they see it?”

“You didn't think he was that good a deal,” Faith reminds her.

Lilah gives her a jaundiced look. “Well, he wasn't in love with me, honey. Never. Makes a difference.”

“He loved me,” Faith says and there's a quiet certainty to her voice that has Lilah's gaze sharpening.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“But he left you.”
“It's why he left me.”

“God,” Lilah says in disgust. “They just don't get any bigger idiots than when they're trying to be noble.”

“Tell me about it.” Faith looks around and sees a silver-framed photograph pushed far back on a low sideboard. “Is that—”

Lilah follows the direction of her gaze and nods. “Our wedding day, yes. My second, his first. No white dress, no church; hell, I think we even put in some hours at the office that day.” She shrugs. “Take a look if you want. See what Wesley looks like on the happiest day of his life.”

Faith stands up and goes over to it, glad that her back's toward Lilah. She's worn the edges soft on the single photograph she has of Wesley, staring at it for hours in the early days of their separation, searching his face for some sign of what he'd had planned and finding nothing but a loving, slightly embarrassed smile. Now she stares down at a younger Wesley, impeccably clad in a dark suit with his one concession to the day being a white carnation through his buttonhole that looks wildly out-of-place. He's standing beside Lilah, who's breathtaking in a green dress that manages to look special without being too much. A wide-brimmed hat is in one hand; her other is resting on Wesley's shoulder.

He's half-turned and smiling at her, but he's not touching her and there's something closed-off and distant in his look.

“Romantic, wasn't it?” Lilah says into Faith's ear. Faith jumps and drops the photograph which falls with a clatter. Lilah reaches past her and sets it upright again and then pushes it back, almost hidden behind a vase. “He tried, I'll give him that. But you can tell when someone's just not there when you're kissing them.”

“‘These poor half-kisses kill me quite,’” Faith murmurs, the words swimming up from her memory. Lilah pulls a face. “Is that a quotation? Don't tell me he used to read you those deadly dull books of his; forget the spanking; that's cruel and unusual right there.”

Faith frowns. “Yeah, it is; Michael Drayton, but Wesley didn't tell me that one.” And when she'd got to the final line, 'Come, nice thing, let my heart alone, I cannot live without thee!' she'd started to cry right there in the middle of the library with a wide-eyed toddler staring at her in silence, his thumb rammed in his mouth. “You—you didn't like it when he read to you?”

“You did?”

They stare at each other across a gulf and Faith turns her head, scanning the apartment. No bookshelves anywhere; no wonder it feels kinda empty. “You don't like reading?”

Lilah snorts. “I read all day; why would I want to do it for fun? Oh, the odd blockbuster, or if there's a book everyone's talking about I'll skim it; you have to keep up with these things, but read the books he does? Classics and poetry? No thanks.”

“Not even the porn?” Faith says with a sidelong grin that fades as she recalls curling up in the library with one of Wesley's leather-bound books, illustrating elegant perversions in text or art that seem all the more shocking because the people in the books are Jane Austen old and it's fucking weird to think of them doing stuff that'd look so dirty if it was a photograph, and looks so erotic in a delicately tinted drawing.

Lilah's lips thin down. “Wesley's taste in porn isn't something I like to think about.”
It's a weak spot and Faith can't resist pressing down on the bruise. Maybe it was seeing the photograph, but she's all jangled nerves and jitters. “Yeah, he said you went rooting around and found his stash.” She frowns severely. “I never did that. Saw his books, but they're not hidden, and he doesn't go in for anything in the way of toys or stuff, so what was it?”

There's a splash of tonic and a long gurgle of vodka as Lilah freshens their glasses. “He probably got rid of it,” she says tiredly, pressing her glass to her forehead and sitting down. “I ripped up a lot of it.”

“You ripped up his books?” Faith says incredulously. She'd burned his office books but she doesn't think she'd have been able to consign any of his personal ones to the flames, no matter how hurt she was.


Faith considers that. “What would you call sick?” she asks cautiously. Lilah doesn't strike her as the prim-and-proper type but maybe she's all talk.

Lilah gives a short laugh. ‘I tell you, and you're going to say, 'Oh, yes, we did that every second Thursday' aren't you?''

“Don't know,” Faith tells her. “And I'm not really comfortable telling you what we did. It's private, you know?”

“Fine,” Lilah says, meeting her eyes and with a flush burning scarlet on her face. “So let's go with what you've already told me. At the court that day you said I should've let him fuck my ass.” She barely waits for Faith's nod before hurrying on. “He asked—hell, he just went ahead and tried one night when we were both drunk, and I nearly took his head off I slapped him so hard.”

“Oh,” Faith murmurs, lost for words. She'd been a bit freaked when he mentioned it but it'd been good, like everything she did with Wesley.

“But you let him, didn't you?” Lilah demands. “You let him do—anything.”

“I told you; not up for discussion. That—yeah, we did. But I'm not saying anything else.”

Lilah smiles. “But I want to know,” she says softly. “We—it was good at first. He was so sweet, so—but it wore off. He was just pretending, just being kind. I couldn't give him what I wanted; didn't even know what it was because he never fucking shared that little secret with me.”

Unbidden, Faith feels pity rise. She remembers how incalculable Wesley could be. If he hadn't made it pretty plain with that first spanking what got him off, would she have worked it out? Probably not.

“So I want to know. Everything he did; everything he asked you to do. I want to know for sure that even if I'd known what he wanted, I wouldn't have wanted to give it to him.”

Lilah's eyes are glittering with tears now, but they're angry tears and her teeth are digging into her lip.

“You wouldn't,” Faith says slowly, groping for the right words. “You're just not like me. You're too...you're too much like him.” And why does she suddenly feel that of the three of them, she's the fucking adult? Wes and Lilah, circling each other, eyes closed, reaching out and never touching.

“Are you going to tell me?” Lilah demands.

“No.” Faith's voice is flat, uncompromising.
Lilah nods as if she'd been expecting that answer and walks over to a desk, taking out a thin, blue folder. “Know what this is?” she says, holding it up.

“If this is more fucking blackmail -” Faith says, struggling to stand.

“No. It's not.” Lilah taps the edge of the folder against her palm and Faith finds herself straining to hear that faint, regular sound over the rush of blood in her ears. “It's an exchange of information, that's all. What I want to know for Wesley's contact details. Where he works, where he lives, phone numbers, his e-mail—God, I can't believe that last one—the man didn't even own a TV for Christ's sake.”

Faith's lips part and close but Lilah notices. “No. Don't tell me. He didn't?”

Faith shrugs apologetically. “Widescreen, surround sound, the works.”

“I don't fucking believe it,” Lilah mutters. “He wouldn't hear of it when I wanted one. Lectured me about it being mass-produced pap for the proletariat or some crap like that.”

She takes three swift strides and thrusts the folder at Faith. “Oh, take it. Use it if you want or trash it. I give up.” She gives Faith a lop-sided smile. “Look his company up when you get a chance; he's got a page on the website all to himself. Guess he turned out to be their blue-eyed boy as well as ours —yours.”

“I don't have a computer,” Faith tells her absently, fingering the cover of the folder gently.

“You will have on Monday,” Lilah tells her. “I took the liberty of assuring Mr. Rosenberg that you were so perfect he didn't need to interview you. You start at nine. Don't be late. He won't spank you if you are, but he gets this sad look in his eyes and you'll feel six-inches tall.”

“I hadn't decided to take it,” Faith says indignantly.

Lilah gives her a skeptical look. “You were all but drooling at the thought of getting out of that place, honey. Don't cut off your pretty little nose, hmm?”

“Thank you,” Faith says awkwardly. “It's—he knows I don't have a reference?”

“Thanks for what?” Lilah shakes her head. “He owes me; you owe me. I like that. No need for thanks. And I'm your reference, so don't let me down.”

“You didn't have to give me this,” Faith says, glancing down at the folder. “That was—nice of you, though I don't know if I'll use it.”

Lilah's eyes flicker. “Right. Because you're just going to let him walk away.”

Faith shrugs. “I might,” she says, and she means it. Not sure she wants to chase Wes, not sure at all. “But it's good to have the option. So thanks. I owe you.”

“You could've found it out yourself,” Lilah says dismissively. “Well, maybe not the name of his cleaner, tailor, and chess partner.”

Chapter One Hundred and Sixteen

She should be worried about the new job. Feel guilty about leaving the diner with two days' notice and just about enough money to retrieve her work clothes from the back of the closet and get them dry-cleaned. Hell, she should even be worried that she might have forgotten how to
minute her way to a better life.

But how can she freak out about any of that when she's freaking out about the three sheets of paper in the blue folder that Lilah gave her? It was game over as soon as she had it in her hands. Lilah was still up for another thrilling installment of scenes from her marriage but she drained her drink in one gulp, got to her feet and made her excuses while Lilah sat there almost forlornly like she thought they were going to be best buddies and get their nails done together on the weekend.

She'd seen Faith to the door, pressed a wet slither of a kiss against the corner of her mouth and it was probably just too much vodka and coincidence that her arm brushed Faith's breasts for five seconds too long as she reached for the latch and husked in her ear, “Don't forget, Faith, you owe me.”

But the way Faith sees it is that Lilah still owes her big time. Sure she's got her some fancy new job and three pieces of paper that are making her sick just thinking about them but that doesn't even begin to make right all the wrongs she's done her.

It's not until Saturday morning when she's back from the dry cleaners but still has an hour to kill before her haircut that she retrieves the folder from under her mattress, locks herself in the bathroom and finally opens it with a shaking hand.

For a moment the words don't make sense. They just swim in front of her like Times Roman little fishies and Lilah could have just written, 'Sucker!' in six inch high letters for all the sense they make. Then she's picking out a word here and there. A sentence, an address, a life that he's carved out for himself far away from her.

It's not a life that seems to involve the brownstone in the West Village that overlooks a garden square. It's hard to tell but isn't East 77th Street kinda uptown? It's so weird to think of him living somewhere that she can't picture. Has he still got space for all of his books? Does he still prefer to sleep in a south-facing room? Has he got some fancy stainless steel kitchen where he doesn't have time to do anything but boil up a kettle because she heard somewhere that New Yorkers eat out a lot. He'd like that but then sometimes he'd get in and he'd just want to make something plain and easy, maybe some pasta and pesto, one of those foofy bottles of imported beer and a football, what the fuck? soccer match on the big TV, if he hadn't sent that back because he didn't have to entertain some eighteen-year old piece of ass anymore.

The e-mail and the website address are easy to skim over though she knows that come Monday, before she's even found out where the john and the coffee maker is, she's going to be doing things she wished she hadn't, but there are phone numbers. All she has to do is pad back into her room, get her cell phone, press in, like, what, ten numbers and she can speak to him?

It can't be that easy. Life isn't that easy. And as soon as she thinks that, the phone rings in the front room and she bites her tongue so fucking hard that it makes her eyes water.

Darla picks it up and it's gonna be Wes. Not just because she thinks that every time the phone rings or the doorbell goes or she catches sight of someone lean and dark but because he's her fucking soul mate and he knows. Knows that they're meant to be together. But it's not Wes. It never is and Darla's banging on the door.

“Faithy, you in there? That was Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow. Can you get there in ten minutes, honey?”

And her eyes are watering again because even after three months and two weeks and five days (and can it really be that they've been apart longer than they were together?) she's still fucking stupid enough to believe that he's going to come back to her. But he's not, because her loving him so much
that she could just about have died from it wasn't enough. She wasn't enough.

So that's why she doesn't *89 and start heavy breathing down the phone the minute he picks up and says, “Pryce here,” in his velvet and broken glass voice. Nope. She shoves the folder back under the mattress and when she's sitting in the chair and Dru, her stylist, asks her what she wants, she takes a long, cold look in the mirror at the girl with dead eyes staring back at her and says, “Cut it all off.”

Luckily Dru knows a thing or two about bad break ups and she doesn't have to turn up at Rosenberg, Flutie and Snyder with a short back and sides. Her jaw length bob is pretty stylin' and if Wes was here to see it then she'd be able to forget sitting down for the rest of the week.

She catches sight of her reflection in the plate glass of the door as she takes a deep breath and steels herself to walk inside. She's wearing the jet black pencil skirt from what she's come to think of as her court suit and her black and white polka dot blouse, kitten heels and a nervous smile.

“Okay, Faithy. If he offers to spank you for every typographical error you make, then you're outta here,” she tells herself and steps inside.

But Mr. Rosenberg is like the anti-Wes. She can tell that from the beaming smile he gives her before he opens his mouth and says, “Faith? Boy howdy am I pleased to see you. And Lilah never mentioned how pretty you were.”

If there was a picture of a sweet, old man in the dictionary next to 'grandad' then it would like just like Mr. Rosenberg, though he's already said she can call him Monty. He doesn't even look at the résumé that she typed up on Xander's roomie’s Mom's computer, just ushers her into his office where yellowing paper seems to have gone to die and asks her hopefully if she can do shorthand?

And who knew that lawyers could give dictation and spell all the difficult names without being asked and not sigh heavily when she asks them to slow down and then give her a cookie when she reads the letters back because “you've done such a good job, sweetheart?”

The morning just flies by. She does the dictation and fields five phone calls from Mrs. Rosenberg who asks her to remind Monty to take his pills at eleven o'clock and to make sure that he doesn't have more than one cup of coffee “because his bladder isn't what it used to be, dear and we're so glad that you're here because he's been absolutely snowed under.”

It's not until three in the afternoon when she's picking at her sandwich, chicken and lettuce and tomato on rye, no mayo, that she has a chance to click on the Internet Explorer icon that's been taunting her all day and access her Gmail account.

She doesn't even have to get the folder out of her bag to type in his e-mail address. It's already written on her heart. She even manages to type in “Dear Wes” and then she's staring at the blank screen and wondering what the hell to do now.

The first draft is full of bile.

Dear Wes:
Hey, remember me? The girl you fucking abandoned after breaking her heart and stamping all over it. Just thought I’d say howdy, you fucking bastard.

And then she’s writing 'fuck' and all variations thereof as fast as her fingers will fly across the keys and when Monty steps out of his office she gets one of his gummy smiles because he thinks that she’s pounding out another deposition, not writing an e-mail full of hate and vitriol to her rat fink ex-boyfriend, ex employer.
She stares at the little window full of hateful words that aren't entirely true, and right before hitting 'discard', she hits 'save draft' instead. Something tells her that she's gonna accumulate quite a few letters never sent in the drafts folder. The next try is too sappy, too simpering.

She basically just cuts and pastes 'I miss you' a hundred times, until she has a thick block of text that's shimmering and insistent with longing. Probably not the best tactic either, she thinks, swooping the mouse to select all the text and deleting it into oblivion.

_Honesty is the best policy, Faithy. If there's anything you've learned from him, it's that, right?_ She sighs, starts again.

_Dear Wes,_

_I know you asked me not to contact you ever again, but this seems safe, right? I mean, you can read this, or ignore it, or delete it, or whatever. It's not even like, a solid thing, just words on a screen. Ephemeral._

_And anyway it's really not your decision to make. You left me. Didn’t get any say in that, did I? Didn’t get any say in a whole bunch of stuff that you threw at me in that letter? So if I want to send you an e-mail then I think the least you can do is respect the fact that maybe there were things I wanted to say to you too._

_You'll have questions about how I got your e-mail address. I'll get to that later. And you'll probably have questions about how I've got access to a computer. Yeah, yeah. I'll get to that too._

Anyway. What's up with me? I've been reading a lot. And I guess I've increased my word power a lot since you were with me. You'd be pretty impressed at how creative I've got when it comes to thinking up names to call you. Seems like I've always got my nose in a book, except when “Pimp My Ride” or “Jackass” is on. I liked _Wuthering Heights_ and went right on to _Madame Bovary_ after that. Like, can you say over-identify? What else have I read? _The Bell Jar, Catcher In The Rye_, but you might not have heard of them, seeing that they were, like, written within the last sixty years. I'm trying Henry James now. You'll probably laugh, but I can totally relate to Isobel Archer, y'know? _Does that make you Ralph Touchett? Feeling consumptive?_  

_Up until a few days ago I was working at the diner. Yup, the one across the road and I looked really fetching in that uniform, let me tell you. It was a riot. And everyone's favorite short order cook only asked me out like, a thousand times the first day I was there. By the way, thanks for remembering to give me a reference, it really made the whole job search a walk in the park._

Anyway, who should saunter in one day but your friend and mine, Ms. Lilah Morgan? And she was just full of surprises. I bet your ears were burning, Wes. _But I’m not going to kiss and tell. Didn’t with Lilah, well not really. I guess I owed you that much and now Lilah reckons I owe her too because she found a job for me._

_Turns out all that business you sent to Mr. Rosenberg has like, totally swamped him. So I'm working as his secretary now. You know, you could really learn a lot from his deskside manner, Wes. He has awesome things like a computer and a copier, even! I have to admit I kinda miss the old Selectric but I'm never going to miss using those nasty, annoying carbons. Just hit print two and wait until the laser printer spits 'em out. It's pretty awesome, but I bet you're finding that out in your new office. By the way, Wes, congratulations on finally getting to grips with a computer. How are you finding the 21st Century?_  

_Oh yeah, that reminds me, speaking of law stuff. Sorry about what I did to your office. At least, I think I'm sorry. You'd just bailed out on me after letting me think everything was going to be okay._
Like, life was going to get good again so I was pretty fucked up. Hey, that's the best you're gonna get out of me for now, so take it or leave it.

I got one other thing to tell you. I cut all my hair off. It's not like you're here to brush it and it's hot out here in the sticks in September. 'Sides, I like it. Still haven't come to a decision about the tattoo and the piercing. Why don't I get back to you on that?

So, like I said, not much going on with me, really. Just trying to save money to get out of here because Darla and Xander, they mean well, but they're totally driving me nuts. Always asking me how I'm feeling and looking a little too concerned when I don't go out, or if I have a stinking glass of wine, like I'm heading for a drunken mental breakdown at any minute. Which I'm totally not, you know. I'm fine. I'm doing just fine.

So, Wes, what about you? You're not living in the brownstone. I guess I can understand why. Sounds like you've got some nice penthouse apartment overlooking the park. And your office is downtown, isn't it? Do you take the subway with the unwashed masses? Or does a big black Cadillac with a uniformed driver from your new fancy law firm wait by the front entrance for you every morning, ready to whisk you to that the big corner office? Do you know your doorman's name? I bet you do, and his whole history and his kids' names and that his wife wants to leave him. Five bucks says you've already totally helped out when his brother got brought up on some petty larceny charge in Queens. Because I get that now too, Wes. You like helping people out like that. That's one of the nicer things I remember about you.

Does that sound mean? Well, what the fuck do you expect? Because really, Wes, this is me trying so hard to be nice, because I can do that now. I've got good at pretending, good at hiding the way I feel. You used to always say I was, oh, transparent, yeah, that was it. That you could see everything I was feeling in my eyes, on my face. Guess you could, but it's hard when we're this far apart, so I'll help you out. Want to know how I feel?

I'm so furious with you that I can't bear it. How dare you think you know what I want or what I need? What gives you the right to know what's best for me, for us?

Did you think I'd just cry into my pillow for a week and then everything would be okay? That I'd be able to even know what happy is any more.

Are you happy there in New York, in your fancy Upper East Side apartment and your fancy new job? I hope so because everything here sucks, sucks, sucks. Everywhere I go people give me weird looks. Still. Like they all know what happened, every intimate detail, even though no one ever says anything to my face. I hate that you left me here to deal with this mess. I hate that you're there and I'm still here and there's nothing I can do about that. And I can't forget you because everything here reminds me of you. Even stupid things like the grocery store, and the movie theater, and that street corner where you picked me up after we had that fight and I was running away from you in the rain. Remember that? I hope you do. Sometimes when I walk by there, I think I never should have got into your car when you stopped for me, that I just should have kept running and never looked back.

And I hate that I want to hit delete because I know this e-mail will have made you angry and that you might not even have read this far. And I hate that I can't hate you even now. And I hate that this e-mail will be with you in seconds while I'm stuck here when I still love you and wish that I could say something or do something that would bring you back to me.

Anyway, that's enough from me for now. If you've got this far you're probably totally mad at me. Or maybe you're just rolling your eyes and sighing because my little cyber hissy fit just reminds you how young and stupid I am.
Also, before you can think that I'm, like, stalking you, you should know that Lilah gave me your e-mail address plus your address and your phone numbers and stuff. Not like I'm gonna call you or turn up on your doorstep. I'm making great strides in self-control these days. But if you're pissed that I've written you, feel free to take it out on her. Wouldn't kill you to write me back though. Just to let me know that you're okay and maybe you think about me sometimes.

Faith

It takes a long time for her to decide to send it, and she spends another twenty minutes after she's done checking the spelling and debating how to sign off. With x's and o's, or “love,” or “yours”? In the end she decides on neither of those options and almost has to close her eyes to hit send. But her stomach's all churny and she doesn't want to accidentally hit 'discard' and lose the whole thing.

And as soon as it's gone off into the ether, she's checking the sent mail folder to make sure it went through, and hardly gets any work done for the rest of the day, because she keeps hitting the refresh button on the inbox, over and over again until she has to make herself stop, because Monty has some filing for her and the only e-mail she's getting now is the occasional stupid penis enlargement ad that slips through the spam filters, which she doesn't find amusing in the slightest.

Chapter One Hundred and Seventeen

Monty's tutting and shaking his head when he arrives at the office the next morning and finds her waiting for him outside—has been for thirty minutes actually—but there's an approving smile on his face too. She squashes down the guilt as he compliments her on being so keen, and salves her conscience by not logging on to check for a message until she's started off a pot of coffee and sorted the mail.

Which means a delay of eight minutes and it's pure torture.

She's still a mass of nerves because she was waiting all evening for a phone call. Hell, for Wes to do what he'd do if this was a movie, and run out of his office five minutes after getting her e-mail, dash to the airport, and be there on her doorstep a few hours later. He could have. There was time. He really could have.

He hadn't though and she'd lulled herself to sleep by telling herself she was a fool for ever thinking he would. But writing back to her, yeah, he can totally do that, right? Rude not to reply, and God knows Wes is never impolite. Sadistic, yes, but in a totally fucking courteous way.

When she's sorted through the spam and she's left with no new messages, it's like a slap across the face, and her hands are trembling as she logs off.

Oh, by lunchtime she's come up with a dozen excuses; he's busy, he's on a trip, he's so fucking dumb he doesn't know how to hit reply, but she doesn't believe any of them. His silence is as eloquent as he's going to get, and that's that. Fuck, for all she knows he's turned into a computer genius and figured out how to block her, so she slips into the spam with the rest of the trash. And isn't that a teeth-grinding thought.

Monty goes out after lunch to meet a client and, shame-faced as if she's hitting an XXX site, she logs on, sneers bravely at the lack of Wesley messages and types in the address of his law firm's Web page. It loads in seconds, all quietly elegant font and photographs that get across just how prestigious Travers & Giles are and how any client of theirs should feel lucky to have them. They've got an
office in London too, and she wonders if they'll ever send Wesley there, and if he'd go if they did.

There's a list of names of partners and she clicks on his, feeling a tension that's so tightly wound she gives a little shriek when the phone rings. Turning away from a page that's taking forever to load, she fields a call from a client who's in total share-mode about a messy divorce, then takes a deep breath and turns back to the screen.

Wes. Blue eyes, faint smile, perfectly-knotted tie. Sitting at a desk—fuck, she's whimpering now—a silver pen held loosely in his long fingers. Behind him there's a kick-ass view of the city and a tall, stacked bookcase over to one side.

There's a page of text too and when she can drag her eyes away from his face, she reads it, finding out shit he'd never got around to telling her, like he'd once written a law book—although given that the title's thirteen words long and half of them are in Latin, she doesn't think it made the best seller list—and that he'd been on the British Olympic rifle team when he was at university. Her jaw drops at that, which means it's perfectly positioned for the discovery that Wesley's hobbies include collecting rare first editions and botany.

Biggles and porn have never sounded so classy.

She's about to log off and actually do what she's paid for when she notices a news item on the home page, side-by-side with the latest celebrity break-up. Seems they're auctioning off the first printed pornography at Sotheby's, dating from 1670, and it's expected to go for $70,000 or so. She reads the description which includes rave reviews about it being 'notorious' and 'the quintessence of debauchery,' and can't resist sending him the link.

Hey Wes.

I saw this and thought of you. Going to be saving up your pocket money for it? Or is it a bit out of your price range?

Can't help wondering what you've been doing to scratch your itch since you left me. Found someone else? Asked around and got hooked up with a hooker? Or are you back trawling the clubs for just-past-jailbait like I was?

Can't see you staying satisfied with your own hand for long. I sure as hell haven't been. Going to see if Xander's in the mood and go into the city this Friday. See what it's like getting kissed by someone who doesn't give a fuck as long as he gets one.

Faith.

She's shaking when she hits 'send', jumping up and pacing around the office, nibbling away at her fingernail until it's a ragged mess. Her heart's jumping too, thudding unevenly until she feels sick with the need for a cigarette. Propping open the window, she lights up and leans out, watching the smoke curl up and drift away and regretting pretty much everything she's done in her life, starting with the first time she cheated in class—and copying off Xander so they got the exact same answers wrong wasn't the brightest idea ever—and ending with that press of a finger against the mouse button five minutes ago.

Xander. Always there when she got in trouble. She's getting sentimental now, just thinking about what a good friend he is, even if he's been totally pissing her off by being really fucking negative about her new job because she'd had to tell him about the Lilah connection.
Monty's car pulls up and she hastily hides the evidence with a spritz of air freshener, and she's the perfect, dutiful typist, tapping away industriously, when he comes in, beaming at her and telling her that she's working too hard.

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She doesn't know what she's doing with these e-mails but as the days flick past with no response and Friday night approaches, she gives it some thought. Is she trying to piss him off? Should she get more and more outrageous—and she's got some fucking good ideas, up to and including sending him a picture of her new hair style so he can see how well it goes with the pink shoes, which'll be all she's wearing—or should she dial it back? Will it work to break his silence the way her disreputable wardrobe and behavior did, way back when, or just convince him he's made the right call to ditch her?

Impossible to tell. Wesley's stopped being someone she can predict—not that he ever was, not really—and started to become shadowy and mysterious again.

A couple of ignored e-mails don't qualify as a conversation; takes two players for that. But neither of them has bounced back, and she figures Wes still knows her well enough to think up effective ways to shut her up if he really wants to.

An e-mail from his secretary, maybe: *Mr. Wyndam-Pryce is in receipt of your communications of the blah-blah and regrets to inform you that he is unable to enter into a non-business related dialog at this present time. Thank you and fuck off.*

Yeah, that'd work and it's cold enough to fit right in with the Wesley who could get on a plane and fly off, leaving another disaster he'd caused to sort itself out without him.

But he hasn't, and the silence almost—almost—becomes encouraging.

She's drunk when she writes to him next though, and the lack of response is pressing down on her until she can't breathe for waiting and wanting.

_Wesley, Wesley, Wes. Hey. It's me. Faith. It's three in the morning and I'm so fucking drunk I might throw up on the keyboard if the screen doesn't stop flashing._

_Not at work. No. I'm at Steve's. Steve's nice and he says I'm pretty; see? Nice. You'd like him. No. You don't like anyone. Don't like any of my friends. Don't like Xander and guess what? He doesn't like you. That's kinda funny, huh?_

_Steve's just fucked me, Wes. Just taken ten minutes tops out of his life to fuck me and now he's asleep and I'm awake and I'm using his computer to tell you that I fucking hate you more than I've ever hated anyone even my fucking vile, shitty father._

_Because he dances good—way better than you—and he bought me drinks all night because he totally thought I needed cheering up and he brought me back to his place and he's nice but he's not fucking you. No one's you but you and I want you and I'm so fucking sad because what the fuck have I done?_

_I've had his fingers in my cunt and his cock—not bare, like yours used to be. No way. Though seeing the tarts you fucked from the clubs, maybe I shoulda made you bag it too, huh, Wes? Safe words with you, safe sex with him, and God it didn't save me, did it? I taste of him. God, I swallow and it's all I can fucking taste. Really am going to throw up, really am, and he didn't know I didn't come, because guess what, I can fake it real good these days. You'd have known if I was faking it, wouldn't you Wes? Never did with you. Promise. Never did. Never had to._

It was horrible, Wes and I'm gonna have to stay awake long enough to delete this so he doesn't read it and get hurt, because that's what you do, not me. You're the one who hurts people you fuck so they can't do anything but remember the pain. And that's going to make you feel bad because you're gonna think I mean pain like when you left me bleeding or my ass was so bruised I slept on my front two nights straight and it's not that. Never minded that, Wes, you know that. Never minded it at all. Miss that. Yeah. Miss your hand on me, Wes, miss the sound of it connecting, and we did, didn't we, Wes? We connected then and it wasn't lonely. It's lonely now, Wes. Always.

God, Wes, you gave me so much to remember and it's not fair. Not fucking fair.

It was dark when he fucked me, so he never got to see the marks you left on my ass. Four of them, Wes and I don't think they're going to go away. Just as well he didn't. Think he'd have freaked. Guess not everyone's got your sophisticated tastes and thank fuck for spell check because that looks majorly wrong now, but it won't when you read it.

If you do.

Miss you, Wes. Love you so fucking much.

Love you. Love you. Can't fucking stop.

You know I can't.

Have you?

Faith

Chapter One Hundred and Eighteen

His silence is deafening.

It pierces right through the throbbing headache she wakes up with the next day and makes it easy to ignore a week's worth of phone calls and texts and e-mails from Steve who for some totally weird reason actually wants to see her again.

And even though it makes her feel sick, she forces herself to check her Gmail first thing every morning, once at lunchtime and just before she leaves at night, just to have proof of what she already knows. He hasn’t replied to any of her e-mails and after the way she cut out what was left of her heart and bled all over his inbox, he’s not going to.

She tries to tell herself that it’s better this way. That Wes’ radio and TV and every other kind of silence is going to force her to be strong and get on with the rest of her life because it’s going to be spent without him. But she’s, like, so pathetic that having to abandon her one-sided correspondence of bitchy e-mails is almost as heart wrenching as being dumped in the first place.

At least Monty loves her. Like a lot. Really a lot. He calls her into his office on the Monday morning of her third week and clears a little pile of papers off a chair so she can sit down.

She sits there with her perfect posture, back straighter than a Mormon preacher, knees pressed tight together, shorthand pad and pencil clutched in her hands and looks at Monty expectantly.

And Monty looks right back at her completely without guile, which is still taking a hell of getting used to.
“Did you have a nice weekend, sweetheart?” he asks her and sounds like he actually wants to know.

She thinks back to the Saturday spent reading Anna Karenina and bawling her eyes out before crying off (quite literally) an evening clubbing with Xander and his new boyfriend because she can’t trust herself not to get blind drunk and end up fucking someone who’s never going to be able to replace the Wes-shaped hole in her life or between her legs.

At least on Sunday she left the house to meet up with Dru to go to this flea market upstate. And that was just, like, not so much with the good ideas. Because Dru’s boyfriend, Spike, came along with his stupid bleached hair and his even stupider British accent. And while Dru bought these creepy Victorian dolls for some performance art show or whatever that she’s doing on Halloween, Faith talked to Spike about punk rock and Mariah Carey and filter tips on cigarettes. Not because she gives a fuck about any of them but if she didn’t look at him, just listened to him instead and pretended that his accent was a little smoother, a little bit more cultured then it was almost like Wes was there too. Except who the fuck was she kidding?

“Yes sir,” she says to Monty. “I had an okay weekend.”

“Call me Monty,” Monty cries for the fiftieth time. “When you say sir it makes me feel like I’m some ancient old coot. And are you happy here, Faith? Settling in all right?”

“Yes sir, I mean Monty,” she assures him, summoning up the shaky smile that’s about 50 percent less effective than it used to be. “My last job? There wasn’t even a photo copier and no cookies either,” she adds, reaching forward to snag a Tollhouse cookie from the tin that’s Monty waving in front of her.

“Well, you’re doing a wonderful job, sweetheart. I’m just worried that you’re sitting out there bored to tears.”

And how can she tell Monty that boring is good? Boring suits her just fine right now. So she just shoves half the cookie into her mouth so she can only shake her head and try not to spray crumbs all over him.

She’s pretty proud that she’s managed to get through the week without clicking send on any inflammatory e-mails to wwpryce@traversgiles.com. She’s also pretty proud of the fact that it’s Sunday night and she’s managed to get through another weekend without getting drunk or getting fucked. Treated Darla to movie and a meal at the Olive Garden on Friday and went to some lame, emo gig with Xander the night before so it’s not like she’s sitting at home like a total loser.

Still, she can’t help being slightly freaked out by just how psyched she is to have finished Anna Karenina though she’s calling a time out on any more books with psycho heroines in them.

She really should turn out the light because she’s trying to get eight hours sleep a night and repair some of the damage caused by three months of insomnia and crying but she can’t help poking through the pile of books on her nightstand to try and decide what to read next.

*Tropic of Cancer* looks kinda promising because there is no way in hell she’s reading *Lolita*. Doesn’t even know why she checked it out of the library but she’s already scanning the first page— *Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul*—oh, so not going there, she thinks with a shudder, when her cell starts ringing.

She picks it up, eyes still skimming through the opening paragraph and hits the green button. “Hey.”

There’s no answer and she wonders if there’s a bad connection when she hears that teeny hiss of
static on the line that happens when no-one’s saying anything.

“Who’s there? Xand, is that you? You recreating the opening scene from Scream again because, like, it wasn’t funny the first forty seven times, y’know.”

And there’s this tiny sound, like someone catching their breath, and she knows as clearly as if he’s just said her name who’s on the other end of the line.

The book’s open on the bed in front of her and there’s a million things she could say. A million things she wants to say. Maybe she’d start with sorry and end an hour later with I love you but she doesn’t speak. Instead she starts to read.

“Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of my tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.”

There’s another little hitch of air in her ear, a start of recognition or it could be a reaction to the sound of her voice and she sits up straighter so she can sound clearer and carries on.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms, she was always Lolita.”

His breathing is slightly ragged. He’s drunk, or certainly he’s been drinking, and she can see him so clearly like he’s lounging at the foot of her bed, tumbler resting loosely in long fingers, skin burnished in the glow of her bedside lamp and he was never in here, which is just another regret to add to the all the others that she wears like her favorite perfume and she wishes that he had been. Just like she wishes that things aren’t so fucked up and messy that she’s not allowed to…

Fuck it! Just fuck it. And she’s putting the book down and clutching the phone tighter so she can say, “Hey, Wes. You gonna say hello?”

There’s a click that sounds louder than a gunshot and she’s just a stupid girl holding a silent phone up to her ear like she can hear the ocean if she listens hard enough.

Chapter One Hundred and Nineteen

It seems like just as she’s finally gone to sleep, drained of tears, the alarm is squawking and dragging her out of bed.

“All night crying jags are so not good for your complexion, Faithy,” she mutters to her puffy reflection after stepping out of the shower, dark smudges around her still red-rimmed eyes announcing like a flashing neon sign that she’s had an hour of sleep, at most.

The more makeup she piles on, the worse it gets, until she gives up with a harumph and scrubs her face clean. The only thing getting her dressed and breakfasted is the dim hope that because he’s probably in his office way before she arrives to work at 9:30, there’ll be an e-mail from him when she logs in. He'd look as shitty as she does—maybe more so because he'd be hungover too, pecking at the keyboard two-fingered, a cup of black tea with lemon the only thing holding him upright.

She walks a different route to work every day, peep-toe heels tucked in her bag, Chuck Taylors measuring out each step to Monty's office. She doesn't pause to think about the seemingly serendipitous timing of his call, only ponders the why and the how. Wonders how many nights he's almost done it, almost punched her number in or half-dialed it and then chickened out at the last moment. Wonders if he'll do it again now that he's over that first hurdle.

But of course, there's no e-mail. Well, not from him anyway, but there's a chipper invitation to a
party at Spike and Dru's (“We've got enough goblets, but bring your own wine!”) and a comprehensive list from Xander of all the upcoming activities he's going to subject her to over the next few days: A gallery opening, three more rock shows, and the gentle suggestion that maybe she should sign up for a speed-dating session at the faux Irish pub downtown on Thursday night. She types back a one line reply, in all caps: AS IF, DUDE, and punching the send button gives her the momentum to open up a blank e-mail, only typing a 'w' before Gmail fills in the rest of the address for her: wwpryce@traversgiles.com. Stupid technology, being all enable-y like that.

She stares at the screen for a long time. It's a habit she's starting to loathe—but Monty's out in court, the phone hasn't rung since she arrived, and there's nothing to type up, nothing to file. She's been the picture of efficiency over the past few weeks, and they're all caught up from the mess of work he was buried under before she arrived. Absentmindedly, she recalls that the plants need to be watered, but after that she could surf style.com and lust over clothes she'll never have, or she could write this e-mail. And it's not exactly Sophie's choice or anything.

Wes:

And here I thought you'd be creeped out that I was stalking you. Nice heavy-breathing act last night. Might not hurt you to say a few words next time, okay? “Hello, Faith,” is a great place to start, but hey, that's just a suggestion. Whatever works for you is good. You know, as long as it involves something besides heavy, dramatic sighs. That's getting really old already.

So, as you've now heard, I'm reading the great literary classics of the 20th century. Didn't get much farther in Lolita last night, though. Why, you ask? Because I was up crying all night. That's right, I was crying all night over you, you stupid fuck and now I'm sitting here at work looking like shit warmed over because you're being a stubborn idiot hiding behind your games. Again. Like I should have expected anything different from you. Nice to see those great leaps in personal growth you've taken there, Wes.

At least I'm getting out every now and then. It's not much, but it's a start—even made a few new friends. Unlike you, I'm not sitting home nights with a bottle of expensive scotch, downing it like it's gone out of style. Because that's your routine now, isn't it? Ordering in from that bistro at the end of the block—the one where they know your name and the pretty waitresses bring you extra clotted cream for your scones at Sunday brunch. And you spend all evening looking out the windows at your fabulous view, listening to Elgar or Shostakovitch on your expensive stereo when you could be down at Carnegie Hall hearing it in person. Because there's some sweet new associate at your firm, right? She's blonde and perky and loves classical music, and it took her a week to get up the nerve to ask you to join her, and you turned her down flat, without even an excuse.

Did I nail it or what? Do I get extra points for accuracy?

At least I'm making an effort here, Wes. Are you?

I didn't think so.

Faith

She's gotta smudge the tears out of her eyes before she hits send, but she almost feels a little better. Not exactly like, vindicated, or anything. More like secretly pleased.

If there's anything she does know, even with the distance between them, it's how to prod him into action—and she's gonna sit at that computer every day and write him and prod and prod until she gets results. He's cracked that door open just a teeny bit with his phone call, that door he had slammed shut the day he left.
And she's got just the tip of her shoe between the door and the frame and she's gonna keep trying to kick it open, no matter how hard he leans on it. No matter how hard he tries to hide away again—it's too late now. She's not giving up.

Getting up for a cup of coffee, she decides that maybe she will try that speed dating thing after all. Bet he'd just love to hear about that, in gory detail. And there's the added bonus that he always turned up his nose at that faux pub, railing against its very existence every time they'd passed it.

Chapter One Hundred and Twenty

Thursday night finds her hovering outside the Fiddler's Green wondering what sick bastard dreamed this idea up anyway. Only the sure and certain knowledge that she's gonna be walking out of here with a wrist aching from circling 'no' very firmly on a dozen score cards lets her push open the door and walk in. Xander's bailed on her, pointing out that he's not likely to find anyone for himself and seeing him snickering into a pint of Guinness wouldn't help her concentration.

Yeah. Like she needs it to talk to a complete stranger for seven minutes and then move tables to the next one. Or sit still as the faces across from her change. Whatever.

She takes a seat at the bar and downs a vodka and Red Bull so fast the glass stays dry.

The second one she sips, and she's got enough of a sneer on to sit back and study the crowd. Most of them are boys in packs, girls in pairs. There's enough giggling and pushing going on to bring back memories of seventh grade and, small town and all, she realizes with a sinking feeling that she's not among strangers. Not really. In fact the seventh grade is pretty well-represented. The losers from it anyway.

Oh fuck. She's so outta here.

“You're here for the speed dating, aren't you?”

She turns and meets a friendly smile and the guy must have some kinda hypnotism deal going on, because in three minutes she's filling out forms, avoiding a sticky puddle on the bar as she uses it to lean on. Within five she's clutching a score card, a cute little red pencil with gold hearts marching up it, and an ID number of thirteen which just says it all.

She gets to stay sitting and they bring the guys to her which suits her fine. She's grabbed a third drink before settling down at the small table with two chairs and she's feeling mellow.

But not mellow enough to be kind. A whistle shrills out—and isn't that going to be fun every seven fucking minutes? —and she leans over and blows a kiss at the first loser—sorry: prospective love-match and mate for life.

“Well, aren't you just so cute I could eat you up?” she murmurs, running the tip of her tongue over glossy red lips and looking up through flirtatiously lowered lashes.

Wes would've given her an old-fashioned look and told her tersely to take that ridiculous pout off her face. This guy swallows, blushes a discordant red, and sucks nervously at the straw emerging from a drink that he's going to be wearing on his shoes by the time the night's over.

“Would you use salt?” he chokes out after an eternity of effort, looking so pleased with himself for being born with the gift of repartee that she's torn between pity and the urge to ruffle up his gelled back hair.

The gel's sticky but by then she's clutching his damp hand so she's got more to worry about than that.
“No way. When I find someone as sweet as you, I'm just going to indulge myself.” She widens her eyes and glances down. “Wanna know where I'd start licking, sugar?”

By the time the whistle ends his torment she's starting to enjoy herself.

The next guy's too average to be worth teasing and there's something about him that tells her he's done this before. He sums her up in thirty seconds of rapped-out questions and they have a silent staring match for a while until he grins, looking friendlier.

“First-timer?”

“How'd you guess?”

He shrugs. “Experience. You walked in looking nervous. Don't know why. You're the prettiest girl here.” She smiles at him but he carries on: “And you're going to get rejected by most of us.” Letting her see what he's doing, he circles 'no' on his card next to her number and gives her a shrug.

She takes a gulp of her drink and gives him a glittering smile. “Go on then. Tell me why.”

“Say 'please',” he counters and for a second she's lost in a memory of Wesley's voice drawling that out as she squirms and gasps under his teasing mouth. But Wesley had almost meant it because he'd said it after she'd screamed, 'Fuck me now, God, I'm fucking dying here!' and he'd been so pissed by what he called her 'peremptory and entirely too noisy request' that he'd called a halt for ten minutes while he lectured her, his fingers two agonizingly distant inches away from her throbbing clit.

This guy's just looking smug and her low-voiced 'Bite me,' is lost in the whistle-blast.

She's so annoyed that she actually makes an effort to be sweet to the next two and even gets talking to the third; not about dating but about books of all things, as it turns out he works at the library and remembers her checking out a stack of books and dropping three of them when a guy who looked a little like Wes walked by. She's kinda sorry when he goes but he still gets a 'no'.

And that's when she realizes she's wasting her time. Because none of them are going to make her heart flutter. None of them are going to make her wet and none of them deserve her scorn because hey, they're just looking for someone and so was she once.

She just hopes when they find theirs they don't lose them as fast as she did.

The room's dark enough that it's hard to work out how much longer she has to endure this. One more, maybe? She'd stand and go, escape the over-heated room for the cool fresh air, but it'd fuck it all up for everyone playing and she's got enough consideration not to want to force someone to sit staring at emptiness for seven minutes because she's taken off.

Wes would. Wes totally would.

And it's just as she thinks about him that the seat's filled with the final hopeful.

“I know you,” she says abruptly, her eyes narrowing. “Warren, right?”

He nods, dark eyes watchful, and she holds back a shiver. Never liked him. Science geek with delusions of coolness, and a taste for bullying. Weird combo and he gave her the creeps.

“Yeah, well I'll save you the trouble. Not interested. So we can sit here and talk about the weather or the last movie you saw, or—”
“Oh, this really isn’t the place for you,” he interrupts with a leer.

“Got that right,” she mutters, glancing around at the shamrocks rioting on every surface.

“Want me to tell you where you belong?” he asks.

She yawns with her mouth closed and feels her ears pop. “Sure,” she says, fiddling with the napkin her drink came with and tearing off confetti-sized shreds.

“On your knees at my feet,” he says casually, eyes fixed solidly on her breasts.

Shock makes her first reaction a giggle but there’s something so fucking scary in his eyes that it dies away.

“In your dreams, geek,” she retorts.

“Now, now. Feisty. I like that.” He smiles slowly. “I think I know exactly what you want. It’s written all over your pretty face.”

“And what’s that, ass-wipe?” she snaps, groping for her purse which has fallen under the table.

“You want someone to call ‘master,’ sweet thing,” he says in a voice so slimed with insinuation she wants to throw up. “And guess what; it's your lucky day. You found one.”

For a split second she can see herself flinging her sticky-sweet cocktail right in this smug, twisted wanker’s face but in the end she decides to take the high road. This unimaginative, fucked-up man doesn’t deserve the full force of her anger—and anyway, she’s saved it all for someone else.

“Oh, did I now?” She stands up, slings her purse over her shoulder, and reaches for her drink. “Well, guess what, junior—you don’t know the first goddamn thing about me. And you sure as hell aren’t going to get anywhere with that attitude. Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?”

“I’m going to teach you some,” he says, grabbing her wrist and looking her up and down peremptorily like she’s a prize heifer at the county fair. For the briefest moment she’s transfixed, mostly by his sheer cojones. She’s sure Wes’d have this fucker out cold in no time flat. But then, if Wes were around, she sure as fuck wouldn’t be wasting her time with this bullshit.

She shakes him off angrily, gets right in his fucking face. “You still spend your Friday nights in your mom’s basement jerking off to Babylon Five, Warren? Or have you moved on to scrambled porn?”

That shuts him right up. There’s a flicker of anger in his eyes but she sees defeat too and it's all the revenge she needs. Channeling her inner bitch, she does a perfect, swift three-point turn on her nosebleed-high heels, letting him get a good look at her ass as she sashays resolutely away from him.

—and right out onto the outdoor smoking area in the back. God, she’s never needed a cigarette so badly in her life. Her nerves are raw and when she tries to fish a cig from the pack her hands are shaking. She manages to get the cigarette to her lips, and is just about to grab for her trusty Zippo when she’s surprised by a hand proffering a light. She looks up to find—

“Holden.” She’s actually pretty fucking happy to see him for once. Well, relieved, anyway. “You here for the horror show?”

He laughs while he lights her cigarette in one fluid motion. “Pretty awful, isn’t it? I have no idea what the hell I was thinking coming here. At least I ran into you. I was starting to think only crazy women came to these things. Hey, you want a drink?”
“Yeah, I would. Thanks.” He looks at her expectantly. It’s funny—she realizes that she was totally waiting for him to choose a drink for her. She’s on her own now, got to make the big decisions along with the small. “Um, margarita? Yeah. Rocks, salt.”

He goes off to the bar and she leans against the wall, smoking furiously and trying her level best to project untouchable vibes to all and sundry. Because she’s definitely had enough for one night. Warren, like every fucking guy here, is just ramming it home that there’s only one Wesley in the world and he’s not here in hers.

She feels her mouth twist in disgust just thinking about Warren. Fucking creep. Xander probably thinks Wes and Warren are the same, which just goes to show how little he knows. For all his determination to cast himself as the monster, for all his reserve, there's nothing grubby or furtive about Wes and she starts to feel better just thinking about how she's gonna describe Warren to him and how he'll do that fastidious little shudder of distaste. And, yeah, get a little bit angry too. There's something comforting about remembering all the times he protected her, like the time he practically broke Liam's nose.

Some creepy guy is circling and moving in just when Holden comes back with two margaritas and some nachos. They get a table and whadda ya know, there aren’t sparks exactly but it’s low-key and relaxed and he seems genuinely interested in her life. The oh-so scintillating details of her day-to-day existence. He’s really listening, too, not just waiting for a moment when he can make his move. There’s a certain comforting, puppy-dog quality to him that’s kind of annoying most of the time, but right now it seems to be exactly what she needs. It sure goes well with her margarita.

Oh, no, Faithy, she thinks to herself. Not going there. One drink with him, some nice amiable chit-chat, and that’s fucking it. You are not going home with him. Repeat: not.

By the time he buys her another drink she’s really not so sure anymore. And when he stands up and says he's going to make tracks, she plants a kiss right on that friendly, smiling mouth.

She doesn't know what she expects him to do but stepping back and shaking his head ruefully wasn’t on the list.

“Faith, let's not pretend you want this to go any further,” he says.

“I don't?” she says—yeah, okay, slurs. One too many drinks to be anything but mushy-mouthed.

His smile gets too kind and she's feeling the familiar prickle of tears because he doesn't have to be nice to her and he is anyway. “You'll thank me in the morning, trust me.” He gets close enough to kiss her cheek. “We've done this all backward; the good night kiss is supposed to come after I've walked you home and said thanks for saving me from terminal boredom.”

“You don't have to—” she begins.

“Walk you home?” He nods. “No, I suppose I don't. But I'm still going to.” He gives her a quizzical look. “You can tell me all about him and cry on my shoulder if you like. I get that a lot.”

“I bet you do,” she murmurs, studying him. “You're just too damn nice, Holden. Thanks, but I'll pass on the crying.”

She saves that for after she's curled up in bed wearing the little red silk slip Wesley had once asked her to put on for him, wrapping her arms tightly around herself, hugging every memory of him and trying not to mind that they're fading and slipping away from her like the autumnal leaves on the trees outside.
Of course, she hasn't even been in the door more than five seconds on Friday morning before she has to tell Wes all about it. He'd want to know that…

...this fucking creepy little sci-fi geek who used to burn insects with a magnifying glass when we were in elementary school thought I might like to be his bitch. And not in a hot biker Momma way either. Thought I should call him 'master' and shit. Like, even you couldn't have pulled that off. Not with a straight face anyway.

Wish you'd been there, Wes. And not just because you'd have rescued me from a lame night having to be nice to a bunch of lame losers. And not just because if you'd been there, it would have meant that you'd never left. But man, I'd have loved to see you get that cruel smile on your face before you opened your mouth and totally annihilated him with some elegant line. Can't think exactly what but you're good at that, aren't you? All that wordy stuff except for now when you're silent and it's driving me fucking mad.

So I'm gonna make it easy for you, Wes. I'm gonna phone you on Sunday night. And there's no need to start freaking out about me screaming obscenities down the phone or expecting you to make promises that you can't keep. Because that never turns out well, does it?

I just want to read to you. And all you have to do is pick up the phone at nine o'clock and listen to me. I've got, like, every right to expect a bit more from you but you're a stubborn fucker and I'm starting to see how that isn't one of your better qualities.

I've got to go now. I have a ton of work to do and Monty always gives me Friday afternoons off, which is some kind of Jewish thing. Did I tell you how he's the best boss a girl could ever have?

Anyway, Wes, Sunday night, at nine. Just pick up, okay?

Faith

Then she presses send before she can even bang her head against the desk because she's obviously lost her mind.

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The weekend is something she manages to get through. Which is so different to how it was when she was greedily reveling in two whole days of having Wes all to herself without competition from his law books and his case notes.

And if he did have to bring work home, he'd always make it up to her. Even if making it up to her meant forcing her to stand by his desk completely naked with his fingers buried in her soaking cunt while he dictated a memo. Happy days…

Going to a poetry slam with Spike and Dru on Saturday night doesn't really match up but it gets her out of the house because Darla's got some friends coming over from work. Though her idea of a dinner party mainly consists of concocting this weird Jell-O salad thing, which makes Faith gag every time she opens the fridge.

She gets through Sunday by alphabetizing her CDs, organizing all her drawers, and then exfoliating, depilating and moisturizing every inch of herself. Can't help but flashbcking to their little phone date that time he was in New York when she'd got herself ready like he was gonna wine and dine and
fuck her but it's not going to be like that this time.

Instead she's sitting fully-clothed and cross-legged on her bed at 8.59 P.M., sucking nervously on a cigarette and staring down at the book that she's going to read from. Not like she needs to. The other thing that's got her through from Friday night to now is making sure she's word perfect. That she can get every intonation and nuance right. So she can, like, wow him with her prose-reading abilities and awesome diction. Like, whatever.

All she's got to do now is to stop her fingers from shaking so she can dial his number. Got that memorized too.

It takes her three goes before she manages to press down the right digits in the right order and then she listens to it ring. Imagines what it sounds like echoing through his fancy New York penthouse. Is he there? Did he jump when he first heard it like he'd expected her to never have the guts to go through with it? Or has he gone out because he hasn't the guts to…

It stops ringing just like that because it's clicked and then there's silence before he says, “Hello?” He says hello. He fucking says hello and she's so shocked that she takes the phone away from her ear and stares at it in disbelief.

“Hello?” He says it again and she's swooning from five letters, two syllables delivered in a crisp, English accent and she tries to tell herself that he has to say something because, like, he could be expecting the local pizza place to call and tell him that they've run out of anchovies but Wes doesn't do pizza and the hello is just for her.

She quickly holds the phone to her ear again before he hangs up because he so would.

“Wes, it's me,” she croaks and gets silence this time. 'Cept not because she can hear him breathing, hear the air echo around where he is and it's enough. “Said I was gonna read to you so I hope you're all comfy. I'm still doing the American greats and this seemed kinda appropriate…”

“I went out into the hall and leaned over the banister, just enough to see without being seen. She was still on the stairs, now she reached the landing, and the ragbag colors of her boy's hair, tawny streaks, strands of albino-blond and yellow, caught the hall light.”

She reads five pages of Breakfast At Tiffany's to him and okay, she stumbles every now and again because the sound of his deep, even breathing makes her feel a little giddy and she has to stop a couple of times because she loses her place, but the weird thing is she can hear him listening to her. He even gives this tiny, muted chuckle when she does her slightly breathless Holly Golightly voice which she's going to be living on for the rest of the week.

“I guess I should stop now, Wes,” she says finally when her mouth is dry and her throat is parched from talking too long. “I'm trying to go to bed early on Sundays because there's always lots to do in the morning. S'pose it's the same for you, yeah?”

He doesn't say anything and she knows this is as good as it's going to get. But he picked up the phone. Gave her fifteen minutes of the life he said he was going to spend without her and that's gotta count for something.

“Good night, Wes. You don't have to say anything but it's pretty fucking rude to not even say goodbye, you know,” she finishes with a flash of anger because she always has to ruin things by running her mouth off.

“Good night, Faith,” he says, drawing her name out like he still loves the taste of it on his tongue, the
sound of it on his lips and before she can beg him to say it again, he rings off.

Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Two

And she tastes those five words as she sleeps, when she wakes, as she floats through the days that follow, because with Wesley silence is always the sharpest weapon he's got. He's screamed hurtful words, sure, but they're less cruel than the cold rejection of a turned head and compressed lips. And if he can give her five words, then fifteen, fifty and, even better, the four it takes to say 'I love you, Faith', go from being a dream to being a possibility.

But there's never anything in her in box from him, and by Thursday night, she's lost the euphoria and she's sitting moodily pushing pasta around her plate and wondering why it doesn't taste the way it did when Wes made it. Course, he was using fresh salmon not canned tuna—and the garlic infused sauce wasn't flavored with some flecks of dubious yellow that she'd scraped out of a jar of garlic powder that had calcified with age. No, with Wes it'd been fresh garlic cloves, emerging from their papery shells to be crushed and scattered and stirred.

And he'd never accompanied it with Diet Pepsi but what the hell; she's trying. Even put a single floret of broccoli on the plate, just to show willing, although it's so gonna get scraped into the trash because it's limp and watery instead of slightly crunchy.

Darla's eating with one eye on the clock because she's going out to the movies with a friend. She hasn't said who it is but Faith's guessing it's her boss, who's being pretty damn accommodating about Darla taking afternoons off to get her hair colored or go shopping. She gets up from the table and checks her makeup anxiously before grabbing her purse.

“Gotta run, honey. I said I'd wait outside and I don't want to keep him waiting.”

Faith grins knowingly. “Him?"

Darla applies another layer of lipstick and winks at Faith before heading toward the door with a gentle sway of her hips, limbering up. Halfway there she gives this startled squeak. “I forgot, sweetie, this parcel came for you today. I signed for it and left it in your room.” The flirtatious demeanor drops away and she's fidgeting. “It's from him I guess,” she blurs out. “From New York. I mean, it's gotta be him, right?”

Faith's just staring at her because really, what the hell can she say, and Darla shakes her head impatiently, diamante earrings catching the light. “Want me to stick around while you open it?” she offers, one eye on the door.

Faith summons up a smile. “Nah. It'll just be some stuff of mine that got mixed in with his, I bet.”

Darla frowns. “And it's taken him four months to notice?”

Good point, but the honk of a car horn saves her from finding an answer, and with an unexpected, hurried kiss that leaves Faith with a Sunset Sky colored smear on her cheek, Darla leaves.

Left alone with a ticking fucking time bomb, Faith starts to tidy the table. She'll clear the table of the dirty dishes, wash them, dry them, put them away. Maybe even take a nice long bath now she's got the place to herself, finish that crossword puzzle. Oh, who is she fucking kidding?

Of course, once she's holding the parcel, which is about the size of a phone directory but way lighter, she slows down. Right down. Because only Wes could've wrapped it in brown paper with
mathematically precise folded corners and neat, cut with scissors, tape and she can't stop running her hands over where his have been. He's put his return address on it, which makes sense, as she's already told him she knows it, and God, just the sight of his spiky, neat handwriting brings a tremulous smile to her face. Even if he's bowed to practicality and used black ink, not brown for once.

She goes back to the kitchen, searching for a knife so she can open it without damaging the wrapping, and it's like fucking Christmas, although, with Halloween just a few weeks away and no idea what's in the parcel, trick or treat's probably closer to the mark.

Inside the paper is a plain brown shoe-box and she lifts the lid and stares down at the contents, looking eagerly for a letter from him, or God, a plane ticket would be nice. No such luck.

She lifts out the contents, one by one, and arranges them on the quilt. She studies the collection and it doesn't make any sense. There's a menu, a newspaper—The New York Times, natch—an oval piece of card, and a ticket stub.

It's—well, it's confusing, but it's also intriguing, and she dons her Sherlock hat and goes to work. The menu's for a place called Fauchon and the address is so close to where he lives that she guess it's where he stops for breakfast because it looks like that kinda place. Croissants and coffee, and she can taste the buttery flakiness of the ones he used to feed her, the ones that left her lips slick and sweet and waiting for him to dab them with a heavy napkin or kiss them clean, depending on his mood.

She turns over the single sheet and sees a date on the back, and this time, yeah, he's used the brown ink. It's the Saturday just gone; the ninth.

“Okay, Wes,” she murmurs, starting to get it. “I know what you did in the morning.”

And after breakfast it looks like he went shopping because the oval card is from a shop called Artisinal and he's told her about this place, over her shrieks of horror, because it's the place cheese goes to die and get even grosser and he can get lyrical describing the two hundred varieties on sale and how the mingled aromas waft out so each inhalation is a delight, and he can threaten to take her there for fondue all he wants, but it's still just—

She brings the card up and stares at the scribble of brown ink that's corrected the original printing, declaring that they're purveyors of fine cheeses, to a way more accurate 'stinky cheeses', and she's jumping off the bed and doing a shimmy-shake of victory because dammit, he loves her. He's fucking joking with her, and he's the most infuriatingly stubborn bastard on the whole freaking planet but she's still champagne-fizz happy for one tingling minute.

When she's settled back down on the bed again, heart doing little skippety-frolics and a big grin making her face ache, it's so wide, she reaches for the paper. It's the Monday edition, which kinda throws her, because she'd been thinking he was leading her through a day and it doesn't fit the pattern.

The Monday paper is always on the light side, a palate cleanser after the heavy richness of Sunday's big feature articles, the glossy goodness of the magazine, and the mind breaking trials of the crossword. She flips through the A section, carefully reading all the articles, stopping to sigh over a pretty dress and coat in a Neiman Marcus ad.

She doesn't know what she's looking for, but she's relatively sure she'll know it when she sees it. She skims the national, then the international news and the opinion page, even if it is all kind of stale now, and reading all this stuff is like looking back through a tiny telescope at the previous week.
There's nothing of note in the business section either—it's mostly pages of stock quotes anyway and dry articles about mergers and acquisitions and mutual fund scandals. Stifling a yawn, she tackles the arts and leisure section next, glad that she'll at least get to do the easy-peasy Monday crossword—that is, if he hasn't already filled it all in.

When she sees what he wants her to see—right there on the front page of the arts section, of course—she's annoyed she didn't just start there.

“Always in the last place you look,” she mutters and laughs.

The ticket stub matches up with a review of sparse, modern production of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler off-Broadway. He's bracketed a paragraph of the review, with a tiny notation: First theatrical production I've seen here. Surprisingly fitting?

The manifestations of Hedda's intelligence, in its healthier stages, have an unmistakably contemporary ring: Ms. Marvel uses the deeper recesses of her voice to bring deader-than-deadpan inflections to long passages of Christopher Hampton's admirably starch-free translation. (Think Janeane Garofalo at her sarcastic best.) Her dry rejoinders are often accompanied by a withering, contemptuous glare. But existing alongside this self-conscious irony is a childish impulsiveness. Hedda doesn't just announce her boredom; she demonstrates it by flinging herself on the floor and beating the daylights out of the flower arrangements, a child pointlessly smashing its toys. Hedda's fervent desire to control someone else's destiny, it seems, is a dangerous side effect of her inability to control her emotions.

But [director] Mr. van Hove is not simply anatomizing the self-destruction of a flawed personality; nor is the production's updating a superficial gesture. Mr. van Hove is using Ibsen's text as a mirror to reflect a contemporary culture in which isolation, self-absorption and a need to instantly satisfy emotional whims are the norm.

She almost tosses the paper aside in disgust after reading the entire review, thinking he's implying that she's like the super-bratty Hedda.

Until it dawns on her that he's pointing that criticism directly at himself. Even if she does look and sound more like Janeane Garofalo than he does. And she's pretty sure she did actually destroy a flower arrangement, once or twice at least.

She wishes she could have seen the play with him—been there giving his hand little meaningful squeezes whenever Hedda unleashed one of those withering contemptuous glares at her equally contemptuous husband. But honestly, she's just glad he's getting out, doing something—even if his first choice of entertainment doesn't sound much more thrilling than staying home and watching a bunch of those soapy melodramas on the WB.

Flipping through the pages, she notices with a smile that he's left half the crossword undone, also with a little note: I nearly finished this before I remembered you always liked doing the Monday puzzle. Hope you don't mind I've done half.

“Really don't mind, Wes,” she says, running her fingers over the slightly smeared newsprint before digging around in the drawer of her nightstand for a pen so she can polish off the remainder of the clues, her scrawly handwriting lined up in the little boxes, occasionally crossing paths with his perfectly-formed letters to form entire words.

Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Three
She floats through the next three days like the world has turned to air around her. Even Darla badgering her about the contents of the package and making not-so-veiled remarks about how she “better not be back in touch with that bastard, Faith, because he's only going to break your heart again,” can't dent her good mood.

That Sunday she gets a “Hello, Faith,” when he answers the phone. Not with a question mark at the end of it either. She reads him five pages from *Tender Is The Night* because she can't trust herself with small talk. If he doesn't join in or, worse, hangs up, she's going to be destroyed.

(“He knew that there was passion there, but there was no shadow of it in her eyes or on her mouth; there was a faint spray of champagne on her breath. She clung nearer desperately and once more he kissed her and was chilled by the innocence of her kiss, by the glance that at the moment of contact looked beyond him out into the darkness of the night, the darkness of the world.”)

And when she's done, he sighs quietly and then says, “Good night, Faith. I hope you sleep well.”

And while she's trying to lever her jaw up off the floor, he rings off.

So that's ten words now. And okay, it's not, “I'm sorry. I'm a stupid, fucked-up idiot but please come back to me because I love you and I can't live without you,” but it's ten whole words. It's practically a conversation.

Then when she gets in from work on Thursday, Darla's tight-lipped disapproval tells her that another package has arrived before she can even spit the words out.

There's last Monday's New York Times with the crossword half-filled in (“I took the liberty of filling in some of the more obscure clues”), a menu from the Round Table room of the Algonquin Hotel with the Grilled Asparagus, Warm Toasted Goat Cheese, Walnut Pesto and Roasted Red And Yellow Tomatoes starter ringed and a note in the margin, which reads, “I doubt this would have met with your approval” and a ticket stub for the Sunday matinee showing of *It Happened One Night*.

The next Sunday, she gets a “Hello, Faith” on the second ring followed by “How are you?”

She doesn't draw breath once in five minutes as she tells him about Darla's new boyfriend who stayed over for the first time the night before and how she tried to make macaroni and cheese from scratch and ended up burning the bottom out of their only saucepan, and the Halloween party that she's going to and how Dru wants her to take part in her performance art piece as some freaky Victorian doll come to life. Finally she has to stop because she's this close to hyperventilating and there's a pause just long enough for her to panic before he says, “And what are you going to read tonight, Faith?” and he sounds just amused and tender enough, maybe even slightly wistful though she's probably projecting, that she doesn't get hissy that he's not in share mode either and gives him five pages of *The Age Of Innocence*.

(“it was the lightest touch but it thrilled him like a caress.”)

“I have to go now, Faith,” he says, when she comes to the end. “Have a good week and I'll speak to you next Sunday.”

She can't bear it any longer. “Are you okay, Wes?” she blurts out. “Is the job going well? Do you like New York? Is your apartment nice? Have you…”

He cuts her off with a very gentle exhalation like her onslaught of questions is giving him a headache. “Everything's fine,” he says tetchily enough that her heart skips a beat. “I really do have to go.”
And he's gone and she cries every night until Thursday when she runs all the way home and there's a box waiting for her on her bed and a muttering Darla lurking in the kitchen.

She only lingers on The New York Times just to make sure that he's started the crossword, which he has, with an underlined, “I could have sworn that Monday's was meant to be easier!” And that exclamation mark speaks volumes because it's Wes cracking a joke and she's missed that. Missed him teasing her.

There's also a brown paper bag with the name Tea And Sympathy printed on it and inside a small glass jar of this brown pasty stuff called Marmite which smells worse than the stinkiest of stinky cheeses and finally there's a postcard of a cartoon from The New Yorker with “Did you ever finish Mansfield Park?” written on the back in his precise script.

By the time Sunday rolls round again she's in a state of giddy excitement, that might have something to do with the jug of margaritas she mixed up in the blender and gulped down in an hour. She's sitting on her bed wearing a little black vintage dress and an Alice band with some fuzzy ears attached to it, and drawing whiskers on her face with an eyebrow pencil and a shaky hand, which is as far as she's going with the Halloween costume even though Dru didn't exactly take it in good humor when she absolutely refused to dress up as a Victorian doll.

“I'm going as a cat, Dru,” she'd insisted when they met for brunch. “A sexy cat. It's, like this whole low-maintenance, non-humiliating costume option.”

Dru had pouted. “Victorian dolls can be sexy too.”

“Of Course they can, princess,” Spike had said hastily and they'd both glared at him.

And now it's time for book at bedtime with Wes and she's half drunk and all prettied up, almost able to taste the anticipation in her mouth, which has more to do with the fact that he's going to say her name in, like, thirty seconds rather than the Halloween party.

She's got ten seconds to go but she's already dialing his number and trying to ride out the butterflies fluttering in her tummy like they're on amphetamine.

“Hello Faith,” he says after the third ring because he was way too eager last time. “How have you been?”

“Great, just great,” she trills with a nervous giggle. “I'm going to a Halloween thing after this and I've got tomorrow off work. So you been trick and treating yet?”

Her boldness gets her the faintest of chuckles. “Hardly. So what's your literary selection for this evening?”

She snuggles back against her pillows, adjusts her cat's ears and takes another slug of lukewarm Margarita. “The Virgin Suicides; have you read it?”

And it's kinda against the rules to trap him in conversation but this is her game. Always was, even though he rang first and if she wants to talk, then he can damn well talk back or just, like, be all passive aggressive and shit and hang up.

“No, I can't say I have, though I dimly recall seeing it in, well… they made it into a film, didn't they?”

“Yeah, you should totally watch it,” she exclaims and her voice is too shrill and she winces slightly. “You still got the TV?”
He doesn't say anything for a while. Long enough that she's rolling her eyes and mentally hitting herself over the head with a large, blunt object.

“Yes,” he says tersely enough to make her tear ducts start prickling. “I'd like you to start reading now, Faith.”

It helps that she loves the book. It's probably her favorite of all the things she's read so it's not hard to lose herself and for her voice to go all throbby as she finishes off reading the paragraph that struck her so hard that she typed it out and stuck it on her computer:

“We knew the pain of winter wind rushing up your skirt, and the ache of keeping your knees together in class, and how drab and infuriating it was to jump rope while the boys played baseball. We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing which colors went together. We knew that the girls were our twins, that we all existed in space like animals with identical skins, and that they knew everything about us though we couldn't fathom them at all. We knew, finally, that the girls were really women in disguise, that they understood love and even death, and that our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them.”

“Thank you,” he says, as she takes another gulp of Margarita to wet her mouth. “That was lovely. I'll have to find a copy for myself.”

“Oh, you totally should!” And she should just stop with the gushing. These phone calls are meant to be about wedging that goddamn door open another inch so she can give him a contact high from the sound of her voice. Seduce him with words from all the books that she's read and learnt from so she's this smarter, more intelligent, well-rounded version of the Faith that he might still be in love with. “So, same time, same place, next week, Wes?”

Everything’s magnified when the love of your life is on the other end of the phone and all you have to go on is what's coming down the fiber optics. Right now he's clearing his throat, which means he's nervous. So that means the door's swinging open and he's about to crack like a…

“I'm afraid… I'm sorry, Faith, but that won't be possible. You see…”

She doesn't give him a chance to finish. Can't bear him stammering and stuttering because this time he has to actually speak to her as he hauls her heart out of her rib cage and tears it into tiny pieces.

“Yeah, I fucking see, Wes,” she hisses. “I see that nothing's changed, that you haven't changed.”

“Faith…” Oh, isn't that funny? Old Wes trying to give her a blast of freeze-dried frost.

“Shut the fuck up and listen to me!” She's shouting now. With a bit of luck she might be able to perforate his eardrum. “Why aren't you getting over yourself? It's not because you can't. It's because you fucking won't. You're too chickenshit to do anything that means that you might actually be happy. Because you're too busy getting off on being miserable and thinking you're some kind of freak. You phoned me, you fucker! You didn't have to. Didn't have to send me your bullshit crosswords and give me these fucking crumbs of hope with your 'Hello Faiths' and 'How have you been, Faiths?' I'm not going to wait for fucking ever, Wes and right now I'm going to go out and I'm going to fuck the first half decent guy I find because I'm done with saving it for you.”

And the problem with cell phones is that you can't slam down the receiver so she has to make do with jamming down on the “shut off” button so hard that she thinks she might just have sprained her finger.
Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Four

She doesn't think she stops muttering curses under her breath until she's actually knocking on the door of Spike and Drusilla's house. She's in full-on rant mode, carrying on a conversation with an invisible Wesley that has people edging away from her as she stalks past, in case crazy is catching.

She's about to give up making herself heard over the music and just go in when there's a raucous scream from a life-sized scarecrow decorating the steps that turns out to be Larry, one of Xander's ex-boyfriends, in costume.

"Joke," he gasps out, laughing so hard he falls off the steps.

"Yeah, you're a laugh riot," she snarls at him when her heartbeat's back to normal.

"Hey, take it easy." He looks a bit hurt and stands up, pushing past her to go inside.

She reaches out and pats his arm awkwardly. "Sorry. Just a bit pissed-off with life right now."

He gives her a stiff nod and then relents and opens the door for her. "You need a drink," he tells her before dropping a plastic spider down the back of her neck.

It's not bad advice and by the time she works her way through the crowd to the bar she's already marked down three possibilities for some revenge sex. She chugs down a glass of bright red punch that's less gross than she expected, with the smooth burn of vodka under the tart fruitiness, refills her glass, and fixes a glittering smile on her face.

"Will you purr if I tickle you, pussy?"

Heart-stopping moments really shouldn't come this close together. She turns in a fast spin and spills her drink down Spike's black shirt, making him yelp as the cold liquid drenches him. Fuck. Wrong Englishman drawling in her ear.

"God, I'm sorry!" she says. "I just—"

He laughs, snatching up a napkin and blotting off his shirt. "'S'all right, pet," he assures her. "I picked black on purpose; doesn't show the spills. Dru already got me with a Bloody Mary, but she said that was part of the costume."

He's come as a vampire, all black cloak and frilled shirt, clinging damply to him now. The upstanding collar of his cloak frames his face and makes his blue eyes bluer.

Still not as blue as—No. So not going there.

"Help a girl out, Spike?" she says abruptly. "Got an itch wants scratching. One night only offer. Anyone here unattached and halfway-hot who won't expect me to call him in the morning?"

One dark eyebrow lifts lazily, bringing back memories. Fuck, do they teach them that trick at school over there?

"You serious?" he asks, leaning in to shout into her ear.

She nods firmly. "Totally. If I don't get some, I'm gonna, I don't know." She waves airily. "Explode. Tiny little pieces. Pieces of Faith." That strikes her as funny, and she starts to giggle. "Fuck, what's in this stuff?" she asks, studying her glass and then shrugging and draining the dregs.

Spike's cool hand closes around her wrist as she reaches for the ladle to refill it. "Leave that," he
says. “Got something better.”

“Much better,” says a voice behind her. Faith turns and sees Drusilla smiling mysteriously, dressed in a long white dress that looks vaguely like a Victorian nightdress.

Something better turns out to be weed, good stuff, that settles down and makes itself at home in her head, smoothing out all the rough, ragged edges of frustration and helpless anger. She leans back among the pillows that Dru's heaped at the top of her huge, high bed—and why is she not surprised it's a four-poster? —and holds court as a select few wander in and out to share the joints Spike's rolling. The noise of the party swells and recedes like the ocean. And there's a reason why she's so sure she can hear the ocean because it's connected to the taste in her mouth and the music's all wrong but she's drifting off to sleep so it doesn't really matter.

She wakes to giggles on a gently shifting bed, and fuck; Spike and Dru are totally doing the deed a foot away. The house is silent and it feels late, at the point where night's in charge and daylight's a distant memory, not an approaching event. A dozen candles send flickering golden light over two pale bodies and she focuses on Drusilla's slender hand, red-tipped nails clawing down Spike's back as she mewls and whimpers in time with his slow, lazy thrusts.

“She,” Faith mumbles. “God, I'm sorry. I'll just—”

It isn't the best time to tell them she's awake she realizes hazily as Spike shudders and pauses, turning his head to give her a tight smile.

“Got bored waiting for you to wake up,” he whispers, but it's loud enough that she feels it echo in her head.

Drusilla pushes him off her and gives this sinuous little wriggle that puts her within reach of Faith. He doesn't seem to mind, although his cock, slicked and shiny-wet, looks painfully hard. As Faith stares, still too dream-caught to look away, he runs his hand along it, touching the tip of his curled tongue to his top lip in a leer that's strangely innocent.

“You still want to play?” he asks. “Because I'm willing and Dru doesn't mind sharing, if you don't.” There's a seriousness about him now and he crawls to her so their vision's filled with their faces as they stare down at her. “Got some rules though.”

“Rules?” she says thickly. She knows about those.

Drusilla's mouth tastes hers in a brief, swift kiss and she blinks at her in surprise, bringing up her hand to explore the tingle it left on her lips. “Oh, yes.” The satin slither of Drusilla's hair tickles her arm. “Rules make it so much more fun.” She smiles back over her shoulder at Spike, arching her back so her small, round breasts push up impudently. “Especially when they get broken.”

There's something familiar about the look they share and she realizes, with a pang, that it's the complicity of trust and understanding she thought she had once.

“Oh, I don't think Faith's gonna be breaking these rules,” Spike murmurs, stroking the back of his hand across Drusilla's nipple. “Real simple they are, pet.” He stares at Faith, as if gauging her possible reaction, and then nods. “I'm with Dru,” he tells her, not unkindly. “Me 'n her, it's special. But we like to play with people we trust, and we like you. One night to cheer you up and maybe it'll work, maybe it won't. No hard feelings and no...”

“Expectations,” Drusilla says, biting down on Spike's shoulder and splitting the single word into four separate syllables.
“But you can say ‘no’ and the couch is free,” Spike adds. “We kicked everyone else out but you’re welcome to stay.”

And it’s blunt and uncompromising and it’s just what she fucking wants right now, part of her anyway. To fuck and sigh and moan, to feel her body climb up high and crash back in a glorious mess. To feel hands not hers on a body that's restless with need these days, always.

“Bed looks big enough for three,” she tells them. “And your couch is lumpy.”

They smile at her but they’re still waiting, not expectant and she knows they want more.

“I’ll play by your rules,” she says, starting to tug at the zipper that's keeping her wrapped-up in clothes, “and I'm so not looking for more than this. But you've gotta suit up—” she nods at Spike with a pointed, downward stare, “and you do anything I don't like, I get to say 'stop', okay?”

Spike shrugs and leans over to rummage in the bedside table. “I'm clean, but fine by me,” he says.

Drusilla purses her lips, watching Faith skin out of her dress and undies. “Keep the cat ears on,” she says imperiously.

Faith grins. “Why not?”

She doesn’t even remember peeling off her stockings and stepping out of her dress. That and every other moment has already started to warp and blur, buckling like old film that’s been left in the canister too long and dries to dust when you try to hold it in your hands. This is something momentary, not meant to last, and she knows it. It’s weird to have nostalgia for something that hasn’t even happened yet, but there you go. Maybe it’s the residual THC talking.

She stands there somewhat awkwardly for a moment before Dru looks at her admiringly and whispers, “Skyclad, so pretty,” punctuating it with this girlish little giggle that puts Faith entirely at ease. Dru wraps her arm sinuously around Faith’s waist, pulling her in toward the center of the bed. The center of this little—whatever it is. If she was going to feel nervous about this at all that breaks the spell somehow, and she finds herself wrapped up between them. It’s not an uncomfortable place to be—they’ve invited her in after all, and it’s with a generosity and a lack of guile that she hadn’t known she’d craved.

At first it’s not a choreography, exactly; more like a chaos. Hands are roaming everywhere at once; she can feel Spike’s cock nudging in between her legs as he moves closer to kiss her shoulder and his arm snakes around so he can see how wet she is. He and Dru both get there at the same time and they share another conspiratorial look. “Faith’s been a naughty kitty, watching us like that,” Dru says soberly. “Got her all wet.”

“That it did. Do we punish her?”

Dru smiles deviously. “Shall we take away her saucer of milk, Spike? Or do we let her have the cream?”

“I think we let her have anything she wants,” he murmurs, gently turning Faith around to face him and pulling her close for a kiss. And he knows how to kiss—every flick of his agile tongue against hers a reminder of what it’ll be like when he’s going down on her, of how he’s going to fuck her. He’s all lithe, angular muscle and different enough from Wes that it’s reassuring somehow.

“Want you both to fuck me,” she whispers when she comes up for air, and nothing more has to be said. And they’re certainly not in any rush; this is the slow dance at the end of the party, and no-one’s taken the lead yet. Faith’s starting to wonder if Dru’s got them under a spell because it’s all so
delirious; then she remembers the punch and the really good weed and it’s no wonder every touch upon her too-sensitive skin makes her shiver even though she’s warmed by the glow of all those candles; their bodies are in such close proximity she can feel the heat pouring off all of them.

It’s a comfort, really. Sounds weird but it’s true.

Teeth and tongue and fingers everywhere and she’s the focal point; she feels like a queen when she’s sprawled out across them, legs spread, breathing just a little labored.

“How next, pet?” Spike drawls in her ear, and God, he’s so not Wes but he’s certainly got it, because his insinuating tone goes straight to her clit. Without thinking, she arches her back and thrusts out her ass. She’s just about to answer with something flippant and bratty like, “Your cock in my ass,” when—

It only takes a split second for the flat of Spike’s hand to connect with her ass with a decisive thwap!—but everything’s been so slow and languid before this that she’s just not ready for it. She lets out this sharp little cry and Spike pulls back abruptly, like he’s afraid to touch her until she gives him some sort of sign.

And she doesn’t give one. She can’t seem to move—she’s frozen in position. Her mind’s racing with a million thoughts but she can’t will herself to do a fucking thing. This is what she wanted isn’t it? And yet it’s not the same. Oh, the attendant, delicious sting that follows soon thereafter is similar enough and if she could just stop thinking for one goddamn second, she could enjoy this. She deserves it, even. She does. But when she closes her eyes it’s his hand she sees, his long-fingered, elegant hand poised in mid-air to—

Thought and action both seem to have gone out the window when she bursts into tears. Messy, mascara-running-everywhere tears. Oh, yeah, good one, Faith, she thinks ruefully—first friendly, no-strings attached three-way and you go all emotional wreck on them. Great strategy, there. Maybe it was too much to think she could do this so casually, or that she could deal with some pale echo of everything she had with Wes. Even if it’s not even an echo—it’s just different. And that in and of itself feels like another loss.

She finds herself stammering out this muddled apology even as she’s trying to stop these choking little sobs that seem to be welling up from somewhere she can’t reach, can’t simply override the signal with rationalization. She half expects them to exile her to the couch, but Dru just eases her down onto the pillows, cooing “Shh, shh,” fingers brushing restlessly against Faith’s skin all the while. She’s almost surprised to find herself electrified by the touch even if her brain is trying hard to reject it. This should be weird, shouldn’t it?

She starts to protest, albeit feebly—“You don’t have to—” but she can’t even finish the thought. What? Take care of me? Make me come? But Dru’s letting her fingers trace slow, graceful whorls around her clit and dipping them experimentally into her wet cunt and she’s starting to go a little non-verbal and really not care if it’s weird or not. It just is.

“Shhh,” Dru says again, her fingers insinuating themselves deeper into her pussy, “Consider it a gift.”

“I certainly do,” adds Spike appreciatively, sprawling back against the pillows and lazily stroking his cock, seemingly content, at least momentarily, to watch.

“You shush too, Spike.” Dru shoots him a glare but Faith’s really not caring. Because, fuck, no-one’s going to make her wait for this orgasm. And she’s still feeling kinda stoned, which gives everything a decidedly unreal quality—like, maybe any second she’s going to wake up with a start,
wondering where the hell a fantasy that didn’t involve Wes came from.

Dru kisses Faith again, lingering this time, her tongue flickering against hers. The kiss is certainly real enough—not yearning, but sweet. She kisses Dru back with a tentativeness that seems to amuse Dru more than anything else. “Such a charm,” she hums against Faith’s parted lips, pinching her nipple almost casually between her fingers while she fucks her with her other hand. Dru’s nimble fingers push upwards, finding that sweet spot and locking in firmly; Faith can’t help but arch her hips forward to meet them. Been so long since anyone cared enough to really get her off—

Nothing is in her mind now but the insistent need to come, and she’s skirting the periphery. The room has receded; she’s dimly aware of Spike’s presence but everything is clouded by this haze of want. There’s a desperate edge to it, and she’s not worrying about decorum or anything as she feverishly thrusts against Dru’s hand. “That’s it,” Dru purrs, skirting her nipple slowly with her tongue one moment and capriciously biting down the next. The little white-hot jolt of pain is just what Faith needs; it shoots right to her clit and she’s coming abruptly in a flurry of breathless “oh’s,” thrashing to one side as she grips the sheets.

Dru looks very pleased indeed. “Made you see the stars,” she says with more than a hint of self-satisfaction. She places a kiss on Faith’s beleaguered clit before she gently removes her fingers from her cunt.

“If I don’t get to come soon...” Spike says in this throaty, plaintive murmur that makes Dru smile slowly as she brings her fingers up and licks them clean. Faith turns her head and sees Spike shudder, closing his eyes as Dru’s sticky-wet fingers slide between her lips.

“You’re trying to kill me, right?” he says, lying back, arms spread dramatically wide. Faith doesn’t think it’s coincidence that his hand curls around hers, giving it a comforting squeeze before releasing her.

Drusilla arches her eyebrow and looks at Faith. “He was good, waiting, wasn’t he?” she asks.

Faith nods, which is about all she’s capable of right then. “Yeah.”

“But he made you squeak like a mouse and you’re a cat,” Drusilla says reprovingly, reaching out and slipping those damn cat ears off Faith. She puts them on and adjusts them with careful fingers. “Why did you squeak, little mouse?”

“Yeah, sorry, ’bout that,” Spike says, sounding the littlest bit rueful. “Should’ve asked, maybe, but —”

“But what?” Faith says, struggling up so she’s half-sitting. “And you don’t need to apologize. It—” She hesitates and then shrugs. “Wasn’t what you did that got me crying. I’m—I like that. I get off on it, okay?” God, if they look at her like Xander does, like she’s a freak—But there’s nothing but interest and the smallest amount of amusement in their eyes.

“Well, yeah.” Spike says. He pushes Faith onto her side with a gentle hand and runs the tip of his finger slowly over the four faint stripes on her ass. “We know.”

She’s torn between a fresh flush of arousal and the urge to wriggle away because she can’t imagine Wesley approving of this, of any of it, and conflicted is a mild word for what’s she feeling.

“Yeah. Well the guy who did that left,” she says shortly, flipping over to her back and glaring at Spike. “And the fucker’s not interested in coming back.”

“Want to talk about it?” Spike asks, but he’s already glancing over at Dru, who’s running her wet
fingertips over her nipples and cooing approvingly when they harden.

She laughs. “Sure. Maybe. But not now.”

Spike nods, his hand going out to stroke along Dru's leg. “Not now,” he agrees.

“No,” Drusilla whispers, as if she's completing an incantation. “Not now.”

***

She wakes up on the couch and, yeah, it's lumpy, but it's where she belongs. Not that Spike and Dru had made her feel unwelcome; she just got up to pee and when she came back and saw them snuggled and curled up and complete she didn't want to disturb them.

Besides, they'd sprawled out so there wasn't any room for her.

So she'd given Spike's lean line of back and ass one last, appreciative look and finished off the night under a blanket that might not have been a cashmere throw but was still soft and warm.

Dru and Spike wake up and give her sleepy, sweet smiles because she's made coffee. She stays long enough to be sure they're cool with what happened—and didn't happen—and then makes getting up to leave noises when Dru vanishes into the shower.

“Hang about,” Spike says, yawning widely and going to sit on the couch with his third cup of coffee. “Wanted to ask you—”

“What?” Faith says. She wants to go now, get home and run the deepest, hottest bath possible so she can cry and pretend it's steam and sweat getting her face wet.

“This bloke, the one who left. Wesley.”

“What about him?” She can't help the defensive tone to her voice. “He's a fucked-up bastard who wouldn't know how to be happy if you gave him a Dummies Guide to Smiling.”

Spike ignores the bitchiness. “You said last night—” And God, how much can he remember? Because she'd told them way too fucking much when the candles had dimmed to scented puddles of wax and they'd put her between them again, their clasped hands resting lightly on the smooth swell of her mound, her head snuggled into Dru's shoulder.

“You said he was your first one you played with. That you didn't know you liked it until you met him.”

She nods reluctantly, eyes going around the room, locating her backpack, her coat. So not a discussion for first thing in the morning. Well, it's gone eleven, but that's still technically morning, right?

“Sounds to me like he took advantage of you,” Spike says severely and fuck, he's Xander's fucking soul mate.

“He fucking didn't,” she hisses. “He thinks he did, so does Xander, so does my mom, so does the whole fucking world, but guess what? I'm the only one who gets to say that and he didn't, okay?”

“Didn't give you a safeword,” Spike says. “Not until he fucked-up good and proper.” He squints at her. “And you didn't know enough to know you needed one.”

“You got a point here?” she demands.
Spike stands up and stretches, with his shirt riding up so she can see his bare stomach. It's flat and hard and she's fairly sure she kissed it at some point last night, but now she doesn't do more than glance and look away.

“Yeah. You're going to want it again, I can tell. Next guy might not be such a prince.” There's a sarcastic twist to his words but she sets her mouth firmly. God knows why she's defending Wesley but she's so fucking tired of people thinking they know what's best for her. “So here—” He walks over to a bookshelf and crouches down, running his fingers along the books. “Borrow these; keep 'em if you like,” he says. “Always good to know what you're getting yourself into, pet.”

She stares at the covers, all bare bodies and rope, rubber and whips, and fuck, this is way beyond anything—“Thanks,” she says weakly, burying them deep in her backpack.

“Take care, love,” he says, giving her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “You can let yourself out, right?” He's skinning out of his shirt and sauntering in the direction of the shower before she’s finished nodding.

***

It's not until she emerges from the bath, skin scarlet and tears dried, that she remembers her phone. It's still where she tossed it, on top of her bed, and she turns it back on, intending to call Xander and see how his party in the city had gone.

She's got voice mail and she grins, because it's gotta be from Xander, the night before, drunk and babbling and demanding to know where the hell she is because it's only three am. Hopefully not singing, because that's never good.

“Faith, your ability to transform from charming conversationalist to Billingsgate fishwife is impressive, but might I suggest that you save it for such time as I deserve your displeasure?”

The phone cracks as her fingers clench on it. Wesley? Wesley called her back? What the fuck? And what in God's name is a—

“If you'd restrained yourself for long enough to allow me to finish—” He's sounding so fucking pissed. Really, really annoyed, voice crackling and cold. “—you'd have discovered that I'm flying back to England tomorrow, on business. I won't be here next Sunday.”

There's a pause and she thinks he left it to allow her to moan, 'Oh, fuck' three times in a rising, anguished whimper.

“I can't say that I'm pleased with your outburst, Faith,” he continues, but somehow he sounds softer. “But I—yes, I blame myself a little. My reluctance to engage you in conversation made me less than clear and—it's very silly of me to do that, isn't it? To pretend that if I say no more than a few words, we're not conversing?”

“Really fucking is,” she whispers as if he can hear her.

“I'll be back a week on Tuesday,” he says. “I—” There's a pause and she can hear him swallow and he's sounding so fucking nervous now that she starts to panic. God, he's not planning on going back for good, is he? “I'm taking some personal time and going to see my mother. This, with you, with us—it's made me see—” His voice firms up, gets cool again. “I have this device. I believe it's called a BlackBerry.” There's a sort of bemused pride there, and Wes getting all goofy over having the latest gadget would be so fucking cute if she wasn't weeping silently. “So I'll be able to get any e-mails you care to send me.” There's a question mark hovering at the end there, as if he doesn't want
to lose contact with her even for that short a time.

“I'm sorry about Sunday,” he says. “I look forward to you reading to me, you know. I'll miss—I'll miss that. Good-bye then, Faith.” There's another pause and then he repeats, “Good-bye,” and hangs up.

Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Five

All she wants to do is drag herself into some dark, dank corner like a little furry animal that's just been mown down in a high speed collision on the freeway so she can die slowly and painfully.

If only she hadn't switched off her phone. If only she hadn't got drunk and stoned and mercy humped by Spike and Dru. If only Wes hadn't taken over four months to start acting like a human being with, like, emotions and shit. If only, if only, if only... she feels like she could choke on if only.

And now that she's been given an engraved invitation to e-mail him, she can't even log on to Gmail to check on the current state of her penis enlargement spams because she knows that she'll press down on the 'w' and his address will write itself and she won't be able to help herself. Which is just how it goes with Wes. And that door is going to slam shut with a resounding thud the minute she 'fesses up that she did just what she told him she'd do. In fact, she didn't even fuck the first half decent guy; she got it totally on with a more than half decent girl too. She's like the biggest ho in Hoville, population 1.

Not like anyone leaves her alone for longer than a freaking second so she can wallow in how fucking stupid she is. In how she's lost him all over again when she hadn't even got him back. Darla and Xander are stereophonically quacking on about her birthday on Friday and she's expected to be an active participant in gift possibilities, venue decisions and guest lists.

“It's no big deal,” she hisses down the phone to Xander on Thursday morning. “I'm a year older, big fucking whoop.”

“Not getting out of your birthday spankings,” Xander giggles even though it's like the opposite of funny and she's told him a hundred times before that she's not ready to make jokes about her broken heart until at least 2010.

Luckily Monty's working on this big case which is freaking him out. Mrs. Rosenberg has to ring her twenty times a day with special instructions on how to hand-hold her husband who still hates having to go to court and she's happy to work late, just to get away from Darla who keeps thrusting these lame Delia catalogs in front of her and asking her to shove some Post-It notes on the appropriate pages.

They double tag her on Thursday morning by turning up at the office and standing in front of her desk like some two-headed birthday demon.

“We just want you to have a special day, Faithy.”

“After the year you've had with the... and the... y'know?”

“And I've found this cute little restaurant but we need to make reservations today.”

“And did I mention about the birthday spankings?”

“There was some really cute stuff in that Delia catalog. You'd look adorable in the Hello Kitty pajama set.”
It couldn't get any worse. She's got her head clutched in her hands as they spew out birthday suggestions like they've done a few lines of speed before they turned up. Then Monty comes out of his office to see why the front desk has been taken over by the Party Planners from hell and…

“Mrs. R can make you a special birthday cake. A chocolate one. You like chocolate, don’t you, sweetheart?”

Even Wes was never this relentless, which just makes her feel even more woe-is-me than she had been. Which really takes some doing.

“Fine!” she snaps, standing up and pushing her chair back. “This is how it's gonna go down. I'll go to the restaurant, Mom. I'll e-mail you a guest list at lunchtime. Xander, if you make one more crack about birthday spankings then you're going to have to get used to life without your kneecaps. Monty, I'd love a chocolate cake and for my present, I want…”

I want Wes to come back. I want him to take me away from here. I want him to promise that he'll never leave me again. I want him to forgive me for all the crazy shit I've pulled. I want him…

“I want a tattoo.”

The words pop out of her mouth like a bullet from a gun. No way is Darla going to go for that, which is precisely why she said it. Might shut her up for longer than a second.

But all she does is frown before tilting her chin up and saying bravely, “Well, I guess. Maybe something tasteful like a dolphin on your ankle. Do we need to make an appointment for that too?”

***

It's past ten when she gets home, which means time and a half in her going away fund and a Hot Pocket in a hot bath.

Darla's out with the boyfriend so she's saved another round of birthday boredom and all she wants to do after she's emerged from the bath all pink and about 23 percent more relaxed is angst about not being to e-mail Wes because she's ruined everything and decide what her tattoo should be. One thing she knows with absolute certainty. It sure as shit ain't gonna be a tasteful dolphin on her ankle.

But her plans for flopping on her bed and maybe having a therapeutic weep are ruined by the bigass box already perched on it. And bigass boxes have taken on a whole new meaning in the last couple of weeks. It's from Wes. She knows that before she even sees her name and address carefully printed out in his elegant script. Overnighted from the mother country and with “Not to be opened until November 5th, Faith” written on it in a red Sharpie.

It's pretty sick to feel herself get wet from eight red words. But that's her body's usual reaction when he gives her an order and four months without him barking them out, sighing them against her skin, purring them into the office intercom have done little to change that.

She can't even sit on the bed now, just in case she accidentally brushes against the box and gets overwhelmed by the urge to tear away the tape and cardboard. Instead she delves under the bed for the books that Spike lent her, plus her copy of Neruda's 100 Love Sonnets because it's been, what? Like at least three days since she read any of them and disappears into the lounge.

She's back in her room at midnight precisely. She knows exactly what her tattoo is going to be. And before she can open the box, she's snagging a highlighter so she can underline one of the passages in the book she's been flicking through:
A safeword is just a communication tool, nothing more, nothing less. If you're playing intensely, it may feel hard to stop the scene, to come back from the edge via a safeword, but if you need to, that's what they're for. Some tops deliberately push their bottoms until their bottoms call safeword; this way, the bottom gets the experience of using it. A safeword that's never used can seem unusable, which isn't a good property for a safeword.

She nods in agreement. And runs the highlighter over another paragraph a little bit farther down:

Some partners find their need for a safeword gradually diminishes as they come to know each other better. Some people do SM in which the bottom doesn't want to have a verbal escape route, for the duration of the scene. (This “no-safeword” play is also sometimes called “edge play.”) One thing that you will learn about the BDSM scene is that styles vary wildly, and people's experiences are astonishingly diverse. But for many people beginning their explorations (and many who've explored enormously), safewords have proved very helpful.

She shoves the books back under her bed because who knows when Darla might be on a cleaning kick and what do you know? It's past midnight. Officially her birthday and she's not breaking any rules and even if she was, Wes isn't here to administer a birthday spanking. Though the box looks plenty big enough for him to post himself over the Atlantic. Though you'd have thought he'd have punched in some air holes.

But Wes isn’t in the box. There’s no room because it’s full to bursting with like a gazillion and one British candy bars in brightly colored, foil wrappers. They have weird names like Flake and Double Decker. And even the ones that sound familiar like Snickers don’t taste the same. She knows that because she's already got one crammed into her mouth and it’s so more chocolatey and yummy than its American looky-likey that she's moaning out loud.

Right at the bottom are ten tubes of Smarties which don't make her cry. They just make her go a teeny bit misty-eyed as she remembers sprawling out on his couch, adorned in them and blindfolded as he kissed them off her.

She's never seen so much chocolate in her life outside of the supermarket and she clutches great, greedy handfuls of it and groans ecstatically at the thought of getting so fat that she won't be able to leave the house. Once she's done squirreling it away in all of her secret hidey places, she gets to the A4 manila envelope that's bulging promisingly. There's a wallet of photographs of an ivy-strewn, red brick house with a big gravel drive like something out of one of those BBC America period dramas. There's a pristine garden with an ornamental lake and a goddamn maze. All that's missing is a chick with a bonnet. Wes has neatly labeled the back of each one, including the snaps of these freckle faced, gap-toothed kids who he must have got from central casting. “Alfie, 9, second cousin”, “Rollo, 5, second cousin”, “Daisy, 3, first cousin, once removed.” And there's also a snarling, sullen Goth giving the camera the finger, which Wes has noted with a sardonic, “Molly, 14, allegedly my cousin's eldest daughter though we believe that she was swapped at birth.”

She traces her fingers over their faces, catching a glimpse of faded, denim blue eyes, the hint of a cheekbone, a crooked smile which prove the family resemblance and make her feel closer to him. Do they call him Wes? Does he get pissy with them when they're being all bratty? Or does he tease them gently and make them eat all their veggies with the promise of a... like, Double Decker, if they clean their plates?

There's also a CD of a band called Goldie Looking Chain, with a piece of paper wedged into the sleeve: “The shop assistant assured me that this was 'sick'. I can only apologize in advance.”

But what she's really after is the pale blue envelope that's stiff with what can only be a birthday card
in it. There's a black and white photo from an old issue of British Vogue on the front of some impossibly elegant, swan-necked girl in a black dress that looks a little bit like the three dresses hanging in the back of her closet. Inside he's written:

Dear Faith

Please don’t eat the chocolate all at once—I'm sure you never guessed that I knew all about your secret candy stash. I thought you might like to see where I grew up. And some pictures of my extended family who seem to have descended on us.

I hope you have a truly wonderful birthday. I'm sure we'll speak soon.

Wes

She holds the card up just to make sure that there isn't some squashed 'x' after his name but it's infuriatingly blank. Then she has to eat another two bars of Orange Kit Kat while she scrutinizes the card for hidden meanings. Finally she falls asleep, feeling vaguely nauseous, but clutching the card in her hand.

It's hard to get out of the house on time the next morning. Darla insists on staggering into her room at the crack of dawn after a night of… God, so not going there, with her new boyfriend, and singing an off-key Happy Birthday before giving her a gift certificate for Borders and a birthday card with details of her appointment at the tattoo place for Saturday afternoon.

“I know your birthdays have been pretty crappy, sweetie,” she says over a breakfast of slightly stale doughnuts and coffee. “I wanted this one to be different, y'know?”

And maybe the one good thing that's come out of all of this is that she doesn't hate Darla anymore. Not even close. She kinda loves her. She's been there for Faith over the last few months, which doesn't exactly make up for eighteen years of alcohol soaked misery but it's a start.

“Thanks, Mom,” she croaks and it doesn't feel weird anymore to get up and give Darla a hug. Especially when now she doesn't stink of vodka, just big, whiffy amounts of J-Lo Glow.

Finally she's at work. Monty's been tucked behind his desk with a pot of contraband coffee and a Twix courtesy of Wes and she can open her e-mail account.

It takes a good five minutes to think about typing in his address but as soon as her fingers hit the keys she's off.

Dear Wes

Well, happy birthday to me. Sorry I haven't been in touch before now. Some stuff came up that I had to deal with.

Thanks for calling me back and I'm sorry that I got so pissed at you but you kinda have to realize that you haven't given me a lot to work with over the last few months. Really glad you called. And what's with the BlackBerry? Have you turned into some techno geek while my back was turned?

I got the box yesterday. Didn't open it until 12.03, which was technically my birthday. Man, all that chocolate! I swear I've put on about five pounds. I really love the Orange Kit Kats, though three of them after a Hot Pocket makes you feel a little pukey.

And I don't know what you mean with the 'secret candy stash.' (Guess you found the pile of Twinkies I hid at the back of the linen closet.)
Your house looks really swank. Did you used to get lost in the maze when you were a kid? Oh yeah, your little cousins look cute though I don't think that Molly got the memo that goth is, like, totally over.

I'm going out for dinner tonight with Darla and Xander and some people from the diner. Plus Spike and Dru who are some new friends I've made. Then tomorrow I'm going to get my birthday present. It's a tattoo. Yeah, Wes. 'Fraid so. But it's going to look wicked cool and I really want one so I'm gonna permanently mark my lily white flesh and there's not much you can do about it.

Hope you're having a good time and the stuff with your Mom isn't too weird.

Better go now—but I'm thinking about what I'm going to read for you on Sunday week.

Have a safe flight back to NY.

Faith

She reads it over before she hits 'send' and feels way proud of herself for managing to get through a whole e-mail without swearing at him. Or telling him that she can come without him. Or, fuck, that she'd much rather have come with him.

Then she hears Monty whimper something about “these damn depositions. Faith, sweetheart, I'm getting all muddled up,” and she's back on the clock.

Helping Monty get through all the depositions that afternoon with an extreme sugar buzz is an experience she'd rather not repeat, even if Mrs. Rosenberg's cake is about the most decadent thing she's ever eaten. It's light and fluffy and weighted down by what seems like ten pounds of chocolate buttercream frosting with swags of pink piped icing around the edges and even a little pink flower nestled against the 'F' in the squiggly pink icing that reads 'Happy Birthday Faith!'

He'd taken her to a long lunch at a locally owned seafood place frequented by businessmen of a certain age, the kind who don't blink at ordering oysters and martinis in the middle of the day. Mrs. R was in the office when they returned, tutting about the coffee pot she'd found behind Monty's desk, but all was forgiven between the two of them with a squishy hug and a flurry of endearments and pet names. Faith can't help but feel a little twinge of jealousy, but that's all washed away too as they present her with the cake and exhort her to blow out all the candles and make a wish.

She hopes it's okay that she's making the same wish in her head over and over again today when she blows out the candles, and she just smiles enigmatically when Mrs. R gives her a hug and a kiss on the cheek and says she hopes it comes true.

Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Six

Even though she'd given Xander the list of people to invite, she's surprised to see them all there when she arrives, gathered around a giant table in the back room of Monica's Soul Food, already sipping sweet tea and lemonade and digging into the bread baskets, slathering sweet butter on thick slabs of still-warm cornbread. Wide-eyed and quiet Tara, one of the lunchtime waitresses from the diner, is nodding politely at Spike. Faith guesses, based on his gesticulations, that he's yammering the poor girl's ear off about Grand Theft Auto or the latest trendy band he'd read about on Pitchfork, or possibly both at once.

Dru and Xander are mulling over the menu, discussing their mutual dislike of chicken fried steak with cream gravy and collard greens, while at the furthest end of the table Darla and her boyfriend
eye Billy suspiciously—he's regaling them with some tale of food service gone awry, do doubt. She just hopes it doesn't turn their stomachs for dinner, because the food at the place is wicked good. She acted surprised, of course, when Xander had told her the address. She didn't have the heart to tell him that she'd been there plenty of times with Wes, who had a fondness for Monica's special liver and onions and the decadent raspberry cobbler slathered with homemade vanilla ice cream.

Someone gets her home—Xander most likely, though she seems to remember hearing Spike's voice as her head hit the pillow, thankfully right before she passed out. After dinner, Darla and her suitor disappeared, and the rest of her guests dragged her to bar after bar after bar, finally ending up on the thumpy dance floor of a cheesy dance club that only played top-40 remixes—and if she's not mistaken, at some point Xander and Spike were slam dancing to Destiny's Child while Billy and Dru waltzed around them, giggling and tripping over their feet. At any rate, it's all just a happy blur of swirling lights and joints sneaked in back alleys now; rows of potent shots with deceptively sweet names that bartenders were only too happy to pour out for her for free, once her wild entourage shrieked that it was her birthday. Thankfully, none of them bothered to card her.

Though, now, as the sun streams through the thin curtains right in her eyes and her mouth tastes pasty and gross, she can't help but think that maybe those last two Flaming Cherry Bomb shots that she'd done with Dru weren't such a good idea after all.

“Wake up, Faithy!” Darla trills, far too chipper for 9:30 on a Saturday morning as she whips the curtains open. “You'd better shake a leg if you're gonna get to the tattoo place on time.”

She'd always expected that she'd get her first tattoo in the middle of the night, on a drunken bender, maybe, that ended with her and Xander ponying up for matching tribal armbands and then completely regretting it the next day—but eventually learning to love the silly, tacky design that came right off a sheet of flash tacked to the wall.

This is a much more serious business, though. Despite her hasty decision to get the thing, when she'd realized what she wanted, it definitely seemed like the right thing to do. And when she's shoving the heavy door of the tattoo parlor at eleven, double caramel latte in hand and handfuls of Wes’ birthday candy in her handbag and sees the dude she's got the appointment with, the butterflies in her stomach are strangely calmed. Somehow it all just feels right, and she's glad of that. He's positively tiny and has a sweet look about him, despite the sleeves inked on his arms and up over his neck.

“Faith, right?” he says.

She nods, crossing the cavernous room to his station. “Hey. You're Oz?”

“One and only.” He smiles, gesturing for her to have a seat on the vinyl-covered bench. “Not too early for you?” he asks, eyeing her giant latte.

“No, no. I'm good. Been up for hours.” A lie; it's been more like an hour, but hey, who's counting?

He fires off a string of questions. Well, fires is the wrong word, as Oz is about the most mellow person she's ever encountered. “Had breakfast? Take any aspirin? No Bloody Marys this morning, or swigs of courage from a flask in that bag of yours?”

“Oh, yes... no... and no... There's just candy in there.” she stammers. “But, uh, I was out drinking last night.”

He nods slowly, thinks a bit before answering. “You're fine. It'd be another story if you came in here reeking still, though. Just don't want you bleeding too much. All that stuff thins your blood. Well, breakfast doesn't. Breakfast keeps you from passing out.” She laughs, liking his dry sense of humor,
and although his economy with words isn't totally reminiscent of Wes, it's a welcome reprieve after all the yammering and shit-talking that had gone on the night before.

Sometime during the evening, Tara had pulled her aside and warned her that the spot she's chosen—the small of her back, right above her ass—was a pretty painful place. Not a lot of fat there to absorb the shock of the needles and probably one of the most sensitive areas of her body, which means only one thing—tons of nerve endings there, all starved for attention since Wes' departure. But, Tara had reminded her, a high tolerance for pain would probably make the whole process go a little more smoothly.

Of course, it's still gonna hurt, love—no matter how much you can take. But don't worry, our mate'll look after you, he's a good sort, Spike had drawled at her with a broad wink, eavesdropping on the conversation.

With a start, she realizes she's been lost in thought and shakes her head slightly, smiling at Oz. “Sorry, zoned out there. I'm a little nervous.” She wasn't really, but it was a good cover.

“You're not. I can tell—bet you'll fall asleep while I'm working.” His eyes are wide and deadly serious, and she can't tell if he's fucking with her or not. “So, what's the plan?”

“You can do words, right?” she asks, setting down her coffee and pulling a manila folder out of her bag.

“Sure; just as long as I've got something to go by, I can pretty much do anything.” He takes the sheet she's holding out to him. He smiles as he reads the words, nodding slightly. “Nice. Big Neruda fan?”

“Something like that.”

“We'll have to blow this up a little though, so it's not so small.”

“That's cool,” she says following him to the back office where a tiny copy machine whirrs to life when he hits a button. “Not too big, though.”

He just nods gravely, and she watches as he carefully resizes the text. She'd found the sheet of cream bond paper tucked in one of the cavernous inside pockets of her Emily Strange backpack one day not long after Wes had left, and even though it had made her cry back then, she couldn't bear to throw it away. It was the only thing she had that she'd typed on his trusty Selectric. And even though it definitely wasn't work related, it was still special. She could even remember the day she'd typed the line over and over—it had been when the office was empty and quiet the first time he'd gone to New York, and she'd filled the day typing random sentences over and over, timing herself, just to see how fast she could go. This page was blank, save one simple line of Neruda's words, the ones that had hit her heart hardest.

“That look good to you?” Oz shows her the words, resized half an inch high. Even just blown up to that size, the edges of the letters are ragged, imperfect.

“Yeah, it's just right.” She smiles, and he immediately sets to making a carbon copy transfer (which she finds so very appropriate)—the first step in permanently etching a line from Sonnet XVII on her flesh.

“And in black, I take it?”

“Absolutely. Wouldn't have it any other way.”
Okay, yeah. It hurts. Of course it does. Hurts like a motherfucker. The oscillating needles feel like the tiny teeth of a little mouth that’s biting into her flesh over and over again, sucking out bit by bit the stray streaks of pain that still live in her body. The broken promises that sit in a thorny ring around her heart, the knots in her neck he’s not there to smooth away, the permanent ache to touch him that’s buried in her fingertips.

But the noise of the tattoo gun is the most annoying part, especially after the lower half of her body has basically gone numb. She’s slung on her belly over the bench: Shirt hiked up, pants off, and underpants pulled down, but not all the way, of course. Every time Oz needs a little break, she’s allowed to have a bite or two of candy (which is turning out to be a lifesaver—breakfast may keep her from passing out, but the English Mars bar keeps her from throwing up) before he orders her to hold perfectly still again. Even though she’s a little rusty, that part’s pretty easy.

It takes longer than she expected too, and so she’s surprised, after about forty-five minutes, to find herself falling asleep, just as Oz had predicted. He works in silence, insisting she not talk because she’d wiggle around too much anyway, and it’s easy for her to just drift off, trying to block out the insistent buzzing of the gun.

“Faith?” Oz’s voice is low and insistent and he’s gently prodding at her shoulder. “Faith, wake up.”

She raises her head with a start from where she’d rested it on her folded arms, and the sudden movement makes her head swim. “You done?”

“Yeah. I hope you don’t mind, I used a little blue around the edges. Gives the letters a little more dimension. You can get up now, by the way.”

“I’m sure it looks great, Oz. Thanks,” she says, struggling to her feet. The letters feel burned into her skin. She tries to remember if it hurts as bad as the lashes on her ass had, but finds she can’t really remember all that clearly anymore—the bigger pain of Wes’ absence is where all her hurt lives now.

“Check it out.” Oz says, offering a hand to steady her on her feet and nodding toward the giant mirrors that line the walls of the room.

He’s done stunning work—it kind of looks like she’s been rolled through the old Selectric, and the keys struck the words on her like she was the finest silk-laid bond paper in the universe.

“I love you because I know no other way…” she whispers, fingers aching to touch each letter in turn, even though the skin is still tender and red.

“Don’t touch it yet. When you apply the vitamin E cream, wash your hands first, of course. Keep it moist, but don’t go crazy and slap the lotion on, or the scabs will scar.”

Her head’s swimming as he hands her a little photocopied sheet with all the information she needs, and he makes her sit down while she waits for the cab he’s called.

“Should have brought someone to drive you,” he chides.

“Had to do this on my own, Oz,” she says and sighs.

He doesn’t say anything and just nods quietly. They don’t say much else while she waits. Another customer—a generic looking soccer mom—comes in to discuss some design elements of her giant back piece that’s nearly complete, a tiger prowling from her shoulders to her ass.

Oz shakes her hand before she exits the shop. “Thanks, Faith.”
“No! Oz—thank you.”

He smiles modestly, and in the driest voice says, “I hope he likes it as much as you do.”

She turns back with a start, confused. “How did you—”

“When you’ve been in this business as long as I have, you start to read people pretty well.” He pauses, gives her a deliberately appraising look. “Hope you guys get back together soon.”

“How the hell?” She’d be offended if he wasn’t being so sweet about it.

“Trade secret,” he replies, face completely devoid of any expression—until he breaks out in a huge grin and hustles her out the door. “Give Spike and Dru my regards!” he yells after her.

Trade secret my ass, she thinks, vowing to punch Spike in the arm—hard—the next time she sees him.

Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Seven

She spends the night at home alone, which is kinda dull and a year ago the idea of Saturday night in would’ve been, like, impossible, but she’s still tired and her back is throbbing insistently. She curls up on the couch watching whatever channel 32 has to offer because she’s too lazy to get up and change channels, and the remote’s, well, remote. Darla tidying has its disadvantages; Faith’s used to the remote being left on the chair, or the couch, not on top of the TV, which sort of defeats the purpose.

She drifts off in the middle of some horror film so dire she’s rooting for the murderer all the way and staggers to bed when Darla breezes in at midnight, all pink cheeks and sparkling eyes.

The next night she’s mentally composing her Monday e-mail to Wes as she irons some work clothes and wishing she could decide whether or not to tell him what the tattoo says, or not. Because he’s going to totally freak, but will it be in a good way?

She lets the iron rest a fraction of a second too long on the sleeve of her polka-dot blouse as she thinks about that and rescues it from scorching just in time when the impatient hiss of the steam alerts her.

In the end—and it’s one of those realizations that smack you in the face, the ones you’re absolutely sure about—she decides she doesn’t care. She’d cut her hair to spite him—yeah, she had—but she’s got the tattoo, not because Wes didn’t want it, but because she did.

“Well, look at you being all mature, Faithy,” she murmurs to herself, hanging the blouse up on the door handle and unplugging the iron. “Next thing you know, I’ll be quitting smoking.” She considers that and grins. Maybe next year.

For the twentieth time that day, she twists around, tugging her clothes out of the way to study the tattoo in the mirror. It’s still red, still sore, but she can see how good it’s going to look and Oz is a fucking genius. She purses up her lips. Picture’s worth a thousand words, right? Maybe she’ll get Xander to take one when it’s all healed-up and send it to Wes. Be good payback for all those fucking birthday spanking jokes he’d made and Wes can add it to the other photographs he took of her.

With an evil smile at the thought of Xander’s reaction, she flops forward onto her bed and cracks open her book. It’s a paperback she’d found in the dollar bin of the used bookstore on Fergus and she’d bought it because she remembered seeing the author’s name on Wesley’s non-porn bookshelves. It’s funny, though she gets the feeling she’s missing a lot of the jokes. Needs Wes to tell her why it’s such a hoot that Flora Poste’s cousins are called Seth and Reuben—and do English
cows really go around with missing hooves? Crazy!

She's just read the part where Aunt Ada—who totally needs smacking down—is shrieking about seeing something nasty in the woodshed when her phone rings. She grabs it, still reading, and she's chucking over Urk's attempts to pick up Meriam so he can make a dramatic exit as she says, “Hi.”

“Good evening, Faith. You sound in remarkably good spirits tonight.”

Cold Comfort Farm gets abandoned abruptly as her eyes go to the clock by her bed. Nine exactly. Well of course it is.

“Wes! Thought you weren't back until Tuesday!”

She can hear him smile. “I'm not. I'm still here.”

She does a rapid calculation. “It's, like, two in the morning, isn't it?”

“It is, indeed. Would you like me to yawn for you to prove I'm here?”

And this is some sort of hallucination from too much chocolate because is this Wes actually fucking talking to her, and being sweet while he does it?

“Nah; you always did like staying up late; I believe you.”

“I still do, but I rather think I'll be going to bed as soon as this call ends. I've spent the afternoon playing soccer on the lawn with two dogs, seven children and a headache and I'm feeling a little sleepy.”

“Wes, you're so gonna pay for that tomorrow.” She giggles, because she can just see him among that crowd, with his mom looking on and the kids laughing and screaming as he does one of those tackle moves and swipes the ball. It's playing out in her head like a home movie and making her feel sentimental.

“I think I already am,” he says dryly. “There's a spectacular bruise on my shin courtesy of Molly and I think it'll take another bath to get rid of all the mud in my hair.”

“I'm feeling kinda stiff and sore myself,” she says, plunging right in.

There's a small silence. “I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to that,” he says finally. “Should I offer commiserations or congratulations? Or neither?”

It's her turn to feel puzzled, until she realizes he thinks—"Oh, fuck, no, Wes!” she blurts out. “Not because I've—but—” She flounders to a dead stop and makes up her mind. “Wes, I've done some stuff and I want to tell you about it—”

“Faith—” And there's a weight of disapproval in the word just waiting to crash down on her head.

“Wes, please,” she says desperately, cringing as she waits for the click as he hangs up because, shit, it didn't take her long to ruin the mood, now did it? “I'm not telling you to hurt you, or because I think I, like, need your approval or something. I'm telling you because whatever's happened, you're still the only one who knows me and sometimes I think I'll go fucking mad with no one to talk to who gets me.”

“You want to tell me something as a friend?” he asks quietly, and she can't work out how he feels. He's too far away.
“Yeah. I guess.”

“I’d like us to be friends, Faith,” he says and the heaviness is back in his voice but she’s not sure why. “Although I can’t help feeling I don’t deserve even that.”

“Not always about deserving, Wes,” she says. “I just—I don’t want there to be stuff I can’t tell you. Might be stuff I don’t, because I’m guessing you’re not interested in a 24/7 rundown of my life—”

“You’d be wrong,” he says and there’s a trace of his drawl back and she’s biting back a moan, because what she wouldn’t give to have Wesley that involved in her life again. “Let’s just say I’m well aware of the fact that I no longer have any say in your actions and that’s just as it should be.”

It really fucking isn’t. She might have been forced to the point where she can make decisions for herself and she might even like doing it sometimes, but if she can still get wet and aching at a written order from him, she’s thinking some things haven’t changed.

And she never wants them to.

“Right. Whatever. okay, I got that tattoo, just like I said I would and I slept with those friends of mine, Spike and Dru, at the party because I was so fucking angry with you.”

She can practically hear him sorting out the blurted words and she starts to panic because, fuck, couldn’t she have been a bit less in-your-face about it?

“He’s not the one who wanted you to call him, ‘master’ is he?” Wesley asks eventually. “Because—as a friend—I have to say that if he is, I’ll be reluctantly compelled to tell you—again as a friend—that I can’t feel it was the most sensible action you’ve ever taken.”

“No! Not him! Christ, Wes, I wouldn’t wipe my feet on him. No.”

“I’m relieved to hear it,” he says solemnly.

“You’re not freaking,” she says and it’s amazing how accusing she sounds, because that’s good, right?

“Faith, what do you want me to say?” he asks and there’s a weariness to his voice that’s not down to anything physical. “That I’m pleased my stupidity and your impulsive nature combined to make you do something you seem to be regretting? Well, I’m not. And—did you say you slept with both of them?”

“And that’s mostly what it was,” she tells him.

“Oh.”

There’s a spark of curiosity in his voice, but she can’t decide if he’s even the smallest bit jealous.

“And I don’t regret it, not really, because they were totally sweet about it, I’m just—I hate that I did it to get back at you when you hadn’t done anything wrong.”

“Do I—if it’s still the case that I have any influence over your actions, then—” He’s stammering, composure lost.

“Well, you do,” she says fiercely. “You do because I still love you, Wes. Haven’t stopped, and I won’t, not ever.” She can hear him take a sharp breath as if she’s hit him but she doesn’t stop talking, even though something’s telling her this conversation won’t end abruptly, won’t end until
they're both done making up for months of silence. “But I've accepted that you're not there to tell me what to do and I'm deciding stuff for myself, like the tattoo.” She resolves then and there not to tell him what it says. He's so fond of puzzles; let him work it out. “It's gonna look so good, Wes. Kind of sore now—that's what I meant—but I love it.”

“And do I get more detail about it than that?” he asks and his voice is controlled again, even vaguely amused. “Or, like your encounter, is that to have a discreet veil drawn over it?”

She snuggles back against the pillows, wincing slightly. “Not gonna tell you, Wes, but you're welcome to think about it and guess. I'll give you a clue; it's not a picture.”

“And am I permitted to know the location?” he asks mildly.

She takes a sledgehammer to that door she's working on—although tonight it feels as if it's wide-open anyway. “Imagine your hand's on my ass, Wes.”

“You're in a very capricious mood tonight, aren't you?” he says softly.

“Totally fucking mercurial,” she assures him. “You got that picture fixed in your head?”

“Oh, yes. Your arse, my hand. Well?”

“If you spread your fingers as wide as they go, your thumb would be just about where part of it is.”

“That's imprecise to say the least,” he complains. “Which part?”

She has to think about that one. “Probably an 'I',' she says.

“I thought you said it wasn't a picture?”

She snickers. “Work it out, Wes; that's all you're getting.”

He sounds a little disappointed. “Very well. Should I have any flashes of inspiration, I'll be sure to share them with you.”

“You do that.” She hesitates. “I want to tell you about the party too, but I don't—will it bother you?”

“Yes.” There's no hesitation there. “I can't contemplate you giving yourself away to someone with the same lack of thought that you used to show without being concerned, any more than you could, were the situations to be reversed. But I'm well aware of the fact that it's your decision to make and if you stop using me as a reason or an excuse for your follies then I'm sure you'll be fine in the future.”

Too much there to think about but she fastens on to one part of it. “Are they?”

“Are they what?”

“Reversed.”

And the tension's crackling between them the way her hair used to do when he brushed it, wrapping around his fingers and sending up sparks.

“I don't think I wish to—”

“No, don't, you don't have to.” She's babbling now, words pouring out in a frantic flood. “Shit, Wes, that was way out of line. I'm sorry. You—oh, fuck, I hate this.”
"I'm so sorry," he says and in those three words she gets what maybe he'll never tell her, sees him as desperate and lonely as her, going back to his old ways, just the way she'd done, because neither of them had had time to really get used to the new. There's lots of clubs in New York, filled with lots of girls whose names begin with 'C'.

"They weren't like that," she says, groping for the words, but determined to tell him. "Spike and Dru. They helped me. I needed—I needed to be touched and they held me and I couldn't—they're such a fucking couple, you know?—and they were even—and he's English and if I closed my eyes I could almost think—and he didn't fuck me because I was crying and—"

"Why were you crying?"

The words are said sharply and she's jolted out of her incoherent recitation. "He thought—he saw the marks on my ass. Little bit of a failure to communicate and he spanked me. Just once and it—God, Wes, it felt good, just for a split-second. Missed that pain so fucking much. Missed you. But it wasn't you and I didn't need it enough to go through with it. Any of it."

"God, Faith," he says quietly. "You have no idea what this is doing to me, do you?"

"No! I don't know!" she wails. "Tell me? Please? Tell me when you came with whoever it was you've fucked that it was different, that it wasn't as good. Tell me you thought of me when you were in them—no, don't, swear to me you didn't, not for a second, please! I don't fucking know. Wes, I came, yes, Dru saw to that and it was good, yes it was, but that was a one-time only and what do I do next, Wes? Really not cut out to go without forever, but Spike's a fucking walking wet-dream, Wes, and he's into it enough that he'd have spanked me red if I'd wanted it, but not even him—It wasn't you and that means it wasn't enough and it never will be."

She's losing it totally now and this is so wrong; he's never gonna call her again if he thinks this is going to happen but she can't calm down, not when she's got relief at confessing clashing against a sick despair that he's moved on enough to replace her. However fleetingly.

And she's only assuming that they were transient encounters. Fuck, maybe he's seeing someone, trying to be that fucked-up normal version of himself he seems to love so much, some rich bitch like Lilah, all power suits and smarm, because he's a man and they don't change, not really.

"It has to be enough," he grits out. "It's all we have. And, no, Faith, there's been no one since you"—and God, she wishes he could stop there, but he can't, she knows he won't—"who compares, and that's why, that's why I haven't—" He gives this goaded little sound and practically snarls at her. "You're unforgettable, Faith and I'm not sure I want to, I'm not sure I can. But I'm trying to, you have to believe me."

"Stop trying," she says and fuck, if she starts crying he'll go, she knows he will. "Wes—it doesn't have to be this way. This is just so fucking pointless, being apart."

"Perhaps it is," he admits, and there's nothing of the hope she's feeling in his voice, just an aching desolation. "But I won't risk hurting you again, Faith."

"You only hurt me by leaving, Wes," she says, and she's not feeling like crying anymore because she's right and he's fucking wrong. "That's the worst you could ever do, and you did it. And you were right, yeah, you were. I didn't know what I was doing and you were way out of line with some of the stuff you did when we hadn't sorted out all those boundaries and stuff. But, hey, I'm not just reading the classics, y'know. Spike gave me all these how to books; bet you know them, and fuck, Wes, you were right; we barely scratched the fucking surface."
“You're reading about it? What we did?”

He sounds stunned, fuck knows why. “Yes,” she says impatiently. “Wes, this is what I am, and I'm not gonna be all brood and gloom about it the way you are. And I want to do, like, research. There's all these sites on the net, but I'm freaked in case Monty comes up behind me—”

“As well you should be,” he says sternly. “This is exactly why I refused to have computers in my office; far too distracting. I'm surprised you get any work done.” And he hasn't used that prissy voice on her for so long.

“Yeah, well trust me, Wes, I spend less time surfing in office hours than I did bent over your desk getting my ass spanked,” she says dryly. “And I don't recall you complaining about me not getting through what needed doing.”

“You were an exemplary secretary once I'd trained you,” he says gravely and without a hint of sarcasm or humor. He sighs. “I knew this would happen if we spoke at length,” he says, and she gets the feeling he's talking to himself. “You're so very—”

“I'm right, Wes,” she snaps. “Look, we fucked up, yes, but has it changed the way you feel about me?”

“Don’t.”

“Don't make you admit you love me? I did it once, Wes, and I can do it again.”

“You don't need to,” he says and he's whispering now. “I never said I'd stopped, did I? But I'm not ready to risk—I'm not like you, Faith.”

“No,” she says simply. “You're a top, I'm a bottom. Night, Wes. Have a safe trip back and I'll speak to you—well, I'll write to you tomorrow and I'll call you Sunday, as normal, but y'know, now we're past the bullshit, you can always hit reply.”

And she waits politely for him to stammer a disconcerted good-bye before disconnecting.
Part Thirteen

Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Eight

She's not sure what she expects after what feels like the most monumental phone call since records began.

It's certainly not opening up her Gmail on Monday morning to find a message from Wes nestling in her inbox since the night before. She can already see the words rushing past: wordy crap like “last night was a temporary aberration”, “we should desist from this painful attempt to conciliate”, “never darken my phone line/in box with your pathetic ramblings.” Door’s slammed shut.

But then she stops being a drama queen and clicks on the message and she's already smiling because only Wes would write an e-mail as precise as the letters he used to dictate to her. Punctuation perfect, capital letters all lined up. Bet he even spell checked it before he sent it. Still, at least he managed not to date it and put his address at the top.

And she knows it's going to be okay, because he starts it with:

Dear Faith

I'm still up. I can't seem to sleep and will definitely suffer for it tomorrow as I believe a farewell hike to the pub in the next village has been planned.

I just wanted to say that despite my reticence when our conversation dangerously veered off course so soon, I'm very glad that we're back in contact. I'm also glad at our decision to be friends.

Would you think it potentially incendiary if I confess that I missed our friendship?

Anyway, I really must drag myself off to bed. And I'm sure you must have lots of work to do when you're not surfing dubious websites.

Good night or rather good morning,

Wes

Grinning, she takes a big gulp of her double caramel latte and clicks on 'reply.'

Hey Wes

Guess you haven't turned into a big, old nerd if you're still using the long words and the commas.

I'm glad that you're glad that we're back in contact. Even gladder that we're friends. I missed that too. Because we like, liked each other just as much as all the other stuff, didn't we?

It's way too early in the morning (and Monty's due in court this afternoon and if he spills coffee on another deposition, I'm gonna bop him over the head with his Harvard mug) to get too heavy about stuff.

Just got a favor to ask you—could you send me some more Orange Kit Kats? I managed to get through them wicked fast and I'm having serious withdrawal.

Have a good hike and don't drink too much beer or lager or whatever you call it over there.
And if he thinks that innocent little X is anything but then he can just freaking well bite her.

The tattoo's still throbbing away under her clothes, which she absolutely refuses to let Darla or Xander or anyone else see because it belongs to her and Wes. But it doesn't feel like the bad kind of secret, any more than the phone calls or the e-mail or the contents of the boxes that Darla brings up in a querulous voice every now and again.

There's no point in confessing about stuff that's only going to get her a metric assload of grief followed by an intervention with pizza and ice cream if she's lucky. So she hugs all of it close to her soul and knows that she's wearing this serene little smile on her face practically all the time, which felt strange at first but suits her. Like her swingy new hair.

She even gets to Tuesday afternoon without angsting about the lack of anything from wwpryce in her inbox. She can fill in the blanks herself. A long walk in the rain (because it rains all the time in England, she's pretty sure about that) to the pub with his cousins and then they sat by a roaring log fire and drank beer and maybe they roasted chestnuts because she also has a vague feeling that they do that all the time in the mother country too. Then he'd have had to go back, pack, have an early night, go to the airport, stopping off to buy her a box of Orange Kit Kats on the way...

And there's a ping because she's got mail.

Faith

Would you believe that I'm writing this while 40,000 feet up in the air? I find it almost impossible to comprehend that one can send e-mails while flying. Did you know about this? It was most unfair of you not to tell me. According to my skymap, I'm currently somewhere above Iceland. I'm also deathly bored and stuck on 14 across:

Pop opera starring Nicole Kidman.

Any ideas?

Wes

Monty's in court and she's got nothing better to do. Really. Well, except filing and she gives the pile of papers on her desk a dismissive look.

Hey Wes

Can't believe you sent me an e-mail from the plane! What can you see out of the window? And you'd better have bought me some Orange Kit Kats or no way in hell am I helping you with the crossword.

Faith x

She's barely got up from her desk to start on the A's when he replies:

My dearest, demanding, devious Faith

Lurking in my hand luggage are ten hand-picked Orange Kit Kats which I'm now planning to give to the snotty-nosed child behind me in a desperate attempt to get him to stop kicking the back of my seat. Unless you know someone else who might like them.

I can't see anything out of the window except sky. Did I mention how mind-numbingly bored I am?

Wes
She hasn't even got time to dwell on the 'dearest'; time enough for that later.

Wes, Wes, Wes

The answer to 14 across is Moulin Rouge and if you give that brat my Kit Kats then I'm gonna phone air traffic control and get your plane diverted via the North Pole.

Thank you, Faith. Though I'm assuming your threat was an idle one and you haven't joined any nascent terrorist organizations lately. One never knows with you. I have to go now, we're having a spot of turbulence.

Wes

PS: There's only one 't' in diverted.

Tuesday he's nowhere to be found but she puts that down to jet lag and on Wednesday it must be his first day back in the office so he'll be all busy dusting down his law books and making sure that no one over-watered his plants, or, like looked at them funny while he was away.

And on Wednesday in her lunch-hour she's too busy having a light bulb moment with her copy of SM 101 to even glance up when she hears her computer ping. She doesn't even check her inbox until she's scribbled in her notebook:

Me: aggressive bottom

Wes: straight top

• Some tops get off on bottoms who are defiant or subtly disobedient.

• Quite often a top will enjoy topping you because of your reactions—the way you wriggle, and squirm, and cry out.

• Just because you're on the bottom doesn't mean you're a puppet. But there is a big difference between being open and communicative, and trying to force things in your preferred direction. A good bottom is one who is enthusiastic, devoted to their top's pleasure, willing to surrender to their top's will, open about their own desires (in a respectful manner, of course), and happy to be bottoming.

“I'm so an aggressive bottom,” she mutters to herself as she shoves her notebook back in her bag and opens up her inbox. There's an e-mail from Spike asking her if she wants to go to some performance art show on Saturday night, one from Darla asking her to pick up some Hamburger Helper on the way home and one from Wes which makes her spit diet Coke over her desk.

Faith

Back in the office now and an Orange Kit Kat is on its way to you. In the singular. Though it may be some comfort for you to know that the other nine were exceedingly tasty. Or maybe you'll get another one in the post when you least expect it. I just popped out to get a paper and saw a small dog with its fur dyed bright pink. It looked most disgruntled.

Wes
She’s already composing her reply which mostly consists of telling him what she thinks of his chocolate bogarting in like, no uncertain terms when Monty comes in, practically vibrating with post-court stress and she has to spend the rest of the afternoon on her knees (and not in a good way) in his office helping him sort through papers and getting him ready for tomorrow.

There’s five minutes before she needs to go and meet Xander to help him pick out his sixth date outfit when she gets a chance to e-mail Wes.

Wes

You think you’re so cute with your evil chocolate withholding routine, yeah? Well, not so much. I’m sending you an invite code to Gmail because I want to send you some stuff that isn’t work-safe. You know I told you I’ve been doing some research, well I think you’ll find it kinda interesting. Or maybe you won’t. Your call. Won’t get mad if you don’t want to. Really, really won’t but please...

And then before she can chicken out, she reminds herself that she’s the pushiest bottom in all of Push Town and she clicks send.

Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Nine

When she switches on her computer in the morning, she’s almost a little shocked to find an acceptance e-mail from one Wesley Wyndam-Pryce waiting for her. Stranger things have happened, sure, but for a second there she thinks the earth might stop spinning on its axis.

Wesley Wyndam-Pryce has accepted your invitation to Gmail and has chosen the brand new address wesley.wyndam-pryce@gmail.com. Wesley's new address has been automatically added to your contact list so you can stay in touch with Gmail.

Thanks,

The Gmail Team

Okay, so now what? She’s the one who opened the whole “not work safe” ball of wax, now she’s got to deliver. Luckily Monty’s out of the office—some client luncheon that’ll undoubtedly end in hours of chummy martini-imbibing and cigar smoking—which means she’s pretty much got the office to herself all afternoon. So she takes a deep breath and dives right in. Too late to backpedal now.

Hey Wes—

So glad you took me up on the invite. Gmail is pretty cool—it keeps everything organized into conversations and thanks to all that storage space I can even hook you up with some mp3s now. I’m sure you’re dying to know what Interpol sound like… Man cannot live on classical music alone. C’mon, Wes, expand your horizons, you know you wanna.

Anyway, I’ve been dying to share some of this stuff I’ve been reading about with you—it’s really fascinating. Complicated, but fascinating. I mean, it’s still pretty new and I’m still sorting everything out, you know? But you’d be proud of me—I spend every night before I go to bed reading and writing stuff down in my journal.

There’s a lot to think about, but one thing I totally get now is that, it’s all about exchange, give-and-take. I didn’t know enough to share responsibility with you, and you didn’t want to, like, burden me with it or something. But it wouldn’t have been a burden for me—I just, well, I didn’t know any
better. When I read this I had to underline it: “The submissive is proud to submit, and the dominant is proud to receive the gift of their submission.”

That’s how it could have been, Wes. And you know what? When we were together, I was proud. No, fuck that. I am proud. Of everything we did together, everything we meant to one another. And still mean, I hope.

Are you?

...

Well, I’m going to stop there—that’s probably enough shop talk for one e-mail. Truth is, I’m kinda bored today. It’s really quiet here. I might even get some more reading done. Oh, don’t worry—I’m not dragging out Screw the Roses when Monty’s got his back turned. No, I’m in the middle of Kavalier and Clay and I have to tell you, I’m not feelin’ it. Maybe I’ll go back and finish Cold Comfort Farm which I liked even though I felt like I was missing pretty much all the jokes.

How’s your day going? Are you still jet-lagged? Do you miss home already? Even the shin-kicking cousins?

Okay, enough with the twenty questions.

Signing off,

Faith x

She hits send with less trepidation this time. She’s never quite sure how he’ll react to anything these days, but for the most part he seems intent on pleasantly surprising her so she isn’t going to stress about it too much. In fact, she practically forgets altogether about having sent the e-mail—she’s busy writing back to Spike about the show on Saturday when she hears the tell-tale ping of a new message in her in-box.

Faith-

I take it by Interpol you’re referring to some sort of musical group and not the global organization? Despite the fact that I seem to be moving gradually in the direction of the new century by embracing e-mail, I have not yet unlocked the eternal mysteries of the mp3. I’m willing to try some of your music if you’re willing to explain how I can play them. Deal? I presume you wouldn’t like some Górecki in return…?

And I don’t mind the twenty questions. In fact they’re sparing me momentarily from this deposition from hell, which I cannot bring myself to tackle.

I do miss home, rather. Feels odd to say that after all this time and finally mean it, but I do. My family is obviously more forgiving of my youthful folly than I ever was. In point of fact, no-one really cared about it as much as my father did my mother certainly didn’t. But she kept quiet all this time because she respected my decision to separate myself irrevocably from them.

I don’t deserve her forgiveness, really, but I’m grateful for it. I had an unexpectedly lovely visit. Perhaps I’ll tell you more about it when next we speak on the phone.

As for your other query—well. Two deceptively simple little words, and you have me at a loss as to how to answer you properly.

You asked me if I was proud of what we did.
No. How could I be? I hurt you, Faith, and to take pleasure in that goes against everything—

I was raised by a man who believed with utter sincerity that women were the weaker sex in every way—and yet still saw nothing wrong with disciplining his wife when he thought it necessary. I don't mean in the same way that I corrected you. No. He never, to my knowledge, struck her in anger, or passion, but I saw him take her to task once, and finish his lecture with a single, deliberate slap that left her face reddened, bruised. He would have told me, had I dared take him to task for it, that it was his duty, as it was his duty to chastise me.

I hit you once in anger, Faith. Just once. Oddly, that blow, of all the ones I gave you, is the one of which I'm least ashamed because there was no thought behind it. The ones I planned hours before, the ones I'd spend my day anticipating...they were different.

No duty involved there; just pleasure. My pleasure.

I sometimes wonder how the child who spent hours reading about heroes, champions of right, imagining himself as one of Arthur's knights, fighting with Robin, and Ivanhoe. And yes, even Biggles—I wonder how I went from idolizing those men to what I became.

They would never have hurt you. Would Lancelot have ever raised his hand to Guinevere? I don't think so. Lancelot...I always did identify with him more, and that's fitting. Galahad whose, 'strength was as the strength of ten because my heart is pure', well, he's not really a good match for me, is he? Lancelot, whose unbridled lust—and stripped of the poetry, that's what it was—brought down all that was good, spoiled everything—far more fitting.

So, no, Faith, I'm not proud.

But when I remember you—and there's no single moment of our time together that I've forgotten—you were always so...accepting of everything I made you endure without ever being—I'm finding this hard to talk about, Faith so forgive me my ramblings. You say you were proud of it, that you took pride in what you were to me, in fulfilling your side of the, well, contract, I suppose? Yes. I think I can see that, looking back and it explains a lot. I don't think I fully appreciated it at the time. Too difficult to believe that you could, that anyone could.

I've read some of the books you must be trying now—not as many perhaps, as I gave up many years ago trying to perform the tricky task of self-analysis. I read what there was—less of it, and far less readily available than now—gritted my teeth for long enough to brand myself a sadist and plunged into an exploration, not of the whys and wherefores, as you're doing, but into indulging my desires as much as I was able.

Which wasn't much.

You're of a different order to me, Faith. So brave, always. So open.

It's impossible to doubt you, even when I can't look into your face, because you're so very bad at lying. I knew, all those weeks, I knew something was wrong.

So if you tell me that our relationship was a source of pride to you, not shame, I can only say that I'm happy to hear it but I'm not sure—Faith, I want to share that feeling but I don't know if I can. You're so very persuasive but you're going up against decades of believing that what I wanted was something to be ashamed of, that what I did was something to be hidden.

I'm not sure even you can change that, Faith.

But, if it helps, for the first time I wish you could.
She imagines it took him hours to compose that answer. And yeah, he’s pretty goddamn persuasive too, but she’s not going to let him get away with being such a fucking martyr. Not anymore. She writes the reply in a rush, pouring all her indignation and frustration and regret into words that she can only hope carry some shred of how important this is to her. She wants to make him understand, somehow—

Jesus, Wes. You really are made of some incredibly dense material. You didn’t make me “endure” anything—can’t you see that? You’re acting like I did everything for you out of some kind of—obligation, is that it?

Well, that’s not it. And you’re so far off base I don’t even know where to start.

My life hasn’t been all that easy, either. You may have noticed that my family is pretty screwed up. Yeah, that’s a fucking newsflash. But that day that you spanked me—it was like, everything else kind of fell away. I’d been looking for so long for something that helped. And everything I’d tried—the stealing, the burning stuff, the getting down on my knees more times than I can count—just left me feeling emptier than before.

But not that. Never that.

Don’t you see? You didn’t debase me, you lifted me up.

I just wish it had gone both ways.

She’s practically shaking when she hits send.

Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Nine

The single chocolate bar is waiting for her when she gets home; and there's an empty wrapper in there too, with a Post-it attached. He's scrawled, 'You're quite right; they're addictive' on it and signed it with a W and a squiggle that just has to be a kiss.

Doesn't make her feel any better when he's silent the next day though and, because Monty's so not the sort to work weekends, with the following day being Saturday she's got no way of checking for a reply. She can phone though, and she does, really late on Saturday night, when Spike and Dru have dropped her off after a night that was, well, interesting, even if the frozen paint she'd been handed and told to warm with her body before using it to paint on a twenty-foot long white wall had been more participation than she'd been planning on. Dru's walk through the crowd with a doll, lights turned down, spotlight on the doll's china face and blue, staring eyes had been creepy as fuck though.

But Wesley's phone had rung and rung and he was either fast asleep in bed, or out.

And she's so not contemplating what Wesley's idea of a Saturday night out might be but she hopes it was the kind he can send her a ticket stub for.

She waits until 9.03 on Sunday night to ring him, not to get him freaking, but because she's not sure if he wants to call her, take that small amount of control back. But he doesn't, so she settles back and presses the buttons. No speed dial; she likes to use the slow, deliberate press of her finger against the buttons to focus herself. Especially tonight because she's got plans. Plans that have taken her all day to work out, all evening to rehearse, until the small trash can in the corner is filled with crumpled
paper and her head's full of dreams.

“Hello, Faith,” he says before she's had chance to even draw breath.

“One day, it'll be, like someone selling replacement windows, not me,” she tells him. “Then what will you say?”

“Something very rude,” he says. “How are you?”

“Fine, but I want the rest of my chocolate, Wes.”

“Always so demanding. All in good time. And stop pouting. It doesn't work long-distance.”

“Did it ever?” she asks curiously, trying to remember any time when he'd relented or done something faster just because she'd begged, pled, or pouted. And she's noticing that they're sticking to the light-hearted, which is fine for now, but they're gonna get to those last two e-mails, she's set on that. No fucking way is she going along with the idea that he's too old to change.

“I think I'll refuse to answer that,” he says. “If you knew which ploys were effective that would never do, now would it? I'd lose all my advantages.”

And they're hovering on the edge of something there, some admission that there'll be a time when they're face-to-face again, but he steps back. “Did you call me last night?”

“Yeah, I did,” she admits. “Went to this performance art show with Spike and Dru and wanted to share. I'll e-mail you a link to the site they've got set up.”

“If you like,” he says agreeably, although she'll bet money on him never doing more than give it a cursory look. “I was in company too but the entertainment was less, ah, experimental.”

And he wouldn't have said that much if it was something he didn't want her to ask about, so she plunges in. “Yeah? What was it then?”

“One of the senior partners, Rupert Giles, seems to have taken me under his wing as we share a nationality, a university and a love of single malts; he asked me over to his house for dinner and we ended up playing chess until very late.”

“Sounds like your sort of an evening,” she says cautiously. “Is he married?”

“Widowed,” Wesley says. “Some years ago now, I believe.” He hesitates. “He—it's the oddest coincidence, but he knew my mother. Not well, but enough that he was interested in hearing about my trip.”

“I am too,” she says.

“Really?” He sounds doubtful and she's all geared up to get probing him when he takes this deep breath and starts talking.

It's a world she doesn't know, green, green, green, with tiny country lanes and cows in fields and woods and pubs and shops with names she doesn't know, crammed full of candy she wants to eat. It's where Wesley came from and it hits her how far away from it he is.

“Your mom,” she says when he pauses in the middle of explaining exactly what a ploughman's lunch is. “She had to have been so glad to see you, Wes. Had to have missed you so much.”

Years without him. Years of returned or ignored letters. God, that had to have hurt.
“She did,” he admits. “If I’d known how much—but she wouldn’t allow me to dwell on the past—”

Good for Mrs. W-P, Faith thinks. “And she's changed so much since my father died. She'd never been out of the country before, but she went on a trip to Egypt last winter. And she's taken up painting. I brought back one she'd done from a photograph of me as a child. She'd done that when as far as she knew she was never going to hear from me again—”

“She's your mom, Wes,” she tells him as his recital falters. “Can't imagine how she could ever stop loving you.”

“Can't you?” He sounds wistful and she's not going to let him get all mopey on her.

“No.” Then, before he's got chance to reply, she says, “Guess you don't want me reading to you any more then, now we're, you know, actually talking?”

“On the contrary,” he says promptly, just jumping at the chance to change the subject as she knew he would. “I'm looking forward to it. What did you have planned?”

“Tell me where you are,” she says. “What you're wearing. I want to picture it.”

There's a moment of startled silence and then he chuckles. “As I'm alone and not expecting that to change, I'm wearing a robe. I've just finished bathing and I'm, well, I'm in my bedroom.”

“You're lying on your bed?” she asks. “The same—”

“No.” His voice wavers and then steadies. “Not—not our bed. Most of my furniture is still in storage. This apartment belongs to a lawyer who's been sent to Europe for a year. I'm sub-letting it, furnished, while I look around.”

She absorbs that and nods, though he can't see her. “Think I get the picture, Wes.” God, does she ever. His hair, sleeked back and two shades darker, skin still redolent of his special soap, damp so that when she strokes her hand against it, it stutters and she has to move so very slowly.

“I'm going to start now,” she tells him. “And you're not to interrupt, or I'll stop.”

“I—very well.”

He sounds intrigued, a little bit wary even. She wants him like that. Well, no, she wants him hard, wants him aching, but that can come later. She lets her voice take on the cadence of someone reading, although the only script's in her head. This is performance art, too, she thinks, with an audience of one.

“She gets into bed and she's wearing the slip he told her he liked, the one she knows he'll never tear because he wouldn't do that to something she loved. It felt cold when she put it on, and she shivered, got all these goose bumps over her arms, but it's warm against her skin now. The room's dark and the breeze from the open window, well it's making her nipples tighten until they start to hurt, just a little, just a bit. Or maybe that's because she knows the rest of the house is dark too, and he'll be here soon. Yeah, think it must be, don't you?

“So she lifts her hand, not hurrying, because he's taught her not to ever rush, and rubs them through the silk, closing her eyes and pretending it's him pinching them or biting down. And sometimes she wishes he'd do it harder, or ease off, but, you know, it's up to him and she likes that. She likes not having a choice. Makes it all so very fucking simple for her.”

“Faith?” He sounds so uncertain but then he gathers himself and he's verging on stern. “What are you doing?”
“I'm stopping, Wes,” she says, keeping her voice level and controlled. “Because you interrupted me. Guess that means you don't want to hear what happens next.” She allows his silence to answer her. He doesn't want her to stop. And if he's not hard she'll give the next Orange Kit Kat to Xander. “Maybe I'm wrong though. Should I carry on reading? Your call, Wes.”

There's just long enough for her to take two deep, slow breaths and then he says, “Carry on.”

“Yes, Wesley.” She pauses, gathers the threads of the story and starts to weave her net. “She's so wet already. Been like that since she stepped into the shower and shaved herself bare the way he'd told her to. She's not sure what turns her on more; when he gives her an order, or when she obeys it. Both, maybe. And if he's whispered it in her ear or written it down for her to find, it's all the same. She shivers and she gets wet and she obeys him.”

There's the smallest sound and it might be her name, bitten-off sharply. She smiles and lets her hand drift down from her nipple.

“She's wet but he's always really clear on where she's allowed to touch and her cunt's for him, no one else. Totally off-limits to get herself off and she can't remember the last time she did when he wasn't watching her, telling her what to do, so his voice and what her fingers are doing get all mixed-up in her head. It got so he could lean in and whisper, 'Come, Faith' and she would, just from that. Did I mention her name was Faith, Wes? This girl in this story? Well it is. And she's so fucking wet, so fucking open, he's gonna be able to slide inside her without touching her if he wants. Just sit beside her on her bed, the same one she's slept on every night since she was nine, and now she's nineteen—yeah, same age as me, what're the odds? —it's a little too narrow, little too short. So he'll be on the edge and he'll tell her to spread her legs wide, and maybe he'll just look, take his time, lean in close so she can feel his breath cool the heat that's coming off her, never touching, never. And—”

She can hear his breath, husky and fast, and she eases back.

“But I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I, Wesley? Because he's not there yet. He still hasn't come. It's just Faith lying on her bed, wet and slippery and waiting. Waiting for him, because he's told her to. Trying to be good and keep her fingers away but not quite managing it and they're so close to her clit, it's almost disobeying.

And she might try harder to please him if she didn't know it's her small rebellions that please him the most. Yeah, she's worked that out.

“Now, you know her name's Faith, but you don't know who this mystery man is, do you, Wes? Bet you're dying to know who it is that's got her like this, so hot she can't think straight, so fucking ready.

“Who is she waiting for, Wes? For a Romeo, all pure and sweet, practically a fucking virgin? Or for someone like her, someone who knows what she wants and doesn't mind how long it takes to give it to her, because when it comes to her he's got all the time in the world? Who am I waiting for, Wesley?”

When he answers he's right there with her, in her room, in her game.

“You're waiting for me, Faith. And you're not waiting very patiently. I think I'd like your hand to be by your side, please.”

She spreads her fingers wide against the bed, carefully placed so she's not touching her skin and then brings them together, clutching at the quilt, gripping it hard so she can keep her voice steady.
“Yes, Wesley.”

There’s a hiss in the dead air between them, makes it seem like they’ve both disappeared into her fantasy, like there's no longer hundreds of miles between them.

She's not sure what to do next though—continue? Or let him take over? And that's when she realizes that she's holding her breath in anticipation and getting lightheaded. The thin comforter is crumpled tight in her hand, and yeah, she's really freakin' wet now, like her fictional self, and when she finally starts breathing again, it cuts through the silence, as ragged and needy as his had been.

“That's good. Now, keep it there and continue reading, Faith,” he drawls, slight emphasis on the word they know is a fabrication.

Her words come out in a tumble, the pretense of repeating words off a page dissolving rapidly, because just how is she supposed to turn the pages with her hand by her side? ‘He was working late, without her. They hated that, but sometimes he needed to be alone to work out his thoughts. But then he'd called and said he was coming over. Didn't give her a chance to argue, or mention that her mother was asleep in the other room. Just said he was coming, and to leave the door unlocked. And on his drive over, he nearly runs two red lights; he's so distracted by the thought of her waiting there in her room, waiting for him. He knows her house, but he's never seen her bedroom, though she's described it to him before. He knows that her room is the first one upstairs, at the top of the landing.

“And when she sees his headlights flash through her window, she slips her hand away from where it's just barely hovering over her clit. Rests her hands flat on the bed, waiting just the way she knows he wants her to be.

“It's hard though, and he can't get there fast enough. Her hands itch to be teasing her clit, and her fingers are twitchy by her sides. If she listens real close, she can hear him shut the door of his car, hear him slowly turn the knob on the front door and slip inside, carefully pushing the door shut behind him. And she knows that look that's on his face. He's so serious, so careful, so deliberate.

“She told him about the stair, the one with the squeak, fourth from the top, and she's counting his footsteps, holding her breath when he reaches that tricky one. But he steps around it, of course, because he's been planning this trip since they met. Waiting for the right night to come over and fuck her in her narrow little bed, pressing her down into it.

“But I'm getting ahead of myself again, aren't I Wesley?” He hasn't been able to get a word in edgewise, but she can hear every little involuntary response—every breath, and she likes the thought of him sprawled on a stranger's bed, surrounded by someone else's furniture and knick-knacks and books. She can tell he wants to interrupt, take over her story, but there's something unspoken between them, and she's not sure when it happened—maybe when he interrupted her the first time, but it was clear to them both, or so it seemed. He would tell her what to do only when it was necessary.

Boldly, she forges ahead. “Are you hard, Wesley?” She doesn't pause to let him answer, though. “I know you've been stroking your cock since we got on the phone together, haven't you? Have you done that every time I’ve called you? Is the sound of my voice enough to make you think of nothing but fucking me?”

“I think you know the answers to all those questions, Faith.”

“I want to hear you say it, Wes. Want to hear you say you still want to fuck me that way. The way it used to be. The way we used to be.”
She can tell he's opened his mouth to say something, but the words are still trapped in his brain, held hostage by his damn insecurities, the one she knows that her last e-mail must have at least begun to chip through. Because otherwise he wouldn't still be on the phone, would have hung up fifteen minutes ago, stammering an excuse and fading back into the night.

“You're a glorious sight, splayed out on your bed, waiting for me,” he finally drawls at her, hiding behind the game. He's changed the tense because he's practically there with her in the room now. With her eyes closed, she can forget that she's clenching the phone to her ear, can forget that his breathing isn't coming from his dark figure in the doorway instead of across a phone line, still tinged with static. “So much of that comes from the sheer fact that you're aware of the effect you have on me. But there's no maliciousness to it. You know your power and you don't use that against me, don't use it to manipulate me. Quite the contrary, you're content, no, that's the wrong word. You're begging me to manipulate you—with my hands, with my mind. Do you have any idea, any at all...” He falters, falling into a stammer.

“Wesley, just answer the questions.”

He's pressed so close to the phone, she can hear him swallow nervously and force the words out. “Of course I am. Of course I do, Faith. How could I not let my hands wander that first night when Nabokov's prose dripped so sweetly from your lips? Or any of the subsequent Sundays? Or now? “It's a little unfair, don't you think?”

“Not really.” His voice drops to a husky whisper. “Keep your hand at your side.”

She smiles, because she knows that he knows that she wouldn't dream of moving it until he told her to. But frustratingly, he keeps dodging the issue, slipping from her grasp, out-gaming her game. “Then say it,” she bites out instead of the demure acquiescence she's sure he was expecting.

He sighs, frustrated. “Say what, Faith? Really, your lack of focus is...”

“Tell me you're not ashamed anymore. You wouldn't be on the phone with me still if you weren't. Tell me you're not ashamed of yourself, of me, of us. Of what we have. Tell me we're special. Tell me you can't have this with anyone else. Tell me you don't want to be with anyone else.”

There's a long pause before he speaks, and her fingers drum impatiently against the mattress. As frustrating as the conversation has become, she's still pleased that they're butting heads like this, that he's played her game this far.

“Wouldn't you rather hear what I have to say, instead of empty words parroted back at you?” he asks, the words so tart they sting and nearly shatter that confidence.

“Of course, Wes. The last thing I want to do is put words in your mouth.”

“I want you to touch yourself now, Faith. I want you to...”

“Wrong answers again, Wesley.” Her patience is snapping.

“I really wish you wouldn't interrupt like that; I wasn't finished.”

“I'm sorry,” she whispers, genuinely contrite. “Go on.”

There's a long silence and she can tell he's regrouping his thoughts, and she doesn't push him further. “You don't know what your last e-mail did to me. You couldn't, of course. You shattered my concentration so fully, I couldn't work. I didn't know what to do—I've always been able to shove my
emotions aside, get things done. And for what was probably the first time in my life, I got up, I walked away. I took the rest of the day off. That's the nice thing about working in a practice; my co-counsel on the case could see I was distressed. He was practically shoving me out the door.

"He sounds like my kind of guy. I'd like to shake his hand."

"I have no doubt that you're Lindsay's kind of girl, as well—and he'd like to do more than shake your hand."

"Stay on topic, Wes."

"Right. Of course. I left the office and got into a cab. I didn't know where I was going, I still haven't been able to explore the city as much as I would have liked. Without thinking, I asked him to take me to the Frick."

"That's where all those John Singer Sargent paintings are."

"You've been reading up, I'm impressed. There are a good number of them there, yes."

"Well, I've been trying to get all that modern art, but I really do like his portraits."

"As do I, and as I wandered the galleries, I realized why I wanted to be there when I turned around a corner, and there she was. One of his subjects resembled you a bit. It's always been one of my favorite paintings, but it had never struck me like this. The girl, the subject, she's staring right out of the canvas, right at you, daring you to challenge her. Daring you to take her on. And she looks so happy. So joyous. She was everything I remembered you looking like, Faith.

"And the words of your last e-mail. When you said I'd lifted you up, I am ashamed to say that I didn't believe you—that I even believed you were dangerously delusional—until I saw this radiant, confident young woman challenging me with her gaze across a century."

"I'd love to see it someday."

"And so you shall, I'm sure of it."

Another long minute of silence ticks between them after his voice trails off.

"I'm trying, Faith. It's going to take me some time, but I'm willing to try. Between you and my mother, I'm beginning to see that it's pointless endeavor to continue wallowing in my self pity when such demanding women have an interest in my well-being."

"That's a step. You weren't even willing to try in your last e-mail, Wes. I'll take my victories where I can."

"Like dragging me into your little game this evening?"

"Something like that. But hey, I'm not the one lounging around in a bathrobe. Which reminds me; we got a little sidetracked, didn't we?"

He laughs, really laughs for the first time in ages. "I suppose that's one way of putting it."

She wishes she could just press a button on her phone and he'd materialize in front of her, still sleek and wet from his bath, wouldn't even pull him down on the bed. Not at first. Just get to her feet and hold him, get used to the feel of him, of his arms around her again.

"God, I wish you were here, Wes," she can't help but sigh and he sighs back, a perfect echo of her
frustration.

“It would be so simple, Faith,” he says carefully. “I could just jump in a cab and go to the airport or send you a ticket and have you on my doorstep in just a few hours…”

“Then why don't you?” she bites out and then tries to bite it back. “I'm sorry, okay. I'm gonna give you time, I am. But I'm not gonna stop with this, Wes. I'm way more stubborn than you.”

And she is and he fucking well knows it, which is why he gives this pained little chuckle. “You're uncontrollable, Faith. I always set such great store by my capacity for control but never with you. I couldn't control my reactions to you, the way I felt about you, the way you made me feel—even now, when my mind was so set. You always find a way to pierce my resolve.”

He sounds a bit pissed off about it but she's still wet and wanting on her bed and she'd bet every single one of those Orange Kit Kats that she can get him from humble to hard again in ten seconds. “Damn straight I can. About to pierce it all over again, Wes.”

Her eyes roll back in her head so hard she thinks she might have dislocated something in her cranium when she hears him sigh yet again. Is he going for the world record?

“I don't want to lead you on, Faith. Or give you false expectations,” he murmurs. “Maybe you should just read me something from Kavalier and Klay instead.”

“And maybe I really should get on a plane so I can come over there and bitchslap you,” she growls and smirks when she hears his little huffy noise of outrage. “I know you've still got, like, stuff to deal with but doesn't mean we can't get each other off in the meantime. Not like you haven't been jerking yourself off every other time I read to you, is it?”

There's a pause so pregnant that she thinks it might just have gone in to labor and then he snaps at her, really fucking snaps at her so she's clutching fistfuls of the sheet again.

“What I really want to do is tip you over my knee, yank up that slip so I can see your pretty arse just begging for the touch of my hand, for the sharp sting of a slap. But your mother's asleep next door, isn't she?”

He's back in the game with a vengeance. “Yeah, she really is,” she says, although Darla's having a sleepover with the boyfriend. “Guess we'll need to be totally quiet.”

“But you do so love to thrash around,” he drawls. “And I imagine your bed creaks. I think I shall have to restrain you just to be on the safe side.”

The hand that isn't clutching the phone is creeping toward the hard, aching tip of her breast now. He hasn't said that she could but then again what does he expect?

“I'm touching myself, Wes,” she murmurs just to make sure that he's down with that.

“Be more specific, Faith,” he barks at her. “Where are you touching yourself?”

“My breasts,” she croaks. “Can't help it.”

“I want you to suck your fingers into your mouth,” he tells her hoarsely and she's rushing to obey, making sure she gives him the soundtrack that she knows he wants. “Now I want you to rub them against your nipples. Are they all pretty and wet now, Faith?”

She lifts her head to see the damp sheen on her breasts. “Yeah.”
“I imagine that your cunt's pretty and wet too, isn't it? I can see it glistening as I spread your legs, tie you down, a silk scarf around each ankle. Then your wrists so you're spread out before me like a feast. Breasts heavy and aching and you beg me to touch them, take them into my mouth, use my tongue, use my teeth. But I've already told you that you need to be quiet, Faith, and you're being unforgivably demanding. Do you want me to gag you?”

“No, Wes,” she's whispering frantically and her legs are parted so far that the muscles in her thighs are quivering, one arm stretched out to cling onto her broken headboard because she can almost feel the soft chafing of the scarf holding her open. “Don't want that.”

“Well, what you want is rather immaterial,” he says silkily. “I wanted to go down on you but it's not possible because you're going to moan and whimper, aren't you, Faith?”

And he can't because he's thousands of miles away but she's still got tears spilling down her cheeks. “I'll be quiet, Wes, promise I will.”

“Even when I hold you open, one thumb resting on your clit so I can fuck you with my tongue. Will you be quiet then?”

“I'll try,” she hisses. “Please, Wes, please…”

His breath is coming in harsh, ragged intervals and she can see his long, elegant fingers slowly sliding over the warm, wet length of his cock, even as she can also see him looming over her as she's splayed out on the bed.

“I want you to slide your hand down your belly, Faith,” he says in a softer voice. “All the way down to your cunt. Are you wet? Tell me how wet you are.”

Her fingers are sliding over her skin superfast so she can dip inside her soaking pussy. “Really wet. Feels so good and I just need…”

“I know what you need. I always do.” It's true. Times like these all his doubt and ambivalence melts away and he's certain, assured and yeah, kinda dark. “Just slide one finger inside your cunt slowly, Faith. Do you think you might need another one?”

She's already moaning like she's got her whole hand in there and she's not even sure if she's managing to sound out 'yes' but he tells her to add two more fingers so she guesses he understood.

Then he flickers back to the other game they're playing and the shift doesn't feel awkward, just that she has these two versions of him now. The one who's letting her fuck herself with shaking fingers, thumb rubbing relentlessly against her swollen clit and the other one who's straddling her now, cock nudging against her cunt…

“And I'm going to have to put my hand over your mouth, Faith, because you're still making those delicious little sounds even though I expressly forbid it. You'll have to remind me to give you a severe and thorough spanking when we're back in the office—not that I'm likely to forget.”

“God, Wes… just want you to fuck me,” she grits out, straining her ears for the sound of his hand moving faster along his cock, fingers twisting over the damp head, getting wet, getting messy.

“Even though you're spread out when I begin to fuck you, it's always a surprise how tight you are. And I have to go slowly, Faith. You're a pleasure that I don't want to rush and we absolutely can't make a sound. Your teeth are biting into my hand, which is another thing I'll have to punish you for tomorrow. I can feel your cunt fluttering against me…”
He stops and her hips are lifting up off the bed as she drives her fingers in faster, harder, only
vaguely aware of the high pitched little cries that she's making.

“That's my Faith,” he gasps. “My beautiful Faith fucking herself… such pretty sounds.”

“You… are you?”

“Yes, of course I am,” he mutters in a strained voice. “I want you to come now, Faith. Come for me. Just for me.”

And he's silent after that. But not really because she can hear how his breaths catch in his throat because she's spasming out her want and love and need and not holding back anything. Especially not his name because she can't stop saying it over and over again like it's a magic chant that will bring him back to her. He gives one tiny groan that sounds like it hurts and she wishes she could feel him spurting inside her.

They're both panting in unison and she's clutching the phone in a hot, sweaty grip as she rolls over and snuggles against the pillow.

“That was even better than the last time we did the phone sex, Wes,” she says when she can actually string a sentence together and he gives a laugh that sounds grateful.

“I suppose it was rather,” he muses, before clearing his throat. “You're a very wicked girl, Faith, to bully me into such unnatural acts with a phone.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she mock-snarls, relieved beyond all measure that he's not ringing off with stammered apologies or even worse, a terse good-bye. “Like you didn't totally get off on it.”

“As long as you don't expect a repeat performance every night,” he says lightly. “And you're not to start sending me obscene e-mails describing what you're wearing or not wearing,” he adds sternly. “Because my productivity levels will plummet and there is the small matter of time. Of giving me some, yes?”

It's a charming, clever speech, designed not to offend but to let her know that she needs to back off. But she's got her fingers crossed behind her back as she agrees demurely. “I'd never do that, Wes. Light-hearted e-mails coming up, check, but we can still speak on the phone on Sundays right? And, y'know, now that we've done this once, doesn't seem like it would hurt if…”

“Faith! Really, you're utterly incorrigible,” he chides her with just the faintest bite to his voice. “Let's see how things are next Sunday, shall we?”

“I guess…”

“And stop pouting. I can hear you pouting, it's quite extraordinary.”

“I'm totally not!” she protests but he's laughing like he doesn't believe her.

“Good night, Faith, sleep well,” he says and he's still laughing even as he hangs up.

Chapter One Hundred and Thirty

She sleeps well, just as if that final comment had been an order, and she wakes with so much purpose and resolve filling her that she could probably leap tall buildings if she put her mind to it, but she doesn't bother trying, because she's planning and plotting and God, he's so doomed.
Just thinking of that puts a smug, secret smile on her face as she walks into the office and boots up the computer. Part of her brain is screaming warnings about getting too confident, based on nineteen years of being disappointed at every fucking turn, but she's only got to remember him telling her to come for him, calling her his beautiful Faith, and the scream fades to a thwarted whimper.

But she's promised him to back off, and she does. There's nothing his mother couldn't have read in the e-mail she sends him telling him all about her Saturday night experience and how her fingernails are still stained cobalt-blue and vermilion from the painting, and Tuesday's, when she earnestly asks him a series of technical questions on Monty's behalf that prompt a three page long screed of references and pertinent citations, is just so fucking industrious and obedient of her that she deserves a pat on the head.

Which she gets just before she goes home Tuesday night as one final e-mail arrives from him:

*Bill for research and supply of data re the 1966 case of Deward v the State of Florida.*

*Amount due; three pages of literature, to be read aloud at 9.01 precisely on Sunday November 21.*

W. Wyndam-Pryce Esq.

And even as she's smiling, she's wondering what to say in the minute he's given her that'll keep him on the phone after she's finished reading.

Wednesday morning she wakes early and stares at the clock until it gets to 7.30 before calling him. She's a little bit curious about how he'll sound when he's not expecting it to be her and yeah, it's his crisp voice, not sounding at all sleepy.

“Hello?”

“Good morning, Wes.”

“Faith?” The crispness softens, just for a second there as he says her name and she can't help hoping that maybe he's spent the night dreaming about her, woken up wishing she was beside him. “What do you want?”

And she's got to do this just right, and she's panicking a little, because it had seemed like such a good idea when she'd thought of it, but now, this early in the morning—but they'd never played their games to a timetable, never restricted them to the night. Time he remembered that; time she worked her way into his life again, 24/7, just like it used to be.

“I'm getting dressed to go to work, Wesley,” she says. “Monty's got clients coming in this morning, important account, and I want to, like made a good impression when they walk in, you know?”

“Very laudable of you, but I still don't see why that necessitates a call to me at—Good Lord, Faith, the crack of dawn for you.”

“Suppose you've been up for hours?” she asks tartly because if there's one thing they don't agree on, and never will, it's the idea that there's anything clever about waking up early.

“Since six,” he admits, sounding faintly smug. “I exercised, breakfasted, showered, and now I'm about to leave.”

He puts a slight emphasis on the last word in a not-very-subtle hint and she ignores it, keeping her voice calm and unhurried.
“I want you to tell me what to wear, Wesley.”

There’s a small silence. “I’m sorry?”

And once, maybe months ago, he could’ve pulled that off, made her think he was annoyed or indifferent, but not now.

“You know my wardrobe as well as I do, Wes. I don’t wear the dresses you got for me, can’t dress like that for Monty, just can’t, but everything else, yeah, still got it all.”

He drops the pretense. “Faith, this is crossing a line. I asked you to give me time.”

“I did. I gave you two days.” She takes a deep breath. “Ring off then, Wes. Slam the door in my face. Go and hide. Waste more time agonizing away or just shoving every thought of me—of us—out of your mind. Bet you’re good at that by now.”

There’s another few seconds of loaded silence—and God, do they drag—and then he sighs in what has to be defeat, before saying firmly. “I’d like you to hang up now, Faith, and go and sit on your bed, feet side by side, hands on your knees. You’re to remain like that until I call you back. What time do you start work?”

“Nine,” she whispers, forcing out the words through the lump in her throat.

“I’ll call you from my office.”

The click is as sharp as a slap and this time it’s welcome.

She carries the phone to the bed and places it beside her before sitting as she’s been told, eyes fixed on the wall, clit throbbing gently in time with her rapid, shivery breathing.

He calls her twenty-five minutes later and she can hear the muted sounds of the office behind him. He doesn’t waste time with a greeting.

“The polka-dot shirt and the black skirt with the two buttons at the waistband. It’s a little too short, but no matter. Your usual office shoes. When you arrive at the office, you’re to send me an e-mail giving me your time of arrival. If you’ve made yourself late with this importunate behavior, I’m afraid I’ll have to exact a small penalty.”

“Yes, Wesley,” she murmurs.

“Very well. Good—”

“Wes?”

“Faith, I really don’t have time—”

“Just wanted to say thanks,” she says softly.

She can hear him sigh. “I think you’re owed them,” he says finally. “You annoyed me terribly, you know, but—thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she says.

“Now I suggest you hurry.” There’s that drawl back in his voice and a hint of amusement. “Or you’ll be late.”
The click's gentle but decisive and she's left smiling at the phone and stretching because sitting still that long's left her wicked stiff.

Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-One

She's still got this totally sappy smile on her face as she logs into her e-mail at precisely eleven minutes past nine and begins to type. Can't help but love Wes' idea of a small penalty whatever it might be. Just means he's back in the game. Back to thinking about her. Back to thinking about punishing her and that always ends up well…

Hey Wes

Yeah, I'm eleven minutes late. But Monty never gets bent out of shape about it so it's no big deal. I had to have this whole chat with my Mom about how I was going to be late and then I had to stand in line for ages for my double caramel latte (I'm completely addicted to them now btw, I've put on, like ten pounds since you left) and then I got into this whole thing where I didn't have the right change.

So, yeah, a whole ELEVEN minutes late. Do your worst!

Faith

And that added sassiness is just going to put the cherry on top of her penalty because he always hated her getting all cheeky when he was on stern mode.

She's got a shit-eating grin on her face for the next ten minutes as she opens the mail and tries to imagine exactly what Wes is going to dream up. Maybe he'll turn up in person to administer eleven hard slaps to her ass because life is always that good. And yeah, it's going to be difficult for him to come up with something effective, being all long distance and stuff, but he's always been really creative so she's not going to worry too much about it.

When she hears her e-mail ping, she practically skips back to her desk and eagerly opens his e-mail.

Dear Faith

Try as I might, I can't muster up any surprise for your tardiness. And yes the circumstances for your lateness seem convincing but they're excuses, not reasons.

There's also the not inconsiderable matter that I asked you to give me time, not to push me in a direction that I'm not entirely willing to go, so I shall deal with that infraction first and leave the matter of your scant regard for punctuality to a later date.

I don't want you to contact me for twenty-four hours. I'm technically proficient enough to block your e-mail address and telephone numbers from my equipment but I'm putting trust in your obedience that I won't have to employ such a drastic measure.

I'm sure that I will hear from you tomorrow. But not sooner.

Wes

Oh yeah, he's fucking creative all right, and she's already clicking on reply and stopping herself just in time by the sheer force with which she scrapes back her chair and heaves herself to her feet.
He's so not playing fair. And okay, maybe she hasn't been either. But there's not playing fair and
then there's being completely, totally, utterly, absolutely evil with added bits of evilness. She'd also
bet an entire weeks' worth of double caramel lattes that her punishment for being late is going to be
some other mean method of making sure that her plot to have him realize that he can't fucking live
without her for longer a second gets all back fired.

She spends the rest of the day in a steaming temper. And she has to do all this work and it's not fun
when she can't send him an e-mail to moan about some woman who screamed at her down the
phone when she said that Monty was in a meeting or to tell him about her lunch with Xander who's
still way infatuated with his new boyfriend even though he looks a lot like Clay Aiken. Doesn't help
that she has to grit her teeth and smile sweetly when Xander remarks with a certain amount of
smugness that she's got her groove back in the last few weeks.

“Guess it's down to all the tough love we've been giving you, Faithy,” he says with a proud grin.
“And how would you feel about going out on a date with Holden Webster?”

Faith very nearly spits root beer all over the table top. “Indifferent,” she says finally. “I don't want to
go out on a date with anyone.”

“But Webbo's been hot for you ever since seventh grade and we could double date. We could go
bowling!” Xander protests and if he doesn't stop with the yenta act she's going to pry his eyes out of
their sockets with a spoon.

“Holden's cool, he's a nice guy but no point, Xand. He's not my type and if you say one word about
what my type is that involves the words 'spanking', 'British', 'uptight' or 'pervert' then you're gonna
be wearing your ice cream float. Capiche?”

The afternoon doesn't get much better. She has to type out a deposition for this financial fraud case
that has far too many tables in it for her liking and she never realized how much time she'd started to
spend e-mailing Wes. Now she can't because he'll stretch the no-contact rule to forty-eight hours or
seventy-two hours, she knows he will.

Somehow she makes it through the evening because it's the start of this yoga course at the
community college that Dru wanted to go to. She can't really see the point of all that stretching and
chanting but Dru just gives her a wicked smile when she hisses, “This sucks,” as she wobbles
through her very first Downward Dog.

“Stop moaning, dearie. This will give you muscle control.”

“Like, whatever, Dru. Don't need muscle control to aim the remote at the TV.”

“Not talking about those muscles.”

And over a couple of jugs of Margaritas in the Mexican bar across the street, which never cards, Dru
tells her more about Kegel muscles than she ever wants to know. Or at least she pretends that it's
really gross but she makes herself a solemn vow to do a hundred pelvic squeezes every day. Though
she can't really see what the point of it is because Mr. Don't Contact Me For Twenty-Four Hours is
probably going to take at least ten years to sort out his fucking issues.

Might be all that soreness and alcohol but she falls asleep as soon as she slumps into bed. Only
wakes up before her alarm goes off because she's parched and her phone's ringing. She squints at the
clock to find that it's only six-fifteen and pulls the pillow over her head. And then she comes to with
a start because there's only one person who'd ever call her this early and still live to tell the tale.
“I thought I wasn't meant to contact you for twenty-four hours,” she slurs grumpily down the phone.

“Good morning, Faith,” he practically chirps. “And I do believe that I'm contacting you, which is an entirely different thing.”

Not even Wes phoning her can shake her awake. “Well call me back in an hour. Gotta sleep.”

“But, Faith you were so keen for me to take charge of your wardrobe yesterday that I thought I'd extend my remit today. I want you out of bed now. Come on, chop, chop.”

“And I want you to bite me,” she offers sulkily, and she's only half joking because she can still remember how he'd nibble on this little spot just behind her ear when he wanted to schedule in a little pre-breakfast fucking.

“Get out of bed now. I won't tell you again,” he snaps and he's gone from chipper to icy in the blink of an eye so she's swinging her legs from under the covers and standing, yawning before she even realizes it.

“I'm up,” she grunts. “Satisfied?”

“Not remotely,” he says lightly and that's too loaded a statement for her to even begin to process. “And I'd forgotten how thoroughly bad tempered you can be first thing in the morning.”

“Not bad tempered, Wes, just sleep deprived.”

“Then a cold shower should be just the thing to revive you. You're to spend five minutes getting washed. Then I want you to shave yourself perfectly smooth—are you still…?” he pauses delicately and she knows exactly what he means and why he's suddenly silent and she doesn't feel an ounce of sympathy for him.

“That's for me to know and you to find out,” she hisses because she's suddenly turned into a ten-year-old.

“We could stop this right now, Faith, if you'd prefer,” he warns her and it's so unfair. He's so unfair.

“Don't want that, Wes,” she mumbles, her voice soft for the first time. “What do you want me to do after that?”

“I want you to clean your teeth,” he orders smoothly like they've been no interruptions. “Two minutes for the top row, starting on your left hand side. Then two minutes for the bottom row, starting in the same place. After that you're to moisturize and do anything else that needs to be done while you're in the bathroom and then you're to sit on your bed without getting dressed, hands by your side, and await further instructions. Is there anything you'd like me to clarify?”

“No, sir.”

“Good.”

She does it all, even the shower turned on to the arctic setting and then sits, skin tingling and rosy pink, on her bed for another three minutes until her phone rings again.

“I trust you're wide awake now, Faith?” he purrs. “Wide awake and raring to go?”

“Well, maybe the wide awake part,” she says ruefully and he laughs and she wishes she was with him because Wes in a good mood first thing in the morning used to get her all kinds of treats.
“Now it's time for us to decide what you're going to wear today… one of your black dresses, I think,” he muses even though she knows damn well he's been planning this ever since he sent her that e-mail yesterday.

“Wes, I can’t…” she protests weakly. “It's not appropriate.”

“I think we'll forgo the corset on this occasion,” he continues like she hasn't even spoken. “So that black underwear set I bought you with the pink ribbons will have to suffice. But I must insist on stockings and your old office shoes. Hurry along and I'll call you back in ten minutes.”

She does it all. All day. Every phoned order she gets, she obeys with minimum snark. The one to tell her what to eat for breakfast. The one forbidding her from her usual mid-morning cigarette. The one at lunch-time. The one just after lunch when he tells her to forgo her usual diet Coke for a glass of water instead. The one where he forbids her her usual mid-afternoon cigarette break. The one after work where he tells her to walk home instead of catching the bus. And Darla's vibrating with curiosity when she gets six phone calls that evening, ranging from dinner and snack requirements to severely curtailing her plans to watch The Gilmore Girls in favor of “a nice, improving book.”

It takes her an hour just to get ready for bed because he's on the phone every five minutes with demands to paint her toe nails, get her clothes ready for work all laid out on the chair and by the time she's snuggled up in bed at precisely ten-thirty, which is still practically the afternoon, she's seething.

Yeah, it's kinda cool and heartwarming and shit that he still knows her. Has her daily routine etched into the fabric of his life so firmly. But he's spent months away from her now and when they were together she was used to his orders. Always finding a way to wriggle out of the ones she didn't like and not just because it might get her a bed-time spanking. But now… but now, it's not the same. She's not so lost that she needs him to find her. Not so insecure and muddled that she can't make her own decisions. If or, like, when they get back together, stuff was going to be different. She'd still take his orders, still get wet when he commanded her to do something but she's a year older now and she's, like, a lifetime wiser and she's not waiting desperately for his validation anymore. Wants it, yeah, craves it too. But it's not the fucking be-all and end-all of her existence anymore And that's a good thing. Well, mostly.

When the phone goes just as she's started the last chapter of Kavalier and Clay, she gives a sigh and answers it.

“Hey, Wes. What is it now? Want me to get out of bed and do twenty stomach crunches or something?”

He gives this indulgent little chuckle, which annoys the fuck out of her after all the crap he's pulled. “I think not. Did you learn anything today, Faith?”

“Yeah, that I am never going to call you and ask you for fashion advice, like, ever again,” she says fiercely. “You worked my last fucking nerve around dinner time, Wes, with that whole 'go out and get some fresh vegetables' routine.”

“Well, at least when I tell you now that I need time, I think you'll respect my decision, yes?”

“Yeah,” she sighs in agreement. “But really you should be, like, flattered that I still think you're worth fighting for.”

“I am,” he says quietly and then his voice gets brisker. “Still, I think today has been a thorough lesson in how you can have too much of a good thing. I trust that you'll think very carefully before phoning me up again to solicit my opinion.”
“You bet,” she says with a giggle, then her evil twin who doesn't seem to have paid any attention to the little pep talk she gave her five minutes ago, pipes up. “You don't have to stop, Wes. Even if you wanted to call me freakishly early tomorrow morning.”

“Think of it as your final punishment for pushing me too far and fast,” he bites out and before she can even summon up some really good outrage, he sweetens the blow. “Of course, you were still eleven minutes late for work. And although I had plans to wait until Sunday to exact punishment, I'd rather hate to impede your literary recitation.”

“My head's gonna spin clean off my neck with all these mixed signals, Wes,” she tells him. “One minute you're telling me to back the hell off and the next you're making all kinds of promises.”

“I didn't say what form the punishment would take, did I?” he reminds her softly. “But I apologize if I'm causing you undue mental anguish and I probably shouldn't ask you to remove the tank top and pajama bottoms I told you to put on half an hour ago.”

“I've been doing like you say all day, Wes,” she says, smiling now. “Be a pity to stop now, just when it's getting interesting.”

“I'm not sure you'll be any happier with the orders to come,” he tells her rather sternly. “Or are you forgetting this is a punishment for being late?”

“No, but...”

“And are you forgetting what—who—I am?” he says remorselessly. “Is distance and my unattainable status lending enchantment to the view?”

“Wes, just tell me what you're getting at,” she snaps, losing the smile.

“Why, given my nature, would I not take the greatest of delight in making you suffer? Especially when I'm more than a little annoyed with you on one level? You used to trust me to, ah, ensure that we both emerged satisfied from an encounter, but that's a little more difficult situated as we are, isn't it?”

“Still don’t know what the fuck you're getting at,” she says flatly.

“I want to make sure you're still willing to play,” he replies. “Or am I incorrect in my belief that I sensed a certain restiveness about you today?”

And it's fucking scary the way he does that, and she's left gaping at the phone. “Little bit,” she admits. “I know you were way over the top with it to make a point, but you could do that again, yeah?”

“I might,” he says evenly. “Particularly now I know you dislike it.”

“That's new,” she comments, gripping hold of the phone. “Never used to do that.”

“Are you sure?”

And this is such a fucking loaded conversation that she's getting chills.

“Wes, you can't have it both ways, all ways,” she says, with the words bursting out of her. “You left because I was too keen to please you, wouldn't say anything to stop you, no matter how far you went. So I've changed. And not just for you, either. I'll tell you straight, looking back, yeah, maybe there were times I should've used my safeword and I didn't, but not many. You were pretty good at
knowing my limits.”

“I'm relieved to hear it,” he says tightly.

“And now, what with all this reading, could be you'll find my limits have changed. Can't deny I'm getting all kinds of curious about stuff I'd like to try, and finding out just what you want to do you never got around to.”

“I'm not sure you'd like—”

“Well, see, you don't know, Wes,” she interrupts, temper sparking. “Look at it this way; how far did I go in fourteen weeks? Quick learner, was I?”

“You were incredible,” he says without hesitation. “Responsive, imaginative, so brave, always and so beautifully vulnerable and open.”

“Shit, Wes,” she murmurs, shaken out of her bad temper. “That's—quite the testimonial.”

“You're quite an extraordinary woman,” he tells her.

“I've had months to get better,” she says softly. “Months to get stronger. Maybe I won't be quite as vulnerable these days, Wes. Really don't see me reacting the way I did when my dad—well, won't go into that, but I'm done being pushed around.”

“You were saying about mixed signals,” he says. “Aren't you sending some? Have you discovered you're more suited to give than receive?”

And it's an interesting idea, phrased so politely, but…“No. I don't think so. That hasn't changed.” She sighs. “I haven't changed that much. This—what we do—I kinda stumbled into it by accident the first time around.”

“I forced it on you,” he says. “And I'd like to be able to say I sensed you were willing, but I think it would be a lie. I simply wanted you too much to resist you.”

“Don't know about that,” she says thoughtfully. “I'd like to think you saw something in me too, but it doesn't matter. I'm more interested in now. I want you, Wes. Want you because I need you. I couldn't live without you before; I'd hurt when you were away, I'd feel lost, scared. You protected me. But now, well, I don't need you, not the same way. I can look after myself.” She takes a deep breath. “I can live without you, Wes. But I don't want to, because I love you and I fucking love what you do to me. And I can't see a single fucking reason why I should have to miss out on that.”

“That's good,” he says, a little sourly, “but there are two of us involved. You might have adjusted with impressive ease but I'm—”

“What? Did you just say this was fucking easy?” she snarls. “Listen to me, you fucking bastard, this has been hell. I've suffered enough that if you'd been around to see it, your cock would've been, like, permanently, hard if that's what gets you off. I've cried and there was one night—no, lots of nights when I came so close to giving up—You left me at the bottom of a fucking grave, Wes, and I clawed my way out of it. Don't you ever fucking tell me it was easy.”

“I—” His voice is shaking now and she waits, tight-lipped and simmering. “I'm sorry.”

“It's not good enough,” she hisses. “Nothing is but an end to this bullshit and I can't fucking do this anymore when I don't know, when I'm not sure—”
“I love you.” He says it so fast she can't quite take it in. “Faith, I love you and that hasn't changed, will never change. I'm trying to be sure because I won't ever risk hurting you again by leaving you. Why can't you see that I'm trying?”

“Because you're not,” she says softly, sadly. “It's all been me, Wes. Me pushing, me making the running. Not getting anything from you that I don't have to work for, really hard.”

"Too hard?” he questions.

“Not yet.”

“We do seem to have painted ourselves into different corners of the room, haven't we?” he sighs. “I'm at a loss, frankly.”

“You're making it too complicated,” she says. “You're in charge, Wes. Make it simple.”

There's a long pause. “Simple. Faith, since I met you, my life's been anything but that.”

“Wish you'd employed someone like Harmony instead?” she asks.

His shudder's enough to lighten the mood a little. “Dear Lord, no. And I didn't say I minded it being complex. You were—and are—a challenge, Faith. You know me well enough to be aware that I prefer it that way.”

“Give me something then, Wes,” and she's all but begging now.

“I want you back in my life,” he says slowly. “I want it more than I can say. I'm even allowing myself to hope that it's possible—”

“Really is, Wes,” she says eagerly.

“Please don't interrupt,” he says mildly. “But I will not be stampeded toward our mutual goal by your impatience, Faith. Do you understand that?”

“Yes,” she says with a sigh. “But—”

“Do you understand, Faith?” And there's a steely edge to his voice that has her swallowing nervously.

“Yes, Wesley.”

“Excellent. I think we've made some progress today, Faith. You've been most forthcoming, for which I thank you, and given me a good deal to think about.”

“Well—” she begins uncertainly, because he's going all mercurial on her ass again, isn't he?

“But before I leave you in peace for the evening, there's one more matter to attend to, isn't there? Tell me what it is, Faith.”

“What? Oh! I was late for work. Eleven minutes late.”

“Indeed you were. Take off your clothes, if you haven't already.” His voice drops into a silky drawl. “Tell me when you're naked.”

“I'm naked now,” she reports about four seconds later.
“Commendably fast. Now, were I to be within reach of you, I think I'd most certainly begin this little disciplinary session with a spanking.” His voice takes on a reflective tone. “It's been so long. I've missed the sounds you used to make, the way your skin would heat against my hand, the way you'd cry even as you arched up pleading wordlessly for more. If you can tell me the last time I spanked you, Faith, I might be less severe.”

And she's certain he doesn't mean what he did with the switch and, yeah, she remembers. Still not going to tell him, though. And fuck, she's wet now and her ass is tingling as if it remembers too.

“I know when it was, Wes. Can I tell you afterward?”

“But—ah. I see.” His voice warms. “You may. Now go and fetch your hairbrush. The one I gave you.”

Her gaze goes to it, sitting on top of the dressing table. She walks over to it and gets all wistful thinking of him dragging the brush slowly through her hair, taking his time over the mundane task, making a ritual of caring out of it.

“Got it,” she says, lying back on the bed.

“For the next eleven minutes you're to follow my instructions precisely,” he tells her. “If at any time they go beyond what you wish, then you've only to say—?”

“It's still 'Neruda','” she tells him.

“I thought it might be. Is your back fully healed?” he asks blandly.

It takes her a second to catch up and when she does, she chuckles. “Yeah.”

“I think I have it narrowed down to three possibilities, but, you know, I'd rather discover which is correct first-hand I think, and I'm sure I will in all good time.” His voice sharpens. “Lie back, Faith and I want you to drag the bristles of the brush very slowly over your right nipple.”

She does it, catching her breath.

“Again. Harder.”

And she does it again, and again, until the tender skin of her breast is crossed with dozens of red lines, fading and flushing bright again as she grits her teeth and repeats the downward stroke.

“That will do for now,” he says and she knows he can hear the flat smack of the wood against her ass because he
sighs, and by the time they get to seven he's having trouble keeping his voice level and she's gasping for breath because each smack is landing in the same place and although it's nothing compared to what she's used to, the fact is, she isn't used to it anymore and there's something so fucking hot about him making her do this to herself that she's whimpering less because of the spreading stinging smart and more because of the emptiness inside her cunt and the hunger that's threatening to spill out into a babble of words, if only she could remember any, with him intoning, 'Ten' and finally 'Eleven' in her ear like that.

She drops the bush and rolls to her stomach, panting heavily. “Wes?” she croaks, her hand scrabbling for the phone. “Wes, I'm fucking dying here. Please.”

“I wasn't going to let you come, actually, and certainly not within the eleven minutes.”

She swallows down the anguished scream that rises to her lips. “How long do I have left?”

“Long enough,” he says calmly. “I'm sure I heard you move without permission, so I'm not inclined to be lenient, although you did do that so very well. Really.” She smiles, squirming lazily against the quilt. “Onto your back now, and I want you to fuck yourself with the handle of the brush, Faith, as hard as you like, but you're not to come.”

She whimpers as she rolls over, whimpers as the polished wood, warm from her hand, slips inside her, swallowed up by her needy cunt. She doesn't hold back a single moan and when he tells her to describe how it feels she launches into an increasingly fervent comparison between the brush and his cock that has him chuckling unfeelingly. When she's pressing her heels down into the mattress and her hand's blurring as it drives the handle inside her over and again, he whispers, “Stop.”

“Wes!”

“Did you stop when I said?”

“Yes, yes, God, do I sound like I've come?” she shrieks.

“Oh, how much I wish I was there right now,” he mutters. “I'd have you regretting that tone of voice.”

“I'm sorry,” she says, all hasty penitence. “Wesley.”

“Tell me when I spanked you last, Faith.”

And she's all set to launch into a description; it was right after the contract negotiations, after the blowjob she'd swapped for his signature, but she smiles.

“It was about, what, two minutes ago, Wes?”

And when he laughs and murmurs, “My clever Faith,” she's grinning with him.

“I'm going now,” he says.

“But—”

“I haven't finished with you, Faith,” he says, warning her to silence. “Clean the brush and you're to sit on the edge of the bed and give your hair the traditional hundred strokes. No rushing. Then you may do whatever you like to achieve release. Good night.” He hesitates and then says softly, “Do you know when I came, Faith?”
She shakes her head but he can't see that so she murmurs, “No.”

“On the stroke of one.”

And he hangs up as she starts to snicker.

Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Two

Sometimes she feels like she's floating through time, the days and the hours and the minutes and the seconds measured out in the e-mails she's just got, the e-mails she's going to send. It's all words. Words that don't really spell out her hopes or dreams or fears because, yeah, Wes, message received and understood. And they're back on the light-hearted setting with no way to say what she wants to say.

I miss you.

I think about you all the time, even when I'm asleep.

I want you more than I ever did.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

The weekend drags by because she's computerless and Internetless and Wesless. And paying a visit to the local cyber café smacks of a desperation she's not allowed to show because he's got to have his precious time to figure out the fucking obvious.

Not that she likes the resentment that's beginning to gnaw away at her insides but all it takes is his lazy, “Hello, Faith,” when she calls him on Sunday night to make everything melt away but the mushy feeling that sweeps all over her, especially when he confesses that he went out for brunch that turned into a long, alcoholic afternoon with Lindsey and Giles and that, “I'm feeling surprisingly mellow so I have to trust you not to take advantage of my slightly intoxicated state.”

She doesn't because man, she doesn't even know where to begin. Instead she reads him six pages of *Bonjour Tristesse* and when she gets to the last lines, “My one wish was to give up all my plans and put myself entirely into her hands for the rest of my life. I had never before been so overcome with a sense of my utter impotence. I closed my eyes. It seemed to me my heart had stopped beating.”

For one moment she thinks she's going to get version whatever fucking number he's on of the “give me more time” lecture, now with added bite but he just makes this weird snuffly noise and launches into this unprompted monologue… nah, not the right word… like, this *soliloquy* to the joys of going down on her and then he begs, fucking begs her to start masturbating. 'Cept Wes, even drunk Wes, never goes quite so far as to beg.

“I want you to bring yourself off, Faith. Want your fingers causing havoc in your beautiful, wet cunt,” he purrs, voice all low and husky right in her ear. “And please feel free to make as much noise as you deem fit while you're doing it.”

When she finally hangs up and goes into the kitchen, all pink faced and kinda smug, Darla's already there eating ice cream with an extra spoon all waiting for her.

“We need to talk, Faithy,” she says, because the You and Your Difficult Teenager Handbook must have advised her to get the Super Fudge Chunk out and then launch right in. “What's going on with you and him?”

She takes her time answering, long enough to dig her spoon into the ice cream and let it melt on her
tongue. “I thought you were at Ted's,” she mumbles.

Darla allows herself a tiny smile because she's so goddamn loved up at the moment that even the mention of Ted's name makes her go all dreamy. Then she snaps out of it and gives Faith her pissiest look. Which doesn't even register after being on the receiving end of all of Wes' pissiest looks. “Well, I was and then I came home and wondered why you'd never told me you were working part-time as a phone sex operator.”

And then her face flushes bright crimson, just a few shades lighter than Faith's own impersonation of a stop light. “Oh shit! You heard? Man…”

“I couldn't help but hear,” Darla squeaks indignantly. “Thought you were being fucking murdered or something. And then you screeched his name and as you spend all your time on your cell… Jesus, Faith!”

She's thinking really hard about getting a knife from the drawer and stabbing herself because there can't be anything in the world more embarrassing than your mother hearing your sex noises, especially when Wes was on the other end of the phone telling her that her whimpers were making him hard.

“I just can't talk about this with you right now,” she hisses, clutching the tub of ice cream to her face because it feels like it's on fire.

Darla's also looking like she wishes she was somewhere else but then her chin lifts up like the very definition of a brave, little soldier and she makes it a million times worse. “I've never… I just, well I didn't think girls had to do that unless they were, like, dykes, you know.”

“Do what? Masturbate? Are we gonna have to have a sex talk where I explain to you what the clitoris is and why you should get to know where it is and why…”

“He's gonna end up hurting you all over again, sweetie,” Darla butts in because as well as making wicked chocolate chip cookies maybe Ted is actually giving her happies.

It's still weird how natural it feels to lean across the table and squeeze Darla's hand. “He won't because I'm not gonna let him, Mom,” she pleads softly. “And nothing can hurt more than not being with him. I still love him and he still loves me, we just gotta work out a way to be together.”

“You're not going to New York!” Darla's voice is so shrill that dogs all over the neighborhood must be yelping in solidarity. “I'm not having you all alone there with just him. And it's full of junkies and prostitutes and what if he throws you out? Or he hurts you? And you've got no money and you're out on the street and, I know you, Faithy, you'll be too fucking proud to call me…”

“I wouldn't. I'll call you every week,” she protests. “Every fucking day, if it makes you happy but when he tells me he's ready then I'm going.” And she's crying now because he might never be ready and even though she hates this shitty little town it's full of people she cares about who she's going to leave behind. “I can't be happy if I'm not with him.”

“But you're doing so well, baby,” Darla's clutching her hand so tight that her knuckles are white with it. “I'm so proud of you with your fancy job and your new friends. Just stick it out for a little bit longer. Six months, Faithy, and then if you still want to go, fine.”

Faith can't help an anguished groan at the thought of another six months with nothing to get her through but e-mail and phone calls. “Look, Mom, it means a lot to me, like you mean a lot to me and I never thought I'd say that but I just feel like part of me, this fucking huge part of me is missing
because he's not here and I miss him so much. Rather have three more months with him even if he kicks me out at the end of it then never get to be with him ever again.”

They go round in circles, the ice cream melting on the table between them. Darla cries and shouts and even threatens to send her to a convent, which cranks up the hysteria all the way to the eleven because in a mood shift so blink-and-you-miss-it-fast that's almost a hangover to the bad old day and worse night of vodka-fuelled spite, Darla starts laughing.

“Gonna get you measured up for a goddamn habit, Faithy,” she chokes, throwing up her hands in the air. “What the fuck am I meant to do with you, you stupid little girl? I knew we should have sent you to Catholic school.”

And she gets this wave of tenderness that she's never associated with Darla again. Makes her begin to cry all over again and throw her arms around her. “They'd have kicked me out before my first Mass,” she sobs and it's good to be a little girl again. Have Darla tuck her into bed and stroke her hair and tell her that everything's going to be all right.

“I'm going to come up there and give him hell if he's not treating you right,” she coos. “And we can go and have beauty treatments like in Sex and the City. Is he, like, your Mr. Big, Faithy?”

“No, he's fucking not! He's, like, my Mr. Darcy or some guy out of a black and white movie,” she murmurs. “Don't stop stroking my hair, I'm nearly asleep.”

She's just drifting off when Darla kisses the top of her head and gets up. “I tell you one thing, sweetie,” she says as she clicks off the light. “No way in hell am I telling Xander about this.”

Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Three

The next morning, even before she e-mails Wes—who's gonna be suffering and serve him right, she thinks primly, virtuously smug as she'd stuck to Coke all night, she e-mails Xander.

Hey, Xander

If I had, like $500, no, scratch that, $350, to spare, could you get me online? One of your geek pals has to have a spare computer lying around, right? Doesn't have to be fancy; not gonna be playing games on it. Just the basics, and tell 'em to wipe the fucking Klingon porn off the hard drive first, okay?

Faith

She's halfway through her e-mail to Wes when he replies, and it's a bit fucking weird to go from telling Wes how adorable he was when he was drunk (which is another word she bets he puts on the forbidden adjective list) to exchanging insults with Xan but she manages it.

Faith: think you missed out the 'pretty please, and you'll be my hero and I'll fucking worship you forever' bit but seeing as it's you... $350? Nah. Leave it with me.

What's with the sudden interest? You're not thinking of trying those online dating chat rooms are you? Because that never ends well. Really. And no power on earth will make me say more than that—but Fritz's frankfurter? More of a weenie, if you know what I mean.

Xander

Xander.
First: eww. I don't wanna hear about the dick size of some loser you picked up. And no, I'm not gonna use it for that. Just need to be able to send e-mails, that's all. What's the biggie? You've been on at me to get hooked up for years, even if it was just so you could look at porn at my house and not have your parents find out.

Faith

(Pretty please, yeah, but no way am I worshipping a guy who drools at the sight of a joy stick. Though considering the shape of them, I guess I can see the attraction.)

It takes him two hours to get back to her and she actually manages to get some work done because Wes is in meetings, and from the terse tone of his e-mail, he's got one hell of a headache.

Faith.

Get your hands on $200 and we'll be around at eight to set you up.

X

Xander

We? What we? Who? No way is some nerd with a panty-sniffing obsession coming into my bedroom.

F

Dear Faith

Just so happens Holden upgraded last month and he's got a sweet system just waiting for a girl he's madly in—well, let's not go there; I just ate. He wanted $150 when I told him it was you, but I beat him up to $200.

Shower me with gratitude any time you like.

X

X

Bite me.

F

(Thanks. I guess)

They stagger in, laden with equipment at eight exactly, and an hour later she's knocking beer bottles with them and smiling with satisfaction at the addition to her room. She'd hesitated about dipping into her 'anywhere but here' fund, but it stands to reason that if she can work on Wes seven days a week, he'll crack even sooner. And she's kinda looking forward to doing some research online too. She's read the books from Spike and there were some sites mentioned that looked interesting.

“This is so cool of you,” she says, beaming at Holden. “Really. Thanks.”

He gives her this cute little grin and if Xander hadn't been all eager eyes she might've planted one on
Holden wanders over to it and sits down. “Want me to add my e-mail to your address book?” he offers. “So if anything crops up, I'm just a mouse-click away?” He pats the keyboard. “She's got her little ways but...”

“Yeah, sure,” Faith says hastily before he gets so sentimental he unplugs it and carries it home. “That'd be great. And it's all set up so I can get to my Gmail account, right?”

He nods, doing some fancy swooshing of the mouse on the desk. “You've got incoming even as we speak,” he says, standing up. “Might want to set up some spam filters. Unless you're really keen on a larger penis, a Rolex watch, and a green card.”

She grins. “Think I'll pass on those. You're not sticking around?”

He shakes his head. “I'm filling in for my sister at the pizza place this week. I need the cash and she's off to Maine for Thanksgiving with her new boyfriend. Catch you later, Xander.”

When she gets back from seeing him out Xander's sitting on the edge of the bed with his back turned away from the computer.

“You've got mail,” he says, raising his beer bottle to his lips and taking a slow, careful sip.

“Yeah? What is it this time?”

He doesn't answer and she steps close enough to see—oh fuck. Wes wrote back.

“I didn't read it,” Xander says. “And I'm not going to get all in your face about it, but—what the fuck are you thinking?” The bottle gets slammed down on the nightstand, beer boiling up and frothing over. Xander shakes his wet hand and glares at her. “Six months ago I stopped you torching his place. Held you while you sobbed and told me he was a bastard and you hated him. Now you're playing kissy-face in cyber space? What the hell happened? What is wrong with you?”

When he puts it like that she can see why he's mad, and there's enough hurt in his eyes to keep her voice gentle as she sits down beside him, reaching out and grabbing his dry hand.

“Quick version—Lilah gave me his e-mail and his phone number. I—I sent him an e-mail. I wanted to tell him how I felt. Get it off my chest the way I never had chance to.”

“And he was just dying to get back to playing with you,” Xander says, his lip curling. “Figures.”

“He didn't answer any of them,” she tells him softly. “Then one night—he called. Didn't say anything, but I knew it was him—”

“That is so fucking creepy!” Xander says indignantly. “Man's got no balls—and no manners.”

She rubs her head against his shoulder until he gives in and puts his arm around her. “He's got issues,” she admits. “But, long story, short, we're talking now. E-mails, phone calls—and he's been sending me the cutest parcels with all this stuff in—”

“Don't wanna know,” Xander says promptly. He clears his throat. “Kinky stuff, right? That could so get him in trouble if it got opened at the mail office?”

“Candy,” she says, punching his arm. “English candy, and God, Xander, their chocolate bars are to die for.”
“And that'd be something else you didn't share?” he asks pointedly.

“Next one I get's all yours,” she promises.

“I think it'd choke me, but thanks.”

“You're—taking this kinda better than I thought,” she ventures.

He moves away, shoving up her pillows and lying back. “You got happy. I kinda noticed that. Wasn't Holden; had to be connected to him.”

“I am happy,” she says, relieved that he's being nice about it. “And, don't want to jinx it, but I'm really making progress here, Xander. I'll be packing to go to New York before you know it, I'm sure I will.”

He stiffens. “What?”

“He's—we've both changed,” she says. She reaches under the bed and waves 'Screw the Roses...' in Xander's face. “See? I've been reading up on it all.”

“Where—where did you get that?” he asks, twisting his head around to stare at the bound woman on the cover.

“Spike gave it to me.”

“Takes about what you are? About him?”

“I kinda got drunk and said a lot more than I meant to when I stopped over after their Halloween party,” she admits.

“You stayed over.” His voice is flat. “With those two.”

“Yeah and don't say a fucking word,” she warns him. “Two one-night stands in six months don't make me a slut.”

“I don't know you,” he mutters, knocking the book out of her hand and glaring at her from eyes that were—oh fuck—starting to fill with tears. “You're going to leave and I'll never see you again and shit it wasn't supposed to be this way, Faith.”

“What did you think?” she demands. “That me and Wes would, what, stay pen pals or something? I love him, Xander. Not being with him—it's killing me.”

“He's going to hurt you again! Why can't you see that?” He's sitting up now and shouting in her face. “It's what he does!”

“You really don't get it, do you?” she says slowly. “What he is—what we are. You've got this narrow-minded perception—”

“Don't try and make this sound like anything but some really kinky shit,” he says stonily. “Don't dress it up with fancy words. He's a fucking pervert and you're better than that, Faith. You don't have to be that way.” Because he can read her mind as well as Wes sometimes he beats her to it. “And, no, it's not like being gay, so don't even try and tell me it is. You were never like this before you met him. You used to tell me about all the boys you went with; they never did anything like this to you and you never wanted them to.”

“They never did anything for me either,” she says fiercely. “Wes didn't brainwash me or something,
Xander. He just opened my eyes and newsflash, I'm not going to stop liking having my ass spanked or any of the other stuff that gets me off just because he's gone. That's why Holden's not going to cut it. He's nice, but he's not—"

“He's normal,” Xander says flatly. “And that's not good enough for you, is it?”

“It's not enough,” she corrects him gently. She rolls her eyes. “You know, it's funny, but Wes'd agree more with you than me. He's got this fucked-up idea that he's a freak, that he's bad for me—” She shakes her head. “I'm trying to get him to see if differently, but he's as fucking stubborn as you.”

“Maybe you should stop trying to force him to change, Faith,” he says pointedly. “Give him some space like he asked you to.”

“He loves me, Xander,” she says. “He needs me, and it goes both ways. Wish you'd got to know him, wish you could see past what we do in bed—which is none of your freaking business—”

“But it isn't just the sex,” Xander says, shaking his head. “He had you doing stuff 24/7. Practically had you in a collar.”

She swallows at that image. Wes never—but—okay, so not the time to be getting dreamy-eyed and yeah, kinda hot thinking about that particular accessory. “Whatever, Xander,” she snaps. “Look, as it stands, I don't have my ticket booked. We're taking it slow, so let's just save this.” She grips his hand. “Really don't wanna fight. Love you too much for that.”

He scrambles across the bed and squeezes her hard enough to hurt. “Love you too, even if your brains have dribbled out your ears and run along the floor—”

“—and I don't need anything but a teaspoon to pick them up,” she finishes. “Yeah, yeah, find another insult; that one's dating you. Third grade, right?”

He punches her shoulder lightly. “Second. Okay, that's enough drama for one night. I'm going to leave you in peace.” He stands up, avoiding looking at the computer. “You going to tell him why his ears were burning tonight?” he says with a forced lightness.

She shakes her head. “Course not. Don't tell him everything, y'know.” Which is a stretch of the truth, not an out-and-out lie.

Impulsively, she picks up the book and pushes it into his hands. “Do me a favor? You don't have to read it all, but just take a look?”

He turns it over in his hands. “Do I have to?” he says plaintively.

“Please?” she begs, getting the eyelash fluttering just right.

He caves on cue. “Fine. I'll read it. For you. But you gotta give me a bag to put it in. No way am I walking around with it on display.”

She kisses him exuberantly, finds him a plastic bag with the name of a lingerie shop on it, just to teach him, and waves good night from the door.

He's barely reached the sidewalk when she's heading upstairs to read Wes' e-mail.

She doesn't want to think about Xander. Because, God knows, she can only focus on one dysfunctional, fucked-up relationship at a time. And right now her heart's beating just a little faster at the thought of Wes' e-mail waiting there for her, unopened.
She pads up the stairs as quietly as possible, a little wary now since Darla's started paying an unhealthy amount of attention to how she spends her time. Wary? Fuck that. Mortified is more like it. She's still blushing head-to-toe at the mere thought when she slips into her room and opens Wes' note.

Faith

I hope you will forgive my...sloppiness last night. I was inebriated and feeling rather sentimental. And you did indulge me so very beautifully, as always.

Getting to work on time this morning was rather a trial. Between the subway strike, my pounding headache, and the hundred pages of annotations to sort through, I fear I've paid for my folly many times over. Not to mention the fact that this case we're working on may very well be my own Ninth Circle.

I do hope your day wasn't quite so thrilling.

Wes

When she thinks of him, poor baby, all stressed out and hung over, she snickers. Yeah, she's not feeling all that sympathetic really.

Wes—

There you go with the indulgence crap again. But thank you. :) And I could honestly use a little of your indulgence right now because Xander's having another one of his periodic hissy fits and oh yeah, my mom kinda overheard our little phone sesh last night. Yeah, seems she thought I was being murdered in my bed or something until I screamed out your name. Although the former might have been better because if I was actually dead I wouldn't be like, dying of terminal embarrassment every time I think about what she might have heard. Now she's giving me the third degree and thinks I'm crazy for talking to you again. Well, she's trying real hard and she kinda came around in the end. But I still get the feeling that deep down she thinks it's all a really fucking bad idea. She's just worried you know? It's her job. But, God, I'm so sick of having to justify every last fucking thing about my life to everyone. Really fucking sick of it. Why does everything have to be so complicated?

I'm tired, and pissed off, and just need to calm the fuck down.

'night, Wes. Talk to you tomorrow maybe? Or would that not fit your plans, whatever those might be?

Faith x

She leaves the computer on, just in case. She changes quickly into her oh-so-sexy nighttime attire (more Old Navy than Agent Provocateur) and flops down onto her bed, grabbing the nearest book and secretly hoping it's so goddamn boring it puts her right to sleep. She's so not in the mood for deep thoughts of any kind.

The book happens to be dull as proverbial ditchwater. Sleep is starting to look mighty fine when she hears the telltale ping of an incoming message. Instantly wide awake, she flings the book aside.

Faith—
Did you tell Darla that this was all my fault? I do seem to recall exhorting you to be as loud as you pleased.

And I certainly recall enjoying it immensely.

I do rather feel that I owe you …an indulgence as you call it. Of what sort? And you'd best take me up on it now, as I'm not liable to be so amenable tomorrow.

I'm waiting.

And yeah, how wrong is it that she's instantly wet just from seeing the words “I'm waiting”? And she sure as fuck doesn't want to keep him waiting, but the question is: what does she want? Is this truth, or dare?

***

She knows five minutes of pacing around the tiny bit of floor space in her room—with phone in hand, getting more and more riled up by the second—isn't the best use of her time, but nonetheless she's doing just that.

“Faith, honey? What are you doing up there? Step aerobics?” Darla yells up the stairs.

“Nothing, Mom, just thinking,” she hollers back before belly-flopping on the bed again, tracing her finger over the dial pad of her phone.

So, if this conversation was gonna go where she thinks it's gonna go, she really needs to soundproof her room as much as possible before, like, she gets vocal again.

That is, if that's the kind of indulgence he has in mind.

She's about to dial when her computer pings again. He's written one line:

I'm still waiting, Faith.

She's amazed at her multitasking skills, because she's like, popping a mix CD into her tiny stereo and dialing his number at the same time—with a quick stop to flip the flimsy lock on her door. It's not like that's gonna make much of a difference, but it makes her feel a little more removed from the reality that Darla's right below her, downstairs in the living room, probably watching the reruns of “Days of our Lives” on SoapNet or some schmaltzy movie on Lifetime.

It's strange not to have a plan for the call—no book to read him, no naughty fantasy to recite. She's sitting cross legged in the middle of the bed now, spine straight, counting the rings. Four, five...and she's starting to freak out that he's changed his mind and it's about to roll over to voice mail when he answers.

“Don't speak.” The words are low and nearly growly, and it's her turn to respond with nothing but a sharp intake of breath and a long patch of silence as she fights both the urge to say something and the urge to shove her hand down her pants and start taking care of her body's nagging call for attention, even if it's just from her fingers.

“That's good. I was wondering if you'd comply.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but snaps it shut with a tiny harumph.
"I'll overlook that, since it wasn't actually a word." She can hear pages flipping in the background, and he can't possibly be about to... "I'm going to read to you now, Faith."

And she can't help it, just can't. It just sort of slips out, a whimper crossed with a moan that ends with his name.

“Of course, you're allowed to make as many of your lovely little noises as you like—that doesn't count as speaking.”

She's grateful for the music, of course, hoping it does the trick to drown out what's sure to be a command performance of the previous evening.

“I imagine that your mother's home now, though, so I don't think I need to remind you to take care not to disturb her.”

And he starts to read. She doesn't recognize the words, or the writing style, and she'd accuse him of making it up—as she had done—if she couldn't hear the rasp of the pages turning, or if his voice wasn't so smooth and even, caressing every word carefully as he picks each one off the page and presents them to her in strings of delicate, lush prose.

She doesn't need to be prompted to slide her pajama bottoms to her ankles and peel her panties off too, shoving them just past her knees. She's dripping wet, of course. Doesn't bother to pull her tank top off even, just shoves it up and roughly pinches and twists her left nipple before dropping her hand down, fingers immediately swirling and slipping against her clit.

And she's lost in it all: His even, soft breathing and the rhythm of his voice and of her fingers; of her pinkie, which she's somehow managed to get curling and teasing around the edges of her slick hole. The whimpers escalate into quiet, throaty moans until he abruptly stops at what seems to be the end of a chapter.

“Please,” she whispers, even though the words are forbidden. “Keep reading.”

“I'm afraid it's become impossible for me to continue turning the pages without attending to my needs as well.”

Those words nearly send her over the edge, but his words stop her.

“Wait for me, Faith. You can wait.” It seems like it's the first time in ages that he's done that, made what should have been a question into something else entirely—a perfectly aimed command.

She gives a whimper she hopes passes for an affirmative, shoving the burgeoning waves of her orgasm back down, shoving her hips into the mattress, dragging her fingers away from her pussy for a few moments before setting them back in motion as soon as his ragged breathing picks up the pace.

It's almost like they're together, just for those short few minutes, where the only words spoken are their mutual nonsensical babble of desire until she hears it, the familiar tightening in his voice. She's more than ready when he gives the word.

And she's secretly pleased that she comes almost instantly, like the old days, mewling into the phone and whispering his name as he gives that sweetly familiar little grunt that curls around her name as he comes as well.

“Good night, Faith,” he whispers after he's caught his breath, and hangs up before she can say good night in return.
Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Four

The early part of the week passes by in a blur of work, getting ready for the long Thanksgiving weekend when Monty's planning to shut down at lunchtime Wednesday, like he's got to get halfway across the country, not fifteen miles to his daughter's house. Wes doesn't call her again, but they're swapping e-mails and she's doing her best to keep them stress-free and non-pushy because he's got enough going on right now. She's being all supportive and such which is why her first reaction to what arrives in the mail on Wednesday is a hiss of outrage.

Darling Faith, he's written. If you've got plans, please don't feel you have to change them, but I noticed that the play I'm going to see on Saturday night with Rupert is also being performed at the Royal in the city near you. It occurred to me that it would be rather nice to compare notes on the two productions.

I've enclosed two tickets as I know from experience that it's dull to go to such events alone. Perhaps Xander would accompany you? Despite our differences, I do regret that your friendship with him has been adversely affected at times by your relationship with me; consider this an olive branch of sorts.

I—this is slightly awkward. Rupert invited me to the play and I agreed of course; he's a charming man and I enjoy his company. Then, once he'd got my firm acceptance, he revealed that we would actually be four, not two. At times he's rather sneaky, I have to say. He's concerned that I'm lonely and, having confirmed that I'm straight and single in the most direct way possible (he's alarmingly frank at times) he's made what I'd hoped was to be a pleasant evening into a double date.

I've met his friend; a delightful young woman called Olivia, who's over here on a flying visit. She's visited before and from the look in his eyes when she's mentioned, they're lovers, although he's never said as much. I'm to be partnered by a woman I've never met called Anne. She's heavily involved in charitable work of some kind, which interests me—as you know, I like to do pro bono work from time to time. Interested in what she does—not in her.

Faith—I'm unable to withdraw gracefully from this engagement, but there is no question of my embarking on even the most casual relationship with anyone at the moment.

The same need not hold true for you; if you meet someone, if you decide, as you have every right to do, that you no longer want me in your life I will understand.

But please don't think that I regret what's happened between us recently. You make me so happy, always, my darling Faith.

Wes x

She's torn between so many emotions after reading that, with the tickets for 'The Taming of the Shrew' clutched in her hand, that she gives up trying to untangle them and settles for shaking her head ruefully. Couldn't fall in love with someone simple, could you? she thinks. Have to go for a lawyer with a pretzel-shaped brain.

Wes

Glad I make you happy, not so glad you're not going to let me have the chance to do it properly any time soon.

Sometimes you've just got to take that chance, Wes.
Thanks for the tickets. Did this play in school, way back. Can't remember much but there was this one line stuck with me.

"Thou must be married to no man but me for I am he born to tame you."

That what you want, Wes? To tame me? Somehow I don't think so. But you have fun trying.

Don't freak about this, but I want you to tell me one of those dark dreams of yours, Wes. One of your fantasies you bring out to play in your head. Trust me enough to share it with me. Doesn't have to be practical, doesn't have to be something you want to, like, actually do to me, with me. I just want to know.

And because I can feel the chill from here as you freeze up in horror, I'll go first. Call it a thank you for the tickets.

This, yeah, we could do this. Wouldn't mark me, wouldn't hurt, and it'd be a one-off, not—God, I can just imagine you drawling at me to get on with it.

Want you to put me in a collar, Wes. One you'd picked out for me, the same way as you picked out my clothes, my purse, my brush, the books I read. You'd tell me about it first, I think. Wouldn't want to surprise me, because you'd lose the fun of watching me wait, never knowing if this was the day.

You'd measure my neck for it, because I don't think you'd take me with you when you got it. Wouldn't want anyone to see it and me, and get to thinking what it'd look like on me because you're the only one allowed to see that, right?

So you'd strip me and stand me in front of you and slip the tape around my neck and it'd feel cool and I'd shiver and God, you'd smile at that, wouldn't you? And fuck me right there where I stood because you couldn't wait a second—and, yeah, okay, this is my fantasy and I, like, get fucked fast, no waiting, if I want.

And one day you'd call me to you and this time you'd make me kneel and you'd open the box, and I can't decide if it'd be all plush like the box my watch came in—God, I never really made it up to you about that. Loved it so much. Love you. Anyway, like that, or maybe black leather, like my collar. Course you could make it pink, to match my shoes;-) See that? It's a smiley. You got the hang of them yet, Wes?

And once you put it on, you'd whisper a number in my ear and that's how many hours I'd have to wear it, no matter what happened, so sometimes you'd be spanking me and you'd stop to undo it and it'd feel so different being spanked with it and without it, and I'd ask you not to take it off, but you'd tell me rules were rules in that firm voice and then, because you love me I think you'd work out a way to make us both happy. You're so fucking good at that, Wes, you really are. Maybe you'd use it to fasten my wrists together, or my ankles, maybe you'd slide it between my teeth to bite on while you made my ass sting and burn. Maybe you'd just let me hold it, put it where I could see it.

But sometimes—and I still work for you in my fantasies, all of them, and I wish—oh fuck, forget that. Not gonna happen, I know. But sometimes I'd have to sleep in the collar, go to work wearing it, and you'd have special clothes I could put on to hide it, high-necked shirts and stuff, but when we were alone, you'd undo the buttons and stare at it, just look, not touch, and I'd get so wet from that, Wes, so very wet.

God, I am now just thinking about it.

Miss you, Wes. And, yeah, not just for the sex but right now, right now I want to fuck you, be fucked
by you, and that's it. Want you in me, real and sweaty and making those finger-shaped bruises on my arms because you lose it, just a little, when you come. I can't stand this much longer.

You'd better be hard now, Wes, better be missing me. Tell me you are. Tell me.

Faith
X

While Darla's screaming at her to get a move on, she follows the instructions and sends an e-mail to Xander.

Yo Xand

Hope you're still not mad at me. I love you—always will even if things are a bit weird between us. Wes sent me two tickets to Taming Of The Shrew at the Royal in the city (I guess it's like a Shakespeare version of Desperate Housewives) and he thought you might like to come with me. Would you? If, like, I promise to leave my gimp mask at home.

Hey, Xand. I'm joking, okay?

Let me know

Faith x

When she finally plucks down in front of the computer that evening after braving the crowds at the grocery store with Darla, picking up last minute things like frozen pie crusts and green beans and those icky fried onion things to put on top of a casserole, there's an e-mail from Xander.

Faith—

Still love you too. I really, really do. Think you're insane and, like, one of those chicks who loves too much and stuff but I still think you're kinda cool. But Faith, Faith, Faith—Shakespeare? Are you on crack per chance? I've already got plans to see Alexander with a bunch of guys from work. Can't resist that whole Roman decadence thing, right? Plus, c'mon, Faithy—Colin Farrell in a toga! So I'm forgiven? Great!

Hey, why don't you ask Holden? Bet he doesn't have any plans that night, and I'm sure he'd love to join you. Wink wink, nudge nudge. So, I already asked him and he said yes! You can thank me when you see me.

-X.

She's barely had time to type a not-entirely-joking reply to Xander (I'll get you for this Harris, you just see if I don't) when her e-mail pings and about fucking time.

Faith.

I'm still at work. I believe the correct 'smiley' for that would be :-(

I'll e-mail you when I get home.

Wes x

PS: Did you get anything interesting in the post today?
It's enough to make her scream in frustration. Maybe even have a proper to goodness hissy fit, which involves rolling on the floor and chewing at the carpet. She bares her soul to him. Shares this, like, completely intimate fantasy and all she gets is thirty words and change. Then she reads it again trying really hard not die from the cuteness that is Wes mastering smileys. He's becoming a total geek.

She doesn't have a clue how long it will take him to get home. Not like all she has to do is sit and wait for the ping on her computer like she has no life. Instead she e-mails Holden to tell him that she's looking forward to Saturday but making sure he understands that it's totally, like, a friends-only kind of deal. And after surfing a bunch of food websites for a classy pie recipe, she snuggles up tight with her collar fantasy. Not even touching herself, just trying to imagine what it will feel like round her neck, the cool touch of Wes' fingers at her neck as he buckles it on and then traces the edge of it and smiles, a little cruelly, when she gasps and...

Ping!

It's probably just Holden. But she hopes it's Wes and she takes her sweet time getting up from the bed, slowly walking to the kitchen to get a glass of water because he's taught her a thing or two about anticipation. Snagging a fresh packet of cigs from her purse, she sits down, and yeah, it's from Wes.

My sweet Faith, my darling Olympia.

Of course I miss you. And, yes, your little fantasy made me hard. I could see the collar, pink to match your shoes, of course. Perfect. I wouldn’t need to take any measurements to get the dimensions just right and I certainly wouldn't fuck you fast and furiously. But then it's not my fantasy, though if you don't mind, I'd rather like to borrow it?

You seem awfully preoccupied with my 'dark dreams' as you call them. And in the spirit of quid pro quo which always worked for us so well, I'll show willing.

Where do I start? I have a million fevered fantasies with you, Faith, there in the center of them.

Should I elaborate on the visions I've had of you with another girl? Of how I longed to ask you about your interlude with Drusilla but supplied the details myself. Of you twisting and writhing while she followed my instructions. But I wouldn't let her make you come, Faith. No one but me would be allowed to make you come. In all my fantasies, you come for me. Only for me.

Or there's the enchanting picture I have in my mind's eye of you tied to a chair by the side of my bed. It's rather an ugly piece of furniture, but I digress. You're being punished because you're always so willful, so disobedient. And this is the one occasion when I've had to gag you so a black, silk scarf stops you spitting out obscenities. Instead you make do with angry tears spilling down your cheeks because I'm sitting opposite you on the bed while a woman brings me off with her mouth. I don't think you like her very much but I chose her precisely because she's everything you're not. Cold and blonde and angular, so unlike my lush, dark, warm girl. And even though I can feel her tongue on me and she's very good, have no doubts about that, I can't snatch my eyes away from you. And when I come in her mouth it's because of you, your tears, the terrible look of envy on your face.

But my favorite fantasy, Faith? The one I come back to time and time again? Would you like to know what it is?

It's you. You're naked, which will come as no surprise because you know how much I loved to look at you. I can still conjure up a perfect replica of you, right down to that tiny line of freckles dancing across your left thigh—pointing the way to your pretty cunt.
And I can see them so clearly because I've tied you to my desk. Not bent over it, not this time but sprawled out, splayed out, spread out, bound at the wrists and ankles so you can't hide anything from me. Not the way your nipples pucker as I blindfold you or the way your cunt slicks up as I insert plugs into your ears. But I'm not going to gag you. Not this time, Faith. God, those noises you make. Those little whimpers. Those tiny sighs. Each delicious moan and groan. I can't deprive myself of them.

But you're forbidden to speak and you're not allowed to move but then I've tied you up so firmly that I don't believe that will be an issue. Then I leave you like that all day.

Of course, it would be unnecessarily cruel to neglect you, but you're in the dark, unable to see or hear or move and time elongates and expands so you can't tell whether five minutes or five hours has slipped past when I sneak in.

The first couple of times I'll just glide my hand up your leg, getting no farther than your knee. Maybe pressing a kiss against it because you're being such a good girl. Too good, too tempting so next time I have to suck at your nipples until they're hard and waiting for the touch of my teeth. And one taste of you is never enough, Faith. I have to be strict though.

So, I leave you for an hour. When I come back, you've made such a beautiful mess. Juices pooling out of your cunt and I want nothing more than to bury my head between your thighs and stay there for days. Instead I remove one of the plugs so I can whisper in your ear? What do I say to you, Faith? Such wicked, filthy things. How beautiful you look all bound and helpless. How much I want to fuck you in your mouth and your cunt and your arse. And you want it too. You tell me repeatedly. You beg me to make you come. But it's not time. You haven't waited long enough.

The next time I come in you're crying. And you cry so beautifully, Faith, even with the blindfold hiding your spiky, wet lashes from me, the way your eyes become so impossibly large when they brim with tears. I have to make do with the way your bottom lip trembles so delightfully and I have to kiss it. A stronger man than me would have difficulty resisting.

And my resistance, my resolve, is weakening every time I enter the room and see the way your limbs quiver with the strain of being confined. How your skin is flushed so pink with arousal and I take pity on you, Faith, on my knees because you know so well how to make me kneel before you.

Your poor little clit is so swollen that you cry out when I trace my tongue along it but I can't linger too long because I need to taste you. I told you the other night of how delicious you are—wild honey, sweet, so sweet and smoky on my tongue, when I fuck you with my mouth.

I can't let you come though. Not yet.

The last time I come in, you've fallen asleep. Worn out by your struggles and sobs. You come to and you give me a hazy smile as I untie you and I fall in love with you just a little bit more. But no matter how much I love you and I do, so very much, you have to be punished for making me wait.

You're unsteady on your feet so I bend you over the table and your arse… That pretty, pretty arse of yours, Faith. How soft it is as I stroke the palm of my hand across it. Pale and then pink as I hit you, feel the heat of the blow on my skin. You love it. Oh, you cry and you plead with me not to keep hitting you in the same place but I'm fascinated by the way the marks of my hand get more pronounced, the red indents of my fingers deepening and your skin is so hot now.

I think that maybe I've been too severe, too hard on my beautiful girl who's been so brave and so good. That she deserves a gentle, lazy fuck on my lap. But my beautiful, brave Faith looks at me over her shoulder, hair tousled and in her eyes, a wicked smile on her lips and she tells me to fuck
her.

There isn't time to do more than press a kiss on the heated curve of your arse before I unzip and I slam my cock inside the tight welcome of your cunt. Always so wet for me, always wanting me as you do now. And I'm fucking you hard because you ask for it so nicely. So many things I want to do—to turn you round and kiss you, stroke your breasts, tell you again and again that I love you. But there's time enough for that. And right now, there are more pressing matters.

I bite you hard on your neck because at times like this I want to consume you. I rub your clit with my hand and I tell you to come. I'm drowning in you: in the constant wet heat of your cunt, the feel of your skin pressed against mine, your pleasured cries echoing in my ears and I don't want to swim to safety. I want to crash on to the rocks and die in your arms.

You'd better be wet now, Faith, better be missing me. Tell me you are. Tell me.

When she moves her hand to the mouse so she can click on 'reply', she realizes that her skin is damp with tears. And she's getting to her feet only to throw herself on the bed and let the pillow muffle her sobs. How can she tell him that she misses him so much that she carries the ache of not being with him deep inside her heart? A constant, small pain, that's so familiar that it's almost comforting. So she lies on her stupid, little girls' bed and cries it out until she's calm enough to actually, like, be able to do stuff like construct sentences.

Dear Wes

Dear, stupid, stubborn, lovely, pretty, adorable, annoying, wouldn't-know-a-good-thing-if-it-bit-him-on-the-ass Wes

Of course, I fucking miss you! I'm wet and I want you so much and you're not here and it's killing me.

I love your dark dreams, Wes. Want to do all this stuff with you. Well, maybe not watch someone else give you a blowjob because there wouldn't be strong enough ropes in the world to stop me scratching the bitch's eyes out. But the other things? God, yeah. I'm not scared. I'm not disgusted. I'm just so fucking turned on, so amazed by you that I can't bear it.

I've been reading all these books and yeah, I know a lot more about what we do now. Know all the names and rules but you know what? It's not what we are. Not what we do. Not really.

Don't need whips and chains. Don't need some whacked out traffic light code. Don't need props and costumes. Just you and all those wicked, wonderful games you come up with. And me who'll let you play them with her. 'Cept now if there's something you want to do that I'm not down with (like letting some skanky ho suck you off) then, believe me, you're gonna be the first to know.

Call me on Saturday after we've both done the play thing. I'm going with Holden (remember him?) Xander's trying to set us up but there's just one tiny problem—I love you, like you didn't already know that.

I know that you need time. I'm giving it to you. Well, I'm trying. But Wes, I'm begging you now, don't fuck this up because you're too chickenshit to be happy.

Faith xxx

She switches off the computer after that, even turns off the phone for good measure. Because she's
getting so undone now that if he writes back some patent Wes bluster about needing time then she's going to… well she's not completely sure what she's going to do but it ain't going to involve hearts and flowers that's for sure.

When it comes down to it, he's all about making her wait for, like, everything. And it's about time he found out exactly how it tastes.

Instead she crawls into bed, closes her eyes and there she is on his desk, completely naked apart from the pink collar around her neck and the black, silk scarves tugging at her wrists and ankles. And she falls asleep, hands still between her legs.

Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Five

Thursday is easy to get through. It kinda is. There's a metric assload of stuff that needs doing like keeping Darla away from edible foods and cooking utensils, cleaning all the battered, chipped furniture so it looks like really shiny battered and chipped furniture and thinking all the time about what Wes is doing. Is he being all snarky and British and not doing Thanksgiving but has gone into work so he can dust off his depositions? Or, like, maybe he's gone round to friends because he actually has some now. Friends who want to set him up with sophisticated women his age who do charity work and would probably squeal in horror if he tried to…

“Hey kiddo, happy Thanksgiving.” Ted's suddenly there grinning, hands full of Tupperware containers that look all kinds of interesting. “Made you some of those chocolate cookies you like.”

And though it's like the law that she has to tell Ted that he's never to call her kiddo again, he makes wicked cookies so she lets it go.
He also manages to get Darla out of the kitchen so he can whip up their Thanksgiving meal, and a great one at that—brined turkey, fancy squash bisque, homemade yeast rolls, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry stuffing, the whole nine yards.

And by the time Ted's pushing a second piece of pie on her, she's definitely beginning to understand why Thanksgiving is such a big deal to other people. Used to mean a whole two days of Liam getting drunker and drunker and meaner and meaner until it exploded into smashed china and split lips some time around three on Friday afternoon.

But Ted… he might actually be a decent guy. Whatever. He's sweet enough to choke down Darla's green bean and cream of mushroom soup casserole with a smile and compliments Faith's attempts at a pumpkin flan—which she'd found a recipe for online. It sounded kind of exotic, but just ended up just being a boring pumpkin custard, the kind of thing Wes would have called pudding. Which had always made her smile, because things he called pudding never even remotely resembled the Jell-O instant chocolate kind.

Friday's better because she's not stuck in the house with two lovebirds who want to snuggle on the sofa, holding hands, without her hogging the remote control. She heads over to the flea market, stopping off to pick up Spike and Dru on the way who are still righteous with indignation at the way Dru's father asked Spike when he was going to make an honest woman of her.

It's so easy to be with them. Even after the whole three-way angst-fest. It's like they're the only people she knows who don't expect anything from her. Don't want her to be anyone except who she is. After they've spent an hour mooching around the stalls and she's bought this little, red wool, vintage dress which buttons all the way up to her neck so Holden won't get any bright ideas when she wears it tomorrow night, they end up in the local hipster café, wading through the emo kids to the last empty table.
Faith reaches into her bag and pulls out the books Spike lent her. “Thanks for these. They were
kinda interesting.”

Drusilla smiles into her gingerbread latte and Spike arches his eyebrow which makes her wonder for,
like, the gazillionth time if they teach that little move in English schools.

“Well, okay, they were a lot interesting and I made notes and stuff but I don't need them anymore.
Don't think me and Wes… well, we're not… I think our little issue about limits isn't going to be a
problem anymore.”

Another eyebrow arch. “Yeah?” Spike doesn’t sound entirely convinced. He puts his hand gently on
her arm, by way of encouraging her.

“Yes,” she says firmly. Spike and Dru just stare at her quietly, intently, as though they’re waiting
for an explanation she’s not entirely sure how to formulate. Everything between her and Wes still
seems so …exploratory and new, a little fragile even; she doesn’t want to endanger it by trying to
reduce it to something deceptively neat and tidy.

She swallows audibly, searching in vain for a way to quantify it. “Well, when I said that I’d never
played like that before… well, he hadn’t either. I mean, not in depth. Obviously he’d known for a
while …what he was, what he wanted, but before he met me, he’d never…”

She pauses, frustrated by her inarticulateness and feeling justifiably protective of Wes’ history.

“I mean, we’re working through it. We’re taking it slow, but that’s good. It’s really…” She weighs it
for a moment before she speaks. “Different, yeah, but good.”

Dru slips the books quietly into her over-the-shoulder bag as Spike asks, “He’s still in New York,
though, yeah?”

She sighs heavily, but the sound’s lost in her cavernous caramel latte. “I said ‘slowly,’ didn’t I? It’s
really fucking frustrating sometimes, but I think it’s the best thing for us. The distance, I mean. Not
the frustration.” She smiles slowly, and not a little coyly. “Although that’s kinda interesting too.”

Dru smiles wickedly. “Oh, do tell.”

She laughs. “I’m not saying another word! I’ve said too much already.”

“I bet the phone sex is phenomenal,” Dru adds matter-of-factly, peering at Faith through her lashes.

Faith doesn’t need to answer because that blush from ear-to-ear is kinda saying everything for her.
Spike practically elbows Dru. “Ease off, pet.”

Dru doesn’t say another word—she just takes another sip of her cooling coffee, looking for all the
world like the cat that ate the canary. That’s when she and Spike share the tiniest of conspiratorial
glances.

“What was that?”

“What?”

“That look.”

Dru giggles. “This is all a bit familiar to us.”

Now she’s curious. “Yeah? Do tell.”
Spike picks up the thread. “We spent two months apart once, early on. Mostly because I was being thick. Wasn’t dealing well with the non-monogamous aspects of our relationship. Spent all my time being jealous rather than being honest. So, yeah, we had a little time out.”

Dru sighs wistfully. “That’s when I discovered that Spike has an absolutely filthy mouth. And what a lovely revelation that was.”

Spike chuckles. “It certainly was.”

Dru gives Faith one of those unsettling, unerring looks that seems to see right through her. “Wes doesn’t have a chance, my dear.”

“Not gonna give him one.” She sounds so fucking convinced, so absolutely sure of it when she says it out loud. That gives her another little shot of hope. And if each day of waiting brings her a little closer to him, then it’s not a day wasted.

Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Six

Holden calls for her, like, half an hour early, but she's been ready for ages, perched on her bed and reading the paperback edition of *The Taming of the Shrew* that she's found buried in a box of school-related junk. And wasn't digging through that a blast from the past, seeing the names of boys she can barely remember scrawled across dog-eared notebooks.

All her thoughts are with Wesley, picturing him getting ready too, maybe sipping at a drink as he dresses— and her mind melts a little at the thought of him in black-tie, even though it's not all that likely. No, not black-tie—but he'll be in one of his suits, all dark wool and crisp cotton shirt and he'll be so perfectly, absolutely right. With a slight shock she realizes that when you've spent your life with parents who've shown you up in dress, behavior and speech at every chance they've had, there's something hot-bath relaxing about going out with someone who never will.

Unless he's trying to make her come in a restaurant, of course.

Driving into the city with a date—and Holden's just a little bit too on-edge for her to think the 'come with me as a friend' message sank in as deeply as she'd hoped it would—is freaky when she thinks back to making the drive with Wes months before, heading for a club and one of the most twisted games they'd played. Holden's car is a clunky box that does the job of getting them from A to B and no more, and the floor's slightly sticky against her shoes.

She can't even think his taste in music is better than Wes' because he tunes into a country station and when she yelps in horror he gives her a puzzled look and turns the warbling up a bit, just so she doesn't miss a single tortured wail of pain.

She pushes memories of the leather-cushioned luxury of Wes' car away, after lingering regretfully on the way he used to drive with one hand clamped possessively on her leg, and tries to chat to Holden. It's labored and awkward until she remembers something her computer's been doing that bugs her and by the time he's finished telling her about the proper way to organize her files and more about folders, sub-folders and data trees than she's ever wanted to know, they're in the city.

With Wes, it was a dark place he made safe and scary at the same time. With Holden, it's just the city, crowded, scruffy around the edges and the only parking is, like, miles away. Wes would've known somewhere close they could park, she thinks. And she's got to stop this because there is no comparison, so why is she even trying? And she's really got to stop pretending she's with Wes,
keeping her head turned so she's not actually looking at Holden because that pops the bubble real fast.

Walking into the theater lifts her mood. There's something so cool about the idea that Wes is doing this right now—she hasn't checked when his performance starts but it's got to be about the same time—that he's chatting in the bar, looking at all the people out to enjoy themselves, little bit buzzed because there's something different, something special, about a live performance and they're all dressed-up.

Holden buys her a glass of white wine, slightly too warm to be drinkable, but sticks to juice as he's driving. She gives him a brilliant smile of thanks and steps back quickly as his hand jerks with shock and he's an inch away from slopping his drink on her dress.

“God, I'm sorry,” he says, looking flustered and she's all set with a reassuring smile when a man who looks enough like Wes from the back to make her heart pound with a dizzying thud of excitement walks by. Even though she knows deep down he's too narrow-shouldered and not tall enough, when he leans in close to his companion and kisses her cheek the lights dim a little. Because wherever Wes is, whatever he's doing, he's doing it with that Anne woman, the one she hates, just a little, sight unseen. She might be fifty and frumpy but somehow Faith doubts it. Giles—who's gone on her shit list, right at the top, for his not-so-bright idea, wouldn't have picked a dog, not when she was supposed to be someone to get Wes out dating again.

As they go to their seats—good ones, with an excellent view of the stage—she's consumed with jealousy because Wes is too good-mannered and too kind not to be nice to that Anne woman. He'll be holding open doors, pulling out seats, draping her coat over her shoulders and giving her that smile.

“Faith?”

Holden's hissed whisper drags her out of a reverie-turned-nightmare just as Wesley's looking deeply into Anne's eyes and telling her softly that the night's been wonderful and why doesn't she come back to his for a nightcap.

“What?” she snaps.

He looks grieved. “I got you a program,” he says, holding it out.

“Oh. Thanks. Sorry.” Queen of the monosyllables. She makes an effort and smiles at him. “Never been here before, have you?”

He shakes his head and they look around at the red-gold splendor, the arched ceiling and balconies, which uses up a good ninety seconds.

Then the house lights go down, the curtain sweeps aside—and Holden's hand edges onto the arm rest and comes to rest too close for comfort to hers, not close enough to call him on it.

It stays there as the play begins but at the interval it vanishes and Holden's turning to her with a babble of information, not about the play but about shrews. Yeah. Seems when they're scared their hearts beat 1200 times a minute. And some can run on water. And the sound they make is the Chinese word for 'money'. And—

Her face is aching from her fixed, desperate smile and she escapes to the washroom and hangs out in there until the bell sends her back to her seat, staring at herself in the mirror and wishing she was a very precise number of miles away.
Because she's having fun—they've gone for a traditional staging, all period costumes and props and she's picturing Wes in doublet and hose which is enough to make her grin wickedly, because he'd freak if he knew but she's having it because she's reminding herself that she's here because Wes wanted her to be, and each time she does that, she gets a little shivery thrill.

The play itself is working its magic because she can't help seeing an echo of the games they've played in the way Petruchio handles Kate. And when Kate hits him and he remarks, 'I swear I'll cuff you if you strike again,' she's torn between a wistful sigh and a grin because she can just hear Wes drawing that at her and meaning every word. Though she doesn't agree with Kate's remark that if Petruchio strikes her he's 'no gentleman'.

No, she really doesn't.

There's a second interval, too short for them to leave their seats, and Holden gives her a smile. “This is great,” he whispers. “Really makes a difference seeing it without the whole of the tenth grade here.”

She snickers, because ain't that the truth and Holden leans in. “Though I hate the ending,” he confides. “It's just not right, y'know; saying she'll put her hand under his foot for him to tread on and all that.”

“Well, I don't know if it's, like, literal,” she begins with a little squirm in her seat because God, how many times has she crawled to Wes? And if he'd told her to do it, she would have, getting quivers as his foot pressed down against her hand, although when you think about it, it's not exactly hot. Face it, she thinks, if Wes told you to top and tail a freaking Brussels sprout you'd get wet these days. God, she misses him.

“It's just wrong,” he says earnestly. “Treating a woman like that.”

And obviously someone wasn't listening to the teacher when Mr. Bennett did his little speech about different times, different attitudes and how—well, she hadn't been listening all that closely either, but she'd got the point he was making; that you can't expect a bunch of English people who lived five hundred years ago to be down with feminism, even if they did have a genuine chop-your-head-off queen at the time.

“Katherina's a bitch,” she tells him. “And he holds up a mirror to her, so she can see what she's like, but it's one of those fun-house mirrors, maybe.” It's all making more sense now. “And when she changes, it's because she wants to, because she doesn't like what she sees.”

Which makes her remember Wesley, her lighter held between his fingers, all those months ago, flicking it open so a flame lights up the space between them and asking if it helped. And it had, but not half as much as his hand on her.

Holden's all bewildered now, because she's not reacting the way he expected. “You're such a— you're so independent,” he says. “How can you like the way she knuckles under to him like that?”

And she wants to tell him that it's more fucking complicated than that, that it's love and compromise and some things you don't budge on, and it's all bound up in simple words like they're saying up there on the stage, words like, 'I burn, I pine, I perish.'

But, really, what's the point? So she smiles and pats his hand—big mistake as he latches onto hers and doesn't let go and she's squeezing it so hard she can't help the anguished moan and then he's so busy apologizing the curtain rises and he's still doing it.
Holden's eager to leave as soon as the curtain falls, talking about a club, dancing, but she turns him down gently. She's not dressed for it, not really, and she wants to get back and wait for Wes to call her.

"This wasn't a date, was it?" he asks, looking woebegone.

"I told you it wasn't," she says, getting into the car and looking at anywhere but him.

"I thought—Xander said—"

"What?" she says, turning her head and giving him a death-glare. "Holden, tell me exactly what 'Xander said'."

And she's going to fucking kill him slowly because he's gone behind her back and filled Holden's head with hope and she knows how quickly that sours, and by the time the drive's over, they're not speaking and Holden's one bewildered heap of misery, still trying to get his head around the blunt truths she's hurled at him. She doesn't mention Wes but he's not stupid and he connects the dots.

"Isn't he, like, a bit old for you?" he says as they reach her house. "Same age as your dad?"

"He's nothing like my dad," she hisses indignantly. "And what the fuck does it matter how old he is?"

"Xander says—"

"Xander won't be saying anything soon because I'm gonna rip his tongue out and—"

"Hey," he says sharply. "He just cares about you, that's all."

She sighs. "Holden, thanks for going with me. I had a really good time. And I'm sorry if you thought it was more than it was, but it wasn't." She gives him a kiss that's aimed at his cheek and he moves so it gets a bit closer to his mouth than she's happy with. "I'm just so in love with someone else," she whispers. "And that's not gonna be changing any time soon."

Holden gives her a grin. "But I get to still be your friend, right?" he says with an unexpected gentle irony.

"God, yes," she says fervently. "You've helped me out, like three times now; I owe you."

"Then pay me back with one kiss," he says. "Just to convince me that I might as well give up hope?"

And she's gone down on virtual strangers and not felt this dirty, but she kisses him, gives it all she has, and the sad little nod and smile she gets as they move apart breaks her heart.

She's not sure how she manages it, but she holds back the tears until his car's disappeared.

The house is silent and her bedroom's like this refuge, this place where she's as close to Wesley as she can get right now and Holden's all but forgotten.

She sends him an e-mail to tell him she's back, gets changed into sleep-top and shorts and waits for him to call.

She's getting good at that. At waiting. Wes'd be proud of her.

He doesn't call. Of course, he doesn't call because he probably had to stick around after the performance and go for drinks and maybe dinner. Then Giles, it would be Giles because he sounds
like a shit stirrer from way back, suggests they go to this quiet little members' only club, all polished mahogany and single malt and him and Olivia have got these smug little smiles on their face and keep suggesting all these bullshit things that Wes and Anne (what kind of a stupid ass name is that anyway?) can do. And Anne is one of those preppy, Ralph Lauren ad blondes and she keeps touching Wes' arm and leaning into him and laughing with this really annoying giggle every time Wes even opens his mouth…

She's so busy torturing herself with how the four of them go to the Hamptons when the weather gets warmer so Anne can run her squinty little eyes all over Wes in a pair of shorts that she doesn't even hear the phone for the first couple of rings and then she's snatching it up and practically growling into it.

“Wes? That you?”

“What else would it be, Faith?” he says and he sounds amused that she's acting like a crazy woman. “How are you?”

She sinks back onto the pillows with a little sigh. “I'm okay, I guess.” And she holds it for a count of three and she can hear the little rush of air as he opens his mouth to say something but she can't help it. “So, did you go to the play with that Anne chick? Was she pretty? Was she blonde? I bet she so was! Did you kiss her when you said good-bye? Did you see her to her door? Gotta say, I…”

“Faith. Stop it,” he says softly. “Just stop it. I really didn't expect the third degree.”

“Well, what the hell did you expect, Wes?”

“After your last e-mail, I'm not entirely sure,” he says waspishly. “I suppose I should feel honored that you've even switched your phone back on.”

And she can feel herself coloring up because, yeah, it's been turned off until about an hour ago and she couldn't even force herself to check the five voice-mail messages that were waiting for her.

“I s'pose I needed some time,” she mumbles. “Not a dig at you, Wes. Not really. Got stuff to figure out too.”

“Really?” He sounds Arctic and frozen and other cold things. “And was your figuring out successful?”

“I'll get back to you on that one,” she says trying to sound all light-hearted and sassy but they've only been speaking for, like, one minute and already it's awkward and spiky. “Still love you though, Wes, if that's what's got you all pissed and I still want to be with you but when I tell you that you get pissed too so I'm kinda running out of options on what we can talk about that doesn't involve us getting each other off.”

For one second she expects to hear a click and then dead air, not one of his little telephonic sighs. “I'm sorry, Faith.” And he's got way better at apologizing than he used to. “I had a rather interminable evening and I was looking forward to speaking to you, only to discover that you're in your most capricious mood yet.”

She can't help but smile at that and she lets out the breath she doesn't know she's been holding and curls up on her side. “Hey, that reminds me. Always wanted to ask you what the difference was between capricious and mercurial?”

“Well, when you're being capricious, Faith, I fear for my mental health and when you're being mercurial, I fear for my physical health,” he tells her and she'd bet the rest of her stash of British
candy that he's wearing a smirk a mile wide.

“You're not funny, Wes,” she giggles. “But we could start again. Like, the phone call, not us. Unless…”

He doesn't let her finish that little time bomb of a sentence. “How are you, Faith? Did you have a good evening?”

“I'm okay, Wes. It was cool to go into the city again but Holden's car smelled kinda ripe. Think something must have crawled into the back and died,” she finishes on an aggrieved wail and it's not just because she knows she'll get that little chuckle from him.

“What did you wear?” he asks in his most honey-tinged voice.

“This vintage dress I got yesterday. It's bright red and it's pretty short and tight but it's got long sleeves and it goes all the way up to my neck. Be perfect to wear a collar under, Wes.”

“That's very good to know.”

“And these bright pink tights and engineer boots that you'd have hated,” she continues with glee. “But I put my hair up so my top half looked kinda respectable. Did you wear black tie, Wes?”

“No, I didn't,” he exclaims indignantly. “I loathe wearing a bow tie. I always feel like I'm being strangled. And what did you think of the play?”

“Well, we had really good seats and thanks for them, by the way, and yeah I liked the play 'cept Bianca's a scheming little bitch with that whole “being mad she's madly mated” crap. And I thought Petruchio was, like, a total asshole to start with and Katherina... well, man, there's a chick who needs a safety word stat.”

Wes gives this soft, little snicker, which makes her wish he was here with her head resting on his chest so she can feel it rumble. “Why did you think he was an arsehole?”

“He didn't love her, just treated her like she was his possession.” She stumbles because she's not good at this stuff but he makes this little encouraging sound and she plows on. “Like, he was only going to marry her for the money but then I think he fell in love with her because she wasn't like anyone else and she had balls. And yeah, well, she was a challenge, wasn't she, Wes?”

“And why do you think she was so angry?” he asks her gently.

“Because her father liked Bianca more and okay, so she liked to run her mouth off but I can get that, Wes. Know you can too. How it is to be so frustrated and hurt all the time and no one will ever let you be anything different. And she had no choices but to get hitched to some guy she didn't like because her father told her to. Like, could you imagine if Liam had picked out my boyfriends? That would have sucked!” She finishes with a laugh that doesn't sound all that happy and then frowns. “It's not like I'm an expert on Shakespeare though and some of it was hard to follow so I probably got it all wrong.”

“It sounds to me as if you followed it perfectly,” Wes assures her. “And I had a similar reaction from Olivia and Anne who were at pains to point out how dated and misogynistic the play was. Though I have a theory that Petruchio didn't just love her spirit but understood her insecurities and loved her for them too: “she is a lusty wench, I love her ten times more than 'ere I did,” he quotes and she melts a little.

“Holden gave me this whole feminist spiel too and I tried to tell him that sometimes love doesn't
make any sense. That when you love someone it changes you: how you think, what you do, shows you where you've been going wrong. Like, well, there's stuff we did, that you asked me to that I would never do with anyone else, wouldn't fucking want to, but with you…” She trails off, not sure exactly where she's going with this.

“I never withheld food, as I recall,” he points out lightly but he sounds rattled and once again it's gone from zero to weird and she doesn't know how to change gears.

“Well, sometimes you wouldn't let me have any dessert…”

“And sometimes I let you have all the ice cream you could eat,” he drawls lightly. And then he gives her a treat that's just as sweet as all the Rocky Road in the world. “I wish it had been possible for us to see it together, though I'm sure I'd be covered in bruises from all the poking you'd have given me during the parts that offended you.”

“Damn straight. So you never said whether you enjoyed it or not?” she reminds him. “Why was it interminable?”

“Well, our production was rather workmanlike and I rather felt as if I was on display for most of the night,” he confesses uneasily.

“So Giles and Olivia kept giving you the eye and nudging each other because they've got mad matchmaking skills?” She can't keep the sour out of her tone but he makes a little affirmative grunt.

“Something like that,” he agrees unwillingly. “Anne was pretty and charming, we had several very cordial conversations and I'm sure she'd have been agreeable for me to go back to her Park Lane apartment for a night cap but I'm afraid I made myself very unpopular when I insisted on calling it a night after a swift cocktail.”

“How pretty was she?” Anne is like this scab she can't stop picking, lifting up the edges of it because she can't leave stuff alone.

“Faith, do you really think any woman I meet now could compare to you?” he asks her sharply. “Do you really think it's that simple? After all that we went through that I'll meet someone else and she'll eclipse what you mean to me? I sat through that play next to Anne, who has the most annoying laugh I've ever heard, and then I had to suffer a very weak vodka tonic and a very predictable conversation about taking a house in the Hamptons next summer, when all I could think about was the pout on your face, and quite possibly tears, if I didn't phone you.”

“I wouldn't have cried,” she whispers indignantly but all she can think about is that he's not about to dump her so he can take Anne to loads of lame charity balls.

“No, you'd probably have broken several objects and then sent me a venomous e-mail. So would you think it unfair of me if I asked you how things went with your companion for the evening?”

“I still love you, Wes,” she splutters. “Holden's sweet though he talks about computers and, like, weird small animals way too much. But he's not you. No one's you. And he's in love with me and I kissed him to say thank you because it's this thing with Xander…”

“What thing with Xander?” And now it's Wes' turn to start sounding like he's got a shit list.

“It's no biggie. It's just this thing where he keeps trying to set me and Holden up and he keeps telling him that I'll get over you and I'm not and I won't, so Holden gets his hopes up and then I manage to trash them every time. So I had to kiss him tonight because he's done all these sweet things for me and just to, y'know, show him that there was, like, zero sparkage. I'm not going to keep stuff like that
from you, Wes. I don't want us to have any more secrets.”

She listens to some tumbleweeds blow across the wires before Wes replies. “If you did have feelings for him, Faith, I'd understand. It's not fair of me to expect you…”

“Don't even fucking go there, Wes!” she snaps. “You know how easy it would be just end up with someone likes Holden because he's there, because it would be uncomplicated and it would be what everyone expected? It's not going to fucking happen. But sometimes I wish it would because I love you and all it's got me is stuck in this goddamn holding pattern.”

“I don't think it's a holding pattern,” he says quietly. “I believe that each time we talk we're moving closer toward the inevitable. It's when, Faith, not if, but not just yet. Does that help?”

And it does. It really does. Because it's the first time he's made it halfway clear that them getting back together is on his to-do list. “This when?” she asks through the huge lump in the back of her throat. “Do you have a ballpark date in mind. Like maybe some time this decade?”

“Definitely some time this decade, Faith but I have to be sure that being with you is something that's right and good for both of us and not just because I can't bear to be without you.”

“It's the same difference, isn't it?” she asks him before she can't speak anymore because she's crying really quietly. So quietly that it's just salt water spilling down her cheeks but he knows because he's so fucking sweet that it just about breaks her almost mended heart.

“Please don't cry, my darling girl,” he murmurs right into her ear. And he doesn't stop cooing endearments and telling her how much he loves her until her eyelids are doing a really good job of not staying open and she can't stifle the yawn that makes him laugh softly and wish her sweet dreams before he hangs up.

Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Seven

And she's just so fond of, 'it's when, not if' that she thinks she might have that tattooed on her too, across the palm of her hand maybe, so she can keep taking sneaky peeks at it and smiling a goofy, sappy smile.

Well, maybe not, but she's still so happy she can't bear it—which translates into doing some totally insane stuff, like spending an evening packing a suitcase so she can be ready to go whenever he calls her. She folds socks in freaking tissue paper, wraps bottles in bubble wrap, folds and fits until the suitcase's a miracle of tidiness and organization that'd bring tears of joy to Wes' eyes, it really would, then the next morning realizes she's packed her makeup bag right at the bottom and has to tip everything out in a rush because she's going to be late for work.

Wes is calling her in the evenings, not to give her orders, not even to leave her in a simmering state of pillow-biting arousal, though just hearing him drawl, 'Hello, Faith' kinda takes care of that, but just to chat.

She starts to find out more about his job, teasing details out of him until she can practically take a quiz on the color of the carpet in his office, where the washrooms are, the kind of muffin he has with his morning coffee—'Oh, Wes, you're kidding me! No way do you eat muffins!'

They're like kids counting down the number of sleeps until Santa comes, and she's just one big smile most of the time, until Darla's sighs and sidelong glances are pretty much continuous.

It's not until she's typing a letter that the significance of it being the eighth of December hits. Not that there's anything special about it as such, but God, she's not even thought about what to give Wes for
Christmas! She's been, like, super-efficient, and gifts for Darla, her Gran, Xander, and yeah, as he seems to be a fixture, Ted, are already bought and wrapped, but Wesley... Shit, she's not got a clue.

If they were living together, with all of New York to shop in, she'd have to practically borrow Santa's sack to put them in because she'd go nuts getting him masses of tiny little pressies; the stinkiest cheese ever, a tie with Eeyore on it for his grumpy days that he'd stare at disbeliefingly and maybe wear one day with the most adorably serious look on his face—books, candy, anything and everything.

But this year, she's stuck. Until she gets a light bulb moment and then she's scrambling off the bed and going over to see Drusilla and Spike.

They're all curled up like kittens and looking entirely too blissed-out for a weeknight but as she explains what she wants they start nodding and Dru sits up straight, spilling Spike from her lap.

“Ooh, I love it!” she exclaims, clapping her hands together softly. “And of course we can do it.”

Spike nods. “Still got the darkroom set up in the basement,” he confirms. “And you're not going to want to get your kit off in front of strangers, now are you? But we've seen all you've got, so no need to worry.”

Faith narrows her eyes. “It's gonna be artistic,” she says. “And I thought Dru was the photographer?”

He gives her a smirk that's too over-the-top to be offensive. ‘I'll be the one dabbing oil on your bits and bobs to get the reflection just right,” he says. “Or turning the lights an inch this way and that.”

Faith and Drusilla exchange knowing glances and he looks wounded. “You need me! I'm the one who can tell you if it'll knock his socks off; provide the male perspective.”

“He can be useful,” Drusilla says, raising one slender hand and tapping Spike's arm in reproof. “But we can manage very nicely without him, my dear, if you don't want him there. Now tell me what you had in mind.”

***

The red silk's cool against her knees but Drusilla's turned the heat right up and even naked she's not feeling the urge to shiver. Which is just as well as she's been told to stay absolutely still. Turns out, Spike is useful; as Drusilla wanders around checking light levels, he's fussing with Faith's hair, brushed sleek and soft and trimmed an hour before by Drusilla so that it's falling in a dark curve high up against her winter-pale back.

She's facing a wall, with a swathe of scarlet silk pinned to it and spread out for her to kneel on. Why it matters that it's red when the photograph's going to be in black and white, she doesn't know, but Drusilla tutted sadly when she asked and she shut up after that.

The idea is that all anyone gets to see is her back, and, yeah, her ass, but she's sitting on most of it, kneeling back on her heels like this. Wes'll be able to see the tattoo but not read it, which will just, like, kill him. She plans to have Dru do a close-up of it for when she gets to see him in person though.

Drusilla's finally ready and she starts to take the pictures, cooing commands in an 'obey me or suffer' voice to Spike and practically purring as she talks to Faith.

“—black hair, white skin, red all around—you're like Snow White, my sweet. Very dramatic. Oh, yes, oh this is going to look—Spike, you need to move. Now.” Her voice drops down. “It's beautiful, but I want to try something. Close your eyes, Faith. Think of him. Think of him telling you
to wait for him like this, calling you from work and telling you to strip and kneel, with your back to the door. Would he do that? Is that the sort of game he'd play?"

She swallows and murmurs something that might be a 'yes', feeling her body get warmer still, pressing her hands down against her thighs.

“So you're waiting, and you've been such a good girl, so patient, so obedient,” Dru says, clicking away so that the shutter acts as punctuation because she's talking in a slow, breathless murmur that doesn't seem to pause. “And you're so wet because you know what he's going to do to you when he comes home, and he's told you not to think about anything but that, and he's told you he's going to hurry, because he's missed you, but you know he won't because this is part of the game, this is all of the game, and if he rushes it's not as much fun, now is it?”

Drusilla gets Wesley, Faith thinks, dizzy from the heat of the lights and the images. Totally gets him.

“But all good things must come to an end, indeed they must,” Drusilla says. “And you hear his key in the door and you hear it slide and turn, hear the metal grate and grind as he pulls it free, hear the door close.” Her voice lilts happily. “And he says your name.”

“Faith?”

And it's not him, it's Spike, but her head turns anyway, quickly, instinctively and she smiles over her shoulder.

Click.

“Yes,” says Drusilla quietly. “That's the one.” Her voice gets darker. “But you moved, my love, and he'll make you pay for that.”

Click.

Spike swears Wesley will like that smile better, when Faith's lips part and she shivers, but Drusilla stares at him coldly and shakes her head until her dark hair lashes back and forth like a black cat's tail.

“Now lie on your tummy,” Drusilla says briskly, “and I'll do the close up of the writing.” She runs an appreciative finger over the tattoo. “Oz is such a clever boy, isn't he?”

“Yeah,” Faith says. “Wes is gonna love it.”

“And that's all that counts,” Spike says dryly.

Faith smiles and snuggles her head into the cushion he's given her. “Not always, but mostly, yeah.”

Drusilla's hand moves lower. “I could take one after you'd been spanked,” she offers. “Would he like that?”

Faith laughs without a blush. “He'd love it—but only if he was the one doing it. Don't think he'd like anyone but him leaving marks on me.”

“Pity,” Drusilla says regretfully.

It takes a few days for them to develop the pictures and blow them up to poster size, then they call her over to see them.

'They're just perfect,” Faith says for the twentieth time, staring at them and fighting back a blush now
because they might be artistic, but even so… “Perfect. I'm going to send him both and keep the close-up for—” She falters, because he still hasn't said anything more.

“It'll be soon,” Drusilla says, leaning in close to the photograph of Faith smiling. “When he sees these, he won't want to wait another minute, I promise.”

She gets back home and writes to him, a proper hand-written letter to get tucked inside his Christmas card.

Dear Wes

These are for you, for Christmas, but you can open them now. I had Dru take them of me and there's one more you're not gonna get until I can hand-deliver it.

Hope you like them. I do, if that doesn't sound all kinds of vain, as it's me. I wanted you to see me how I look now. My hair's getting longer again but I guess it still looks pretty short to you? It grows fast though.

There are two because in the end I couldn't pick which one I liked the best. Drusilla calls them 'Waiting Ends', which is the one where I'm smiling, and 'Waiting Begins' which is the second one. I know, I know, makes no sense, back-to-front, but it does if you know what she was saying as she took them.

She'd got this whole story going where you'd called me from work and made me wait like this for you until you got home, kneeling naked, back to the door. And, yeah, if you ever did, when you finally walked in I'd look just like that, I guess. We didn't do that much, with us working together, but I know what it was like when I'd be waiting for you to get back from a trip. You'd come through the door and it'd be as if I'd woken up, as if everything when you weren't there didn't matter, didn't count.

And if you're wondering what I'm waiting for in the second one, it's because you'd told me not to move and so, yeah, guess I'm gonna get punished now.

But you know I'd think it was worth it to get to see you a split-second earlier.

I love you, Wes.

Merry Christmas

Yours always,

Faith

xxx

Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Eight

Because she loves Wes, she actually gets up early on Saturday morning (and ten in the morning on a weekend is practically the crack of freakin' dawn) to mail Wes' package and even the pre-Christmas crowds of old people with shopping carts and harassed mothers with push-chairs all set on a collision course with her shins can't dent her good mood, even if they give her some wicked bruises.

She can just imagine Wes getting in from a hard day of doing lawyerly stuff and the doorman guy for his building will hand him her package and he'll go up to his swank apartment, pour himself a vodka tonic and won't be able to take his eyes off her neatly wrapped parcel. And he just can't stop himself.
Won't even get halfway down the glass before Kierkegaard be damned, he's ripping away the brown paper and tape and staring at the black and white Faith looking over her shoulder at him. He'll trace the faint smudge of her tattoo. Keep looking from one picture to the next because he can't decide which one he likes best and then he'll phone her to thank her. Well, that's what he's planned. But between her being sweet as sugar candy on the phone and the monochrome promise of her ass, he'll totally cave and she'll be spending Christmas in his arms, in his bed, in fucking New York. Or should that be fucking in his bed in fucking New York?

And she's in such a disgustingly good mood that when Xander phones up she can't even keep to her resolution to stay officially pissed with him over the whole Holden thing and finds herself chirpily agreeing to go to see some band with him that night because his boyfriend (“Faith, if I've been on seven dates and slept with him and he's still returning my calls that makes him my boyfriend, right?”) has to work.

She's just stroking on a final coat of red lipstick when her phone rings and her face is aching from another ear-splitting beam as Wes' name flashes up on her caller display.

“Hey you,” she trills and winces because she sounds like she's auditioning for a remake of The Stepford Wives. Like, an even lamer version than the one with Nicole Kidman in it.

“Hello, my darling girl,” Wes purrs back and she's such a pushover that she knows that if he asked her to she'd totally blow Xander off so she could curl up on her bed and talk to Wes for a couple of hours. Even if it wasn't going to be one of those phone calls that leaves her sore from the feverish movements of her fingers responding to his demands. “I'm going out so I thought I'd give you a call before I left.”

Which puts paid to her plans for a little phone sex but she's got half an hour before she needs to meet Xand so she tucks the phone under her ear so she can brush her hair and sits down. “You going to— what was it? The museum benefit tonight?”

“You're awfully sweet to remember, Faith and yes. The firm's booked a table and I must admit I'm rather hoping to get a sneak preview of their latest exhibit.”

“You all black tied up then, Wes?” she asks him and closes her eyes as she sees him all black suit and snowy white shirt. And how she can see her reflection in the polished tips of his black shoes when she kneels in front of him.

“I'm sure I was garroted in a previous life,” he says exasperatedly. “This bloody bow tie has a stranglehold around my poor, defenseless neck.”

“If I was there I could kiss it better for you,” she suggests with just a smidgeon of dreaminess to her tone. “And then you could tie my hands up with it afterward.”

“Faith…”

“Just saying, Wes. Give you something nice to think about while all those Park Avenue princesses are tweeting in your ear about summer rentals in the fucking Hamptons,” she says with a grin because he's giving a little sigh like the Park Avenue princesses work his last nerve, which is just what she wants to hear.

“Well, it's a small price to pay and you've given me such a delightful reason to call you back when I get home so you can explain exactly what you'd like me to do to you once I've restrained you with this damn tie,” he drawls. “Will you be in later?”
“I'm going to see a couple of bands with Xander but I'll be back by midnight. Might want to start thinking about what you could do with your belt and my ankles too, Wes.”

“I must say, Faith, you sound positively skittish.”

That's a new one. Maybe they've overdone the whole mercurial/capricious thing too much. “Well, I posted off your Christmas present today, Wes,” she can't resist telling him in her smuggest voice. “And you're gonna totally freak when you see it. In, like, a good way.”

He gives a throaty little chuckle. “That sounds intriguing. Dare I ask if it's animal, mineral, or vegetable?”

“Nope, but you should probably be relieved that I rethought the whole Eeyore tie idea I had,” she giggles, wriggling in delight at his gasp of outrage.

“I don't even know who Eeyore is but…”

“Oh, you so do, Wes! Don't pull that crap on me. Bet you were totally down with all that Winnie the Pooh stuff when you were little and, like, way over-identified with Christopher Robin.”

“Absolutely impossible,” he intones darkly. “And maddening and capricious and quite possibly mercurial…”

“Whatver. You love it. I'm gonna be late now, so we'll speak later, yeah?”

And it's like the law now that he can't ring off before he's told her that he loves her, so by the time she has to run five blocks in heels because she's so very late now, her smile's so blinding it could probably power all the fairy lights on the Christmas tree perched on the roof of the bar, Xander's standing outside with a grumpy expression on his face as he checks his watch.

Not like Xander's Captain Timekeeping anyway and he gets over it in the time it takes for her to order two vodka and cranberries and a couple of tequila slammers, which they knock back in a count of three.

Xander's like the best drinking buddy in the world. Holds her bag when she has to go to the bathroom to pee and when she comes back because the line's too long, he grabs her hand and pulls her into the guys' with a loud, “Make way, make way, lady with a weak bladder coming through.”

The first band are really lame. Like, that whole whiny boy mope rock is so over but the headliners actually have melodies and a brass section and she lets Xander spin her round the floor and get into an argument with some dude whose drink she spills.

By the time they collapse on a sticky patch of floor she's that good kind of drunk where her teeth have gone numb and she can't stop giggling.

“… so then Monty makes me tell her that he hasn't eaten anything with sugar in it and, like, ten minutes later she's barging into his office to find him eating his third muffin. And y'know, Xander, I didn't think Mrs. Rosenberg knew words like that.”

Xander's bug-eyed. “What words? Did she swear?”

“She called him a fucking motherfucker. My ears nearly fell off.” And when his mouth gapes open, she nudges him so hard that he spills his drink down his front. “As if, Xand!”

He tries to glare at her as he makes a feeble attempt to mop up the spillage and then gives up.
“Faithy, we are not getting this drunk over Christmas because there was that whole thing last year when you fell over in my Mom's azalea patch and flashed my Grandad. His heart hasn't been the same since.”

It's getting really hard to focus on Xander's dopey grin unless she really squints her eyes. “Not sure what's happening this year, Xand,” she says, leaning against him. “There's the whole Ted deal and I think Mom wants me to meet his folks, which, so not going there and, y'know…”

“Y'know what?” he asks suspiciously and maybe she's not drunk enough for this conversation after all but if she does it quickly and then buys him another tequila shot it might not hurt so much.

“You're gonna get all mad at me but I think I might be spending Christmas with Wes,” she blurts out in this rush so there's no gaps between any of the words and he might not even have heard her. But he has because he's giving her a none-too-gentle shove so she's not slumped against him and can get the full force of his scrunched up face likes she's just made him suck on a lemon.

“Spending Christmas with him in New York?” he begins furiously.

“Well, he hasn't asked me yet,” she says carefully and she can't hold it in any longer because she's happy and Xander's her best friend and best friends want each other to be happy. “We talk every night on the phone and he's said when not if, which is just such a fucking huge step and like, how much longer can we have these talks where we tell each other every single little thing that happens during the day and how much we love each other and, man, Xand, never thought that you could do it over the phone but one night I came so hard that I kicked the lamp off my nightstand which took a bit of explaining when my Mom…”

She stops because Xander's got his hands clamped over his ears and he's got this pained expression on his face, which she isn't buying for even a single second. “Oh, what, Xand?” she sneers, giving him an enthusiastic punch on the arm. “Like, you and Mr. Seven Dates haven't done much worse than get each other off courtesy of Verizon?”

Xander doesn't rise to the bait because he's rising to his feet so he can haul her up so hard that her feet skid on the wet floor.

“When are you going to stop being so fucking stupid?” he screams in her face, tiny drops of spit landing on her cheeks. “He's a sick, twisted fuck who doesn't love you because he doesn't fucking know what it means!”

And they've sung this song so many times that it's kind of funny that she's forgotten the words. Or maybe she's way drunker or way, like fed upper with him and his shitty, small-town ideas of what love is because she doesn't chime in with the “he does love me, Xand” refrain but shoves him away from her so violently that he's doing this spastic stagger to stay on his feet.

“Fuck you!” she screams and it's like she's twisted his balls or stamped on his feet or pulled the head off his G I Joe because his face kinda collapses and he's shrinking away from her. “I love him. I'm gonna be with him and if you don't like that then you can just fuck off!”

He doesn't say anything, just walks away from her with his head down and shoulders hunched so he's not even at the door before she's running after him.

“Xand! Xander!” She tugs him round, grabbing at his unwilling, heavy body and physically turning him round so she can see the tears spilling down his face so now it's her turn to shrink away from him. “I didn't mean it. Look, we've both had too much to drink and even if you don't get it… I love him. I can't be happy without him and you have to, Xand… you have to be cool with that because
you're, like, my best friend and I'm not going to choose between you.”

And he just gives her this tiny little smile that makes something in her chest crack ever so slightly that she has to press her hand against her heart. “You've already chosen, Faith,” he says dully. “Don't know why we're even kidding ourselves. You've chosen him and he's gonna hurt you and fuck you up a million times worse than he did last spring and you're still too fucking dumb to see it.”

He stands statue still as she cups his hot face in her hands. “I can't keep doing this, Xand,” she implores him. “I love you, that's never going to change but maybe I have and you need to start dealing with that.”

For a moment she thinks she's finally broken through because he lets her hug him and she feels his lips press against her forehead. But then his hands bite into her arms as he slowly and deliberately pushes her away.

“Fuck you, Faith,” he bites out and pushes the door open so he can walk away without a backward glance.

Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Nine

She gets home and she can't remember how exactly, because she's going from angry to sad to, oh God, I wanna hurl, and there's no room in there for navigating the half-empty streets and looking left, then right, then left again.

But her feet know the way and it's a mercifully short time before she's in her room, clothes discarded, in the dark, face-down and sobbing on the bed.

It's a different sort of pain to losing Wesley. There's no room in her heart for hope that Xander will ever see the light because she knows him too well. He's stubborn, yeah, just like Wes—like her, if it comes to that—but he's inflexible too, and somehow, for all his determination, Wes isn't. Only got to remember him knocking back a vodka milkshake, eating Chinese from the trash or buying a freaking widescreen TV to know when it comes to her he's all kinds of bendy.

But not Xander.

He's got it stuck in his head that Wes is the Big Bad Wolf and that was true even before Wesley left. Was true from the first time he saw the bruises on her skin, wrapping around her wrists the way Wesley's fingers used to do.

Xander's too used to bruises on her meaning Liam, meaning tears, meaning hurt, and she gets that, she really does, but she's losing patience with him.

Because, fuck, how many times does she have to spell it out? And why the fuck should she anyway?

The phone rings as she crests a wave of righteous anger and she forgets that Wes had promised to call because right now it's Xander who's got center-stage in her head and wouldn't he like that.

“You can fuck off,” she says fiercely. “And you're gonna have to apologize crawling on your fucking bended knees—”

“Faith?”

The pained astonishment in Wesley's voice leaves her openmouthed with horror. “Oh God, Wes. Not you! Shit, I thought you were Xander.”
“Who owes you an apology? Interesting. Tell me more.”

And there's the faintest tinge of amusement there that tells her he's slightly drunk but she's well past that state herself into well and truly slammed so she's less discreet than she should be.

“He's a prat. And a pillock. And—tell me more funny English words that start with 'p' that mean Xander.”

“I'll e-mail you a list of suitable adjectives and nouns from A to Z my sweet, but not now.” His voice sharpens. “Although I'm still waiting to hear what exactly Mr. Harris has done to merit your evident disapproval.”

“See, now when you're drunk you get all precise and fussy,” she marvels. “How do you do that?”

“It takes practice,” he says. “I'm still waiting.”

She's all set to launch into a 'he said and then I said, and then he said' spiel when it occurs to her, in an alcoholically-inspired burst of cunning clarity, that she can't. If Wes knows she's counting on being with him at Christmas, it'll jinx it and she'll be lucky to be there for the Easter bunny, let alone Santa.

So she starts to cry instead, and that's easy and it means Wes doesn't expect her to talk much, so she gets away with a snuffled précis that comes out like, “Told me to fuck off. Said I was dumb. Fucking dumb. I'm not dumb am I, Wes? You don't think I'm—”

“No.” His voice is dangerously close to anger and she stops talking. “I don't. Enlighten me, Faith; what precisely was it that led him to this erroneous conclusion?”

“You. Me,” she says softly, and it's not a lie. Stripped down that's all of it. Xander can see her with Holden and smile because he knows she doesn't and won't ever love him, but Wesley? Different story. Oh, whole different story. “He thinks this—us getting—oh God, can I say getting back together, or is that just gonna piss you off? I'm so fucking drunk I don't know what to say. Tell me, Wes. Tell me.”

“Exactly what he said will do nicely,” Wesley suggests politely, but it's his fucking scary voice. “Do share his thoughts about us getting back together, Faith.”

She frowns. “He's just worried—”

“I'm sure he is,” Wesley interrupts. “But somehow, I'm having trouble believing it's entirely about your well-being these days.”

She's just about to defend him when she reconsiders. Fuck it.

“Wes? Tell me what you wanna do to him?” she asks, curling up in bed and hiccupping unexpectedly.

“I did call to tell you what I wanted to do you you,” he says gently.

“More of a blood-lust mood right now,” she confesses. “I mean, I still love him and all, but shit, he told me to fuck off right in front of everyone.” She pushes up her sleeve and stares at the dim bruises left by Xander's final touch. “And my arm's all red,” she discovers, talking more to herself.

“I beg your pardon?”
Quiet voice. Oh fuck.

“It's fine. I'm fine. Look, Wes, fine means about to puke if I'm gonna be honest. Why don't we call it a night and—”

“Did he—” Wesley takes a slow breath. “Did he dare to put his fucking hands on you?”

She stares at the phone and gives it a tiny shake. “Did you just swear? Because you never—”

“Did he fucking hurt you?” Wesley growls.

And this is just beyond freaky and she might have wanted Wes all protective and indignant but not like this, not sounding as Xander's life expectancy would be three minutes and counting if they were in the same room together.

“No! As if!”

“Then—just for curiosity's sake—why is your arm red?” he asks levelly.

“Knocked it against a wall,” she improvises.

“Faith, were you to be close enough for me to touch, you do realize what that little lie would have earned you?”

It's pretty fucking clear from his chilly tone that it wouldn't have been one of those fun spankings that qualify as foreplay, with Wesley's hand spending just about as long slipping between her thighs to tease her as it does smacking down on the curve of her ass. No. Not one of those.

“I'm sorry!” she wails and fuck she wishes she could stop hiccupping because it's so hard to sound persuasive and dignified when every third word is punctuated with one. “Wes, he didn't hurt me. It's nothing. He just grabbed my arms and pushed me away. He was mad at me. He's allowed to—”

“Allowed? To hurt you? No one is allowed to do that, Faith. No one.”

“Not even you?” she asks in a tiny quaver of a voice because he's not swearing anymore and he's not shouting but he's fucking furious and it's leaving her heart thudding wildly in unreasoned panic.

“Especially not me,” he says without hesitating. “Not unless you allow it.”

“He's like, he's close, Wes,” she says softly. “Not much of a personal bubble with us. Really isn't that I'm bothered about. It's the whole Xander walking off deal that's got me sad, not what he did or said. He just—he doesn't get it. Us. Never will.” She sighs. “Bet he never even read that book.”

There's a snort of something that sounds like laughter. “Tell me you're not trying to educate Xander in the finer points of sadomasochism, Faith.”

“I totally am,” she says, relieved that the storm's over. “Lent him 'Screw the Roses' and told him I wanted a book report, 2,000 words minimum, by Friday.”

Wes chuckles again but he sounds serious when he tells her, “I applaud your zeal, but I don't think it will enlighten him; more confirm his belief that I've corrupted you.”

“Well, that's fucking bullshit,” she says firmly. “You know that, right?” When she's answered by silence she sighs. “God, you two are the only ones in the world who, like, think I was this innocent, naive little virgin or something.”
“I don't think I ever saw you quite in that light,” Wesley drawls.

“No?” She cuddles into her pillows. “How do you see me now, Wes? Now I'm naked with that tie of yours around my wrists? Do you wanna, like, rescue me? Or do you want to—”

“I want to—” He makes a frustrated sound. “I'm not sure I'm quite in the mood for this, Faith.”

“You're not gonna let Xander get to you, are you?” she says, because she's drunk enough to be all over the place emotionally and right now she's getting all kinds of aroused. “You still wearing that tie, Wes? Really want to see you dressed up some day, even if you hate it.”

“I do hate it,” he says petulantly. “And I took that bloody tie off the moment I came in.”

“Pick it up,” she says, her voice breathy. “Look at it and think of everything you could do to me with it.”

“Such as?” he asks and she can hear him walk and guesses he's going to his bedroom. There're the muffled thuds of shoes being kicked off and she's fairly sure, yeah, definitely a zipper.

“Want to take a moment to get comfortable, Wes?” she asks archly.

“I asked you a question,” he reminds her.

“What? Oh, yeah.” She runs her tongue along her lips, tasting the red she'd painted them with. “Is it long enough to gag me with?”

“Yes, but why would I want to?” he asks. “Not only do I have a certain fondness for the appreciative little sounds you make—and the not-so-appreciative ones have a charm of their own—but gagged, you couldn't use your mouth to please me, now could you?”

“I miss doing that,” she says dreamily. “Not just going down on you, though, God, yes, I miss that a lot, but kissing you.”

“Do you?”

He sounds wistful now and she abandons her half-assed attempts to seduce him and settles for sincerity. “Yeah, I really do. It took you so fucking long to do that, d'you remember?”

“I—well—”

“Your bathroom, that first time I went there,” she reminds him. “I jumped you and started plastering kisses all over your face and you turned me and put my back against the wall and you kissed me. You'd spanked me, whipped me, shaved me, watched me come. I'd gone down on you and you'd had your tongue in my cunt and on my clit, but you hadn't kissed me.”

“Most remiss of me,” he whispers, sounding shaken at the recital.

“Worth waiting for,” she sighs. “I fell in love with your kisses, Wes. Totally love them, you know?”

“If you were to appear here in front of me,” he says, “it's the first thing I'd do.”

“Kiss me?”

“For the longest time I could manage it without being compelled to do...other things,” he assures her.

“How long are we talking, Wes?” she says, feeling a smile tug at her lips.
“I think, yes, I'm positive I could make it last a good thirty seconds.”

She snorts. “Man, that's pathetic! Thought you were all iron-control man.”

“Where you're concerned, I'm starting to think I'm more like...”

“Marshmallow?” she offers brightly. “No use to me like that, Wes. Kinda like you hard, you know?”

“I think we're at cross-purposes here,” he purrs. “Did you think the kiss would end so I could fuck you, Faith?”

“Well, yeah,” she says indignantly, because it's been fucking months.

“I have a rather lengthy list of your misdemeanors that will need to be dealt with before I can indulge myself in that way,” he says.

“This list,” she says hollowly. “It's, like, metaphorical, right?”

“I think it's time you went to sleep,” he says smoothly. “Don't worry about Xander; I'm sure the excessive amount of alcohol you both undoubtedly consumed played its part. By tomorrow he'll be suitably contrite.”

She yawns. “Hope so. Hey, this didn't turn out like we planned, did it? Sorry 'bout that.”

“You so often disrupt my plans,” he says tenderly. “And somehow I rarely seem to mind, simply because it's you.”

“Love you, Wes,” she murmurs.

“I love you, too” he says, and she slides into sleep with that in her head, not Xander's harsh words.

Chapter One Hundred and Forty

When she wakes up the next morning, she's definitely moved on to cursing herself for forgetting to pop two aspirin and down a glass of water before falling asleep—her surefire way of avoiding a hangover—because yeah, she's really got the mother of all hangovers.

The kind of hangover that's exacerbated by the squawking of her cell phone. A way-too-chipper Dru is on the other end, demanding to know just exactly where she is, and isn't dear Faith just so lucky that there's an hour wait at their favorite hole-in-the-wall Mexican joint, and hadn't she better be getting there soon, or Spike will be really cross, and wouldn't that just be too awful?

She mumbles something completely incoherent but slightly affirmative into the phone and rolls out of bed and straight to the shower.

Spike and Dru don't push her when she picks sullenly at her breakfast and tells them she's not upset about Wes.

“It's just Xander,” she says, after downing two cups of coffee and half a plate of huevos mexicanos. The whole story comes tumbling out in an incoherent rush, and earns more than its fair share of cocked eyebrows from Spike and disapproving coos from Dru.

“Happens that way sometimes, love. You outgrow your mates. Painful for everyone involved...”

Spike cuts off because she's given him the most aggrieved look like, ever.

“I know. I just... Well, I just never thought it'd go down like this between us.”
“Of course you couldn't, dear.” Dru pats her hand. “Men are such ciphers and yet so sadly predictable. It's what makes them so delightful. And so frustrating.”

“Hey, that's what you said the last time I left wet towels wadded up in the bathtub. Don't recycle that line to explain away that stupid prig!” Spike's all smiles, but there's something bitter behind his words.

“Oh, shut up, Spike! Faith needs cheering-up, not a dose of your self-righteous whining.” She kisses him gently on the cheek, and in a second, all is forgiven and that sends a pang of jealousy right through Faith, though she’s immediately protesting loudly and full of smiles again too when Dru announces: “Now then, who's ready to do some Christmas shopping?”

Of course, her shopping's all taken care of, and she suspects they’d planned this outing as a way to scope out what kind of present she’d like, especially when they giggle and whisper and shoot her pointed and deliberate looks as they examine some item or another, like a retro-ironic belt buckle that read, in red script, “Big Mamma's” or a T-shirt with 'No Loitering' strategically screen printed across the bust. And, as a bonus, being dragged from shop to shop along the town's one trendy avenue is extremely efficient at making her forget all about more pressing matters, from the fight with Xander to what to read Wes that evening, because Sunday's kind of snuck up on her this week.

And she's thrilled when she spots a set of vintage jet and silver cufflinks in a case at an eclectic and classy junk store that aren't nearly as expensive as she'd expected. They’re just the perfect birthday gift for Wes. He’d said it was between Christmas and New Year’s…

“Hope you're not thinking of those for me, then,” Spike says in her ear, sneaking up behind her.

“Never seen you in French cuffs, Spike, so, uh, not really,” she laughs, wiggling out of his hug and turning to examine the old-fashioned tie bars instead.

“Thought not.” He winks. “You feeling a little better, then? About Xander?”

“Suppose so,” she sighs, though she's suddenly taken aback by the fact that her cell hasn't buzzed with a text or a voice-mail from him. It's not like she was really expecting it, as she knows his pointed silence isn't just petulant stewing this time.

“He'll call you when he's ready.” Spike says, as if reading her mind and nodding at the cell phone sticking out of her handbag.

“Not sure if I'm ready, so that's just fine by me.”

Spike doesn’t look convinced, though. She turns back to the jewelry case to avoid his pointed look and flags down the clerk. “I’ll take these,” she says, sliding the cufflinks across the counter. “And could you wrap them, please?”

***

It’s possibly the most subdued Sunday call ever, since they’re both nursing residual hangovers that late brunches and lazy afternoons couldn’t entirely erase. There’s no mention of Xander, from either of them, but there’s little quiet gaps in the conversation, and she’s never been more grateful to just know he’s at the other end of the line.

She reads him the last few chapters of A Room With a View, trying not to sigh too heavily after reading: “Then they spoke of other things—the desultory talk of those who have been fighting to reach one another, and whose reward is to rest quietly in each other's arms.” And she manages to muddle through most of the Italian in the last chapter especially without too much trouble, though he
does softly correct her pronunciation a few times.

“Didn’t spoil the ending for you, did I?” she asks, shutting the book and picturing her and Wes and the perfect view of Florence and not leaving the hotel room for days and days…

“Oh no, I’ve seen the film, of course,” he teases, because she knows full well he’s read the book before, she’d seen a copy in a carefully culled pile stacked on the bottom shelf of his bedside table.

“Oh, of course! How silly of me not to realize that,” she plays along. “So, how’s your week shaping up? Tons of meetings? Big important case?”

“All that and more, I’m sure. It would seem that every attorney on staff is attempting to wrap up their cases before the Christmas holiday, and I’m no exception.”

“Well, I know. Even Monty’s schedule for next week looks pretty insane.”

“I don’t mind though, being busy helps keep my mind…”

“…off other things?” She interrupts, finishing his sentence. “Yeah, I know. Mine too.” She pauses, unsure of where exactly this conversation is headed. “So, if you’re clearing things up, must mean you’ve got big plans for Christmas…?” As soon as the words have trailed out of her mouth, she’s desperately wishing to pull them back in. Was that too pushy? Too nosy? Too desperate?

He gives her a soft little laugh. “The holidays are always busy and it always seems there’s something popping up at the last minute, doesn’t it? I thought it best to make sure my schedule was clear, just in case.” There’s a rather pregnant pause that she can’t fill because her mouth’s hanging open in shock. That couldn’t possibly be a hint of… “Giles and Olivia had mentioned something about skiing in Vermont for the weekend, for instance. But we don’t really have any concrete plans yet,” he continues smoothly.

Perhaps she’d just imagined it. Yeah, that was it. He wasn’t really dropping any hints, she was just reading too much into what he was saying. Right?

“That sounds nice,” she says, but it comes out all squeaky and slightly sullen. “We’re just doing the usual family thing, you know…”

“I’m sure that will be lovely as well. Especially since Ted seems to be quite the culinary artist.”

“Hey, I’m all for a man who knows his way around the kitchen. Pretty big improvement over the kind who only knows his way to the liquor cabinet.” She sighs. “Is it too much to hope that Xander will…God, I don’t know. Come around? It won’t feel like Christmas without him, it really won’t.”

“I wish I had more soothing words for you, but you really mustn’t let Xander…”

“I know, Wes. Really do. Already got this pep talk from Spike and Dru today, even. Just, still kind of stings a little, y’know?” She steamrolls over his sputtered reply as he tries to interrupt. “Not physically, Wes. In other ways.”

“I know what you meant, dearest Faith. Now, I think we should both get to bed…”

And she can’t exactly argue with that suggestion because her eyes are getting heavy and in the back of her mind, she’s already playing out this really sweet and dreamy and completely impossible fantasy that she’ll be able to hand him those pretty cufflinks for his birthday—in person.

Chapter One Hundred and Forty-One
Monday is one of those sucky days that should be taken off the calendar.

Before she's even got to work, she's managed to catch the sleeve of her favorite polka dot blouse on the chipped side of her dressing table, tearing it so hard that she'll never be able to wear it again. And okay, it's just a little something she picked up at a yard sale for a dollar but damn, it's got memories and all of them Wes-shaped. It had survived about half a dozen spankings, not to mention Wes' mouth furiously attacking her nipples through it and as she hunts through her closet for something else to wear, she's ridiculously upset.

Then she snaps her heel clean in half on a jagged piece of sidewalk and the barista at her favorite coffee shop is too busy perving on the new waitress to remember the caramel in her double latte and by the time she gets to the office she's ten minutes late and Monty's vibrating with nerves and too much sugar because he's due in court.

The minute she's managed to hustle him out of the door, she's back at her computer and telling her tale of woe to someone who cares.

*Hey Wes*

*I'm having the worst morning. Tore the sleeve on my white polka dot blouse and it's, like, ruined beyond repair. Then I broke the heel on my suede 'fuck me' shoes and the stupid ass geek at The Java Joint made me a double caramel latte without the freakin' caramel. Plus I get to the office and Monty is bouncing off the walls from too much sugar. Write me something that'll make me smile.*

*Love*

*Faith x*

And her e-mail pings like one second later, which is too quick even for Wes' superior multi-tasking skills and she's staring in disbelief at an Out Of Office auto reply thingy telling her that Mr. Wyndam-Pryce is in court all day and that any urgent correspondence should be directed to his assistant, Ms. Anya Jenkins. And she doesn't know who the fuck Ms. Anya Jenkins is or, like, why Wes has never mentioned her before but she upgrades her bad mood to a full-on existential crisis that doesn't get any better when she tries him on his cell at lunchtime to have it go straight to voice-mail and she's got no choice but to hang up instead of leaving some whiny, 'nobody loves me' message.

The only thing that goes right is bumping into Darla and Ted all spiffed up for a night line-dancing going out as she's coming in. Like, could they be any more white trash? But at least she's got the house to herself so she can eat ice cream for dinner and dance around in her underwear to The Polyphonic Spree until Wes calls her.

She's just settling in with a family-sized pack of Fritos and an OC marathon when some fucker starts leaning on the doorbell. And just like every other time that there's a ring on the doorbell she has to tell her heart to stop pounding because it's not gonna be Wes all ready to whisk her off to someplace else. Not this time anyway. Because standing on the stoop, shoulders hunched inside his battered leather jacket and looking like his whole world has turned to broken biscuit is Xander.

It takes some doing to school her features into complete blankness when inside she's torn between ripping him a new one and just dragging him inside and hugging him and telling him that he's a stupid asshole but she still loves him.
“Xand,” she says in the icy, controlled voice she learnt at Wes' knee, or bent over it anyhow. “What do you want?”

And she never really gets a chance to find out because he's crying. Proper crying with snot and his fists balled into his eyes and she's tugging him through the door and pushing him on to the couch so she can sit down next to him and let him get the shoulder of her favorite American Apparel T-shirt all soggy.

“Did that bastard break up with you, Xand?” she asks indignantly, when the sobs have muted down to a few quite hiccups, because she's allowed to get mad at him and hate him but she's got, like, privileges after fourteen years of being his best friend.

He shakes his head and she pushes a lock of hair off his sweaty forehead. “So what's with the waterworks then? Is this about the other night because yeah, you just about destroyed me but I guess I told you to fuck off first and that wasn't as bad as the argument we had in seventh grade when you…”

“I'm so fucking sorry, Faith,” he chokes out. “Got drunk last night, like multi-colored, surround sound drunk and I was so angry with you and him and… it's no excuse and you're going to leave and now I know I'll never see you again because I'm so fucking stupid…”

She doesn't know what he's done and knowing Xander it could be anything and she can't even focus on the little rash of goose bumps breaking out on every inch of her skin because he's rummaging in his shirt pocket and pulling out a couple of sheets of neatly folded paper.

“What did you do?”

And she knows already but he's spluttering out, “I sent him this”, even as she's snatching the paper out of his nerveless hands and running, not walking, to her room to read it.

Listen to me, you fucking, sick, pervert

Faith's told me that you're getting back together and I'm just letting you know that I'm gonna do anything I can to make sure that never happen. Googled your e-mail address, bet I can Google your boss' e-mail addresses just as easily and tell them what kind of freak they have working for them. How he's, like, meant to be all justicey and fighting for the powers of good when actually he gets off on hurting little girls.

She's nineteen! And you're old enough to be her father. You're just like that bastard. You enjoy hurting her and leaving bruises and fucking her up. Because she is totally fucked up. Gave me this dumbass book to read on other pain freaks but I know some shit too. Like, this whole thing with you is this cycle of abuse she's in because of what Liam did to her.

It's not just you, though you've managed to finish what he started and ruin every chance Faith's gonna have of a normal life. Like, she's had this three-way with a guy and a girl so it's not like she needs you to get off. Bet she never told you about that, huh? And she's been going out on dates with this friend of mine and he loves her and he's kind and he's funny and he has, like, a really cool vibe and they could be perfect for each other but she's still hung up on you because you've got her thinking that she's like this total little bondage groupie.

Just fuck off and leave her alone. Did it last time, didn't you? Wrote your chickenshit little letter and left everyone else to pick up the pieces and now you're back because you can't find anyone else who's like as stupid and trusting and vulnerable and sweet as Faith.
I know you. You know what you're like too. And she'll be in New York without people who love her there so you can do what the fuck you like to her. So she's just all covered in bruises and stuck in your apartment all day and too scared to leave you because you've got her so screwed up that she thinks she deserved to be treated like a piece of shit.

She was doing great until you showed up again with all your bullshit presents and phone calls. Got a great job, new friends and a guy who's ready to fucking worship the ground she walks on if she wasn't so hung up on a fucking jerk like you. So I'm telling you now to just back the fuck off.

And if you don't, I'm gonna fuck your shit up. Gonna hurt you and I fucking promise you, man, it's not such fucking fun when you're on the end of it.

Nobody gives a fuck about you, except Faith. And give it another six months and she won't either. You'd be doing everyone a great favor, if you'd just fuck off and die!

She's sitting on the floor and kinda laughing because Xand sounds like he's twelve or something but she's kinda crying too because it's just all so fucked-up. There's so many thoughts crashing around in her skull that she can't even begin to start untangling them. The loudest one is telling her that Wes is going to disappear again. Fuck it! He already has with his auto replies and his voice-mail and she was so close. So fucking close to being happy, being complete, getting everything she ever wanted which began and ended with Wes and it's all gone to shit.

And it hurts to read what Xander's written about her because he's her best friend and he doesn't know her at all. Thinks that she's nothing more than a victim of Liam, of Wes, that she gets off on pain because it's been bred into her with every blow from Liam's fists. That he doesn't see his friend anymore; just sees a freak.

She picks up the other piece of paper from the floor where it's fallen and she's crying now. No kinda about it because through the blur of tears she can make out Wes' e-mail address in the top line. Thank you.

Two words. Takes two words for Wes to come to the conclusion that Xander knows what's best for her. Two words to give up on them. Two words to make sure that nothing's ever going to feel good again and she looks up to see Xander white faced and trembling at her door.

“Just go home, Xand. I don't even wanna fucking look at you right now,” she sobs.

He takes a step forward and she looks up and he's backing away. “I'm sorry, Faithy. You got to believe me and hey, I can write and say I'm sorry. I can fix this. You have to let me fix this. You have to, Faith…”

“Go away,” she grits out. “I can't... I just need you not to be here. Please.”

And when he's still standing there, she gets up and slams the door in his face and stays with her face pressed against it until she hears him walk down the hall and into the street.

It's not even sunk in yet because she can still walk and go to the bathroom to throw up, before cleaning her teeth and splashing her face with cold water and chain smoking five cigarettes right down to the butt and leaving twenty messages on Wes' voice-mail that say, well, variations on “I love you” and “don't do this to me again” and “please don't break my heart because I can't put it back together again anymore.”
Eventually she's so cried out that her eyes are aching and scratchy and all she wants to do is crawl into bed, pull the covers over her head and just fucking die. Because she's got nothing now. But even as she thinks that, she realizes that it also means that she's got nothing left to lose.

That thought has her stumbling over to her desk and collapsing on to the chair so she can start writing. 120 words per minute and every single one of them has to matter.

Wes

I love you. I could write it out a million times. I love you. I love you. I love you. And it's the kind of love that's in the books I've read to you. Great, romantic, passionate love, that sweeps everything away because it's absolute and important and huge.

That's how it feels to me. It makes me so fucking happy. Makes me feel sad too sometimes that I can love you so much and really I don't have the words to describe it. You're good with words but all I can do is show you, time and time again, and it's hard when we're not together. I worry that you'll forget exactly how much I love you.

I know how I feel. But I still don't know how you feel. Not really. Guess I thought I did but I was wrong because how can you turn your back on me, on us, how can you fuck up the rest of our lives because of some dumb e-mail that Xander wrote because he was drunk and he's stupid and he doesn't understand? And what do you write back?

Thank you. Thank you? For fucking what, Wes? For reminding you that unless you're feeling like a martyr, you're not really living? For pointing out that poor, little Faith is so fucking screwed up that she doesn't know what she wants and oh gee, I should just keep away from her?

Yeah, newsflash, Xander thinks it's sordid and shameful what we do, what we did. And I can't just keep telling you and him all the reasons why it wasn't and why I loved it and I need it and I miss it. But you know what I realize? That's not all we were. Not all we are. Not all we could be.

And I'm sitting here and trying to explain about why I love you and it's:

• Being safe and snuggled up in your arms while the rest of the world passes by outside.
• And it's the way we used to do the crossword together and you'd always let me do the easy ones first and never get that mad that I filled the answers in in pen and got some of them wrong.
• It's all the delicious meals you used to make me—I have dreams about your roast chicken—and you'd feed me and, I don't know, like nourish me so I'd be healthy because you cared about me.
• And reading Jane Austen to me in silly voices.
• Being so fucking sweet when I had period pains and buying me chocolate and giving me back rubs.
• Holding me when I had bad dreams and stroking my hair and telling me you loved me until I fell asleep again.
• Giving me stuff that changed my life. Not the presents, but the really important things like getting me to read and showing me that I was worth loving and looking after. You made me feel like I deserved to be treated like that.
• Getting stoned together and the TV and the ice cream and the stinky cheese and you teasing me and pretending you were all pissed and you could never do it for long because you'd start smiling and your smiles would just kill me because they were so fucking beautiful.

And it's a stupid list and it doesn't even come close to explaining it. If that were all we were, it would be enough. But we were more than that and it's not. I'm getting all, like, not making sense again. But you always tell me how brave I am, Wes. And I'm going to do the bravest thing I've ever done and tell you right now that I wouldn't come back to you, wouldn't want to be with you if this list was all I
ever got.

I want the other stuff too. Want your hand on my ass, hitting me, hurting me, giving me that lowdown ache and sting so everything's simple and right and it's just the pain that you give me and then make it all better.

Want you making me wait. Want you tying me up. Want you holding me down. Want you making me cry and scream and beg. Want all the other dark things that we haven't even begun to explore.

But more than that I want your cock in my cunt, my ass and my mouth. Want you fucking me.

There's been too many secrets between us; all this gray and I'm choking on it. I can't do this for much longer. I hate that I'm so fucking scared all the time that I'm going to do or say the wrong thing and get punished with your silence. Out of all the things you've done, your silence is the worst, Wes. Hurts me way more than the switch ever did. And now you've gone quiet again because of some stupid ass e-mail from Xander and Wes... he was just looking out for me. In a really dumb, fuckheaded way but I can't hate him for it.

But this isn't about Xander, Or anyone else. It's about you and me. So, I'm going to give you an out. Let you have a chance to just walk away without looking back. Gonna make it easy for you.

Want everything that you've got to give me, Wes. Want all the shit you've been holding back. I can't live with any less. But if you can, then just fucking tell me and I swear that I'll let you go.

Love always

Faith x

Clicking 'send' feels like the most monumental thing she's ever done in her life. She listens to the computer make the swooshing noise it does when it's pushing something out into the ether before crawling into bed and pulling the pillows over her head.

One Hundred and Forty-Two

She's dragged out of sleep by the insistent chirp of her phone, lying where she'd tossed it after the nineteenth time she'd got Wesley's voice-mail message instead of the man himself. It's far enough away that she has to get out of bed to pick it up from the floor and she can hear the creak of Darla's bed as her mother stirs restlessly in her sleep.

Late-night calls are something they've both come to associate with Liam and trouble in the past and it's a hard habit to break.

She reaches for the noisy phone with groping, sleep-clumsy fingers and promises herself that if it's a contrite Xander on the other end she's gonna tell him everything she never got around to saying earlier. Then she catches sight of the bedside clock and fuck, it's two in the morning; it's got to be—

“Wes? Wesley? Is that you?”

“Yes, of course it is,” he says and this has to be a fucking dream, because she'd fallen asleep on a tear-soaked pillow wondering if he'd even give her the two words Xander had got and here he is calling her sounding absolutely normal, if a little hurried.

“You—” She falls silent, because what can she say? She's said it all in her e-mail, in the increasingly
anguished repetition of the plea for him to call her, and now he has, she's got nothing.

“My darling Faith,” he says and the urgency's left his voice now as if all he needed was to hear her say his name. “I'm sorry to disturb you so late.”

“Doesn't matter,” she says thickly, trying to wake up. “Doesn't matter, Wes.” She stumbles back into the warmth of the tangled sheets, clutching the phone.

“I couldn't—I just got your messages, your e-mail—I couldn't wait until the morning,” he murmurs. “Faith, nothing's changed, nothing. I don't see how you could think for a moment that I'd let Xander's rather obvious threats make a difference to my feelings for you.”

She can't let herself feel glad because she's not that brave. “You thanked him,” she said, and remembered anger wakes her up better than cold water and bright lights. “You fucking thanked him after all he said about us—about me, and I've been calling you and calling you—”

“I didn't think for a moment that he'd be stupid enough to tell you what he'd done—oh, of course. Remorse set in, did it?” Wesley makes a 'tchah' sound and she can almost see him roll his eyes. “I've been in court all day, Faith and afterward I was swept off by Rupert to celebrate our victory and it all went on considerably longer than I expected. I'm still not really accustomed to checking for e-mails and my phone was left in my briefcase and I—”

“It doesn't matter,” she says, cutting off his explanation. “Wes—tell me, just fucking tell me.”

There's a silence and it seems to last forever until he begins to speak. “I didn't call you straight away, Faith. I heard your phone messages first and I was all set to return them and find out what on earth had distressed you, when it occurred to me that there might be a letter from you waiting for me.” He pauses. “I read your e-mail half an hour ago, Faith. It’s taken me that long to get to the point where I could call you back without just telling you to come to me, come now. Or to just come and get you myself.” She's biting her knuckle now, teeth digging into flesh until she can taste the salt-tang of blood in her mouth, trying to hold back the words, the tears, because she doesn't want to miss anything that he's saying.

“But it's still not time for that yet, Faith, and I won't be pushed into anything by the actions of a hurt, angry boy.”

“Wish you would,” she manages to say. “Wesley—I meant it. I can't stand this much longer.”

“Would it help if I set a limit?” he asks, his voice calm and assured as if he can tell how close she is to breaking down. “If I promised that we'd be together by a certain date?”

“How can you?” she asks, still too sleep-dazed to think clearly. “If you can tell me February 17th, you can tell me next Thursday.”

“Why then?” he asks curiously. “The February date, I mean.”

She smiles, even though he can't see it. “You tell me,” she says.

It takes him two slow breaths, as she starts to let herself believe it's going to be fine, to get it.


“Hey!” she protests. “Wes, that's two months away!”
“I didn't say it wouldn't be earlier,” he points out. “I simply—”

“You're fucking with me,” she says flatly, not caring if he gets annoyed with her.

“Perhaps,” he says and there’s a note in his voice she hasn't heard for a long time. “Or perhaps now this is just part of the game. If I said it was, Faith, if I promised you that I knew exactly what I was doing, would you play?”

“Do I have a choice?” she counters but there's a stirring of excitement that makes it come out as a challenge he can't help but recognize.

“You have the same choice as always, Faith,” he says smoothly. “Say your safeword and it stops. Whatever I'm doing to you, it stops.”

“What would you do if I did?” she asks. “If I said it now, tonight. Would you let me come to you?”

“Yes.”

“Then—” She stops, seeing the trap. “You really can be a total fucking bastard, Wes, you know that?”

“You've said that before,” he reminds her, “many times, but have I ever not made it worth your while to wait?”

The memories of a hundred bone-melting orgasms won't allow her to disagree. “No.”

“It's your choice, Faith,” he says gently. “As it's always been.”

“You know I won't say it for this,” she says. “But I totally fucking should, Wes, because being apart like this, it's fucking killing me, you know?”

“I do know,” he says with a fervent assurance. “As I feel exactly the same way, how could I not?”

“Then why—no, forget it,” she says with a resigned sigh. “I trust you, Wes.”

“I love you so very much,” he says with devastating simplicity. “Reading Xander's e-mail left me quite shaken. It wasn't that I thought he'd carry out his threats—I really do hope you believe me when I say that was never a consideration—but for a moment I began to doubt my ability to keep you safe.”

“As if! Wes, that's stupid.”

“No. He made some good points,” he corrects her. “Would you—when you come here—would it—” He sighs and starts over. “I want you to open an account,” he says. “I'll deposit a sum more than sufficient for you to buy a ticket home, keep yourself—”

“No!” She's sitting bolt-upright in bed now. “I've got a savings account already—been putting some aside, but I don't need that, Wes. I don't want you to mention it again.”

“Faith—” He's sounding pained now but she's not giving way.

“Relationships don't come with safety nets, Wes,” she says. “And you don't go into them planning for what's gonna happen when they end.”

“I just want—”
"You do that and I'm not coming," she says firmly. "You choose now, Wes. You fucking choose."

He gives a chuckle, conceding defeat. "You've given me none," he says dryly. "I don't think you realize quite what I'd do, what I'd give, or give up, to have you with me again."

"Tell me," she says, and it's a question not a plea, nor a command. "Wes, I've had a fucking horrible night. I need you to tell me."

He exhales and his voice is shaking as he murmurs her name. "Faith, there isn't anything more important to me than you. Anything, or anyone. I love you too much to be wise, too deeply to be anything but your slave."

"Haven't you got that the wrong way 'round?" she says, feeling her body flush with heat as if he's there beside her, his hand running over her skin, waking it, arousing her, making her ache with wanting him.

"I really haven't," he says. "I'm going to let you go back to sleep now, Faith."

"Don't think I can, Wes," she says, though the yawn that follows that isn't convincing. "Feel all kinds of worked-up. Kinda like Christmas Eve, you know?"

"I want you to go to sleep," he says firmly. "Faith, I really can't have you going to work tomorrow and performing at a less-than-adequate level for your employer because you've had insufficient sleep. Are you lying down?"

"Yes," she says drowsily, snuggling back. "I'm all tucked in."

"Close your eyes."

"You gonna sing me a lullaby, Wes?"

"I'm not, no," he says sounding amused. "But I could tell you a story."

"This the kind with audience participation?" she says, with her fingers already working their way down between her legs, tracing the bump of her clit and feeling the wetness he's coaxed from her with just a few words.

"If you like," he says indulgently. His voice sharpens. "It's dark? Your eyes are closed?"

"Yes, Wesley," she says.

"Good girl." He pauses. "Although it occurs to me—"

"What?"

"You've fallen into some very bad habits while we've been apart, Faith. I told you to go to sleep and you're arguing with me."

"I'm not!" she whispers indignantly. "Wesley, I want my story-"

"No, you don't," he whispers back. "That's not really what you want, Faith, is it?"

She catches her breath sharply and hears him smile, yes, she so fucking does.

"You're being so willful," he says dreamily and he's tired too, she can tell and she wonders if he's in bed too, naked in the darkness. "So very insubordinate and demanding. I think we both know where
this is leading, Faith, don't you? To an addressing of your bad behavior until you're properly repentant. It's going to take some time to regain lost ground, but I think—yes, I think it's time to begin again in earnest. Were you to be here, you know I'd tip you over my knee. I miss the weight of you across my lap, you know. You'd feel so warm and real, after years of dreaming, and even though I couldn't always see your face—did you ever wonder why I used to insist that your hair be tied back at work, Faith? It was to give myself the pleasure of seeing your face flush and the way the tears trickled and fell as I spanked you.”

Her fingers are rubbing at her clit now, feverish and frantic and she must have voiced the moan that's echoing in her head because he whispers, “Slowly, Faith—or I'll make you place your hands a long way from where they are now. I'm already jealous of them for touching you there, where my fingers should be, my mouth. Where was I? Oh, yes. The charming way you reacted when I was spanking you. I'm not sure how aware you were of what you were doing. At the beginning, I imagine you were; that you were listening as I spoke to you, lectured you on whatever you'd done to deserve punishment—and of course, so often, it was nothing more than my need that placed you there, nothing more than me giving into the temptation you presented. If I ever think of myself as weak, Faith, I'll remember how many times I let you walk away to type up the letters I'd dictated with half my mind lost in a fantasy of fucking you, instead of ordering you to stay, to strip, to come to me.”

“Wesley,” she groans, because she can't listen to this and stay silent. “Wish you had, wish you'd fucked me every time.”

“My sweet Faith,” he purrs. “So eager, always. And once again you've distracted me. I really do think I'll have to tell you not to interrupt me again.”

“Yes, Wesley,” she says.

“That counts,” he tells her mildly. “So. I'd watch you and gradually you'd lose your inhibitions. Your body would squirm, your eyes would squeeze closed and you'd make these sounds—God, Faith, I can hear them now. You'd say my name, over and over, and if you'd tried—and I don't think by then you were capable of unstudied speech—I don't think you could've said anything that would have moved me more than those repetitions of my name. You made it sound like—”

“Like I was praying,” she says, not caring that she's not supposed to be talking. “Praying you wouldn't stop, that this time your hand hit me wouldn't be the last one and I'd want you to stop because I'd want you to fuck me, but it was part of it somehow and I used to feel so close to you then.”

“I had to make myself stop,” he admits. “Partly because I'd be so hard I couldn't wait, but because I could see what I was doing to you and I didn't want to—”

“Yes, you did,” she says. “Tell me, Wes. Tell me.”

She thinks she's pushed him too far, but she doesn't care. Here, in the silent house, with the night wrapping around her as it is around him, with his voice soft in her ear, she wants honesty from him because she deserves it.

“I wanted to hurt you,” he says finally and there's a dark resolve there now and no shame or hesitation. “Wanted to see your arse bruised and burning so beautifully. And I will do, Faith. You needn't fear I'll be merciful with you when you come to me.”

And it's the oddest fucking thing to say maybe but it's what tips her over so she's coming with his name on her lips, moaning and jerking against her insistent fingers and he listens in appreciative silence before sighing.
“Go to sleep, Faith,” he says gently.

“Wes,” she says as sleep rushes in to claim her, forcing the words past her sleep-numbed lips. “Why did you thank him?”

“Xander?” He clears his throat. “Partly because I was genuinely grateful for his concern, however misplaced or motivated and partly—”

“Yeah?” she yawns.

“I wanted to piss him off,” he says a little smugly. “Did it work, do you think?”

She's still grinning as she falls asleep.

Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Two

She wakes up in the morning with a muggy, aching head from the ocean of tears she'd cried the night before. But then she feels the stickiness between her legs, sees the phone lying next to her on the pillow and she stretches out languidly allowing herself a small, satisfied smile because it's not if, it's not even when any more. She's got a date. And yeah, two months seems like several fucking lifetimes to get through but she can wait. He's managed to train her to do that at least.

But as she wanders back from the bathroom, she sees the crumpled pieces of paper lying on the floor when she left them and she's crying again. Not for her and Wes this time because she has an absolute certainty that though he's gonna make her cry plenty, they'll be happy tears. Tears because it would be just like him to make her wait until a minute before midnight on February 17th and even if he doesn't, she's gonna be weeping buckets when he finally gets his hand on her ass and gives her some payback.

So, no not tears for her and Wes but tears for her and Xander because they've torn apart from each other now and there isn't glue enough in the world to stick them back together. And then she hears Darla moving about in the kitchen and she's set on a collision course right into her arms.

“Faithy, baby, what's the matter?” Darla says in the split second before she collapses sobbing on her shoulder.

And it's hard to choke out the words through a head full of snot and tears but Darla's stroking her back and pushing her hair away from her hot, sticky face.

“And it's not like I won't speak to him, I can't,” she finishes finally, rounding it off with a volley of sneezes that has Darla backing away nervously.

“He was just looking out for you, sweetie,” she coos. “In a dumbass guy way. Bet he'll be back this evening with some ice cream and a CD that makes your ears hurt when you listen to it.”

“But he doesn't get me anymore,” Faith wails, snagging a piece of paper towel so she can blow her nose. “Like, I've changed and he can't change with me and he's getting left behind and I can't slow down… I just can't.”

She looks up through blurry, tear-soaked eyes to see Darla watching her with a thoughtful expression on her face that's so still, so quiet that it's almost a shock.

“Are you going to be here for Christmas?” she asks softly. “Or do you think you'll want to spend it in New York?”
She shrugs, then sighs heavily because ain't that the $64,000 question. “I don't know. I hope so… would you be pissed at me if I wasn't here?”

Darla's reaching for a tumbler from the cupboard above the sink but she turns so Faith can see her try to paste on a bright smile.

“Maybe a little, honey,” she gulps. “Be nice to have one good Christmas with you that doesn't end up with the police coming round or…”

“… a visit to the ER, yeah, I know.”

“I don't know. Faithy, seems like a pretty whacked out plan to get out of Christmas Eve dinner at your gran's house with the glazed ham and that Jell-O salad,” Darla shudders at the memory and then allows herself a smug smile. “Least I didn't inherit the way she can't cook for shit.”

And she tries to laugh because, like, ironic much but turns out she wants to sneeze much more and, maybe have coughing fit while she's at it.

She feels really guilty about having to call in sick. Actually, she kinda does. Because she loves Monty in a totally not inappropriate way and he's way busy with the Christmas rush of acrimonious divorces and bankruptcy hearings but he gasps in horror when she croaks down the phone at him and even threatens to send Mrs. Monty round with chicken soup.

Just before, she crawls back into bed she quickly sends an e-mail to Wes because he'd want to know that she's all poorly. And she lets herself wish that it was, like, February 19th because he'd coddle her and cuddle her and probably lug the bigass TV into the bedroom so she could watch Lifetime.

Hey Wes

Not in work today. Got this stinking cold and way more snot than any girl should have. You still love me, even after that charming visual? You'd better.

Speak to you later

Faith x

She's dozing fitfully and trying to summon up the energy to stagger into the lounge so she can watch TV when her phone, which is buried somewhere under the covers begins to chirp, which makes her wince even as she starts digging around for it.

She knows it's him but she still manages to croak, “Wes?” before she starts hacking up one of her lungs.

“You sound absolutely dreadful,” he says, sounding gratifyingly worried. “Have you been to see a doctor?”

“No… hang on,” she yelps and grabs for the tissues so she can cut off a sneeze before it gets going. “Took some Advil and my mom's coming home at lunchtime with some OJ.”

“I still think you should see someone,” he states with absolute certainty, like she needs a second opinion to be told she's got a cold. “Are you running a fever? How long have you felt like this? You should have said something last night. Have you got a sore throat?”

In the background she can hear a man calling his name with a good-natured impatience and practically hear Wesley's teeth grind.
“Stop fussing, Wes. I'll be okay. Just need to sweat it out,” she assures him and then ruins it by chasing the tickle in her throat.

“I have no doubt that you brought this on yourself by running about without a coat on,” he intones darkly before hissing in annoyance. “Bloody hell. Yes Doyle, I'll be there in a moment!” He clears his throat. “This is impossible. I'll call you later, but is there anything I can do—”

And she doesn't even have to think about that one. Not even for a second. “Yeah, you can jump on a plane and be here to make me hot drinks and give me back rubs and bring the TV into the bedroom.”

The man's still jawing on in the background but doesn't seem like Wes gives a fuck because he chuckles. “I forgot that being ill makes you even more demanding than you normally are, Faith. I have to go but I do hope you'll feel better by February 17th because I do have rather a lot of elaborate plans that I'd hate to have to postpone because of…”

“Hey, Wes, you said it could be sooner!” she protests indignantly and then pauses for a second because she can feel a cough coming right on cue. “Can't believe that you're tormenting me when I'm all ill and stuff.”

“Doyle, I said I'll be there in a minute,” he snaps and then like he's flicked a switch, his voice changes so it's warm and caring and just a little bit dark. “My poor little Faith. I'll speak to you tonight, even though we'll have to take a rain check on the little entertainment I'd devised with the able assistance of Mr. Bunny. I trust he's not indisposed too?”

Mr. Bunny has been unceremoniously shoved into the back of a drawer for a good few months but she's not telling him that. “Now you come to mention it, Wes, he has been feeling kinda poorly.”

“What a pity,” he drawls and then she can hear a rustle and the snap of something that sounds like his briefcase. “I really have to go, Faith. Try and get some sleep and I'll speak to you later.”

Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Three

Tuesday goes by in a haze, and even Wesley calling her that night and being totally sweet with all sorts of anxious questions, dire threats about how she hadn't better be smoking while she's like this, and, just before he hangs up, a promise that if he catches her cold he's adding it to that hypothetical list of her sins he swears he's keeping, doesn't really register. Her head and throat ache, her nose is running and she's not even gonna think about what she looks like with the Rudolph nose and the flattened, sweat-damp hair.

But whether it was his stern admonition that she get better or Darla making up for all the colds she didn't coddle and pouring sticky-sweet honey-lemon drinks and Advil down Faith's throat every chance she gets, she wakes up late on Wednesday morning and feels halfway-human again. She's still liable to sneeze explosively when she least expects it, and her voice is husky even when she's not trying to sound seductive, but her head's cleared a little and she manages to drag herself to the sofa.

She's drifting between sleep and soaps when the doorbell rings. Cursing because curiosity won't let her leave it unanswered, but she's so not ready for visitors, she staggers to the door, pushing her hair behind her ears and tugging at the waistband of the sweatpants she's looking so totally glam in.

She opens the door and is greeted by a smiling delivery man and a clipboard shoved under her nose. “Sign here,”

She scribbles something that's vaguely like her signature, her eyes locked on the flowers he's holding out.
“Who—”

“There's a card,” the delivery man says helpfully, backing away because it's too close to Christmas for him to want to get sneezed on by crazy bed-head lady. “Hope you're feeling better soon.”

“Yeah, thanks,” she murmurs, shutting the door and making her way back to the couch. She sets the flowers down on the coffee table and stares at them. Not a huge, bigger than she is, monstrosity, not a cheap assortment of the usual flowers—and she's eliminated Xander and Holden right there—though it might be Monty, but really, as her questing fingers clutch eagerly at the envelope tucked discreetly into the foliage, it's just got to be Wes.

Because it's a severely simple arrangement of blue iris in a rectangular planter, all the same height, slim green stems supporting delicate, deep blue flowers and the combination of order and beauty remind her of his garden.

She reaches out to touch them, brushing her fingers across the cool petals, and then opens the envelope.

**Darling Faith.**

*I trust you've obeyed my final order and got better. I'll call you later to make sure you have.*

*Love*

*Wes*

She imagines the flower service repeating that dictated message back to him with a doubtful frown and snickers to herself.

When he calls her that evening she's well enough that she's already decided to go into work the next day and she's taken a bath. All the dozing has left her feeling strangely alert so that when he's listened indulgently to her thanks for the flowers and exhausted his inquiries about her state of health, she's not ready to let him go as he suggests.

“No, Wes. So not sleepy. Unless you've, like, got somewhere you've got to be?”

And it wasn't an attempt to pry and he must get that because he just says, “No,” and he's all set to start one of their rambling conversations that can cover anything from the proper way to slice bread and butter to make soldiers to dunk in a soft-boiled egg (it's an English thing and she just about died of the cuteness when he told her how he used to knock holes in the eggshell to stop witches using them for boats as a child, and still does it without thinking even now) to the color of the ocean lapping against the tropical island they're going to visit someday, although that's more her fantasy than his, as he keeps telling her horror stories about crabs that bite your toes and trying to make her swap it for a cottage in Scotland next to his favorite salmon-river. Before he does more than take a breath, she's asking casually,

“So, what's this Anya like then, Wes?”

“I'm sorry?” He makes a good attempt to sound baffled, not wary, but he's not fooling her.

“When I tried to get hold of you a few days ago, I got this message saying anything urgent had to go through Ms. Anya Jenkins and—”

“Yes,” he drawls, giving nothing away. “That's very probable.”

“Wesley!” she wails. “She's, like, your new me and I want to know what she's like! Stop teasing
“She most certainly is not the new you,” he says firmly, “any more than Harmony was.” He hesitates and then adds, “Though she's considerably more efficient than Harmony.”

“Oh, she is, is she?” Faith mutters, hating her already. “Bet she knew how to spell your name right away, didn't she?”

“Well, yes, but it's written on the door, so—”

“And I bet she types, like, way faster than me, because she doesn't get the break-her-nails typewriter the way I did.”

“I've no complaints about her speed, it's true, but, Faith—”

“She's old, yeah?” she says hopefully. “Kinda sweet and keeps pissing you off telling you about her granddaughters?”

He coughs. “No. She doesn't do that.”

She thinks she's gonna scream but she's not sure her lacerated throat could take it.

“How old is she then?”

He gives a long-suffering sigh. “Faith, you're not being very sensible about this. I have to work with someone and she was assigned to me by Rupert.” He pauses and then adds reflectively, “I don't think it endeared me to her, as she was hoping she'd report to Rupert after his former secretary left to have a baby, but she's taken me under her wing to a certain extent—”

Her indignant hiss is about all she can manage before she starts coughing. “Wes—you—oh God, that hurts!”

“Stop talking,” he orders her, the amusement gone. “Faith, as you're being so insistent, Anya is about twenty-five, attractive, blonde—though that seems to change quite frequently—and totally obsessed with Rupert, although he seems not to be aware of that. Which doesn't mean he isn't, of course. She's very good indeed at what she does, bullies me unmercifully, and I find her reminiscent of my Aunt Mary which means I'm not in the least inclined to—”

“Spank her?”

There's a horrified silence and then he starts to splutter. “Faith—you—as if I would ever—”

“Did with me,” she points out unanswerably.

“That was quite different!”

“Why?”

“Because it was!” he snaps and she starts to grin.

“Do you want to though, Wes? When she makes mistakes?”

“She doesn't make any,” he says dryly, sounding suddenly calm. “And if she did I might feel tempted to point them out, with a little more emphasis than strictly necessary, to repay her for her frankness in detailing my errors as I got to grips with the accepted way of doing things in this office, but I'd far sooner spank you, and believe me, after this conversation my hand's itching.”
She gives a contented sigh because Anya sounds so not his type and Rupert deserves her after pushing Anne at Wes like that. “Yeah? Well, maybe you should get me where you can reach me then, Wes.”

“Perhaps I should,” he murmurs. “Possibly we could reschedule that final date.” Her heart's barely had time to start beating faster when he says thoughtfully, “Valentine's Day is a little trite perhaps, but—”

“Three days earlier?” she yelps. “That's it?”

“I haven't actually said I will,” he reminds her. “And now, as you seem to be recovered, I think we should address your unseemly curiosity—”

“Think I'm feeling kinda sleepy now, Wes,” she says hurriedly, because he doesn't sound as if he's got anything pleasant in mind.

“Really. How fortuitous.”

“Yeah. Really is,” she says hopefully.

“Very well, I'll allow you to get some much-needed rest, but I think you should set your alarm half an hour earlier,” he purrs. “As you're doubtless a little rusty after this time away from your desk—”

“Only been two days!”

“—it might be beneficial to prepare for your return.”

He won't say another word, apart from telling her to check her e-mail in the morning, and when she does, already preparing to pout, she finds a quotation:

*Sleep, that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care.*

and the bland instruction that she's to type it out a hundred times, and that cut and paste really isn't an option.

So, of course she totally cuts and pastes the quotation. Because she loves obeying his orders, but she loves disobeying them and getting what's coming to her even more.

And the list that he keeps banging on about is taking on practically mythological proportions and there's a hell of a lot of bad girl stuff she can get up to from here until fucking February 14th. Even if she behaved all demure and shit like a debutante at her first cotillion, he'd still think of ways to make her ass sting every day for a month. Good times, man, good times…

After listening patiently to Monty's frantic inquiries about her health, which are almost as comprehensive as Wes', she gets a chance to send Wes an e-mail with her lines attached and, oh dear, would you just look at that lonely, little ‘v' just sitting forlornly in the middle of the page so he'll know that she was cut and pasting all over the place? Like, there would be no point in being disobedient if he didn't know about it.

She's got a mountain of work to climb after her sick days but her thoughts are someplace else. Mostly on refreshing her Gmail page every five seconds and trying to decide on what outfit she's going to wear when she gets her marching orders to come to Gotham in February.

Unless he tells her to wear one of her black work ensembles, she's narrowed it down to either her new red dress or maybe this green fitted top she's seen at her favorite vintage store which has, like, a
gazillion hooks down the back which Wes'd have a world of fun undoing. But it's gonna be cold in New York in February. Hell, there might even be snow.

She's halfway through her Manhattan shopping list when he finally replies and she's sighing happily as she reads:

Oh, my willful, disobedient, conniving little Faith

I can only assume that your willingness to cut and paste and your lack of good judgment in allowing me to discover this contravention of my orders means that you'll take your punishment with a good grace.

And while we’re on the subject, I'd like to know exactly how many cigarettes you smoked while you were ill, even though I expressly forbade it.

I must warn you that the list of your misdemeanors is currently running at a scarcely believable three pages.

Wes x

She saunters out to lunch with a shit-eating grin on her face and can barely force down her miso soup before she's skipping back to work so she can compose a sassy e-mail that will continue to bring the wrath of Wes down on her still-a-little-poorly head.

Dear Wes

Guess I'm busted! But in my defense, I have been ill. Like, really ill. It could have been, like bronchial pneumonia or something and all that typing was making my eyes hurt.

Oh yeah, and I smoked five cigarettes on Tuesday and seven on Wednesday but they totally got rid of the tickle in my throat. They were medicinal cigarettes.

So should I look into getting my poor, defenseless, pert and lily white ass Scotchguarded before I come to New York for Christmas, I mean, in January, okay, February. But, like, I may have totally gone off the rails by then. You're gonna have to take a month off work, Wes, to get me back on the straight and narrow.

Lots of love

Faith x

BTW: This list? It's open to negotiation, right?

Dear Faith

This list? It's open to negotiation, right?

Do you even have to ask? Absolutely, unequivocally not. But thank you for your candid
correspondence. I've now added a further five misdemeanors to your running total, though you'll be gratified (or your arse will) to hear that I decided upon reflection to count the cigarettes collectively rather than singularly.

I fear that I'm becoming rather too kind hearted in my old age.

Much love

Wes x

She's practically howling when she reads that. Half in delight and half in outrage and she's already hitting reply:

Yo Wes

Stop being so mean to me when I'm ill! I got so, like, totally overwrought by your e-mail that I'm going to have to go and smoke a cigarette. Maybe two.

Wish you were here right now to call me into your office, bend me over your desk, lift up my skirt, pull down my panties and… shit! Sorry, Wes, gotta go…

F x

And she doesn't think Wes has much on that afternoon because even when she's actually trying to do some work for Monty, which mostly involves writing out Happy Holidays cards in a more readable version of her usual scrawl, he's bouncing e-mails back to her promising all sorts of dire and delicious things. And she hasn't even got the heart to call him on totally frittering away office time because she has this little picture in her head of the hard-faced, not naturally blonde Anya who she likes to think has the beginnings of a hunchback and maybe a little mustache which she has to get waxed, glaring at Wes from the outer office and getting all huffy when Wes shouts at her for interrupting his very important business, which is sending her flirty, dirty e-mails because she's his favorite ever secretary. Accept no fucking substitutes, Ms. Anya Jenkins.

But by the time she gets home, she's pretty much back to feeling crappy and after Darla's version of a recuperative meal which involves Tater Tots and Rice A Roni, she's tucked up in bed with the latest issue of Vogue so she can find out what the rich girls in New York are wearing this season and then scope out H&M to see if she can afford the budget version.

She's just Post-it-ing a pair of kickass boots when her phone goes and she's grinning as Wes' name flashes up on her display.

“Monty is totally going to call you tomorrow about distracting me when I'm meant to be working,” she says by way of greeting and she's expecting him to see her snark and raise it by twenty but instead he gives this tiny, little sigh that's so soft and gentle that it starts a correspondent flutter in her heart.

“Faith,” he breathes and right on cue, even under three layers her nipples are hardening. “I came home to find your Christmas present.”

She sits bolt upright, Vogue falling to the floor with a thud. “So you opened it, right? Did you like them?”

“No,” he says baldly but before she can bawl her eyes out and honest to goodness, she can already feel the tears prickling, he corrects her. “I loved them. God, Faith, have you any idea…?”
Those prickly tears of upset have transformed into something else entirely and are already spilling out of her eyes because that longing—no, that fucking yearning in his voice is enough to make her hang up the phone right then, pack a suitcase, and take the goddamn Greyhound to New York—even if that meant it would take two whole days to reach him, squashed in a stuffy coach with the Clampetts and their squalling babies and a roving pack of junkies on the road to nowhere.

“I'm glad,” she croaks, not very successfully swallowing the lump in her throat and following that up with a great big sniffle as she gropes blindly for the Kleenex box on the nightstand. “You had me scared for a minute there, Wes. Thought you were pissed or...”

“How could I be, my darling girl?” His voice is so low and gravelly that it makes the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end and every possible inch of her aches for his touch. “This is, this is truly the loveliest gift I've ever received.”

She doesn't know what to say to that, her cheeks flushing as she dabs the tears away. “It was nothing, really,” she finally replies, trailing off as she tilts her head back from the phone to blow her nose in the daintiest way possible.

“I shouldn't think you'd want me adding that lie to your list of transgressions.” He laughs softly. “This most certainly isn't nothing, Faith. Though I must admit, there's plenty here to ensure that perhaps I will need to take you up on that previous suggestion of taking a whole month off work to mete out the punishments due you at this point.”

“Oh yeah?” she purrs, stretching out in the bed and settling back into a comfortable position propped up on a pillow. And she's really pleased to hear a breath catch in his throat because she knows that means he's beyond turned on, that he's hard, and that he's thinking up ways right now somewhere in that big brain of his to get her off with the magic combination of just his voice and her fingers. Which, in all honesty, wouldn't be too hard, really, after being deprived of the regular schedule of naughty phone calls since she's been laid up for a few days. “Anything particular you have in mind?”

“I'd hate to overexcite you; you seem to have a touch of that cold still.” The words are brisk, but she can hear the sparkle of teasing behind them.

“Oh, no. I'm good as new, practically. Right as rain, even.”

“No doubt you'd say as much no matter what your true condition.” There's a rustle of paper against fabric on the other end of the line, followed by what she can only describe as a plaintive sigh as he murmurs, “Oh, your hair, Faith. Your beautiful hair.”

“Hey, Wes, it's still beautiful. And a hell of lot more easy to take care of now!”

“Yes, of course it is.” Another slither of paper fills the dead air, and she tries to imagine his fingertips hovering over her real flesh, and not just her photographic image. “You just look so... You look like a different person, Faith.”

“I'm not, you know. I'm still me.” She feels a little ridiculous saying that, but it's like she needs to, just to let him know for sure.

“That difference, it's not necessarily a bad thing.” It's almost as if he hadn't heard her at all. “You probably haven't noticed the little changes—they're in your eyes, in your poise—and they're even more evident to me than the major ones. But your smile...” There's total silence as his words trail off this time. “It's just the same. I've missed it.”

And his voice is so full of melancholy that it's nearly breaking her heart all over again. “You read the
letter too, right? You haven't just been drooling over the pictures?"

she asks lightly, trying to brighten the mood a little. “There's a story that goes with...”

“Yes, of course I read it,” he says, all in a rush. “Quite a pretty little scenario. And I take it that you
posed deliberately so I can't make out exactly what's on your back?’”

“You would be right in thinking that, sir,” she says, with mock-seriousness. “You'll have to wait to
read it all in person.”

“And then redden your arse immediately after. Because no matter how pretty you look in these
photos, Faith, you really have pushed the limits of disobedience, haven't you?”

She's not ready for that inflection, because it seems like weeks, months maybe since she's heard it
properly. There's not really a question mark at the end of that sentence, and it leaves her no room to
argue or put up a protest. And her nipples, hard since the beginning of the conversation, start to ache
and she can't help but reach down under the waistband of her pajama pants and give her clit a slight
nudge. Of course, she isn't surprised to discover that she's beyond wet, and God, she'd give anything
to have him there right now, waiting to lap at those juices, to slide his tongue across her clit, to make
her come with his fingers deep inside her cunt and her ass.

“Where is your hand, Faith?”

She snatches it back with a disgruntled little noise. “What are you, Wes, a clairvoyant?”

“You forget the phone amplifies every sound, every breath. I'd be severely remiss if I didn't
immediately recognize the little noises you make when your mind and your hands start to wander.”

“Damn, nothing gets past you, does it?”

“Generally, no,” he says with a laugh before switching back to his husky tone. “Where's your
vibrator, Faith?”

She should have known he'd take this route, just to drive her even farther up the wall. “In the
dresser.”

“Put the phone down and retrieve it. Then remove all your nightclothes and get back in bed.”

And really, again, there's no room for argument or comment so she just obeys, and she's even a little
wobbly in the knees when she stands up, the kind of feeling that had just become a distant memory.
But she's finished the tasks in no time and splays out on top of the covers. “All done, Wes.”

“Very good,” he drawls, and dammit, if she wasn't turned on before, she's positively incandescent
with need now. “Now then, turn it on the lowest setting.” She gives the base a little twist and Mr.
Bunny perks right up with a gentle hum and Wes gives a little noise of approval. “And place the tip
just barely inside your cunt, not all the way, now.”

It's all she can do not to come just from the gentle pulsating motion pressed lightly inside and she
doesn't bother to muffle the tangled moan of frustration and pleasure as her fingers wander up to slip
up and over her clit.

“Gently now, Faith,” he says, his breathing as irregular and ragged as hers.

Before she can stop herself, she's speaking. “Are you jerking yourself off, Wes? Don't you wish
that's my mouth on your cock and not just your hand?”
“Yes, I do. And I'm wishing I was running my hands over your beautiful tattoo and the hot, red flesh of your ass while you do it. Because make no mistake, Faith. I will make sure reparations are made for each of my orders you've so willfully flaunted.”

Those few words are nearly enough to send her just over the edge, but he stops her. “Switch it off now.” And over her muffled curses and moans of displeasure, he continues, “And slide it all the way in and back out again, ten times. Slowly. I know you must be wet enough for this not to be an issue,” he rasps in her ear. “And count off, please, Faith.”

The first three strokes are much too quick. “Slower,” he admonishes after each—until after the fourth he mutters thickly, “That's good. Very good. Continue just like that.” And soon the numbers are connected by a string of incoherent murmurings as her hips buck against her hand and her thumb drags against her clit with each thrust.

And on the tenth one he doesn't even need to tell her to come; he just says her name and she's seeing stars.

Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Four

And damn if that orgasm isn’t as beneficial as a daily dose of Emergen-C, because when the alarm goes off the next morning Faith practically bounds out of bed. Which is completely fucking unheard of. She even forgoes her morning cigarette in favor of some orange juice before she runs out the door, leaving Darla’s chipper “Have a good day, honey” in the dust.

It’s not just that the achy-head-stuffy-fever is gone, or that she’s feeling really well-rested for the first time in days (another side benefit of a really good orgasm). No, she’s propelled by the merest promise that she’s going to see him soon. By the memory of the way he said, “You look like a different person, Faith,” his voice lingering on her name with a quiet, slightly impenetrable air of reverence that will always and forever sound new to her. She’s smiling this secret smile to herself and feeling so fucking cherished again. That’s more than enough to keep her floating several inches above the sidewalk as she makes her way to the local purveyor of overpriced caffeinated sludge.

She’s so goddamn blissed-out she barely notices when they call out her caramel double latte and really doesn’t notice the light pressure of a hand on her shoulder. Momentarily startled, she almost spills her $3.50’s worth of precious cargo.

“Faith.” She spins around to come face-to-face with an impeccable, power-suited Lilah. Did that woman go anywhere without her armor? Probably not.

“Jesus, Lilah, I didn’t expect to—” Not a good tack, Faithy. Pause. Start again. “I mean, um, hi.” She forces out a weak smile before realizing that she actually has Lilah to thank for her current state of sickening happiness. Christ, she thinks, if the world got any weirder she was gonna have to start believing in miracles.

Lilah, ever an expert in the fine art of mirroring, smiles one of her wolfish, slightly predatory grins before gesturing toward a nearby empty table. “Care to join me?”

That’s a loaded question if there ever was one, but there’s only one polite answer and Faith sits down. “Just for a minute. Monty’s expecting me at nine.”

She waves dismissively. “Don’t worry about Monty. I told him you might be a few minutes late.”

Faith narrows her eyes, immediately distrustful. She definitely doesn’t want to think about Lilah’s
possible ulterior motives for contriving this little tête-à-tête. She resolves to let Lilah talk and gauge things from there.

Lilah leans back, deceptively casual, sipping slowly at her cooling coffee. Not a word yet, but she’s watching Faith intently. Faith sips at her coffee, knowing damn well that Lilah’s all coiled up and ready to strike—she’s just waiting for the right moment. Yeah, well, she knows from waiting, and if Lilah thinks she can get at her now she’s got another fucking think coming.

“Monty tells me very good things, Faith.” And she manages not to sound condescending when she says it.

“We’re working very well together, Lilah. Thank you.” Which translates neatly as: not gonna play that game, Lilah, but thanks anyway.

“He also tells me that a certain mutual acquaintance of ours has been phoning the office during business hours. Not to talk shop, though. Seems he wants to talk to you.” Lilah even manages to school her features into some vague semblance of surprise. “Things going well there too, Faith?”

Mum’s the fucking word, Faith thinks, offering only a flicker of a smile in return for Lilah’s feint.

“Thought so.” Lilah sets her coffee down and leans in toward Faith, as though offering something in strictest confidence. “I misjudged you, Faith. I thought you were an eager little gold-digging trollop who’d somehow gotten Wes by the balls. Didn’t think there was anything lasting there.”

“Look, Lilah, you don’t have to—”

Lilah puts her hand on her arm, her grip firm. “I’m giving you what passes for my blessing, Faith, don’t question it.”

Her first instinct is to bristle; there’s a flash of anger but she quells it. And, considering what happened the last time, she’s not especially comfortable with Lilah touching her. Faith snatches her arm away. “Thank you,” she says, her voice quiet but resolute.

“Don’t mention it. I just wanted you to know that I’m through trying to make Wes’—and by extension, your—life miserable. It never would have worked between us, anyway. We’re too goddamn similar. I knew it the second I put the ring on my finger. Too bad we both stuck around long enough to fuck one another up royally. But hey, the five unbillable hours of our honeymoon were pretty fucking memorable.” Lilah’s frosty reserve drops away for the briefest of moments and her features soften. Faith can see the faint echo of how pretty she was before circumstance hardened her. She almost feels sorry for her—almost. But not really because Lilah really fucking dished it out before having her little change of heart. Lilah sighs, still wandering down memory lane: “When Wes is devoted, he’s deliciously single-minded about it.”

Despite herself, Faith laughs. “That’s for fucking sure.”

She snaps back to herself at that. “I bet he loves it when you swear. He may have changed, but I bet he’s still got that Madonna/whore thing going. That’s in his DNA.”

“And I bet that drove you crazy.”

“Yeah, it did. But you know, we just weren’t suited to one another. Both partners can’t be in the driver’s seat, wrestling for control. Because there’s going to be a spectacular flame-out at the first curve in the road.”

For a woman with such a finely tuned mind, Lilah could be remarkably slow on the uptake. But
then, Wes took his time figuring this shit out too. It was becoming clear to Faith that self-reflection didn’t come easily to either one of them. Once again, Faith felt like the mature one. It was a decidedly odd, but satisfying, feeling.

Lilah continues, words tumbling out quickly, without their usual sharpness. “He really loves you, you know. I didn’t think the bastard was capable of it, but then, he does keep finding new ways to surprise me.” Lilah turns sharply away from her, blinking furiously and brushing her hair back with this little nervous gesture. Once she regains her composure, her voice resumes its cool and crisp timbre. “You should go. Get the fuck out of here. You don’t belong.”

“And you do?” She’s surprised to hear indignation in her voice.

Lilah turns toward her again, folding her arms protectively over her chest and sighing. “Maybe not, but I’ve been consigned. My own little purgatory. I get to suffer for my sins in this little backwater. You—well, you’ve paid enough.”

Faith shifts uncomfortably, not really sure what to say, and puts down her empty coffee cup. “I really should go.” Monty may not be counting the minutes, but she is.

Lilah smiles. “You really should. Take care of yourself.”

“Thanks.” She turns to go, but she hears her name again. Lilah’s getting up, tossing her coffee cup with practiced ease into the bin. “Take care of him too.”

“But I’m not with him yet.”

“You will be.”

“You really think so?”

Lilah just nods assent. Faith rushes out the door, not bothering to look back.

Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Five

Of course Wes is on the phone within ten minutes of her getting in to the office and she tells him about Lilah. Not to piss him off because they’re several planets beyond that now. But more, like, well it might give him some peace. Help him to draw a line through Lilah’s name and mark her file closed.

She gives him a headlines only highlight of their coffee klatch and it’s hard to hear his sighs and intakes of breath over the hum of her computer and Monty babbling away on the phone in the next room, but she definitely hears his soft laugh before he says lightly, “I must remember to send her a thank you card. You'll have to remind me.”

“Thank you for what?” she asks snippily. “Those five unbillable hours of your honeymoon?”

“Oh, come now, Faith,” he purrs out a warning. “What's in the past is past and surely you can't be jealous of the fact that I'd like to thank my incomparable ex-wife for reuniting us, though I'm not entirely sure that those were her intentions when she gave you my contact details.”

“Well, I guess,” she says doubtfully and he laughs again.

“Really, Faith, I don’t know whether to be flattered by these little displays of jealousy or to add them to the quite gargantuan list of your misdemeanors.”

And then he rings off just as she's working up to a really crushing retort.
Seems like nothing can dent his good mood, not even the epic hissy fit she has the next day on the phone when he tells her that he's calling a moratorium on their late night calls with benefits.

“You've got be fucking kidding me!” she snarls down the line at him and the smug little chuckle he gives her in reply has her gnashing her teeth so hard that she swears she just took the top layer off her back molars.

“I have something very special planned for when we speak on Christmas Day,” he informs her, and she's surprised he can't hear the way her heart plummets like a shopping cart sinking to the bottom of a lake, because yeah, she'd kinda been hoping that this whole February stuff was just smoke and mirrors bullshit and she was gonna be in his Christmas stocking on December 25th. Or under his tree. okay, she was a little shaky on the details but there'd been this whole slowly unwrapping her scenario that had got her through every single boring task Monty had wanted her to do this week. And now, not so much.

“Fine,” she says, just a little less snappier than she actually feels because she's has, like, poise now. “Not exactly sure that I'm gonna be taking any calls that day but I'll get back to you.”

“Oh, Faith,” he coos sorrowfully. “Good things come to she who waits. Surely you haven't forgotten that little lesson.”

And even though she's in a mood with him because, hell, she's allowed even though he never made any promises about Christmas, she tries to snap out of it. It helps that he's so fucking sweet through the next few days of phone calls and e-mails that she manages to haul herself back from the brink of the mother of all snits, which even had Darla threatening to sell her presents on eBay if she didn't snap out of it.

The e-mail she finds waiting for her on the Tuesday before Christmas is a case in point.

My darling girl

This may be my last e-mail to you as I believe that the redoubtable Ms. Jenkins may poison my Earl Grey before the end of the day. I thought that a copy of How to Win Friends and Influence People was a highly appropriate gift for her but, alas, she had other ideas.

You'll wear something nice to my funeral, I trust?

Thankfully I have to spend most of the day in court so I may yet escape her considerable wrath. I'll speak to you tonight.

Much love

Wes x

And she's so planning to take him to task on boss/secretary etiquette, especially when she's pretty damn certain that he'd never buy Anya inappropriate clothes like he did her. But when she gets home there's a package waiting on her bed. She checks it carefully to make sure there's no small print about waiting until Christmas before she opens it and then she's tearing into it and unearthing a small box that looks all kinds of familiar.

The rubies sparkle dully as she sees them through tear-blurred eyes and she furiously scrubs at her face with the back of her hand so she can check to see that the watch hasn't suffered any scratches on its journey from pawn shop to New York and back to her wrist.

It feels cool against her skin, like his fingers, and even as she searches the debris of paper for the
small card, she's aware of the weight of it, how the platinum shines as it catches the light.

The card is brief and to the point.

*My dearest, darling Faith*

*I hope that this gift doesn't upset you or remind you of unhappier times, which was never my intention. I simply wanted to return this to you, its rightful owner, and I hope you'll forgive me my sentimentality in wanting quite desperately for you to always wear the first present I ever bought you.*

*Needless to say, if you even entertain the idea of selling it again my displeasure will know no bounds.*

*Love always*

*Wes x*

It's not really that surprising that she spends most of that night's phone call vacillating between ardent declarations of how much she loves him and floods of tears at why they're not together. A state of being which started the day she went with Liam to the pawn shop.

“Faith, please,” he begs her after twenty minutes of her at her most fucking mercurial. “You're starting to verge on hysterical.”

“Just love you so much,” she sobs. “And I love the watch and I never told you how sorry I was about having to sell it… didn't want to but…”

“I know,” he says tenderly. But after five more minutes he's stern and resolute. “I want you to stop crying now, Faith. It's getting extremely tiresome, not to mention upsetting. Put down the phone and go and wash your face,” he adds in his wrath of God voice and by the time she's back on the line with just a few post-weeping hiccups, he's back to being maddeningly adorable.

The next day she spends most of her time out with Monty delivering Mrs. Monty's home-made muffin baskets to their best clients even though Monty's at pains to point out that being Jewish, they don't really celebrate Christmas but it's a good excuse to shut the office until the New Year.

She's still laughing at the bemused expression on Monty's face when she tried to explain to him the concept of Chrismukkah as she unlocks the front door to find Darla buried under a mound of wrapping paper.

“Faithy!” she squeaks indignantly, trying to hide a bigass bag from Bed, Bath and Beyond without too much success. “You're not meant to be home this early.”

“Monty let me have the rest of the afternoon off,” Faith says with a shrug and peers at the pile of bags and boxes that Darla's draped over like a human shield. “You need a hand with any of that?”

She can't help but grin at Darla's scowl. “You go to your room right this second, young lady and you don't come out until I tell you to, because it's not too late to take these back.”

“You sure you don't need my help, Mom? I've got mad sticky tape skillz.”

Darla flushes and Faith can see she's trying to bite back some snark but instead she reins it in and smiles smugly. “You don't go to your room, then you can't open the present that's sitting on your bed. The one with the New York postmark.”
She's out of the door before Darla's even finished her last sentence and is decimating the brown paper before she's even closed her mouth. This time it's a square flat box and she's thinking necklace to go with the watch, even though it's a little on the large size. Turns out she was almost right because when she lifts the lid, there's a black leather strap nestled on pink velvet, silver buckle gleaming dully and as she lifts it up and holds it to her face so she can inhale the rich, dusty smell, the small, metal tab digs into her cheek. Etched onto it are the initials, WWP.

This time, the card reads:

My beloved Olympia

I know this will fit perfectly as you'll find out because I expect you to wear it for an hour every evening. I'd like you to put it on at 8.55 P.M. just before I call you.

Yours Wes x

PS: I toyed with the notion of having a pink one made but I couldn't resist the quite delightful vision of the black leather against your beautiful neck.

She attaches the collar to her neck just as he instructed and she's wet before she's even finished buckling it into place. When he phones five minutes later, she doesn't even say hello before she's begging him to let her bring herself off while he listens.

“Faith, correct me if I'm wrong but I do believe I was quite adamant that there was to be a cessation of these types of calls until Christmas,” he barks, the bite to his voice making the words crisper than usual.

“But I'm so wet,” she begs plaintively. “And it hurts, Wes.”

“Good,” he intones with satisfaction. But then he relents. Kind of. And he tells her to strip off her clothes and spends the next hour telling her to describe how the collar feels around her neck, what she'd like him to do to her while she's wearing it and just when she's sure that his next command will be to plunge her fingers into her sopping cunt, he rings off with a chuckle that's an eighth of an inch away from pure, fucking evil. And it serves him right that she comes, like, three times after he hangs up, shaking her head constantly so she can feel the leather shifting against her skin and reliving her collar fantasy in glorious Technicolor and imagining how much better it's going to be when they're together and she's over his lap with his hand warming her ass as she bites the collar between her teeth.

She's not really surprised when she gets to work the next day to see his e-mail. In fact, she'd been counting on it.

Dear Faith

How many times did you come last night? Please inform me at your earliest convenience so I can update my records.

Yours faithfully

Wesley Wyndam-Pryce Esq.
Her earliest convenience is a good couple of hours later. And it's because Monty's already halfway out of the door with a list of instructions on what she needs to do before she closes up the office until January 4th really it is, but mostly it's because it doesn't do him any harm to wait. See how he likes it.

Dear Mr. Wyndam-Pryce Esq.

I came three times. And each time I thought about you.

Yours faithfully

F x

She's waiting for an outraged e-mail in reply when the bell above the front door jangles and she looks up to see a courier (thank God, it's not Holden) come in clutching an envelope. As she signs for it, she's wondering just what sad sack loser has no life that they have to send important legal documents the day before Christmas Eve and she's half tempted to just shove it into Monty's in tray and not worry about it until she catches sight of her name and the senders' address and then she can't hustle the courier out of the door fast enough.

“Yeah, yeah, Happy Holidays, whatever,” she mutters under her breath as she snags a nail yanking it open.

It's a piece of really heavy card and someone using a Selectric, if she's not very much mistaken, has typed a poem on it.

Love Sonnet LXVI by Pablo Neruda

I do not love you—except because I love you;
I go from loving to not loving you,
from waiting to not waiting for you
my heart moves from the cold into

the fire. I love you only because it's you
I love; I hate you no end, and hating you
bend to you, and the measure of my changing love for you
is that I do not see you but love you

blindly. Maybe the January light will consume
my heart with its cruel
ray, stealing my key to true

calm. In this part of the story I am the one who
dies, the only one, and I will die of love because I love you,
because I love you, Love, in fire and in blood.

Her fingers trace every word like she's touching his mouth as she sounds them out. And she's stuck on the third line for the longest time. “From waiting to not waiting for you,” she whispers.

She doesn't know how long she sits there. It's long enough to have memorized the poem and she's just about to pick up the phone and tell him she's coming and he can just fucking well deal with it when the bell jangles again and the courier's striding in with another manila envelope.
“Give it to me,” she demands imperiously, already holding out her hand and although he looks like a fully paid up member of the local biker gang, she's sounding deranged and desperate enough that he shoves it at her and doesn’t let the door hit him in the ass on his way out.

There's no card this time, just four sheets of linen bond that she hasn't seen since May with a post-it note attached, which reads in Wes’ brown inked writing, “Of course, this will have to be completely renegotiated. As you can see, I've already started making notes.”

She stares at the contract in confusion. She'd lost her copy in the move and, yeah, it's one of the things that she was going to reinstate when they got back together but it looks like he's beaten her to it. He's already scribbled in the margins all sorts of exciting notes like, “The party of the second part is to wear her collar for one hour every day and all weekend. Subject to the whims of the party of the first part.” And, “the party of the second part is to say her safeword at least once a week.” Oh, and her particular favorite, “in the unlikely event that the party of the second part is obedient she's still to receive at least one disciplinary session every week.”

There's all kinds of things she wants added and taken away too. It will be way after February before they've negotiated a compromise agreement, she thinks happily as she reaches for the phone and dials his direct line.

It's picked up on the third ring.

“Wes? You're unfuckingbelievable!” she hisses only to hear a frosty cough that doesn't sound the least bit like Wes.

“This is the office of Mr. Wyndam-Pryce. How may I direct your call?” says this officious little bitch who can only answer to the name of Ms. Anya Jenkins.

“I'd like to speak to Wesley,” Faith spits out and then adds an unwilling “please” on as an afterthought.

“I'm afraid Mr. Wyndam-Pryce has asked me to hold all his calls until later this afternoon,” comes back the tetchy reply. “Would you like to leave a message?” And I definitely won't pass it on.

“Is he in the office? Because if he is, he'll definitely speak to me. Can you tell him that it's Faith?”

There's an impatient little sigh. “Miss, would you like to leave a message?”

“No, I'd like to talk to Wes, like, now!” she growls back. “Tell him it's totally important.”

“Are you likely to die in the next hour?”

“N-no…”

“And have you got a man holding a gun to your head and threatening to kill you unless Mr. Wyndam-Pryce listens to his demands?”

“Well, no but…”

“Or do you need to take an injunction out this afternoon preventing your abusive ex-husband from gaining access to your children over the holiday period?”

“Listen to me, you…”

“Well in that case, missy, you'll have to wait for Mr. Wyndam-Pryce to ring you when he has an
appropriate slot. Thank you for calling and happy holidays!”

Faith's left listening to the ring tone as she holds the phone away from her ear and stares at it in disbelief.

Then she's typing faster than she's ever done in her life.

*Hey Wes*

*Your secretary is a bitch on wheels! She just fucking cut me off!*

*CALL ME NOW!*

*Faith x*

*PS: Loved the poem. Loved it so fucking much.*

*PPS: Got the contract too. I think we'll have to meet in person to discuss the metric assload of renegotiating that needs to happen because you seem to be on crack.*

*PPS: I love you.*

Of course, the bastard doesn't reply. And she can just see him in his fancy corner office reading her e-mail and smirking to himself as he turns off his cell because he's not answering that either.

By the time the courier turns up again in an hour, on the hour, because she's seeing a pattern emerging here, she's watered all the plants, put Monty's e-mail on Out Of Office Assistant, set up his voice-mail and is pacing the carpet in front of her desk.

“You got another envelope?” she yelps at him.

“Y-yeah. Just got to have your signature, miss,” he answers nervously as she advances toward him.”

She snatches it from him and glares at him. “You got anything else that you're planning to deliver in say, oooh, like an hour from now?”

But he's already halfway out of the door, muttering something about company policy and she thinks she might have to get a paper bag to place over her mouth before she starts hyperventilating instead of opening the third manila envelope.

And if she wasn't on the verge of losing all her supply of oxygen before, she is now. Her hearts pounding, her blood is racing through her veins at twice the speed it should and her hands are trembling so hard that the papers flutter in her grip.

*The List Of Faith's Misdemeanors—May to December 2004*

*1. 14th May 2004*

*Burned $17,000 (approximation) of legal reference books belonging to Wesley Wyndam-Pryce and assorted documents.*

There's pages upon pages of it. A diary of the time they've been apart measured out in her words
(“Screamed at me in an extremely querulous fashion for not allowing you to come”) and her deeds (“cut your hair despite my clear and precise instructions that this was absolutely forbidden.”) She's not even surprised by the last sheet of paper, which has a note to her scrawled on it.

**Dear Faith**

_I'd appreciate it if you could type this up as a table, leaving a box so I can fill in each penalty. I was going to add them to the list but I believe an element of surprise is vital when addressing your extreme disobedience. Rest assured that where possible, the punishment will fit the crime._

_Please add your latest insurrections though they will be subject to my corrections._

_I expect you to e-mail me the completed document as an attachment before five o’clock today._

_Thanking you in advance_

_Wes x_

As she pulls up a blank document on her screen, she tries to ignore the clamoring voices in her head that insist that this isn't just Wes' whacked out notion of what stocking filler should be. That he's got another motive besides making her so fucking turned on that all she can feel is the insistent pulse between her legs. That there's no point in having a contract and a list and a fucking poem that's etched on her heart, unless he's going to make good on all of it way before February.

She's halfway through the list when the courier comes back with a package this time. Just to be unpredictable. And she's feeling pretty capricious herself because this time she gives him a sweet smile and a cookie from the tin that Monty left.

And it's just as well he took a big handful and left her nothing but crumbs because Wes' next surprise in his plan to drive her fucking insane is a box of Orange KitKats. Overnighted all the way from the mother country, his note informs her, just “to keep your energy levels up while you beaver away industriously.”

Five Orange Kit Kats later which don't taste so yummy when they're competing with the metallic tang of expectation in her mouth and she's typing the last box on her tabulated, absolutely fucking perfect document.

23rd December

12.31 P.M.: _Sent Wes a rude e-mail about what a fucking bitch his new, way inferior secretary is and implied that he was on drugs._

She spellchecks the document with a beatific smile on her face and is just about to send it off when the courier's back. And this time she's going to ask him out for drinks, she really is.

“Miss, if you promise not to shout at me again, I can tell you this is the last item to be delivered to your office today,” he blurs out before she can even open her mouth.

“I so was not going to shout at you,” she protests, having to force herself not to rip the envelope out of his shaking hands. “I'm just working on this really big... thing and... well, yeah, so hand it over, dude.”

And then he's happy holidaying her and man, she just wishes he'd get his butt out of there so she can
discover for herself the last piece of Wes', like, completely Machiavellian master plan.

There's another list of instructions, one of the Polaroids he took of her wearing nothing but a snarl and what looks like a bird's nest on her hair, which he's written "I love you" on and then there's one other thing. The thing that makes her rest her head on her desk and burst into tears when her brain finally kicks into gear and she realizes what it is.

They're not like the other tears she's shed since May. She guesses that they're happy tears but they still hurt, they still make her ribs ache and her eyes sore but once she's done with them and she's sending the e-mail, five minutes late and with a hastily typed last box added to the document, she feels clean and new as she picks up her bag and jacket, turns off the lights and locks the door behind her.

When she gets back home, fingers still clutching at all the paperwork because she can't bear to let go of it, Darla's crying on the couch, soggy Kleenex dabbing away at the tears that've ruined her makeup.

“Mom!” Faith sets down her precious collection of envelopes and rushes over to her. “What's wrong?” Even as she hugs Darla, she's sneaking glances around the room, looking for a glass, a bottle. God, if that's all going to start again—She bites back a whimper because she can't leave Darla if she's drinking again. Not if she wants to still be able to brush her hair in the morning without seeing a fucking ungrateful bitch of a useless, selfish daughter in the mirror anyway. “Ted. Did he, oh God, did you break up? Just before Christmas?”

“What?” Darla raises her head from Faith's shoulder and gives her an astonished look from tear-drenched eyes. “You think I'm crying like this over a man? Never again.” Her lips tremble. “It's you. I'm losing my baby and I've only just—oh Faithy, I'm gonna miss you so much!”

“I'm still here,” Faith says uneasily. “But—”

Darla sniffs comprehensively and grabs a new Kleenex. “He called me today,” she says baldly.

'He' means Wesley. No one else but God goes without saying for Darla, which sometimes makes Faith smile and sometimes freaks her out. “Wesley called here? Why didn't he call me at the office?”

“Because he wanted to speak to me, not you, Missy!” Darla snaps, reviving a little. Faith gapes at her in silence and Darla nods. “Called me and told me what he'd sent you.” Not the collar, Faith thinks, please God, not the—“So, do I even need to ask?”

Faith shakes her head. “I've got to go,” she says, and any reluctance in her voice is down to not wanting to hurt her mother. “I can't—when I'm not with him, I'm not—” And it sounds so over-the-top, but God, what about her and Wes isn't? “I'm not alive. Not whole. I need him.”

Darla sighs and balls up her Kleenex, tossing it in the general direction of the wastepaper bin. “Guess you do, though I still don't know what you see in him.” Her gaze drops to the rich, soft gleam of silver and rubies on Faith's wrist and her eyes widen. “Or maybe I do.”

“You can't think I'm after his money!” Faith says hotly. “Christ, why does everyone think that?”

“I don't,” Darla says, “but you're not going to tell me it doesn't matter?”

Faith opens her mouth to assure her that it doesn't, and then changes her mind. “It's...it's part of him,” she says slowly. “It's made him see some stuff differently to the way we do, and it's made him safe in some ways we've never been, but it's not—he's not had it easy, Mom. He—”
“I don't want to know,” Darla says flatly. She meets Faith's eyes squarely. “He called and he was all polite, told me he'd sent you some tickets.” She smiles a little sourly. “First-class. With a limo to pick you up and take you to the airport. Guess he doesn't mind spending some of that money on you.”

“He loves it,” Faith says distractedly. “I haven't spoken to him all day—how did he—how did he sound?”

“Like a kid on Christmas Day,” Darla says, sounding a little surprised at her flight of fancy. “He sounded happy. Didn't think he ever was. Whenever I've seen him he's been so closed-up and cold —”

“Yeah, well you never really saw him at his best, did you?” Faith says wryly, thinking back to the various Darla/Wes encounters with a shudder.

“Somehow I think you're the only one who ever will,” Darla says.

Faith thinks about that and shakes her head. “Maybe once, but he's changed,” she says. “Got some friends, got a social life—”

“That's not what I mean,” Darla says heavily. “I mean when he's really happy. But I don't want to go there.”

“Yeah,” Faith says uncomfortably, because all the reading and surfing she's done still doesn't mean she wants to go into detail about what she and Wes get up to with her mom for fuck's sake.

“So—”

“I'm going.” Faith's head turns and she looks at the bulk of the courier envelope with her tickets and inventory in it. “Tomorrow at nine.”

***

She snuggles down under the covers, breathless with excitement, so on edge she can barely stand it. Wes hasn't called, hasn't e-mailed, but she didn't expect him to. He knows she's coming and he's content to wait out the hours before she arrives without speaking to her.

The only regret she's got is that she's fairly sure he's not gonna be in the limousine picking her up when she arrives; he won't want to be in public when they meet each other and really, as all her visions of the five minutes following, 'Hi, Wes' involve getting naked fast, she supposes that's of the good.

She's spent most of the evening wet; both ways. She's bathed and soaked until she's glowing and squeaky-clean, shaving herself carefully, with hands that stop shaking only because Wes won't like it if there's even the tiniest cut on her skin, rubbing lotion over her still-damp body and remembering how he used to do that as she stood in front of him, forbidden to move. She's packed her bags, putting in everything she's ever worn that he liked, red panties to pink shoes—and she's deliberately disobeyed him because she's been wearing his collar for hours now, feeling the weight of it like his hand on her, a constant, unrelenting touch that she can't get used to, so each time she moves she feels a throb of arousal, dark and joyous.

God, she's never going to sleep. Reluctantly, she unbuckles it and gets out of bed, putting it back in the box and slipping it inside the suitcase. Wes had been pretty fucking clear about what he planned to do — want you naked when I put it on you, with nothing on your body but my collar and my hands. I want to fuck you with it around your neck, want to see it against your skin, your pale, pretty skin. I want to hear you whimper when I fasten it, want to thrust my fingers deep inside you after I've
put it on you, feel how wet it's made you.

He wasn't very sympathetic about getting herself off as a way of relaxing enough to sleep either. In fact he'd foreseen it and forbidden it with an uncompromising set of commands, so precise and detailed that there was zero wiggle room.

Which had just turned her on even fucking more.

She gets to sleep after looking at the creased, faded-through-being-stared-at-too-much photograph of him and kissing it, like, a hundred times, whispering his name, which is so unbelievably sappy and she doesn't give a fuck.
Part Fourteen

Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Six

She tosses and turns fitfully, too excited to fall into a truly deep, restful sleep. Even asleep her mind is reeling with so many imagined moments. They unspool in staccato bursts, these potentialities that all feature with Wes’ fingers tracing lightly over the letters that have been newly embossed onto her flesh, lingering on the slightly raised curves of each one. Or his lips brushing softly against her skin, sounding out each letter in turn with a seemingly endless patience that only serves to inflame her more. The focus isn’t even on fucking so much as the satisfaction of simple touch, rekindling the sense memories she’s filed carefully away. But they’re intense and electric enough to make her wonder what the real thing will be like after so much time away. But she doesn’t want to think about that, not even subconsciously, because she’s been taught to wait and she knows he’ll find a way to surprise her. He always does and he always will.

There’s more, she knows there is—all night she’s plagued by dreams so vivid she’s almost jarred from sleep. So she spends the night feverish with want and frustrated, but willingly so, because she’s promised him. And she’s so close to seeing him, she wouldn’t want to jeopardize that by going against his express order. Not now. By the time she’s awakened by the obnoxious blare of her alarm at the ungodly hour of 5:30 A.M., every delicious, imagined moment has dissipated into the ether and she’s left, bleary-eyed and trying to adjust to the slightly harsh light of her bedside lamp. She ducks quickly into the shower, more to wake herself up than anything else, as she’s plucked and shaved and moisturized to within an inch of her life and so very ready to go out that door.

She dresses quietly and wrestles her bag down the stairs as carefully as possible so as not to wake Darla only to find her sitting in the kitchen, two mugs filled with freshly brewed coffee on the table in front of her.

“Mom, you didn’t have to get up to see me off.” She thumps the bag down the rest of the stairs, placing it right by the door.

“I wanted to, honey. I’m happy for you, you know? I really am. Maybe I don’t always like this Wes character, but if he makes you happy, then that’s the most important thing.”

Darla proffers one mug to Faith even as she raises the other in a kind-of toast. It’s preferable to the ones she used to make in her old boozing days. They clink mugs and Faith grins because it’s just so fucking sweet of her mother to be there for her and really, aside from getting to be with Wes for Christmas, it’s the second best Christmas gift she could have asked for.

“Thanks, Mom. It means a lot. And, y’know, we can celebrate Christmas for real when I get back. I’m only going to be gone for—”

Darla looks at her with one of those looks that says, “You can’t fucking fool me.” She smiles, a little sadly. “A couple of weeks? Mm-hmm. Sure. You’re going to breeze back here, floating on cloud nine, and the second you can find a replacement at the office you’ll be outta here for good quicker than a New York minute. Am I right?”

Faith can’t even squirm uncomfortably because Darla’d pegged it, yeah. Mother’s intuition, or something.
“Maybe?” she ventures, but her tone is distinctly lacking in credibility.

“You’ll let me come visit you in the big city, won’t you? Take me to all those fancy museums and maybe even a party?”

“Mom! I’m not going yet! This is just—it’s like, a trial visit. You just want to get rid of me so you can rent out my room, right?”

“Yup. That’s totally it.” Darla’s laugh is interrupted by the sharp sound of a car horn out front.

“Shit! That’s me. I’ve gotta go.” She gives Darla a big hug and kiss on the cheek, grabs her carry-on bag and purse and races out the door.

She knew to expect a limo, but the whole romantic movie magicalness of it all doesn't really hit her until she sees the liveried driver waiting by the rear door of the long black vehicle with a giant, steaming cup of coffee and white paper sack from the café's bakery in his hands.

“Good morning, miss,” he says with a genuine smile, breath puffing in the unusually cold morning air. “Your coffee? And a croissant. There's butter and jam inside as well.” He hands both to her before opening the door.

“Good morning. And, uh, thanks,” she manages to stammer out before sliding into the cushy leather seats in a daze. The only thing that's registering as real is the coffee warming her hands. Taking a tentative sip, the familiar smooth sweetness of the caramel flavoring warms her to her toes.

“My pleasure, Miss,” the driver says, still smiling as he closes the door, her suitcase in his other hand.

When they pull away from the curb, she's totally down the spiral in full movie-cliché overload, because she's almost about to cry when she looks back and sees Darla, standing on the front porch wrapped in her housecoat, unfolding her arms to give a little forlorn wave of farewell. She wishes right then she could run back out and give Darla one last hug; thank her again for finally like, being a mom after all these years—or at least give a little wave back, but the limo's tinted glass make that kind of impossible.

And before she can roll down the window to yell out one last good-bye, the driver's voice crackles over the intercom, letting her know that they'll arrive at the airport in thirty minutes and then they're already at the end of the block and it's too far from the house for her voice to carry—and Darla's already gone back inside anyway.

With a little dramatic sniffle that leaves her wishing for one of Wes' always-handy handkerchiefs, she shoves the coffee into a cup holder, smears the tears from her eyes, smoothes invisible wrinkles out of her red dress with fluttery, nervous hands, and shoves the croissant into her Emily Strange bag. She's not exactly hungry anymore, but maybe she will be later. No, for now she's content, without any regret, to watch the buildings and landmarks roll by as they make their way to the highway, scored by the strains of tasteful popular classical music—the kind Wes always turned up his nose at—softly emanating from the limo's innumerable speakers.

And everything's kind of a blur after that: The driver's warm smile as he wishes her a good trip as he leaves her at the baggage check-in, then suffering the indignity of removing her stompy boots at the security station and hobbling to the gate in her stocking feet, and the near-endless wait—because of course, she's arrived early to avoid delays—paging mindlessly through the magazines she grabbed at a newsstand and picking at the croissant because her stomach's way too flippy-floppy to take any more food without serious consequences. The airport gradually becomes more and more crowded, and she's so completely absorbed in people-watching by that point that she doesn't realize her
phone's ringing until a sweet old lady in the seat opposite tastefully opines that perhaps she should answer it.

It's Wes—of course.

“Good morning, Faith.” His voice is as warm and welcome as the caramel latte had been an hour and a half earlier and recharges the anticipatory desire, the tingles in all the right places. “I assume you had no trouble waking up on time and meeting your ride, and that you're at the airport?”

“Yeah, I'm sitting at the gate now. The plane's not here yet, but they say we'll be boarding soon. Thanks for the coffee, by the way. I think I'm totally spoiled—Darla's daily pot of Folger's just doesn't do it for me anymore.”

“And you spoke with Darla, and she's all right with your decision to fly up?” he asks a little nervously. She never did find out exactly what Darla had said to him in that conversation, but Faith imagines Darla's newfound-maternal instincts had put the fear of God in him or something.

“She'll be fine,” she says simply, only because she's not sure she won't freakin' burst into tears all over again if she gives any more detail than that.

“Good.”

A long silence hisses across the line until a woman at the check-in counter announces something incomprehensible over the intercom. “Hey, hang on. They're announcing something. God, I hope the plane's not late.”

And no sooner has she said that then the old woman next to her is cursing audibly in a most un-old ladylike fashion. “Don't mean to eavesdrop, young lady, but yes. Delayed for at least forty-five minutes.”

She doesn't even need to ask if he's heard that because there's an exasperated sigh in her ear, and it's not the kind that that gives her goose bumps. “I specifically chose this flight because the airline assured me it had the lowest percentage of delays. This is completely unacceptable.”

And she wishes right then she could just kiss him right through the phone because she knows his brow's furrowed and his mouth is drawn thin with disapproval. “Hey, it's okay, Wes. Really. What's another hour or so after this long, huh? Remember, the waiting is the best part? Right?” But as she says the words, she's starting to feel just as peeved as the departure time bumps forward on the digital display at the check-in counter and her fellow passengers start to bitch a little more audibly.

“I do believe I was the person who first made you amenable to that concept,” he says with mock-exasperation. “Well, they will be hearing from me at least.”

“Of course they will,” she says with a little laugh. “I wouldn't expect otherwise.”

And after a few more minutes of idle chatter, they sign off with a totally mushy good-bye that's saccharine enough to make the crabby, eavesdropping old lady smile.

A girl could get used to all this top-notch treatment, she thinks as she slides into the second expansive leather seat of the day, in the first class cabin of the airplane. Luckily the delay had actually only been thirty minutes, but it's enough to send the business travelers complaining and the cabin crew in first class is beyond ingratiating. She doesn't feel a bit guilty about ordering two Bloody Marys from an unabashedly queer steward who calls her sweetheart—since they're free and in first class and all—but she promptly conks out before drinking them, lulled to sleep by the independent music station's playlist that's a little heavy on the dream pop and shoegaze-y tunes.
Of course, the only problem with sleeping on a plane, she discovers as she awakens with a start when the steward asks her to put her seat back up for the landing, is that it's really freakin' disorienting. Not to mention it fucks up your hair. She may not be fully conscious enough to recognize more landmarks than the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building and all the bridges, but she's totally aware that one half of her hair feels extremely flattened and askew, a fact that's confirmed when she stumbles off the plane and into the nearest powder room. After jostling elbows with a bunch of irate, power-suited Lilah clones at the bank of mirrors in the big, echoing bathroom, she manages to coax her hair back into an acceptable style.

There's another liveried driver waiting for her at the bottom of the escalator to the baggage claim, with a sign that reads, simply, 'Faith.'

"That's me," she says to the driver, who nods curtly and leads her to the baggage carousel for her flight and lugs her bag out to a limo that's clearly violating all kinds of new Homeland Security regulations about parking in the curbside area, but no one seems to care.

And holy crap, it's *cold* outside—colder than she's ever been *ever*, like totally edging in on single digits, and she's suddenly wishing that she had gloves and a hat and a scarf, perhaps, and a coat that's just a little more substantial. But then again, she knows Wes will tsk at her disapprovingly and hopefully take her right out shopping to make sure she's got all the right weather-appropriate gear—so maybe it's not all bad after all, because she's in the heated car in a matter of seconds anyway, the bitter cold nearly immediately forgotten.

She tries not to act like a total country bumpkin when the driver wends his way out of the airport and on to the BQE, taking her over the Triborough Bridge into Manhattan, and her heart's starting to beat like a mile a minute when they start driving down Park Avenue. The streets are packed with last minute shoppers toting huge bags, and though she doesn't see any dogs dyed silly colors, she does see more than a few in darling little sweaters leading around women dressed so stylishly she's starting to rethink the whole vintage dress/stompy boot combo, big time.

But then the driver's turning on E. 77th and circling the block to bring her right up to the main entrance to his building, and really, all she cares about is not hyperventilating or passing out—or both.

She stands shivering on the sidewalk as the driver and the doorman who's wearing this fancy gold frogged cap and coat just like in the movies tussle over her cheap suitcase and the plastic bag stuffed full of Darla's presents.

And even though she squints through the ornate glass doors because he might be coming down in the elevator right this second, really she's more worried about tipping the driver because that's what happens in New York. And, like, will she have to tip the doorman too? And just how freaking cold is it going to get?

The doorman though is already slipping the driver a bill in this totally suave move that she'll never be able to master if she lives to be a hundred. And then the door's being held open for her and she's stepping over the threshold into another world of black and white tiles that gleam and polished mahogany and the scent of beeswax and lilies from the huge vase sitting on the reception desk.

There's no time to do more than stare openmouthed as she's already being ushered toward the elevator. When she tries to play this back all she'll remember are brass fittings and heavy doors that open with an expensive swooshing sound.

"Welcome to Carlyle House, miss," the doorman says after he's placed her battered luggage in the elevator with the kind of reverence that would make you think it was matching set of Louis Vuitton
cases. “Mr. Wyndam-Pryce is expecting you. 15th floor, apartment A,” he adds touching his cap with a gloved hand as she scrabbles for the right button.

And she's watching the floors light up on the numbered display when really she should be trying hard not to pee her pants and maybe check that her hair doesn't look like it fell on her from a great height but she can't do that. All she can do is what she does, which is suddenly smack her hand on the control panel so the elevator grinds to a halt on the 11th floor.

“Fuck, fuck, oh fuck,” she chants because this is, like, the hugest moment of her life. Way huger than even the day she first turned the handle on the door and walked into his offices. It's immense and she feels tiny in comparison; insignificant within the enormity of the changing pattern of her existence. She's going to step out and walk into her future and for one second she's gripped with doubt that she's not ready. That he'll look at her and it's not the same. She's not the same. What he felt, what he thought he felt was just an illusion and it's going to be awful.

But then her chin comes up and she whirls round so she can fix her reflection with a resolute glare. If he realizes that he doesn't love her any more than she's just going to have to fucking change his mind.

And in the end, it's easy. She pats her hair, willing it to maybe grow a couple of inches in the next few seconds and presses the button again, trying to ignore the stereophonic lurching of the elevator and her stomach.

The door glides open on an empty hallway, because it's not Wes' style to be hovering on the parquet, and she steps out, hauling her bags with her and looks around to see which way the letters go. And she's walking along, amazed that the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other, brings her nearer to the door at the end of the corridor.

The door opens and he's standing there, a tall, lean figure cast in shadows just like on that first day when she turned up for her interview in her stupid, waterlogged clothes. He's just standing there and she's trying to do the whole one foot in front of the other thing but it's not working. She's rooted to the spot, looking for a sign from him, from above and then he holds out his arms and she's not walking, but running, the suitcase banging against her legs until she drops it because he's taken a step toward her, into the light. His face is wreathed in smiles and she drops her case and her bag so she can get to him faster, so fast that her feet don't even touch the ground anymore because she's flying through the air and his hands… his hands are touching her, around her waist so he can pick her up and spin her round while she clings to him.

All those fancy speeches she worked on, this perfect blend of sass and snark and maybe just a little bit of exasperation have fallen out of her head and she's got her face buried against his neck and he still smells the same. Of bergamot and limes and something else that she can't even describe; she'd just call it Wes. And he's warm and a bit soggy because, yeah she's crying and laughing at the same time and his hands are everywhere, smoothing down her hair, stroking her back, like she's precious, like he has to keep touching her to make sure she's really there.

She can't even look at him, until he gently cups her chin and turns her face toward him and he never looked like that before. Never looked at her like that before.

“Faith,” he breathes. “What the hell took you so long?”

Her mouth drops open so she can gasp in outrage because he was the one with the…

With the? She can't remember right now because his lips are on her and she shuts her eyes because it's one of those kisses straight out of the movies and even though he has to shift her higher in his
arms so he can walk a few feet and nudge her bags along with his toe, it's still perfect.

He kicks the door shut behind them, which is also perfect because it means he can press her up against it so she's pinned between the wood and his hard body. And she's, like, completely light-headed from all of it. Mostly the nearness of him and how she can be touching him and still be greedy and desperate to touch him again and again. But also the sinuous flicker of his tongue in her mouth, the hard jut of his cock right between her legs when she hitches herself just a few crucial inches up.

“Hey,” she whispers when he finally lets go of her mouth so he can kiss the damp path down her cheek that her tears have made. “Hey, Wes.”

He's placing her gently on her shaky feet and taking a step back from her. “Hello, my darling girl. Let me have a proper look at you.”

She's already trying to tug down the skirt of her dress which is up over her hips and she knows for a fact that his fingers have completely ruined her hair and her lipstick's just a dim and distant memory but his eyes run over her and she can feel them as fervently as his fingers before he smiles.

“I'd forgotten just how beautiful you are,” he tells her softly and she grins.

“And you're still fucking pretty yourself, Wes.”

He glances at his watch and gives her a smug smile. “Really, Faith, you're slipping. I expected you to mention that odious word at least five minutes ago.”

“Whatever,” she mock-snarls, bumping him with her hip because she's still got, like, hours to go before she'll run out of excuses to not touch him. “Y'know, I was so fucking nervous when I was coming up in the elevator,” she says following him down the halls after he's picked up her bags. “That you'd be there and it would be all weird and awkward and shit and I still feel like I'm about to start crying again but I'm so fucking happy, Wes.” And she'd be even fucking happier if she could stop talking but he just looks over his shoulder at her and grins.

“A sentiment I share, I quite assure you. Did you have a good flight?”

He shoulders open a door and she's stepping into a room and yeah, there's furniture and a floor and hey, walls too. There's also a big, comfy bed just made for two.

“It was cool,” she says, sitting down on the edge of it and bouncing experimentally. “I fell asleep for most of it.”

“Are you hungry? You must want something to drink at least and I had all of your favorite foods delivered under cover of darkness so my reputation as a gourmand remains intact,” he continues and his fingers are tracing circles along the top of a chest of drawers and he's barely pausing for breath, which makes her kinda relieved that he's just as nervous as her. “And, Faith, really I can’t believe that you came all this way without even a proper coat.”

She has to stop herself from doing something completely immature like squealing with delight like a little piggie when he fixes her with a stern glare.

“Well we don't get a lot of arctic winds in Florida,” she huffs. “Guess we could go out while the stores are still open. I wanna check out all those fancy New York shops.”

He nods in agreement. “We could do that.”
“Can we get the subway?” she asks jumping up. Because there was this whole theory she'd had about being naked by now but shopping would be a good second best. “Or a yellow cab? Or… hey! We could get the subway there and a cab back and we could make him drive through Central Park and the ice rink. Where's the ice rink?”

Wes shakes his head slowly, eyes closed, a small smile tugging at his lips. “It's by the Rockefeller Center,” he says and there's this tiny frozen moment when he's staring at her as she stands there, her arms swinging by her sides and she's staring right back at him and he's wearing jeans and a black sweater and he hasn't shaved this morning and she's forgotten what that feels like. Which is why she's suddenly in front of him, hands running over the rough angles of his cheekbones.

“Your hair's gotten grayer,” she tells him gravely. “And these little lines on your forehead are deeper and you've lost weight.”

His first instinct is to flinch away from her touch, she can tell that by the sudden start he gives but then he stills and his eyes flutter closed for just a second before opening wide so all she can see is blue.

“I've been pining away,” he says plaintively and he's still no better at making that sound convincing. “And your hair's a lot shorter and we are going to have a conversation about that, my darling Faith, later on this evening.”

“I'm counting on it,” she agrees happily, winding her fingers through his because there's no damn good reason why she can't. “So you gonna show me the sights then? And maybe lend me a sweater and a scarf before we go?”

“I've got a couple of things that got shrunk by my laundry service which should suffice.”

“Cool. C'mon, Wes, got my Christmas bonus just burning a hole in my pocketbook,” she says, trying not to go all googly eyed because he's staring at her again, all intense and his mouth flattened out into a tight line. “And I saw these totally wicked…”

“Oh, sod it!” he groans and she's being hauled into his arms again. “It doesn't matter. I have absolutely no intention of letting you leave this room for the next three days,” he says before he kisses her.

And it's not like she's going to argue with him, now is it? Because even though if her life depended on it she couldn't say what color the carpet was, or what the room contained beside a bed and the chest of drawers he's standing by, she's ready to swear it's the perfect room for holing up in with him and she's fairly certain he'll relax enough to let them make it to the bathroom for long, splashy soaks, showers where they're clinging together so tightly the soap bubbles can't fit between them, and yeah, trips to wherever he's stashed the food because suddenly she's starving now the butterflies have migrated south.

“Wes,” she says when the kiss ends and she's only held up by his arms which are cradling her to him. “This is still, like, majorly weird, y'know.”

He stares at her and nods slowly. “It is, a little, yes,” he allows. “The expectation, the time apart, the fact that you're more beautiful than I'd remembered which is forcing me to adjust my memories of you, but I think I can restore some small semblance of normality if you like.”

She stares at him and fuck, they've been apart too long, or maybe he's changed too much, because she's not really sure if he's joking or not. Somewhat hesitantly, she returns his nod. “I'd like that.”
“Turn around,” he says softly and there's nothing in his voice, no command, no expectation of compliance, but it's Wes telling her to do something and it's the easiest thing in the world to obey instantly, relaxing into the safety of being with him again, with nothing but good surprises.

She's facing a long wall and she gives a gasp because she's there, framed in silver, a dull gleam of metal enclosing the two photographs she'd sent him. They look stunning, carefully lit, placed so that they illuminate the room with the subtle contrast of white and dark.

“What color were you kneeling against?” he asks, slipping his hands around her arms to hold her back when she starts to move toward them.

“Red,” she tells him.

“I thought so,” he says with satisfaction. “You said you had a third?”

“It's in my case,” she says. “Do you want to see it?”

“Very much so,” he says, “but not until I've seen the original. I'd like you to undress now, Faith, please.”

And she could swear she comes just from that, the drawled command, Wes in total control of himself, of her, of them and she makes a sound that has his hands tightening on her arms as he dips his head and bites the side of her neck, just in the place that sends shivers over her in a tingling rush, hardening her nipples in a sharp throb her clit echoes.

Wordlessly she lifts her hands to start undoing buttons and zippers, peeling and stripping away everything that's hiding her body from his eyes and hands and mouth.

He doesn't move far and he stays behind her until the moment when her tattoo's about to be exposed and then he circles around and sits on the bed, gaze locked on her face.

She steps out of the last piece of clothing and lets the damp scrap of her thong fall to the floor, not missing the pursed lips that tell her he's noticed what she was wearing and he doesn't approve. Which she'd counted on. And it beat handing him a bottle of wine as she arrived, or a bunch of flowers.

Once she's naked, he studies her carefully without moving from the bed, his gaze taking in each gained or lost pound, lingering on her hair, and although he tries, he can't prevent the small smile that follows his detailed examination.

“Yes,” he murmurs finally, answering a question he hasn't voiced. He turns and gives the smallest of gestures toward the photographs. “I'd like you to walk over there and kneel between them, looking toward the wall.”

She swallows, because she doesn't want to; she wants to run to him because already she's missing the touch of his hands and this is all so swift, so sudden.

Ten minutes ago she was in the elevator and now she's caught up in one of Wesley's games, and is it too soon, too abrupt—

“It's better this way,” he says gently as if he can read her doubts in the small hesitation. ‘Trust me.”

His voice lifts at the end, just a little, making it a question and she nods. “I do, Wes,” she says. “I really do.”
“Then walk... and kneel... and wait,” he says and he makes it sound so simple that she does just that.

The carpet’s a soft pale green she discovers and it’s thick enough that her knees sink into it a little and she’s trembling slightly as she glances between a scrap of white fluff on the otherwise-pristine surface and the small scar on her left knee from a biking accident years ago.

“You're slouching. Straighten up,” he says with a sternness that brings her shoulders back and her chin up. “Good girl,” he adds, the quick approval enough to make her smile because it points up the fact that today she's not going to be able to do anything to make him angry, no matter how hard she tries. And she arches her back slightly, proudly, making her position match the twin Faith's who're smiling down at her, wondering if he's allowed himself to read the line across her back yet.

“Look at me,” he says finally when her breath's begun to catch because every second that passes with him behind her is leading her deeper into a fevered arousal she's not sure she can control. She imagines if they did this again she'd relax, float into a dream-like state of waiting, but not today. The slick, thick heat between her legs is too insistent to allow that.

She turns her head and stares at him gravely, not smiling because she's held captive by the same sense of significance that had made her halt the elevator. She doesn't want to do this wrong. Doesn't want to disappoint.

“Your hair's already a little longer,” he tells her, transferring his gaze from her to the photographs.

“I told you; it grows fast,” she whispers. “Wes—”

“Yes?” he asks and she sees that his hand's clinging onto the small post of the footboard and wonders if he's as uncertain and unsettled as she is.

“Can you read it?”

“I haven't tried,” he says and his hand slips free and he beckons to her. “Come here, so I can.”

She twists around and then pauses. He hasn't told her to—She meets his eyes and they narrow, a wickedly amused gleam brightening them. “Oh, I think so, don't you?” he says and the tension that doesn't belong, the part caused by being apart for so long, the residual bitterness of the way he left, leaves her, and, she thinks, him, in a sudden rush. “As you're about to reveal such a flagrant disregard of my wishes.”

So she crawls to kneel beside him and she knows he's watching the heavy, slow sway of her breasts, tipped with painfully-hard nipples, knows he's running his eyes over the changing curve of her back and ass as her hands lift and fall. Knows because she's staring at him the whole time, seeing the way his jaw tightens as he swallows, how his eyes are darkening to navy.

He looks down at her as she lifts herself to her knees and reaches out his hand, cupping her face. “You did that beautifully,” he says.

“Hey, I've got poise, remember,” she whispers because just forming words is difficult enough without making them audible too.

He smiles. “Indeed you do,” he agrees gravely. “Do you think it'll survive the first contact of my hand against your arse?”

She blinks at him, because really, now she's not capable of doing anything but stare.

“Over my knee, Faith,” he says calmly. “I think that's the best way for me to view the addition to
your skin, don't you?"

She freezes up and he smiles at her, without much kindness, because she thinks he knows that'd break her, and pats his knee. “I'm waiting.”

His jeans are rough enough against her sensitized skin to make her give a gasp that changes to a moan as she wriggles into position. Or maybe that's down to the fact that she's ideally placed to find out just how hard he is, rigid and, yeah, really fucking familiar, there for her breast to brush against as he pulls her forward and adjusts her to his precise requirements.

There's the longest pause and then she feels his finger running along the words as he sounds them out.

“I love you because I know no other way.” There's a small silence and then he says quietly, “Yes,” and his hand comes to rest, not on her ass, but covering the words, as though he's trying to gather them up and hold them.

“It looks very well,” he says, “and the words are perfectly chosen, but still.” His hand shifts. “This is by no means the full extent of the penalty I'll need to exact,” he tells her, with his hand moving restlessly, eagerly over her ass, in a sharp contrast to the measured calm of his voice. “But I want to fuck you, Faith, so very much that I can't wait much longer, and this will serve as a beginning. Nine words. Count them for me.”

And she cries out as his hand falls against her skin, not because of the flare of heat within and without, but because his hand slips between her parted legs and strokes across the wet, aching folds of her cunt.

“One,” he reminds her, in a voice that's not so fucking steady now he's felt how ready she is.

“One,” she manages to say back to him.

By five she's thrusting her ass up to meet each slowly-metered out slap, craving that delicious dip down that follows each one, with his fingers claiming more each time they touch her, delving inside her, tweaking at the hard, swollen bud of her clit, and, soaked with her juices, circling the tightness of her asshole with a questing, testing, maddeningly light touch.

By seven he's slowed down enough that she's ready to scream, taking time out to tap against each tattooed word with a sticky-wet finger as she gasps out a number.

“Nine,” she says finally almost shrieking it out. “Nine, Wes, nine!”

“Yes,” he says and she's tipped off his knee onto cool sheets and by the time she's rolled onto her back, finger-combing her tangled hair off her face, he's naked, and she doesn't get chance for more than one glance down to his cock, hard and ready, before he's kneeling beside her.

“I want to see you come,” he says harshly, and his fingers are between her legs before he's finished speaking, and nothing's changed about the way she responds to his touch, shuddering and clenching around him.

He watches her arch and pant out his name as she's swept up in a climax that's triggered less by the way he's found the perfect combination of thrusting fingers and dexterously rubbing thumb and more by the look in his eyes as he watches her, so totally caught up in her that he doesn't realize how unguarded his expression is.

He draws his fingers out of her and brings them to his lips, tasting her. “I thought I'd forgotten how
“You tasted,” he says, half to himself, “but I hadn’t.”

“Wes, I need you to fuck me,” she begs. “Please—” The climax hasn’t helped at all; she’s still quivering, hurting with the need to feel him slide inside her, light-headed and dizzy.

“Shall I promise to never make you wait again?” he asks, shifting so that the head of his cock is nudging against her clit, sending white-hot flashes over her. “Would you like that?”

“No,” she bites out. “Just don’t make me wait right now.”

He tilts his hips just a little so that she feels him stretch her open, start to fill her. She’s all set to start begging when he gasps and lunges forward. “God, Faith,” he mutters. “Oh God.”

She wraps her legs around him, pulling him deeper, reveling in the weight of him on her, of him inside her. The feeling is still new and strange, just a little, but that’s all right. She expected that. He rests his head at the hollow of her throat, a sigh escaping from his lips. If it’s a word, she can’t make it out over the pounding of her heart and her breathless exhortations, which have long ceased to be coherent. She angles her hips forward to meet his, encircling him with her arms, her restless hands roaming across the broad expanse of his back because she can’t stop touching him. He’s clearly still in control enough to give this series of shallow, deliciously slow thrusts in response that leave her practically screaming with frustration. But she doesn’t cry out, just bites the sound back, wanting desperately to come but at the same time wanting this to go on forever, just wave after wave of inchoate pleasure with no end in sight. There’s something so surreal, so heightened about every touch they give to one another, and in that way it feels like the first time again. It is the first time again. For a moment everything’s slow and languid and she feels almost drugged.

Her eyes have drifted shut, and she’s so focused on the sharp little thrusts of his hips and the feeling of his fingertips gripping her arm, so tightly she knows there’ll be bruises there later, that she’s startled when he whispers, “Open your eyes. I want to look at you.” Her eyelids flutter open and he’s gazing at her so adoringly she almost can’t take it. She doesn’t want to cry—not now, not again.

Another ragged whisper—”My beautiful girl”—before he dips his head low to kiss each of her breasts in turn. His tongue darts out to encircle one hard kernel of nipple, which makes her moan and arch against him. He nips at it, sharply, and she cries out as he spreads her legs wider so he can thrust more deeply into her.

“Fuck me, fuck me,” she whispers hoarsely, scarcely able to force out the words, and she’s shaking like a leaf against him, she’s so close to coming. If he senses it, there’s nothing he can do, because there’s far too much urgency in either of their movements for them to turn back now. They’d shifted irrevocably away from the unhurried; all the hunger and desperation they felt when they were apart colors everything now. He pulls himself out of her abruptly and before she has a chance to cry out in protest he plunges back inside with a single swift, forceful motion, twisting a nipple roughly between his fingers as he does so. It certainly evokes the desired response—sending an electric jolt right to her clit, causing her to clench forcefully around him, her head thrown back as she grips the sheets tightly in her hands.

“I can’t, I can’t—” She’s thrashing under him, her orgasm already starting to plateau and she wants to quell it, wants to wait. She can’t even see him anymore—everything is white-hot and bright and reduced to this frenzy of feeling that’s paradoxically too large to contain. But she can feel him. Can feel the exaggerated rise and fall of his breath against the taut line of her neck, the weight of his hips against hers, his steel grip against her back, fingers splayed across her buttocks, cushioning her from the full force of his thrusts.

“Come for me, please, want you to—” His voice sounds so naked, so vulnerable, and almost faraway, that it hardly sounds like him. But she doesn’t much care, because she can’t hold off any
longer; she's completely lost to it as she shudders uncontrollably against him. One final, violent thrust and he comes too, spurting hotly inside her as he cries out her name. He falls silent against her chest, breathing heavily.

"Don't want this to end, not yet," she whispers hoarsely, barely able to squeeze the words out for the pressure of his head against her chest, clamping her still-rippling cunt around his spent and twitching cock. It's still so deliciously hard and slides gently against her over-sensitized flesh and she's got him right where she wants him—in her arms again with his hands cradling her tingling ass, fingers curled protectively over the indelible words etched into her skin. And she can't help it, the moment's so fucking tender that she slips her fingers through his slightly sweat-damp hair and pulls him up for a kiss, his tongue soft and entangled with hers.

There's no measure of time that can accurately measure out how long they stay that way, locked tight in a seemingly-endless embrace, kissing with eyes wide open. She can't look away, and neither can he and he says as much.

"Three days won't be nearly enough," he whispers in her ear, when their lips finally part and she's all goose bumps and chills and hangs on to him tighter than ever.

When he finally pulls out—slowly, of course, maddeningly so, his eyes are still locked on hers and a sliver of her lower lip caught between her teeth doesn't do much to stop her little moan of dismay.

But it's not over—he's not done, not even by a long shot, because in half a second he's on his side, spooning her into a possessive embrace. His cock—damp and still slightly hard, rests against the cleft of her ass as he lets his hands wander up from the overly sensitive flesh at the small of her back up to her breasts, cupping one in each hand and stroking her nipples lightly with the pads of his thumbs. She can't do anything but whimper as he nuzzles her neck, sucks her earlobe, murmurs: "I go from loving to not loving you, from waiting to not waiting for you, my heart moves from the cold into the fire."

It's lines from the new Neruda sonnet he'd sent her and she's about to come again right then, just from the warm burr of his voice that's overflowing with a mournful ache that she knows all to well—like he's exorcizing the lost months of their time apart with his voice and his hands and the heat that's rising from their two bodies pressed together.

And they're still moving with some unscripted, mutual rhythm as his hands slide over every exposed inch of her skin and his hand slips between her legs. She's so very slick with their commingled come that his fingers feel like they're dragging the spent fires back inside—especially when he's sliding one finger up, gently teasing and circling her asshole until he gently slips it in. She's pretty sure she's gone from cooing his name to screaming it in record time, his other arm crushing against her chest as he pulls her spasming body in tighter and holds her there as she rides out another rush of pleasure before managing to wiggle out from his embrace. She can't stand not to be lost in that gaze of his, because it's kind of changed in a way she quite pin down. But it's definitely a change for the better.

Barely left with the energy to flop over to face him, she manages somehow, but loses the momentum to plant a kiss on his lips and instead ends up resting her lips against the familiar, faint stubble along his jawline. "Trying to kill me or something?" she asks, breathless. "I mean, damn, Wes. I just got here!"

Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Seven

They lie curled around each other until the sun fades into smudgy twilight, the words that they haven't yet said spoken for them by soft kisses and the thud of his heart underneath her hand, his fingers winding lazily through her tangled hair.
She wants to stay like that forever. Because, she thinks, she missed this post-fucking intimacy and quiet maybe more than the actual fucking and when she tells him that, he makes a quiet murmur of agreement.

But forever never lasts and eventually she has to wriggle out of his arms and sit up with a stretch and a yawn, unable to wipe the smirk off her face as his gaze rests with fascination on her upthrust breasts.

“Hey, Wes, seen anything you like?” she asks him tartly and he snakes out a hand so he can press against one rosy red nipple with the tip of his finger.

“Well, I rather like this,” he purrs and then leans forward to rub his cheek against the curve of her belly. “And I'm inordinately fond of this too especially as you've managed to gain some of the weight you lost.”

She gives a giggly sound of protest as his stubble tickles against her stomach. “You saying I've gotten fat?” she asks indignantly and she can feel his smile on her skin.

“Oh yes, disgustingly so,” he assures her gravely, ignoring her squeal of outrage and the vicious pinch that she gives his upper arm. “Which is why I have elaborate plans to fatten you up even further starting with dinner. Are you hungry?”

She stops contemplating her thighs, which still seem like a pretty wobble-free zone and gives him a beseeching look. “I'm fucking starving,” she announces woefully. “And I totally need to pee too.”

He looks startled for a second, like he's forgotten that she's never going to be the poster girl for, what? Like, good manners and breeding but then he's flopping back on the bed and giving an astonished gurgle of laughter.

When he's stopped shaking with mirth and wiping the tears from his eyes, which she knows for a fact he's just doing to get a rise out of her, he strokes his hand gently along the curve of her hip. “I missed you, Faith. More than you'll ever know,” he tells her throatily and it's only because all the available liquid in her is already sloshing around in her bladder that she doesn't burst into tears.

“Think I've got a damn good idea,” she says quietly and he opens his mouth to say something but she presses her fingers to his lips. “That whole needing to pee thing wasn't an idle threat, Wes.”

He shows her in to the en suite which is all black and white and art deco-y, she guesses, and then he tactfully retreats, muttering something about food, so she can do what a girl has to do.

She's finished attacking her hair with a brush and is just casting longing looks at the bathtub when he's back with a bottle of champagne and a couple of glasses and a delighted smile because it seems that all she has to do is be in his line of vision to get one of those.

“On a scale of one to ten just how fucking starving are you?” he inquires with an arch of his eyebrow and she's glad that he hasn't forgotten how to do that.

She thinks about it for all of a millisecond. “Eleven. I'm fucking starving to eleven. My stomach's about to start eating itself.”

“I did wonder what that alarming noise was,” he says with a smile. “In that case, I'm going to start running you a bath and then I'm going to concoct a delicious sandwich for you to eat in it. Does that sound agreeable?”

She's nodding frantically. “A big sandwich, Wes. And are you gonna wash my back for me?”
That was the general idea.” He's already turned on the hot tap so a steaming jet of water gushes out while he adds something that smells wonderful and makes some bigass bubbles too. “What kind of stinky cheese would you like on your sandwich?” he adds but he's already out of the door before she can throw something at him.

She's chin deep in bubbles by the time he comes back with the biggest smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel she's ever seen in his hand.

“Do you think this'll curb your immediate hunger pangs?” he asks doubtfully as she grabs the plate from him, sinks back into the bubbles and takes an enormous bite.

“Worth a try,” she mumbles with her mouth full and he's rolling his eyes and muttering something about her deplorable lack of manners as he opens the champagne.

The tub isn't quite as big as the one he used to have but she scooches over as he climbs in and then leans back against his chest so she can finish her bagel.

“Would you like to know what I have planned for the next few days?” he asks casually when she's sipping slowly at her second glass of champagne and wondering if she'll ever get used to how heavenly it is to be skin on skin with him.

“Really would, Wes.”

“Well, apart from a brisk walk at least once a day, I have absolutely no desire to share you with New York for a good while,” he begins, a hand skimming down the damp slope of her belly so he can rest his palm between her legs. “And I'd like to get started on the contract negotiations as soon as possible, not to mention addressing some of your more severe wrongdoings.”

She shifts languidly in the water against his burgeoning erection as his fingers trace against the swollen bud of her clit. “Collar,” she mutters indistinctly. Her cognitive thought processes have all flown south for the winter because in her mind's eye she's already bent over every flat surface in the apartment. Tied up, held down, toyed with, made to wait, made to beg until all she's sure of is the anchoring weight of it around her neck.

“Oh yes, the collar. It does feature rather heavily in quite a number of the different scenarios I've been devising,” he promises darkly. “But I'm afraid that you'll have to give it back to me after we've bathed, Faith, as it does actually belong to me.”

He rubs a finger along the slickening walls of her cunt as she parts her legs wider. “Got your initials on it,” she reminds him. “Thought about getting your initials tattooed on my ass too.”

“Really?” he asks thickly and then he clears his throat as she nods. “Anyway back to our itinerary. I'm going to fuck you too… lean back, Faith, and spread your legs a little farther, please… I missed fucking you. I'm going to fuck your cunt and your arse and your mouth. And, of course, lots of mindless DVD watching and the eating of vast amounts of carbohydrate-laden food.”

And even though he's now got two fingers dipping lazily in and out of her cunt, she tries to swivel round so she can kiss the smirk off his face but his hand grips her shoulder tightly, stilling her movements.

“Don't move, Faith,” he orders in his steeliest voice.

“I just wanted to…” she begins and then closes her mouth with an almost audible snap.

“I can see that you've forgotten even the most basic rules,” he says sorrowfully, fingers driving into
her relentlessly so she's squirming back against him, trying to get him even deeper inside her. “You seem to have completely forgotten how to follow even the simplest of instructions, Faith. I just asked you not to move and you're writhing around like a hyperactive lap dancer.”

Despite the fact that he's finger fucking her godholy that sure gets her attention and she's moving plenty so she can whip her head round and glare at him. “How the fuck would you know what a hyperactive lap dancer writhes like? Anything you want to tell me, Wes?”

“Yes,” he snaps out, pulling his fingers out of her, eyes dancing wickedly. “I'm telling you to get out of the bath now. Then go over to the counter and assume the position.”

She's already scrambling out of the bath, causing a veritable slooge of water to spill over the side of the tub as she skids over to the vanity unit and arranges herself over it, making sure to spread her legs and arch her back so her ass is thrust out.

He makes her stay like that for the time it takes him to slowly sip a glass of champagne and wash himself while she pouts at him in the mirror. Then he's climbing out of the bath and fussing with the plug and towels until it's taking all her willpower not to scream at him to get the fuck on with it already. As it is, she's sure there's a little puddle of her juices pooling at her feet.

Then he disappears out of the door and he even has the nerve to whistle a fucking jaunty tune while he's at it. She's ready to cry real tears of frustration by the time he comes back, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and clutching something in his head that she can't quite make out in the steamed over glass of the mirror.

“I hope you don't mind, Faith,” he says, honeyed sweetness dripping from every syllable. “But I took the liberty of fetching something from your suitcase.”

Her breath catches in her throat as he slowly uncoils the length of leather from around his palm and dangles it so the buckle glances across her buttocks.

“I'd like to ask you something, Faith, and I'd like you to be honest with me,” he says carefully and it's déjà vu time all over again until she remembers that all those bad, dirty secrets that built a wall between them have been smashed down.

“What do you want to know?”

“That time I hit you with your belt in the office and you said that you didn't want to do that ever again…” He's almost hesitant but then she sees his chin lift up and his shoulders straighten. “Was that because it hurt too much?”

Her fingers flex against the damp tiles and she takes a deep breath. “It did hurt, Wes, like, a bearable hurt but I didn't want to do it again because it made me feel too vulnerable and there was all the stuff going on with my dad and when you hit me with the belt it took me to this place that made me, like exposed and I'd told you too many lies…” She can't finish what she's saying because she's getting too choked up and the tears aren't too far behind.

“Ssshh, ssshh,” he soothes, leaning over her so he can dot kisses along her shoulder blades. “I didn't mean to dredge up so many bad memories, Faith.”

She raises her head so she can see his eyes in the mirror, how tenderly they look at her. “Think we’re both gonna have to get used to that, Wes,” she tells him with just a tinge of sadness. “Still got stuff to work through, haven't we?”

“I'm so sorry,” he says helplessly, putting the collar down on the top. “For every single stupid and
thoughtless thing I did or said. When I think…”

“I know,” she says simply. “Wes, I know.”

And she knew this conversation was going to happen, but she didn't expect to be completely naked with her ass stuck in the air while they were having it but then it kinda feels normal. Because normal for her and Wes, is about a thousand fucking miles away from anyone else's idea of normal.

There's a featherlight touch across her cheeks, four straight lines traced by his fingers and she doesn't even need to think to know that he's discovered the scars from the switch.

“They're almost beautiful in a terrible kind of way,” he remarks softly and the rules can go fuck themselves because she's turning her head so she can smile at him.

“They really fucking are,” she says fiercely. “Glad that you put your mark on me, Wes, and I don't regret them for a second.”

“Faith…”

“And I want you to whip me with the collar,” she adds, wiggling her ass and already craving the bite of the leather on it. “Couldn't sleep last night for thinking about it and I know you want to do it too. And if I don't like it or it hurts too much, you're gonna hear me fucking screaming out my safeword. Anything you want clarified, Wesley?”

He doesn't reply at first and the steam has cleared the mirror enough that she can see the flush pinking up his cheeks as he gives this almost dreamy little sigh. “You are an impossible, imperious little bitch,” he tells her fondly, picking up the collar. “Five strokes, Faith, and you promise...?”

“I promise, Wes,” she assures him, staring at his reflection at he brings his hand up.

The leather stings against her slightly damp skin, burning where it touches so she's nothing more than the sensation and she knows he's holding back from really going to town so all she's getting is this delicious, slowly blossoming hurt that heats her up and leaves her gasping as the fifth stroke lands across her buttocks.

“Wes…” she pleads but he's already dropping to his knees, spreading her open and fastening his mouth to her soaking cunt. She pushes back against him hard, moaning as his tongue drills into her again and again and again until she comes with a cry that might be his name.

It takes her long moments to come down, to stop shaking, to stop clinging to him even as he cleans her up with a warm flannel. Then he tucks one of the soft, fluffy towels that he still seems to be buying by the dozen around her and kisses the top of her head gently.

“I think that's quite enough for now, don't you?” he drawls, leading her back into the bedroom. “Nothing more strenuous for the time being but one of your famous cuddling sessions and a good film.”

“And ice cream,” she insists weakly as she drags her case open. “You'd better have some ice cream stashed away somewhere, Wes, or there's gonna be trouble.”

She's already pulling on her pajama bottoms and digging around for a tank top when he coughs meaningfully.

“I'd like you to be naked please, Faith,” he informs her quietly and she ignores him while she tugs out her favorite black wifebeater.
“Neruda,” she says firmly, yanking it over her head quickly so she doesn't miss the astonished expression on his face. She wishes she had a camera because, man, he's gone all bug eyed and slack-jawed.

“I beg your pardon,” he splutters.

“Neruda,” she replies sweetly. “And just to clarify, Wes, I'm not spending all my time bare ass any more. Girl's gotta have some mystique, you know. But if you want to shuck off your clothes then we could have some quid pro quo thing happening.”

They have this stand-off for all of three seconds and yup, his hands are actually toying with the button on his jeans before he shakes his head. “Maybe we could forgo the movie and start on those contract negotiations?” he suggests with a wry grin.

“Nuh-huh, Wes,” she says, wagging her finger at him. “Movie, ice cream, cuddles. In that order.”

He doesn't say anything, just gives her a thoughtful look before he takes her hand and leads her out of the room.

Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Eight

The remnants of the ice cream are melting in a bowl on the coffee table and the credits are rolling when he clears his throat, the way he always does before he’s about to say something he's not sure about.

As she's draped across him like his very own Faith blankie, she can't see his face without way more effort than she's capable of right now. The early start, the disturbed night—she's all but drifting off to sleep, stretched out on this huge, black leather couch that's wide enough for them to lie side-by-side, she bets, though she prefers it this way.

“What, Wes?” she murmurs, pursing her lips and kissing his chest because it's right there and why not?

“I'm pleased that you used your safeword of course,” he begins carefully, not sounding pleased at all, “but now you've decided to utilize it, I do hope that you don't use it frivolously.”

“I get it,” she says calmly. “I understand how it works.”

“Yes,” he says, in a way that means 'but' is a breath away. “But—” Thought so.

“Wes,” she says, propping herself up on her elbow and ignoring his 'oof' as it digs into his ribs. “If I get how it works, I can't use it frivolously, can I? Because it's meant for serious times. For when I don't want to do something. Really don't want to, for whatever reason.”

He looks just the tiniest bit miffed and a whole lot disturbed. “You don't want to be naked around me?” he asks. “Because it's never—”

She pushes herself to sitting and curls up beside him, waiting for him to struggle into a position that's a bit less recumbent. Damn, this couch is like quicksand.

“Fine, Wes. Let's get this done now, because I'd rather get it over with.”

“Yes,” he says, with a small smile. “I remember that about you. You're not a toe-dipper, are you?”

She smiles back. “Really aren’t,” she agrees. “And, no, of course I don't mind being naked around
you. As if! But naked when you're not is different and you know it."

A slight frown furrows the skin between his eyebrows. “Yes, of course I do. But, well—”

“Yeah,” she says. “It’s a game. I get that, Wes, I do, and if you told me tomorrow, or next Tuesday you were going to keep me naked all day, gave me time to think about it, I’d be fine with it. Maybe. And if, two months from now you said it casually, just like you did tonight—” She pauses. Two months. Will she—? God, how does she know—She realizes with a burst of panic, sour-sweet in her mouth that she still doesn’t feel fucking safe—

His hand’s hard and warm and painfully tight around her wrist, dragging her back from the edge. “I’ll make a note of it,” he says, eyes searching her face. “February 24th. Tell Faith to remove her clothing at a time and place as yet undetermined, while I watch.”

She gives him a grateful smile. “And I might say, ‘yes’, and I might say—well, not ‘no’. I suppose I don’t get to say that, do I?”

He shakes his head, trying to look regretful. “I don’t think you do, although I’m fairly certain you will. But you can always say your safeword. I’m really not trying to argue with your use of it—”

She gives his knee a solid thunk with her elbow. “You totally were!” she says, outraged. “But that’s what I get for hooking up with a lawyer. Just lucky for me that I’m way sneakier, being a teenage girl.”

“You’re terrifying me,” he murmurs giving this little wiggle of his eyebrows.

“I’m so not. But I’m getting all kinds of sleepy and I don’t wanna argue with you.”

He sits up abruptly and kisses her. “We’re not,” he says firmly. “We’re having a rational discussion about an important matter and we are not arguing because I simply won’t allow that on our first night together.”

She traces the shape of his lips and smiles. “Yes, Wesley,” she says meekly, spoiling it entirely by giggling.

“Faith,” he drawls, “it occurs to me that we’ve moved into uncharted territory now that the movie, ice cream and uh, cuddles are over, so before I schedule an unprecedented third assault on your arse for being deplorably cheeky, perhaps you’d like to summarize your position?” He smirks. “It’s what sneaky lawyers do.”

She nods, not letting herself get side-tracked, even though his hands are still on her, sliding up her sides and skimming the curve of her breasts with his thumbs. “You wanting me to strip was a whim.”

“Well, I—”

“A whim. I’d been naked for hours.”

“It’s not enough,” he says and there’s nothing but longing in his voice. “Do you know how much I’ve missed the sight of you? The way you feel when I’m holding you?”

She strokes a hand down his arm. “Yeah. But it was still a whim, and guess what, Wes? I’m allowed to have them too. And I just got here and I’m tired and this has been one hell of a few weeks—months—and I thought I wasn’t gonna see you until February, and you’ve been fucking me long-distance, and not in a good way, and you fucking bastard, you left me.”
Her voice starting to rise, and the sudden spill of hot tears, came about three words in and she watches his face tighten as he hears her out in silence, not trying to interrupt her with stammered excuses the way Xander would have, not trying to calm her down.

“I'm sorry,” she says, wiping at the tears and looking around for something better than the back of her hand, but this is a swanky New York apartment and boxes of Kleenex don't seem to be in this year.

“Here,” he says, and yeah, it's a Wes hanky, impeccable folds, blindingly white and she grabs it and stands up, moving away from him over to the window with the view out over the city.

He gives her time to snuffle the tears away and then sighs and she hears the creak of the leather as he stands up and walks over to her, moving quickly. His hands curve over her shoulders and then he slips his arms around her waist, hugging her to him. “Do you like the view?” he asks quietly.

She nods. It's spectacular. Ribbons of light on the biggest present of them all; New York with Wes on Christmas Eve.

“Did you hate me very much?” he asks next and there's something in his voice that's close to the cringe an animal gives as it readies itself for a blow because she's guessing he thinks she did and hearing it from her is something he's been expecting—dreading—no matter how much they kissed and made-up while they were apart.

“Not enough to ever stop loving you,” she says, turning to face him. “And I can get why you did it, and why we needed to be apart, but it doesn't mean I liked it. It doesn't mean I'd have chosen it, or maybe, if we'd discussed it, we couldn't have come up with a better way.”

“Possibly we could,” he says. “In fact, as I've spent the time away from you feeling bereft and utterly miserable, I'm certain we could have. But I was so sure—” He sighs and his head drops down onto her shoulder. “I'm sorry, Faith,” he says, speaking softly against her bare skin. “Sorry for rushing you tonight, too, for overwhelming you because I still can't help feeling you're not really here, it's all just too perfect—”

“You too?” she interrupts, blurtling out the words.

He raises his head and blinks. “I'm sorry?”

She rolls her eyes. “The panic thing, Wes. This—” She waves her arm at the view, the apartment. “It's all so fucking fast.” She stares at him suspiciously as he clears his throat. “What?”

“I've been planning it for weeks,” he confesses.

“Say what?” she says dangerously.

“I thought it would be a surprise—”

“Got that right.”

“I've been working late to clear my desk so I could take these two weeks off, the plane tickets and the limousines were booked ages ago—”

“Wes, you—”

“And I was utterly fucking terrified that you wouldn't come,” he says, silencing her splutters of sheer fury. “Every preparation I made, every item ticked off my to-do list...it all let me believe that I was a
step closer to seeing you again.” He glances away. “When you contacted me...you thought it odd that I took so long to speak to you, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” she mutters, moving to perch on the arm of the chair that goes with the couch. He stays by the window, gazing out at the light show and the invisible sky.

“I was stunned, Faith. I never expected—I’d begun to adjust—”

“Sorry I fucked all that up,” she says and it's like they've stepped back a few months, because aren't they past all this? Didn't they do this already?

And, no, when she thinks about it, they didn't. Not face-to-face and not really in any of the letters or calls.

One final fucking hurdle then.

“You didn't,” he says harshly. “Never think that. I wanted you with me desperately, Faith. Desperately. That didn't change. I missed you so much—but just as you did, I coped.”

And, yeah, she supposes she did but viewed at a distance those small, personal victories, like starting to read again, to go out clubbing, to stop—what had he called it? Dipping her toe in? Yeah—seemed pretty fucking trivial.

“You split us up,” she says without making it sound like an accusation.

“And you brought us back together,” he says. He smiles a little sadly. “And if you want to add one more thing to my list of transgressions, it's that, being who I am, I rather selfishly wanted to be the one to arrange the time and place of our reunion, once you'd made me see how inevitable it was, and I lived in daily expectation and dread of looking up from my desk to see you trample over Anya and hurdle through the door toward me, having taken matters into your own hands.”

She snorts. “You're forgetting the poise again” she says. “I'd have waited until she went to pee and snuck past her desk.”

“No, you wouldn't,” he says with certainty, walking over to her.

She pouts. “Made an appointment?”

He kneels beside her and rests his head in her lap. “I'd left strict instructions that you weren't to be permitted to do that.”

Her hand caresses his hair, combing through it and smoothing it into place. “Better change them.”

“Why?” he says, sounding drowsy. “You can't afford my hourly rates and it would be unethical of me to act as your lawyer given our close, personal relationship.”

“So how do I get to see you when you're at work?” she demands.

He tilts his head to the side, looks up, and gives her a sweet smile that melts away the last of an anger that was more an echo of a past emotion than anything else. “Faith, my darling, you're far too distracting for me to be able to work while you're there, but if you time your visits to coincide with lunch, I think all you'll need to do is walk in.” He frowns. “Unless I'm with a client. Or taking a call. Or—”

“Wesley.”
He stands up, abandoning the teasing, and holds out his hand. “Come to bed, Faith.”

And he's not asking for a truce, and he's not asking that they forget—but they can't do this easily, they can't do this fast, and she's so fucking tired right now, and he is too, because somehow she doesn't think he slept all that well either.

And she wants to fall asleep with him beside her, wake up with him smiling down at her, and so she takes his hand and lets him lead her to the bedroom.

Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Nine

There hadn't been time to do anything last night but to fall into bed, tug his arms around her and her clothes still on, which had to be a first.

And as she slowly comes to the next morning, she's disorientated by the way the light comes slanting in through windows that are in the wrong place and a warm body pressed up against hers. For a moment she thinks it's just another sense memory until she remembers that it's not. It's real. He's real again. Not just a voice on the telephone and a series of pictures in her mind but someone she fucked and argued with and cuddled yesterday.

Yeah, there's still stuff to be worked out. Words that are difficult to think about, much less sound out and see the way he frowns and his eyes shadow when she says them. But right now on a winter bright, New York morning with the weight and feel and smell of him all around her, it can all wait.

They're together again and she allows herself a sleepy smile before she gets back to the serious business of trying to get some more shut-eye. And he'd made it pretty obvious how much he detested her choice of sleepwear so it's no wonder that her tank top's been rucked up so he can clamp one hand possessively over her breast. And the waistband of her pajama bottoms has been pushed down so his other hand can burrow between her legs and stay there, guarding her snatch from any intruders.

“I know you're awake, Faith,” he whispers, her breath tickling in her ear.

“No, you don't,” she mumbles, wrapping the quilt tighter round her.

His thumb is absent-mindedly brushing her nipple, which ignores the fact that the rest of her is trying to go back to sleep and stands up to say hello. “Well, you've stopped snoring for one thing.”

Okay, now she's awake. “Hey, I don't snore,” she protests indignantly. “Might snuffle a bit.”

“Have you ever stayed awake to find out?” he points out with infuriating Wes logic and she's wriggling out of his hold and turning around so she can narrow her eyes at him even as she's reaching up to buss his lips in a noisy kiss.

“Happy Christmas, Wes.” She grins, wrapping her hand around his attentive cock. “Do you want your present now?”

His eyes are all slits as she strokes him to hardness. “Would this require me to get out of bed and unwrap it?” he asks with the closest he ever comes to a leer.

“Nope, you have to stay in bed while I unwrap it.” And he's rolling onto his back and lifting his hips so she can yank his shorts down and it's the best present she ever had. Hard and wet and all hers. She slides down the bed so she's lying between his spread legs and she was going to tease him, she really fucking was, but as she swipes her tongue over the head, gets that first bead of spunk on her tongue, just the taste of him makes her moan.
And the solid weight of him in her hand makes her whimper and like a chain reaction the sounds she's making, her lips trembling around him makes him whimper and tremble too and she's jacking him off with shaking hands and licking frantically at every bit of his cock that she can get near her greedy mouth.

He's trying really hard not to thrust but his hips are jerking off the bed and when she looks up at him, his head's flung back and he looks like he's about bite clean through his bottom lip. And she ignores the insistent throb of her clit, the ache in her cunt which wants his cock as much as her mouth does because this is all for Wes.

“Oh God, my Faith,” he groans when she nibbles the edge of his foreskin and she's just got time to suck him down hard, moaning again as the sea-salt tang of him explodes on her tongue before he's coming in violent spurts.

And she's not missing a second of it. The strangled moan that's torn out of him. The way his fingers clench around handfuls of sheet. Because in those seconds she's seeing Wes in a way no one else ever will. When he's incapable of holding anything back and all his artifice and bullshit is blown away because of what she's doing to him. He's completely and totally hers. He belongs to her. She owns him.

She curls her tongue around him one last time before she lets him sinks back down on the pillows with a gasp and she's crawling back up the bed so she can snuggle against him.

“Did you like your present, Wes?” she asks him smugly because his ragged breathing is the only answer she needs. “Took me ages to work out what to get you.”

“It was wonderful,” he sighs, raising her hands to his lips and pressing a hot, openmouthed kiss to the back of her knuckles. “I wonder if that particular store does gift certificates.”

“Guess we could sort something out. Got some other stuff for you too in my case,” she adds because there's the photo and she had enough time at the airport to buy him a bag load of silly things that were more about having something to give him, than angsting about finding the perfect gift.

“I have a few small trifles for you too,” he says and he's not sounding quite so much like he's just run a marathon. “Of course, it's a tradition in my family to open presents after lunch.”

“You're kidding, right?”

He gives her a lazy smile. “I'm afraid not. Though I suppose I could be prevailed upon to let you open some now and we can think of something else to do after lunch.”

His heavy-lidded look promises the kind of things that she's not going to be able to take back if the size is wrong, not like she thinks that's gonna be a problem.

“If you let me open them now, then after lunch I've got something for you from the same place that I got the last thing,” she pouts, running a finger along his spent cock, just in case he needed a clue.

His hand comes down on her ass with a resounding, stinging slap so she guesses he doesn't.

“Presents—the under the tree kind? Now?” she asks, bright eyed and grinning, shaking the bed while her tummy rumbles loudly. “And breakfast? Totally starving over here, man.”

He sighs, rolling his eyes. “Yes, very well. Presents it is, you naughty, demanding girl. And I'll make you eggs and waffles and bacon and anything else you'd like.”
She snatches his hand and pulls him out of bed. “C’mon, then! Enough talking, more doing!” She realizes as she dashes ahead to the living room that she’s never been this excited on Christmas morning, not like ever.

The front rooms of the open, airy apartment are filled with bright, hard winter light and look so different from the night before. The shadows are out of the corners and though it's not filled with any of his things, it's still very lovely. Most notable of all, though, is a little live Christmas tree with long, delicate needles in a pot that she hadn't noticed before, sitting on the glass and steel coffee table and decorated with a few strands of perfectly arranged white lights and a bunting of gold ribbon. And a stack of perfectly wrapped boxes as well, the kind with giant silver ribbons that some shop assistant probably took ages to wrap up under his watchful eye.

“Hey, wait. That wasn't there before,” she says, looking at him incredulously. “Where exactly did all this come from?”

“Must have been Santa Claus, though I'm surprised he left you anything, seeing as you didn't leave out the milk and cookies,” he says with an innocent smile. “So, shall I make some coffee first?”

“Don't change the subject!” She pokes him in the ribs and it nets her another cheery smack on the ass. “I mean, yeah, coffee, please. But seriously...”

“Faith, you're really too demanding sometimes. Correction: all of the time.” He moves off to the little kitchen area, ignoring her pointed glare and fires up the gas range under a tea kettle, pulling a French press out of the dish rack. “Why should it matter? It's all here now.”

“But...” She's forced to trail off as he turns on the coffee grinder so she settles onto a tall stool on one side of the black granite bar that separates the kitchen from the apartment's dining area.

He gives the grinder a few extra-long pulses with a naughty grin. “I would have thought you of all people, Faith, would believe in the magic of Christmas.”

She looks for something to throw at him, but comes up empty-handed and settles for sticking her tongue out instead. “You must have done it while I was asleep. Just admit it, Wes.”

“I deny everything!” he says with a laugh. “Do you want your orange now, or later?”

“What? My orange?”

“Well, clementine, to be precise.” He goes all stiff and proper after tossing her a little orange, not much bigger than a tangerine, from a bowl on the counter. Even when it's just in her hands it smells lovely, the crisp, citrus fragrance a making her feel a little homesick for the spindly orange trees that grew in her Gran's backyard. “Wasn't so long ago that a girl would consider herself very lucky indeed if she was presented with a clementine orange for Christmas by her suitor.”

“Oh, on the contrary. These are from Spain. They've only just ripened; this is the best season for them,” he says with a wink before turning to remove the whistling tea kettle off the burner.

“Whatever!” she bristles, but as soon as his back's turned, she's enraptured with the smooth, shiny rind that's a million miles prettier than the tough hide of the navel oranges she's used to eating. “Can I eat it now?”

“Perhaps you'd best wait until the presents are done—I'd hate for you to get your sticky fingers on your gifts.”
“You know, I could throw this at you. I've got mad good aim,” she says, cocking her arm back menacingly.

“I did keep all the receipts. I can always send everything back.”

“You wouldn't,” she mutters, eyes flinty.

“Oh wouldn't I?” His glare matches hers and they're locked in another standoff until, near simultaneously, their resolve collapses into giggles. “Go sit on that sofa now like a good girl, Faith, while I finish up in here.”

“Oh, wait. But I have presents for you too! I almost forgot!” And before he can protest, she dashes back to the bedroom to dig them out of the bottom of her suitcase.

The pungent smell of the coffee brewing makes sure she doesn't stay away too long, even with a pit stop and a quick second in front of the bathroom mirror to make sure that her hair's not too freakin' birdsnestly, and he's waiting for her on the sofa, all smiles and really looking too damn pretty for words when she sneaks back into the room, hands clutching the plastic bag from the airport shops behind her back.

“Didn't have time to wrap things, but...” She stashes the bag behind a cushion and snuggles up next to him, planting a kiss on his lips.

“Faith, you didn't need to get me anything else. The pictures and the fact that you're here now...” He sighs, pulling her close and letting his hands wander under her top, one skimming her breasts, the other making a beeline for the small of her back. “That's enough for me.”

She doesn't pull away, because his warm hands are really doing the talking, and instead looks up at him with a laugh. “Oh whatever—don't be such a sap. You want presents. Admit it!”

“You know, you really have regressed completely in our time apart and become quite truculent all over again,” he says, punctuating the five dollar word with the tweak of a nipple and dragging his lips lightly along the curve of her neck.

“I think it came in the package with the poise,” she says, trying not to melt in his wandering hands and finally manages to wriggle away to grab the first box on the pile and give it a good shake.

“I wouldn't shake that too vigorously, Faith,” Wes drawls, looking really fucking amused.

Momentarily chastened, she peers at the box intently, as though she might develop X-ray vision any second and be able to see right through it. She puts it back down. “No, I should wait. After lunch you said, right? I can wait.” She crosses her arms across her chest with what she hopes is a kind of resolve, even as she eyes the daintily wrapped, monstrously enticing package one more time before glancing pointedly toward the kitchen, where there's coffee brewing and the enticing promise of a cholesterol-laden breakfast feast.

Wes surprises her by saying, “No, I think you should open that one.” He gives her a quick kiss on the top of her head. “You picked very well indeed. Good things do come in small packages, after all.”

“You feeling all right Wes? Are you actually advising me not to freakin' wait?” She reaches up to feel his forehead. “Hmm, you do feel a little warm. All that exertion this morning too much for you?”

“Clearly. The air must be quite thin up here. I do believe I'm light-headed from the acute lack of caffeine,” he mutters, perfectly stone-faced, before getting up to finish fixing the coffee.
By the time he comes back with two steaming mugs filled to the brim with the most heavenly smelling brew she's ever encountered, she's already sized-up the rest of the packages, weeding out the book-shaped ones and trying to decide if the medium-sized, rectangular one is another bag or a pair of shoes. She's secretly hoping shoes, but either way... Then she stops herself, mid-thought, because, really, she doesn't need all this—this stuff, and she hopes to God it's not something Wes has done to assuage his guilt, or by way of apology, or—

"Wes?"

He's rooting deep in the fridge for creamer and his head pokes out from behind the door. "Yes?"

"Would you come here?"

He sits down on the couch next to her, picking up a mug taking an exploratory sip. His other hand rests warmly, heavily on her knee.

"I'm not used to a real Christmas, you know. Christmas to me is, like, a time of drunken inappropriateness and arguments and if there were any gifts under the tree they were usually hocked in record time. So, y'know”—she pauses and takes Wes' hand in hers, squeezing it—"This is, like, all new to me. And I don't want you to think you have to spend money on me, because I can't return the favor and it makes me feel all uncomfortable, a little bit, and just being here is the best gift you could give me anyway and I—"

"Faith."

She looks up at him. "What?"

"You're babbling a mile a minute. And I know." He wraps his arm around her and leans close, kissing her neck gently and working his way slowly toward her lips. "I got you these things because I wanted to. Upsetting you was the furthest thing from my mind."

"I know, I just..."

"I think you should open one of your presents and not worry about another thing. Except, perhaps, which one to open first. Although I do rather think you got it right the first time."

She reaches out and the paper's fluttering to the floor before he's had time to wince because she's not, like, unpeeling the tape carefully, folding the paper neatly and putting it to one side.

When she sees what's slipped out into her lap she gives a yelp that reaches bat-high levels of squeakiness. "Wes, this is—"

"Pink. I know," he says with a shudder, averting his eyes from the iPod she's clutching possessively but sneaking a pleased peek at her when he thinks she isn't looking.

Which she's not, because she's totally engrossed in getting rid of all the packaging and stroking the shiny flat sides.

He reaches out and sorts through the presents and tosses her one that's she's only persuaded to open when he glares at her. It's full of just about every accessory they do for her new gadget and she's cooing over them adoringly when she realizes she hasn't actually said 'thank you' yet. Darla would be mortified.

Placing her lapful of goodies aside, she launches herself at Wes, who's sipping his coffee in a slightly martyred way. "I love it. I love you," she says, giving him kiss after kiss until he leans sideways,
deposits his coffee on the table and pulls her onto his lap.

“If you don't like the color, I can exchange it for the silver one,” he says, tucking a bit of her hair behind her ear and frowning when it falls back again, because it's too short to do that anymore. “That pink's entirely too...pink for my liking.”

“Hey!” She drills her finger into his chest. “I want the pink one!”

“You have it,” he points out.

“I do, I totally do!”

And it makes up for all the Barbie-pink stuff she never got which is probably why she sounds about seven with the gleeful hand-clapping and all, but Wes doesn't really seem to mind. There's a flicker of amusement in his eyes and he picks up her hand and kisses it. “Open some more,” he says, and damn, he sounds as eager as she is.

“No,” she decides. “It's your turn.”

He nods at the presents. “There's one there for me from Rupert—”

“From me,” she says indignantly, because she's still not big with the Rupert Giles-love after the whole setting Wes up with a date thing.

“It's a bottle of single-malt, I'm sure of it,” Wesley says. He frowns pensively at the present. “Although I don't know which one...”

“Wesley...” she says ominously.

“I'll open it later,” he says hastily. “In fact—” He stands up and hauls her to her feet. “I'm going to let you play with that gadget while you keep me company as I cook us some breakfast. I have plans for later that don't include you demanding food at inopportune moments.”

“Whatever” she says, scooping up her pretty pink shiny thing.

He pauses. “I've actually missed you saying that,” he says, shaking his head. “Remarkable.”

“Oh, you,” she says, and gives his ass a smart smack as she goes past him. The death-glare he gives her is only around level three, so she doesn't think he minds that much.

After she's done justice to Wesley's promised breakfast she drags him back to the entrancingly enticing heap of gifts, ignoring his longing looks at the dishwasher which he'd just dying to fill according to his weird-ass system.

“I believe it was my turn?” he says, giving into her suspiciously soon, and damn if he doesn't look kind of lit-up, as if this isn't something he's used to either.

She nods and scrabbles behind the cushion. “Close your eyes,” she says.

“Really, Faith,” he protests, “is that absolutely necessary?”

“Really is.”

“Oh, very well.” He closes his eyes, and one thing about Wes, if he plays, he does it properly; there's not even a glimmer of blue showing. She rewards him with a kiss and drops the first of his presents into his waiting hands.
He blinks with bemusement at a thick, white novelty mug bearing the slogan, 'Lawyers Do It In Briefs'. “I—don't know what to say,” he confesses.

She smirks. “Couldn't resist it, but you don't have to—oh!”

She watches as he carefully pours his coffee into it, not spilling a drop of course, and takes a small sip. “Thank you,” he says politely, raising it to her in a small salute. “I'll take it into work with me, I think.” He smiles to himself. “Anya usually gets my coffee. I'm sure she'll find it amusing.”

Yeah, like that's gonna happen!

“My turn,” she says, fingers twitching.

“It is,” he agrees.

Next up is a box that's full of soft wool, and she's savvy enough to recognize the Marc by Marc Jacobs label when she sees it.

“You got me warm stuff,” she says with delight, investigating. “Scarf...hat...gloves. They're lovely, Wes.” She puts them all on and goes to look in the mirror on one wall, admiring herself. There's this cute little knitted flower on the side of the hat and the scarf and gloves have a frill on them that makes them a million years away from the clumpy, heavy, itchy ones her Gran used to knit her in the unlikely event the temperature plummeted below sixty.

“You might need this too,” Wesley says, coming up behind her. “I unwrapped it and hung it up.” He gives her a rueful smile as he helps her into a Miu Miu coat that does a pretty good job of transforming her into someone who looks special, someone who matters. And, yeah, clothes shouldn’t do that, but this does, because it's beautiful and when she fastens the three buttons and watches it flare elegantly out, she sighs. “I dashed out at the last minute yesterday when it occurred to me that, you being you, it was highly unlikely that you'd come prepared for the weather. I made myself incredibly unpopular by being in a hurry on the busiest shopping day of the year, but I was worried that you'd arrive before I got back.” His lips twist in a grin. “I got sworn at by at least three women,” he says, “all of whom looked ready to murder me for pushing in front of them.”

“Wes, you really do like to live dangerously,” she murmurs. “That's not like you...being impolite and all.”

“It was an emergency,” he says, helping her out of the coat. “And I'm not likely to ever see them again, after all.”

“You hope,” she says darkly, going back to the presents and taking off the mitts so she can open them. “And, hey,” she says, “if all this was waiting for me, how come I got, like, totally nagged for not bringing my own winter woolies?”

She gives him a stern look but it slides off him. “Had you come equipped I would have been astonished,” he tells her smoothly, “but in that unlikely event, you'd simply have had a spare set, wouldn't you?”

“You wouldn't have taken them back?” she asks him.

He looks astonished. “Hardly. Unless you didn't like them, or they didn't fit, of course.”

“Not much chance of that,” she says, her mild indignation dissipating. “You always know what to get me.”
“I'm looking forward to shopping with you though,” he says thoughtfully. “Seeing what you choose
yourself. I think it'll be very interesting. Illuminating even”

He's got this possessive look on his face as he contemplates that, and she knows he gets off on
working out what makes her tick, but that's usually connected with making her whimper needily. Or
so she'd thought, but really, this is Wes; he's an all-or-nothing type. She doesn't say anything, just
swallows and reaches for a present without really thinking about it.

“I believe it's my turn,” he says smartly, whipping it right out of her hands as she tears at the paper
and looking expectant.

She gives him a major pout, because it might be, but she'd already started unwrapping that one.

“If you pout like that, I might be forced to call a halt to this, and administer some much needed
reminders about taking turns in the form of...” He studies her. “Kisses,” he decides, edging toward
her until she's close enough to grab. She starts to pucker up and finds herself face down over his
knees. “Or, on second thoughts....”

She lets him get in three completely playful swats before twisting over and grinning up at him. “I'll
be good,” she says.

“Hmm. Doubtful,” he tells her, bending down to kiss her and helping her off his lap. “But,
somehow, you're so charmingly naughty that I think Santa forgave you.”

“He really did,” she says, eying the stack of presents meaningfully. She reaches out and grabs the
one from Rupert, passing it over to Wes with a smug smile of being good plastered on her face.

“Why, thank you,” he says. He unwraps it and stares at a fugly-cheap looking wooden box, looking
stunned.

“So what is it?” she asks curiously as he slides the top off the box and eases out a bottle of what,
yeah, looks like whiskey.

“Twenty-five-year-old Macallan,” he says in a reverential tone she thinks is totally over the top.

“Oh. Uh, good. It is good, right?”

“Very much so,” he assures her, putting it back in the box. “A little early for it yet, but I look forward
to trying it later.”

“What did you get him?” she asks curiously.

Wesley smiles a little uncomfortably and points at the box.

“You're kidding! Are you two, like, separated-at-birth twins, or something?” she asks.

“Hardly. But we do share an appreciation of many things.” His gaze goes from the whiskey to her
and he smiles slightly. “He'll be captivated by you, I'm sure.”

“Yeah, well,” she mutters, because apart from Lilah, who really doesn't count, she's not met any of
his friends and she's more than a little freaked at the prospect.

“Oh, Faith,” he says, chiding her gently. “You've only to be yourself. And I'll make sure you're
seated close to me.”

Wesley clears his throat. “It's my birthday on the second. I wasn't going to do anything in particular, but he knew you would be here and suggested we all go out for dinner to celebrate. It seemed like a delightful idea.”

“Oh God.”

He staves off a total panic attack by giving her something to open from the pile of Darla presents she'd brought with her and then wanders into the kitchen, coming back with flutes filled with champagne and freshly squeezed orange juice as she takes out an assortment of bath gel and soap.

He watches as she twists the top off and sniffs at the pale green goop. “Does it smell nice?” he asks cautiously.

“Yeah, it really does,” she assures him, delving in deeper and seeing that Darla's gone to town on all sorts of face scrubs and masks and stuff. She catches sight of the tag and blinks away the dampness that brings to her eyes, because although she doesn't want Darla here exactly, she wants her—

A phone starts to ring and Wesley raises his eyebrows in pretended surprise. “I wonder who that could be?” he asks the air.

Faith takes off across the floor and dives at her bag, dragging out her phone just before it clicks on to voice mail. “Hello?” she says.

“Faithy?” Her mother's voice sounds uncertain. “It's me. Just called to wish you Merry Christmas, sweetie.” Her voice drops. “He said to call now; said he'd make sure you were up.”

“Mom! It's Christmas Day! I've been up for, like, hours,” she says.

Darla chuckles, relaxing. “Bet you have. So, what did Santa bring you then?”

She perches on the edge of a chair and sees Wes start to tactfully busy himself with clearing away some of the debris. She's all set to launch into fancy clothes and iPods when she stops herself. “Don't know about him, but got some nice stuff from you,” she says gently. “Thanks.”

“Oh, now I'm working, I can do it,” Darla says. “And thanks for the—”

They carry on talking and then Darla giggles. “Ted's here, and he's carrying so much stuff, he's never gonna be able to ring the bell,” she says. “I'll see you in the new year, right?”

“Right,” Faith says. “And give Ted a smooch from me.”

“Go and kiss your own honey,” Darla says with a haughty sniff followed by another giggle before ringing off.

Faith glances over at Wesley. “That was nice of you,” she says quietly. “I was gonna ring her later but I know she'd never have called me if you hadn't said it was okay.”

Wesley flushes. “I do feel a little guilty about both our mothers,” he says, startling her. “I think they'd both have liked us to be with them as this is the first Christmas since we, ah, reached a better understanding, but we've been selfish and—” He shakes his head. “No. Not selfish. I needed you. This.”

“Me too,” she says, walking over to him. There's a load of gifts left but she's willing to wait. “Wes? Can we time out on the unwrapping and just, well—”
“Yes,” he says with the gentlest of sighs, translating her incoherence without even trying. “I'd like that.”

He presses the lightest of kisses onto her lips and then runs his finger across her collarbone. “It occurs to me that I still haven't seen you wearing your collar, Faith.”

She'd been thinking more along the lines of a quick, if tender, encounter, just to give her chance to unload some of her pent-up emotions, but the way his lips shape the word 'collar' give her all sorts of thoughts that lead to the presents waiting until what Wes calls Boxing Day if they have to.

“It's your collar, remember,” she says, rubbing against him and feeling his cock harden. “So you get to tell me when to put it on.”

“I do, don't I?” he muses. “Well, as this is traditionally a time of self-indulgence, who am I to argue?” His voice settles into a completely assured drawl. “Go to the bedroom, undress and wait for me, Faith, standing facing the door, to the left of the bed.”

And she's missed those detailed, fussy instructions of his that make it all so simple because there's no room left for her to do it wrong, to make a mistake. She closes her eyes against the stab of desire that follows and then goes to the bedroom, knowing that he's watching her every step of the way.

Chapter One Hundred and Fifty

When he appears in the doorway he's got the collar in his hand and a familiar gleam in his eyes as he stares at her.

He walks over to a wide, cushioned, armless chair and pulls it away from the wall slightly before sitting down.

“Come here,” he says quietly.

She walks to him and at his nod falls to her knees so he can slip the leather around her neck. It's so easy to kneel for Wesley, she thinks, with the part of her brain that isn't dazzled by arousal, mostly because he wants her like this for no other reason than to bring her neck within reach. Well, mostly.

His fingers are warm on her skin as he buckles it and adjusts it with his customary precision.

“So very lovely,” he says simply, touching it with the back of his fingers, a hum of approval in his voice. “Stand now, please.”

He leans back to give her room and waits until she's standing in front of him, her feet apart a little, before thrusting his fingers inside her wet, waiting cunt, forcing a cry of surprise from her that ends in a whimper as his hand works at her as she sways, hips tilted forward, mutely begging him for more as her fingers clench by her sides.

“So wet,” he says. “Does it feel good on you, Faith? Do you like wearing my collar?”

His thumb gets in on the act, rubbing against her clit in a maddeningly delicate circle he repeats over and over as he waits for her to be able to answer him.

“I fucking love it,” she manages. “Wes, you keep doing that and I'll come.”

“Then I'll take the collar off you,” he says imperturbably. “And I'll use it to give your impatient, disobedient cunt three strokes, as hard as I think you can bear.” He tilts his head back and looks at her. “Do you still want to come before I give you permission, Faith?”
She's so very fucking tempted but she sees the challenge in his look and manages to dredge up enough control to shake her head. There's something dark and relentless in his eyes now and it might scare her, if she wasn't sure her eyes held the same expression.

This is what she's here for. This is what she chose over Xander's friendship; this chance to see her desires mirrored so perfectly in his eyes.

It was easier on the phone when he'd made her wait—but now, here, with his fingers arching deep inside and his thumb still stroking her clit with a cruel tenderness, she just can't do it. Can't prevent the crawling, tingling sensation deep inside from overflowing to the rest of her body. Can't push it down, make it wait. Can't.

“Stop,” she hisses through clenched teeth. All she can see is his eyes, and everything else is swimming out of focus. “If you don't want me to come yet, then...stop...” But of course, he won't and doesn't, and she's digging her heels into the plush carpet, knees locking so that she comes dangerously close to swaying over right on top of him. But those fingers of his, always in control, twist roughly for a fleeting moment, slamming everything back to focus and setting her back on balance again.

“Now, Faith. You know better than that. You know the only way I'll stop is if that word crosses your lips. But then we'd need to stop everything now,” he drawls, still unperturbed. As a reminder, or a gentle threat, or maybe even a tease, he pulls his thumb away, slides his fingers down just a little so they're barely inside her. “I don't think you want me to stop.”

“No, don't,” she cries out, more sharply than intended. “God, don't stop, Wes. But please...” And the sharp gasp he gives as his thumb slides back over her clit and her cunt clutches possessively at his fingers is almost enough to send her over the edge, his command be damned.

“Please, what, Faith?” He drags out the question and every inch of her flesh touched by his busy fingers is burning with an insatiable need for a release.

“Please let me come for you.” The words barely form on her lips before she's sure that she'll probably pass out first and she squeezes her eyes shut just to make the room stop going in and out of focus so jarringly.

He doesn't reply, just lets his free hand slide up over her hip to cradle the small of her back. And she's not sure if the little whimper ringing in her ears is hers or his as she leans back on his steadying hand. He's there to hold her, fingers caressing the cleft of her ass—there to hold her up and keep her safe even if he is torturing her at the same time.

And before she's even aware of it, her hand clamps tightly 'round his forearm, her other hand sliding up roughly over an achingly hard nipple, her fingers finding their target, skimming the leather of the collar and the charged skin around it, throwing her head back at the shock of sensation from her forbidden touch.

And as she comes with a pained cry that's nearly a closer neighbor to distress than pleasure, he's sweeping her up into his arms and pushing her backward toward the bed. In a tangle of feet and shed trousers, he shoves her up and over the edge of the mattress, his cock bumping against her clit as she begs incoherently for him to hurry, faster, now.

“You're impossibly impatient.” It's his turn to grit out the words as she shudders and bucks beneath him, her fierce guttural moans nearly drowning out the sound of his voice in her ear. “Do you have any idea how much harder it is for me to stay in control than it is for you?”
And she can't answer that, just whimpers as he slips into her dripping cunt easily, sliding his hands under her ass to tip her open just as she locks her legs around him, pulling him in fast and deep, as deep as he'll go.

Her hands flutter uselessly as she tries to pull him down to kiss her, suck on her nipples, run his tongue along the curve of her neck—anything to get that wicked mouth of his on her—but he won't have any of that. Freeing his hands from under her weight, he pins her wrists to the mattress and pounds away at her cunt, jarring her locked legs open. She manages to get some purchase on the edge of the bed, tilting herself up to meet each thrust until they're synchronized in a perfect give and take of motion that pushes him in farther each time.

And it may just be that they haven't fucked like this in months, and it may just be that she's distracted by the intensity of his gaze as they greedily push their bodies together, but she's pretty sure the head of his cock is rubbing against parts of her he's never reached before, that his hands never gripped her wrists quite so tightly, that the quiet growl in the back of his throat was never more needy.

But there's one thing she can tell: he's holding back, making himself wait to come, making himself take on the discipline that she'd lacked moments before. And in what she knows is a possibly fruitless move she struggles against his grip, to at least get up on her elbows, because then she might have a chance to pull him down to kiss her finally, to run her fingers through his hair and trace lightly across his back—and to her surprise, instead of twisting his hands more tightly around her wrists, he lets her go.

And just when she thinks she's got an in to clasp her hands around his neck, he pulls out completely, shoving her up the mattress and crawling up on it himself, hovering for a moment with his cock lightly resting against her hole before thrusting it back inside her and dipping his head to take to greedily snatch her mouth into a kiss that leaves her breathless and seeing stars.

She's not ready for what comes next though—as if she wasn't already about to spontaneously combust from sensory overload, he nuzzles forcefully against her neck, pulling the collar tight across her throat. His tongue traces along the edge where the leather meets her flesh and he comes as she breathes his name between her screams of pleasure.

He doesn't stay inside her for long, pulling out quickly and dragging his still-twitching cock across her thigh, rolling over and pulling in her close, kissing her lightly over and over again, fingers stroking her neck and tangling in her hair. They're breathing in heavy, desperate unison and she thinks if he moves away from her she'll cry...love you because I know no other way...there is no I or you...so close that your hand on my chest, is my hand...so close that when you close your eyes, I fall asleep...

He shifts so that she's lying on her back, smiling down at her, but there's something in the smile that's—expectant? Hopeful? His finger comes up and hooks under the collar and she gets it.

“I came before you said,” she tells him. “I guess you missed something out.”

His eyebrow arches. “Did I?” he asks smoothly. “I think you'll have to remind me, Faith. In what area was I remiss?”

And suddenly being fucked feels like foreplay.

“You said,” and she takes a deep breath because this isn't the same as writing it, or whispering it into a phone. “You said if I came before you gave me permission, you'd take my collar off. And it's still on.”
His finger is still hooked in the collar and he slides it around so that he can reach the buckle, undoing it without taking his eyes off her flushed face.

The collar loosens and splits apart; still behind her neck as she lies back against the pillow but no longer fastened. He grips the buckle end and pulls sharply, so that the leather burns her skin hotly as it's freed. She misses its weight, feels naked without it.

“Was that all I said?” he asks her, sitting up a little and drawing the collar through his fingers. “So warm when it's been on you,” he murmurs reflectively.

“No.”

“Well?” he drawls, sounding impatient and even though he isn't, not really, she hurries, stumbling over the words.

“You said—told me—oh God, Wes, if you hadn't I wouldn't have come, you—”

The collar's wrapped around his hand and he places his hand across her mouth to silence her, so her lips are brushed by the leather, warm, like he said. “Careful,” he warns her lightly. “I think you should choose your next word with a view to my dislike at being called names, don't you?”

She smiles and his hand rises.

“—wouldn't have come, you fucking bastard,” she enunciates with as much clarity as she's capable of. He sighs regretfully and shakes his head but she carries on. “And I want that, Wes, I want it.”

He moves to straddle her, idly flicking her breasts with the end of the collar. “You still haven't reminded me what I said,” he points out blandly.

“You said you'd give my cunt three strokes with my—”

“My.”

“—your collar,” she hisses. “And you didn't.”

He leans forward and whispers in her ear. “I never said when I was going to do it, Faith. But as you're so eager, I think I can safely say it won't be just yet. Consider that the price to be paid for your poor word-choice.” He traces a place on her neck, that the mirror tells her later is slightly bruised, with his tongue, biting down on it so she feels a throb of pain jolt through her. “But it will be today, if that's any consolation.”

She twists her head and kisses him fiercely. “Thank you,” she says.

He looks momentarily astonished and then he smiles. “You're very welcome,” he says softly, taking her in his arms again and letting her wrap herself around him.

“No offense to the rest of the gifts you've given me,” she whispers, snuggling even closer. “But this was like, totally the best present of all.”

“Better than that ridiculously overpriced, pink high-tech transistor radio?” he teases, shifting the mood smoothly and she has to kiss him to get him to shut up all over again.

“It is not ridiculous! You'll be grateful for it when I want to listen to like, something that's really totally obnoxious.”

“Like that Bright Eyes fellow? I don't believe I can stand much of his melodramatic caterwauling.”
“I'll add that to the list of stuff to listen to when you're not around.”

“Thank goodness,” he murmurs, planting a kiss on her forehead. “Dreadful stuff.”

Chapter One Hundred and Fifty-One

It's like no other Christmas Day she's had. But with the whole having to get up all over again when Wes tugs her out of her bed, it's more like Groundhog Day. He shaves while she's having a shower and she knows that she's going to have to get used to seeing herself reflected in his eyes all over again, that relentless scrutiny of his that makes her feel safe, but on edge all at the same time.

As she steps out of the shower and he's already there with a towel, it feels like she's come home. And she's getting her fair share of sneaked glances in too. All the little things she used to take for... well, not granted but she'd got used to them. It's kinda weird to stand there and watch the intent look on his face, the way his tongue pokes out the corner of his mouth as he concentrates on smoothing moisturizer everywhere—between her toes, behind her knees until she's squirming under a touch that's a little too ticklish for her liking.

“Stand still,” he snaps at her even as his hands are heart-breakingly gentle.

None of it's easy. Not when she's used to making her own wardrobe choices and quickly yanking a brush through her hair. Not easy to stand there patiently while his hands brush over her aching nipples before he secures her bra, because the sharp throb of arousal is already making her grit her teeth as she resists the urge to tug him down on the bed and demand that he fuck her all over again.

“Now why have you got such a sulky little pout on your pretty face?” he asks her teasingly as he buttons up his shirt before she can see the light bulb ping over his head. “Habits die hard, don't they, Faith? Even the ones you so recently acquired?”

“Thought it would be easier than this,” she admits with a shrug. “Y'know, that we'd just slot right back into it.”

“You've changed,” he says simply. “We both have. We've both grown. But then again, we needed to, yes?”

And when he says that she can feel the panic mounting because maybe he didn't mean grown so much as grown apart and her independence isn't so much a challenge as, like, a complication. And what if...

“Stop it, Faith,” he says sharply enough that it's an order and that makes everything so much simpler. Gets even simpler when he moves across the room so he can press a kiss to her forehead. “I love you. I love the girl you've become. I love the girl you were. Now stop frowning or I won't let you go out on the balcony to have a cigarette.”

“Oh, like you could even stop me!” she hisses, snatching up her Marlboros and lighter from the top of the chest of drawers, because she hasn't had a good lungful of nicotine since she got to the airport yesterday and that has to account for about 80 percent of her jumpiness.

When she gets back inside after two cigarettes that tasted yummy even though she could have done without the biting cold, he's already sorting through the rest of the presents and yeah, there's all kinds of intriguingly shaped packages but he the most intriguing one of all. And she stands at the French doors for just a second so she can familiarize herself with the way his eyebrows draw together when he's concentrating on something, those beautiful long fingers that can be so careful but cause so
much havoc. How blue his eyes are when he glances up and sees her watching him, how his smile can be so unguarded, so kissable and she's hurrying over to him so she can do just that.

“No, Wes, let's leave the rest of the presents until after lunch,” she says when she finally manages to tear her lips away from reacquainting themselves with the sharp angles of his cheekbones. “I'm trying to work on my whole delayed gratification response times.”

Which isn't really true. But he's taught her that anticipation is, like, say 50 percent of the pleasure and if this is going to be her best Christmas Day ever she wants to eke it out, make all of it last a bit longer. Like, how she could make a bag of M&Ms last an hour when she was a kid by sorting them into colors and then sucking off the candy before she could even think about eating the chocolate.

They have a little tussle about that and another argument, though he insists it's a discussion, about how there's no way in hell that she's eating a mince pie, because why the fuck do the British think that ground beef and pastry goes with brandy butter and he's snickering to himself like she's trying to be funny rather than totally grossed out. And the panic dissipates as she remembers that this is her and Wes and they never agree on, well, anything. Whether it's food or the appropriate time of day for opening presents or how long before she's allowed to come.

And once she realizes that that's never going to change, she calms down and gives him a smirky, little smile that sends his eyebrows shooting up as he demands to know what she's looking so smug about.

Half an hour later she's top and tailing Brussels sprouts (and that little order sure didn't get her wet) which no way in hell is she going to eat and Wes is on the other side of the kitchen tutting about how the butcher has trussed up the chicken all wrong, when the phone goes.

That's kinda freaky in itself because Wes never used to get calls outside of work time but he's already reaching for the phone and tucking it between his head and shoulder and muttering “hello?” as he smears his garlic and herb butter over the chicken.

She's trying really hard not to listen. Oh, whatever. Her ears are totally peeled and she almost slices her thumb open when she hears him laugh and say, “And Happy Christmas to you too, Mum.”

Then there's this whole conversation about the weather before she realizes that even she's been brought up better than to listen in on phone calls and she's putting the knife down and edging toward the door.

“No, Faith…” he mumbles, gently latching on to her wrist as she brushes past him and pulling her into the cradle of his arms. “Yes, she's right here, do you want to talk to her?”

She knows her mouth and eyes are three wide circles of horror as Wes offers her the phone and tightens his hold on her as she tries to back away.

“Wes!” she hisses, waving her hands in front of her while he gives her one of his patented looks of exasperated tenderness. “I can't!”

“Sorry, Mum, she's being uncharacteristically shy,” he chuckles into the phone before holding it to her ear. “Say hello, Faith.”

She gives him the mother (pun intended) of all glares but grabs the phone and shows willing. “Er, hi… I mean hello, Mrs. Wyndam-Pryce,” she chirps as perkily as she can and there's that weird delay on the line that she remembers from when Wes was in England before she hears a strangely familiar little laugh and then some lady who sounds just like the goddamn Queen says, “Happy Christmas,
Faith. And please, call me Sylvia. Wesley has told me so much about you. Tell me, are you liking New York? And I do hope Wesley's looking after you…"

Turns out that she doesn't so much chat politely to Mrs. Wyn… Sylvia but have her ear talked off for fifteen minutes about Orange Kit Kats (“they've very more-ish, aren't they, dear?”), the weird-assness that is mince pies (“did he tell you that? He really is absolutely impossible sometimes. No, dear, they have currants and mixed peel and apples in them”) and she's just spilling the dirt on Wes' sixth Christmas (“And I heard a strange noise and came down to find him halfway up the chimney with a glass of milk for Santa…”) when the phone's taken away from her.

“Mum,” he says firmly. “It was lovely to talk to you or hang around while you talked to Faith but she's neglecting her Brussels sprouts… yes… yes… really, yes, Mum…”

He doesn't manage to escape for another five minutes, periodically rolling his eyes at her, until Sylvia probably needs to hook herself up to some oxygen.

“I'm sorry about that,” he says smoothly. “Honestly that woman could talk for England.” But he's all pink-faced and pleased and she can tell that he's glad she called.

“Didn't think you'd tell your mom about me,” she says, trying to sound all casual, as she finishes the last of the sprouts. “With the age difference and all that.”

She feels his hand rest on her shoulder before he bends down and kisses the nape of her neck.

“When I went home, you were all I could talk about,” he tells her quietly. “She knew the moment she saw me. She gave me a very piercing look and decreed, 'Oh, Wesley, some girl's gone and broken your heart.'”

And she can't help but giggle at his lame impersonation of his mother before she turns around and whacks him on the shoulder. “Hey! You broke my heart first, Wes,” she tells him fiercely and his face blanks out and shuts down and she's already running her fingers over the spot that she's just hit. “Not gonna hold it against you, Wes, well, not much. Just… this is fucking hard, you know. I keep saying the wrong thing and shouldn't there just be something I can say and it all becomes right again?”

“I rather think that should be my task, don't you?” he asks her helplessly, tipping up her chin with his garlicky hands so she can see the troubled expression on his face. “But I seem to be stuck on saying that I'm sorry and that I love you and though I mean both those statements fervently, I think that we have to just muddle through.”

“I know,” she nods, reaching up to kiss him. “And I'm so fucking glad to be here, Wes.”

“I know. And, for the record, I'm sorry if I broke your heart.”

She pulls his hand to where it's still beating and she doesn't even care if he gets butter stains on her new green top. “See? It's almost mended. 'Sides, Monty says that broken hearts make the best vessels.”

“Well, he's a very wise man,” Wes says stoutly, before pushing her away and turning her round to face the worktop. “Now if this is just an elaborate plan to wriggle out of peeling potatoes, it's not working, Faith. Not if you plan to eat lunch with me.”

And yeah, they're swinging back and forth like a frickin' yoyo but she's going to have to get used to that too.
But once the chicken's on and Wes has done whatever he does to the potatoes that had her missing them desperately during the months they were apart, they curl up on the sofa and they talk.

She tells him how much she misses Xander, and about the yoga course she's been on, and he tells her how his mother called him a 'bloody fool' when he gave her a heavily edited account of why he left her and by the time she's sitting at the table and practically drooling at the mouth while he heaps chicken and potatoes and green beans on her plate, the only thing she's worried about is how quickly she can get it all into her stomach.

“Man, Wes, I used to dream about your roast chicken,” she breathes as he gives her a generous helping of stuffing. “No fucking way, Wes,” she adds, as the serving spoon hovers over the dish of sprouts which are just as stinky as she thought they would be. “You are not putting them anywhere near my plate. And don't fucking glare at me either because it's not gonna work.”

He gives her this totally patronizing look, which is designed to have her bottom lip jutting out. “Really, Faith, I forgot how emotional you get about vegetables. Why don't you try just one?”

“And why don't you bite me?” she asks him sweetly, spearing a crispy, golden potato with her fork and biting into it while he walks out of the room. Probably gone to bang his head against the wall, she figures, as she moans in ecstasy and crams the whole potato into her mouth.

He's back before she can even get started on the roast chicken and she gives him a suspicious glance when she sees the shit-eating grin on her face.

“What?”

He doesn't say anything, just places the collar next to her wineglass and takes a seat.

“I was going to make a traditional Christmas dinner with turkey but it seemed rather excessive just for the two of us,” he remarks conversationally and she's not even listening because all she can do is stare at the coiled length of leather and remember how it felt against her neck. What he said he was going to do with it and she shifts in her seat as she realizes, startled, that she's already wet.

And the collar simplifies everything. Because when it's there, within touching distance, it reminds her of all sorts of things that are way more delicious than his roast chicken. That she belongs to him, that the game is always being played and she's got the power to stop it if she wants.

“Wes…” It comes out as a plaintive moan. “Can I put it on?”

He puts down his fork and takes a sip of his wine with a hand that's not quite steady. “No,” he says firmly. “You don't deserve such a special treat.”

There's all sorts of comebacks to that but instead she leans across the table and digs her fork viciously into the bowl of sprouts and crams one into her mouth before she loses her nerve.

It tastes just as gross as she thought it would, despite the hazelnut puree. All cabbagey and swampy and she's swallowing it down quickly so she can pick up her wineglass and start chugging back the champagne to try and get the taste out of her mouth.

“There!” she announces dramatically. “I ate one and it was totally disgusting. You happy?”

He gives her a slow hand-clap and a smug smile. “Blissfully, my darling girl.”

“Can I put it on now, Wes? Please.”
“Maybe later,” he says vaguely and all of a sudden she's not as hungry as she thought she was. Still manages to come back for seconds and two mince pies, which she's relieved to find out are just as Sylvia promised they would be. And then there's coffee and petit fours and she's practically staggering to her feet so she can help him clear the table.

“I'm stuffed,” she groans, following him into the kitchen. “Might have to have a lie down, Wes, on that big bed and I might have to take all my clothes off because I don't think they're going to fit any more.”

His hand rubs caressingly over her belly, which she swears has expanded. “Stop being such a little minx and go and put your coat on. I think a bracing walk will work off those extra pounds from the seven potatoes you managed to eat.”

And if he doesn't want to get all snugly and naked with her, then that's his loss, she thinks sulkily as she flounces out to retrieve her coat.

He comes up behind her with her new winter woollies, as she's buttoning up and she turns round expectantly. “You can put them on me if you like,” she says because she's being a brat and if she's extra 'specially nice to him he night relent about the collar. Not like anyone's going to see it underneath her scarf.

But this is Wes and now he knows how much she fucking wants it, he's going to make her wait even longer. It's what he does and she wouldn't have it any other way.

Then he takes her mitted hand and doesn't stop holding it as they step out of the main doors and into, like, this arctic wind. They walk up to the Met and he promises to take her back when it's open because there's this fashion exhibition on and then they stroll over to the turtle pond because she read about it in The Catcher In The Rye and she wants to see for herself if the ducks have skedaddled for the winter.

It's a good half of all her New York fantasies all rolled into two short hours and as they start trudging back through the park when the daylight begins to fade, she feels the fucking tiresome prickle of tears irritating her eyes.

“Faith,” he sighs with just a hint of reproach. “Please, don't.”

“It's the wind,” she insists, scrubbing her face with the back of her hand and then giving him a crooked smile. “And it's being here, in New York, with you. Can't believe it's real, you know? Keep thinking I'm going to wake up back home and none of this ever happened.”

He doesn't reply and then he gives her an evil grin and pinches her arm hard enough through her coat that she gives an indignant squawk.

“Ow! What the fuck did you do that for?”

“Did it wake you up?” he asks her solicitously.

“No because I wasn't asleep, you… you pig.”

“Well, then you can't be dreaming,” he points out. “And I think that last little endearment has convinced me that it's time to curtail our walk and head back home so we can start working on that list.”

They walk back in silence, the tension thrumming between then and she can feel it unfurling in her belly as his pace picks up as they clear the park and cross the road.
“Don't dawdle, Faith,” he drawls, even though she's scurrying to keep up with him. “I'm trusting you to start making your reparations with a good grace.”

He practically drags her the rest of the way and the elevator doors have barely shut behind them when he's pushing her against the wood panels and snatching off her hat before he can kiss her senseless.

It takes both of them a little while to realize that they're on the 15th floor and the door's opened before he's pulling her out and down the hall.

“I want you to go into the bedroom,” he tells her before he's even fished his keys out, and his voice is so clipped, so controlled that all the hairs on her body are standing to attention because she knows what that means. “You're to take off all your clothes and lie down in the center of the bed and wait for me. Is that clear, Faith?”

“Yes sir,” she says and his eyes light up, like the fucking little stars on the Christmas tree, as he brushes his hand across her cheek.

He doesn't make her wait this time and her back's barely hit the Egyptian cotton before he's slouched in the doorway.

“There's my little Olympia,” he purrs and he steps toward her so she can see that he's got the collar and one long, white candle in his hands. “I thought I'd address the issue of all those expensive books you burned first.”

It's not even the thought of the collar or the candle as much as the gleam in his eyes, full of all sorts of dark promise, that's got her so fucking wet she can't concentrate. Luckily he's got more than enough focus for both of them.

“Was it satisfying, Faith? To watch all that paper flare and burn, see all those words vanish in a thick haze of smoke? Watch them curl and warp, then disappear into ash?” As he speaks, his tone unwavering, his voice even and his words deliberate, he steps forward, cradling one hand under her head, angling her into position so he can buckle the collar around her neck. She shivers a little under his touch. He steps back, his gaze traveling along the length of her supine body. “How good did it feel to give in to that urge again, that release that I'd expressly withheld from you? Did you think that act of wanton destructiveness would even things out between us? Make everything simpler?”

The involuntary flush of arousal she feels at the sound of his voice is more acute than the dull, aching throb of recognition at what he’s asking her, the yes yes yes to all of it. All she knew at that moment when she’d thrown the lit match was that he was gone irrevocably from her life, and she had no other way of coping. She’d just wanted to burn it all back, hurt him as he’d hurt her. And she knows, more than he ever will, how that moment of decisive, chaotic desperation marked the turning point. That everything that was happening to her—to both of them—right now had sprung from the ashes.

But when she gives him this slight little Mona Lisa smile by way of an answer, his eyes lock into hers like he knows. He knows. And he doesn’t need to say as much, because it’s there, in every calm, measured word.

“Honestly, I don’t know how I’m to even begin properly addressing the magnitude of your disobedience.” He runs his hand lightly along her stomach, inching slowly down toward the vertex of her sex, and she can’t help but part her thighs to him. “So wanton, always, aren’t you?” he whispers, withdrawing a slick finger from her cunt. She can’t help but arch her hips up slightly in response, a tiny moan escaping her lips. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t move, Faith. Am I going to have to restrain you?” he asks, darkly, and she nods dumbly because she seems to have been reduced to
this mute creature of sensation.

Now it’s his turn to smile enigmatically, like he’s been planning this for so long, turning it over and over in his mind, smoothing out the rough edges and making it perfect, that he can’t believe it’s time to make it a reality. While she’s spread out on the bed, waiting impatiently for the game to begin and slowly liquefying on his 300-thread count sheets, he looks as fucking composed and unruffled as always, the only outward sign of his desire his really promising erection. She tries not to concentrate on that too much, as she knows damn well that he’s going to make her wait for his cock the same way he makes her wait for everything else.

“You’re always so willful, Faith, so intractable. And, of course, I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He chuckles, but catches himself. “I’m going to make this simple for you, since you seem to have such trouble being obedient. Close your eyes, and place your hands flat upon the bed. Please.” The last word isn’t strictly necessary but he must know how wet it gets her, the inflection and the formality and most of all, the control.

“Please,” she echoes quietly, her voice tinged with desperation.

He clucks his tongue to silence her, brushing her hair gently off her forehead at the same time. She almost cries out at the touch. “Close your eyes,” he says again. This time his voice isn’t nearly so polite. No, it’s all kinds of terse and that means he's gonna deliver on all that dark promise and isn’t she a lucky girl? Oh yes.

She complies. Once her eyes adjust to the darkness she can hear everything in the room so clearly, from the smooth whirr of the bedside drawer being opened to the slight squeak of one of his shoes as he takes a step toward the bed. He grips one of her wrists, gently drawing it up so that he can lash it to the headboard. She’d know the feel of that black silk anywhere. It’s been far too long.

Once her other wrist is firmly bound, she hears him step back, and she’s just about to open her eyes when she’s surprised by the feather-light, cool weight of the silk resting across her brow. She draws in this sharp little breath as he tightens the loop of silk behind her head. “Was that a complaint, Faith? Because I don’t have to make this easy for you. Not at all.”

She nods, no. In the darkness, she can hear her swallow as loudly as if it were a gunshot. After that there’s silence and she waits, not a little anxiously.

Suddenly the bed tips precipitously and she can feel the weight of him on the bed. Is he kneeling beside her? She’s not sure. He’s close, but not touching her. Not yet. Then she hears a familiar click—the sound of her lighter snapping open; the sneaky bastard must have filched it from her purse when she wasn’t looking—then she can see the soft yellowish glow of candlelight through the folds of the silk. She swallows again, willing herself to stay still and calm and God if only he’d fuck her right now—

His hand reaches out to still her, spreading flat across her abdomen, rising and falling with it. The candlelight is gone and there’s total darkness again and just when she’s wondering what he’s got planned after all when there’s a sharp, not unpleasant heat blooming next to his hand. The sting is intense and then it retreats, leaving a lingering warmth as the wax cools and hardens. There’s another, and another, and she’s biting back a cry as his hand slowly glides inexorably back to her cunt. “I’ve never seen you so wet, Faith. Perhaps I’m punishing you too hard,” he drawls as he twists three fingers roughly up inside her.

“God,” she grits out, trying hard not to buck against him. There’s not much give in the silk, but just enough that she can writhe a little.
“You moved.” He sounds almost disappointed, and she’s rewarded with heat, the locus being one nipple, then the other. He removes his nimble fingers from her greedy cunt and just as quickly they’re circling her nipple, which is now encased in rapidly cooling wax. He peels the wax back, slowly, and she revels in the feel of it slowly being revealed to the crisp air; then his mouth is on her even as his fingers are peeling back the other hardened bit of wax and her nipple’s standing to attention as the air hits it. His tongue circles one nipple while his fingers pinch roughly at the other; there’s another spatter of wax against her belly, and another, the heat flaring through her body like a wildfire, causing her cunt to clutch feverishly at nothing. Juices spilling out of her like a flood and she can’t control them, can’t control anything.

“Do you want my cock?” Another sharp tweak of her nipple and she groans.

“Yes, God, yes. Please, Wes, fuck me. You can finish this later, whatever you want, just—”

Everything goes pitch black again and the bed creaks and dips and he must be setting the candle aside. She guesses. Nothing follows but a long stretch of dead silence and she’s getting nervous, wondering if he’s left her there. Left her wet and wanting, in the dark, just like he’d promised in a certain e-mail to her. So long as he doesn’t show up with some skanky blonde ho she figures that’s okay, even if she fervently hopes she gets to come soon. She doesn’t much like the idea of waiting there for hours, she’s gotta admit.

She can hear him again. She’s relieved. Maybe he’ll fuck her now—

He’s back on the bed, kneeling next to her. He’s still dressed; she can feel the roughness of his wool trousers next to her skin. The slight friction of it against her nakedness raises the goose pimples and she can’t help but shiver. “Lie still, Faith,” he admonishes, his voice cold. That’s when he straddles her chest, the weight of him hard and definitive and a bit of a shock, leaving her a little breathless. He settles in, gripping a lock of her hair in one hand, tilting her head back roughly. She hears the pop of a button, the rasp of a zipper slowly being undone.

“Open your mouth, Faith.”

She wants to. God, how she wants to. But she really wants his cock where she’s wet and aching for him. And the part of her brain that hasn't been consumed by this deafening mantra of “fuck me now, just fuck me”, can’t help but wonder just how deep his delight in her disobedience goes. Just how much power she really has. So she does the unthinkable.

She keeps her mouth shut and turns her head away from the wet nudge of his cock.

His fingers trace the tight seam of her lips and not sucking them into the moist heat of her mouth is maybe the hardest thing she’s ever done but she’s drunk on the need to snatch the script away from him and see how he improvises.

She can feel the warm gust of air as he sighs heavily. “Three choices, Faith,” he tells her curtly. “You open your mouth so I can fuck it with my cock, you say your safeword or you suffer the consequences of your deplorable behavior. Now, which is it to be?”

The cat-that-got-the-cream smile is how she replies and then it's his turn to do the unthinkable. His weight shifts down and then her ears strain to catch the sound of his fingers moving easily, slowly, against the length of his cock.

“You gonna come on my face, Wes?” she taunts him. “Or how about my tits? Wanna fuck them?”

“Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?” he breathes and he doesn't sound quite so fucking sure of
himself now. “Love to feel me touching you?” And he punctuates the question by slapping his cock against the soft curve of her belly and he's right, she does love it, arches up to try and get more than just a wet promise and weight against her skin.

But she's not going to beg him because this is such a lovely, new way to play the game, especially when he pins her down and she can feel his cock rubbing between them as his movements pick up and he's hissing in her ear: “Do you want me to fuck your tight, wet cunt, Faith? Is that what you want? Is that they you're being such a naughty, little girl?”

And not speaking is easy but there's nothing she can do about the way she's bucking under him, speeding him along until he gives this anguished cry and she feels the spatter of his spunk on her stomach like warm, summer rain.

“You're such a fucking jerk,” she spits out, willed into furious speech by the waste of it clinging to her instead of spurting inside her pussy.

He drags a finger through the sticky trail before his weight moves off her and she arches her hips imperiously. “You've picked up more bad habits than I could ever have imagined,” she tells him sorrowfully but she doesn't care because his hand's stealing around her ankle, holding her open so he's going to have to be fucking blind not to notice how needy she is.

She gives a purr of satisfaction as he secures both ankles to the footboard, which swiftly upgrades to a growl of pure frustration as she hears his footsteps move away from her. “Maybe you should use this time for some quiet reflection, Faith,” he says smugly, before he closes the door with a gentle click.

Chapter One Hundred and Fifty-Two

Time goes slower in the dark. She counts out the seconds by the correspondent throb of her clit, the frantic pounding of her heart and it feels like hours until she hears his quiet tread in the hall and the door opening.

“What's happened, Faith?” he asks softly and she manages to raise her head in his general direction.

“Maybe,” she says sulkily.

He tuts and she just bets he's shaking his head but he comes nearer and she hears him place something heavy on the nightstand before his hand curls round her neck, lifting her head up.

“I'll take that under advisement,” he purrs. “But you should have some water to replace all the liquid that's pouring out of your demanding, little cunt.”

She can feel the cool rim of a glass against her lips and she's gratefully gulping down the icy water before he takes it away.

“That's enough, Faith. Now you've made a terrible mess and I want you to hold perfectly still while I clean you up.”

That's one order she's happy to follow and she lies still, almost boneless, as he dabs his dried spunk off her with a damp cloth, stifling the giggles when he carefully peels off the hardened spots of wax and kisses the skin underneath each one.

“Oh dear,” he drawls as he sits down on the edge of the bed and she hears him dip the cloth into what has to be a bowl of warm water on the bedside table. “This is very messy.”
And then the cloth is stroking her pussy and not doing a very good job of cleaning her up at all, because he's pressing one towel-covered finger right against her clit so she can writhe against it.

“Perfectly still, Faith,” he admonishes her and she locks her muscles into place before giving a startled cry as he inserts the cloth into her cunt in a futile attempt to mop up her ever flowing juices.

“Wes… please!” Yeah, she's begging now because it has to have been fucking hours and she's going to dissolve on his sheets if he doesn't let her come soon.

“There, that's a little better,” he says fussily, pulling the twisted-up length out of her cunt so she can give a sigh of relief. “Now, Faith, are you ready to apologize?”

“What for?” she asks him and she's genuinely curious. “For not sucking you off?”

“One thing at a time. Are you sorry for burning all those books?”

She thinks about it for a little while and she has to be honest. He doesn't like it when she lies to him. “No,” she says simply. “You left me. You hurt me and I'm glad I hurt you back.”

“That's commendably honest of you, Faith,” he says, sounding more pleased than she expected. “But unfortunately you're being punished for the action, rather than the cause.”

And in their skewed little world, it makes perfect sense. So does the way her cunt starts slicking up as she hears the click of her lighter again.

This time he's holding the candle nearer so the wax doesn't have so far to drop, doesn't have so much time to cool before it lands in these stinging, hot little pools on her breasts and she's sucking in a breath as they connect and it seems almost as if he's letting out each one for her with his ragged pants.

The drops fall in a biting, downwards pattern and she can feel the heat of the candle right over her shaved mound and she should be shrinking away. She knows she should. But instead she's trying to arch her hips nearer.

“Stop that,” he barks, one hand hard on her hip as he presses her down into the mattress. “I'm going to ask you again, Faith, are you sorry?”

She's not going to lie to him. Not ever again. “No!” she practically screams at him and he's not doing anything, just holding the candle and not touching her, not making her feel anything but righteously pissed. “And while we're at it, Wesley, you might want to send Xander a bill for half the books because he was right fucking there with me and you can write him a thank you note for the collar, too, because that was totally his idea!”

One single drop of wax falls right onto her clit and she's so wet that all she feels is the tiniest pressure but it's been so long and she's such an overwrought mess of feeling and sensation that it's all she needs to come with a violent shudder and a frantic shriek.

“Oh God, just fuck me!” she shouts at him. “Just fucking fuck me, you bastard.”

She's screaming all over again (and she hopes to God that he's got sound proofing because the neighbors are gonna think she's being murdered) when his hand fumbles around her neck and he wrenches off the collar.

“Wes, no. Put it back! I'll be good, I promise I will. Promise!”
And for just one second she panics, not just because the comforting length of leather is gone but because she's been playing her own game and it doesn't seem like she knows the rules.

“You'll be good?” he muses and she's gritting her teeth and groaning again as he lashes the collar against her belly. “But, Faith, that's not very sporting of you.”

If she had enough oxygen, she'd be sighing in relief. They're still playing. And the leather kisses her skin as he flicks the end of it across her swollen breasts.

“You seem to keep forgetting that when I let you wear my collar it's a privilege that you've earned,” he reminds her and she can hear the smile he's wearing. “You have to deserve it and I'm afraid right now, you don't.”

She can't speak anymore because she's sobbing piteously, sure that she's going to fucking explode from the constant torment, the relentless touch of his hand on her hip, keeping her still and the stinging kiss of the collar until all she is is feeling and more feeling until her head's swimming with it.

“Oh no, no, no,” he says in a sing-song voice. “No tears, Faith. Not when I've got such a lovely treat planned for you.”

She tries to ask what fucking evil scheme he's cooked up but she's choking out the words as the collar lashes against the curve of her hip and he's hitting her harder now, like he knows that she can't take soft any more.

But he must have understood because he gives this tiny, gleeful laugh. “You know all those times that I don't let you come? How angry you get? How you beg? This time, my darling Faith, I want you to come as many times as you can. And I'm going to help you, because despite your wicked, willful behavior and your filthy little mouth, I'm really feeling remarkably conciliatory. But I'm afraid you'll have to come at least five times before I'll stop, is that clear?”

“I can't… I don't know… “

“How about we already count the disobedient way you've already come just from a single drop of candle wax even though I'm very disappointed in your lack of control?” he asks her likes he's the most understanding, fucking considerate man in the goddamn world and she manages to nod and cry and moan all at the same time.

She waits for the press of his fingers inside her aching cunt, a violent suck on her clit with his hungry mouth but all she gets is the lash of the collar closer, closer, closer to where she's spread wet and wide open.

“Oh of course, there is the small matter of the three strokes I promised you this morning,” he says. “Hmmm, I wonder if you'll come from them. Let's see, shall we?”

She's so tense that she wouldn't be surprised to hear her bones snap and she's so dreading and yearning the sting of each blow right there so when she feels something hard and solid tracing around her hole, all her attention shifts and she's being carried away by a back-breaking orgasm as he pushes the candle into her even as he brings the leather down on her poor, defenseless clit,

Again she's so wet, so protected by the sticky coating of her juices that it doesn't really hurt, just gives her something to squirm against.

“That's two, Faith,” he says in an approving voice. “Oh, my mistake, three.”

She's not even sure if she is coming again or that she just hasn't stopped as he hits her for a third time.
before she hears the leather drop to the floor and he's using his free hand to rub hard against her clit as he fucks her fast and furiously with the candle.

He stops then because she guesses that he doesn't want her to have a heart attack. She's trying to lie still and calm the frenetic beating of a heart that feels like it might be bursting out of her rib cage any time soon.

“You're doing so well, not to mention beautifully,” he says and he's shifting on the bed so she can feel him, and he's beautifully naked and cool against her feverish skin. “I think you should have another drink before we deal with matters pending. Would you like me to untie you?”

“Blindfold,” she mutters hoarsely because she can only process one thing at a time and she wants to see him. And it's soaked with her tears and far more of an irritation than the silk scarves chafing at her wrists and ankles.

The light makes her wince and screw up her eyes but when she slowly unpeels her lids he's gazing down at her tenderly.

“Hi,” she says with a dopey smile and he bends down and kisses her softly.

“Hello, my darling girl.” He brushes back the sweat-dampened strands of her hair before he lets her take little sips of water and then places the glass back on the nightstand. “Do you want to stop, Faith?”

She's recovered enough to give him an angry glare. “You promised me two more orgasms, Wes,” she bursts out hotly. “And you still haven't fucked me!”

“I never said that I was going to,” he points out calmly and smiles thinly as she makes a frustrated little huffing sound. “Two orgasms,” he continues almost dreamily. “So many delicious options. I think I'd like to bring you off with my mouth first because, as you know, I love the taste of you but then what? Maybe I should surprise you.”

“Want your cock,” she supplies helpfully as he slithers down her trembling body, pausing to kiss and nip and suck as the fancy takes him.

His face is right between her legs before he answers so his breath tickles against her soaked lips and forces her to make a futile attempt to twist away.

“I did offer it to you before, but you were remarkably unforthcoming,” he answers before bending his head.

He makes her wait for the fourth orgasm. Fuck! Does he make her wait? Kissing her thighs, blowing tiny puffs of air against her swollen clit, barely running the tip of his tongue along the sticky glaze that's coating her and when she's getting ready to use her last reserves of strength to fucking rip away from the scarves and shove his mouth against her, he delicately pries her open with his fingers and starts tongue-fucking her in earnest, the edge of his thumbnail gently scratching against her clit until she comes violently with the whole special effects package. Starbursts of light exploding behind her eyelids, a rushing sound in her ears and her whole cunt has become liquid as he doesn't stop but keeps lapping at the juices spilling out of her.

“You're going to kill me,” she whimpers when he rests his head on her belly and gently strokes her still-throbbing pussy with his hand.

He lifts his head and gives her a concerned look. “Seriously, Faith, do you want me to stop? I can collect on our debt tomorrow.”
It's kind of weird what goes through your mind when you've had four orgasms in an hour and you're doing a good impersonation of a wrung out, fucked-out dishrag. “Kill me with kindness,” she quotes at him with a shaky grin. “Reckon I've got one more orgasm in me, Wes.”

He smiles before he presses a hot, wet kiss against the underside of her breast. “Such an insatiable, little thing,” he murmurs fondly. “I was going to fuck your arse, you know, but I think we'll save that for tomorrow.”

And she really is totally insatiable because it's been, like, a lifetime since she had his cock in her ass and she missed that. “Can if you like, Wes. Want you to.”

“No, Faith,” he says firmly, reaching down to untie her ankles even though she never asked him to. “There's something else I want to do.”

Her legs and arms are all crampy once he's released her from her restraints and he takes long moments to stroke and knead at her limbs before scooping her up and carrying her into the bathroom.

Her legs aren't doing a very good job of holding her up; especially when he's kissing her so hard that she's pretty much in a constant swoon. And when he starts sucking on her nipples, she has to grab onto the guide bar and try not to slide to the floor of the shower stall.

So he picks her up as the hot water rains down on them and fucks... no, makes love to her like that, with her back pressed against the tiles and her legs wrapped around his hips as he slides into her again and again, the head of his cock nudging against that maddening little bump inside her until she's clutching around him and squeezing with everything she's still capable of because she wants him to come too. With her. For her. Inside her.

And he does; staring at her so fiercely that she can see it all: love, desire, need and blue, blue, blue until she decides it's her absolutely favorite color in the whole, wide world.

She's not really fit for anything after that. Just curling up on his lap with one of the cashmere throws tucked tight around her so she can hear the steady thrum of his heart as he finger dries her hair.

“I love you so much, Wes,” she says finally when they've both been wrapped in a warm, comfortable silence for too long.

His arm tightens around her. “And I love you, Faith,” he says, kissing her earlobe and surprising a giggle out of her. “And, well, thank you.”

She snuggles closer against him, giving in to the urge to shut her eyes and stop fighting the waves of sleep that have been threatening to pull her under. “You're welcome,” she mumbles.

Chapter One Hundred and Fifty-Three

She wakes from a happy dream of Darla and Wes' mum sharing tea and a tin of Cadbury Fingers and laughing over some shared amusement in a sunny and bright room she doesn't recognize. Luckily her sleep-hazed mind isn't inclined to read too much into that and she's more concerned with the fact that she's deadly thirsty, needs to pee, and that the bed is definitely empty.

Sneaking into the bathroom, she's almost startled by the sight of her dim reflection in the mirror. Yeah, there's the birdsnesty hair, that's to be expected after sleeping with it wet and all, but it's more the way she looks. She hadn't realized that there'd been dark circles permanently smudged in the hollows under her eyes; that her default expression had become a tiny frown. But now, and she hates to think something so trite, but she looks so freaking happy. There's a little smile still playing across her lips and she's looking much less careworn. Hell, there's even a flush of pink spread across the
apples of her cheeks, like one of those happy-go-lucky J. Crew models or something, who look like they spend all their time taking long, bracing walks in nippy weather or sitting by roaring fires drinking cocoa and playing endless games of Scrabble with their perfectly handsome boyfriends.

She's definitely not fallen out of the pages of that patrician New England fantasy world. Is that glow from being with Wes? From the five orgasms? From being tied to his bed and showing him the new Faith? The Faith who doesn't follow every order but then obediently succumbs to every resulting punishment? After the evening's activities, she feels like she may as well have "pushy bottom" tattooed across her forehead now. Then again, she's pretty sure he's hip to that now—given that when she'd ripped the control of the game out of his hands, he'd met her on that divergent path, and then led her even farther into that dark scary forest of his desires—and she'd willingly, gratefully followed.

And yeah, she's sure there's still words to be had in the future over the way she'd nearly burned his office to the ground. But it's a nice feeling to know that most of that crap had been worked out not just with her refusal to apologize, but also with every drop of hot wax that had hit her skin, every moment she'd spent alone in the dark and tied to the bed, every shudder and cry of pleasure that followed each of those precious five times he'd let her come.

Finishing up her business in the bathroom, she's glad to discover the tumbler of water's still sitting on the bedside table, and swallows it all down in one long, greedy gulp.

Grateful that the door doesn't squeak on its hinges to give her away, she tiptoes out into the hallway, hoping he hadn't heard her banging around in the bathroom.

She finds him standing in the living room, looking out one of the giant windows, and it's really almost too picture-perfect for words, and when she says softly, "Hey, Wes," that smile on his face as he turns and looks over his shoulder makes her want to run into his arms all over again, hold him tight, and seriously, like, never let go.

She figures that might be a little melodramatic though, and instead joins him by the window, snuggling close as his arm curls protectively over her shoulder.

"Why'd you let me sleep? We didn't even get to the rest of the presents," she says huffily as they part from a long, languid kiss that's spicy sweet from the whiskey he's been drinking. "And you busted out Giles' present without me."

"We can do the rest tomorrow, my demanding girl. They're not going to disappear overnight," he says with an indulgent smile.

"Like, I don't think so. We're so doing 'em now," she says. "Wait, isn't it tomorrow already?"

"Not quite. There's still fifteen minutes of Christmas left."

"Well, dammit, you're getting the rest of your presents now, even if you make me wait to open the rest of mine in the morning."

"I think you've given me plenty today, Faith."

"Oh, don't start with that! I picked out all this stuff 'specially for you." She pulls away from his embrace and digs the airport gift shop bag out from under the sofa cushion it's been hiding under all day. "Okay, so like, I picked it out in five minutes, but still." She bats her eyelashes at him, turns on her sugary-sweet charm. "They're all from the heart."

And really, she'd totally sell her soul to see him laugh like that more often. "Very well, then. I can't
possibly say no to such a charming appeal. And maybe I'll let you open up the last of your gifts as well.”

And he's still laughing when she hands him a garish T-shirt two sizes too big, “My girlfriend went to Florida for spring break, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt” emblazoned across the chest, a “Someone in Tallahassee loves me!” keychain, and a collapsible umbrella patterned with pink flamingos.

“But I don't even know anyone in Tallahassee,” he sputters.

“Exactly!” she says with a smile. “That's why it's so funny! And the shirt, well it was on the sale rack and I couldn't resist. And the umbrella, that's so...”

“So I won't forget the first day we met,” he finishes the sentence for her, pulling her close for another long, sweet kiss. “As if I could ever forget that, my darling Faith.”

“Oh! There's one more thing.” she says, wiggling out of his grasp and rooting around in the bottom of the bag and pulling out a tiny stuffed Eeyore, looking even more miserable than usual—if such a thing is possible—dressed in an impossible T-shirt that screamed “ORLANDO!” in hideous pink script. “In case you're ever insane enough to think about moving back to Florida, this will remind you not to.”

“I doubt I'll ever entertain those thoughts. And I'm sure AA Milne is turning in his grave right about now,” he laughs, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “I think I need another drink. You?”

“If it's time for expensive booze, yes please!”

He wanders into the kitchen and retrieves a snifter to match the one that's already sitting on the coffee table. “Are you hungry?”

She shakes her head, surprised that she isn't. “Still full from that impressive spread, Wes. But, I like, totally wouldn't say no to something sweet or a little snack.”

“It just so happens that two of your remaining gifts might fit the bill perfectly then,” he says, digging around in the cabinets for the glass. “Open the box wrapped in purple. And then the one in gold.”

The purple box turns out to be a box of fancy chocolates from Vosges—she'd read about them in an issue of “Lucky” and couldn't believe some of the weird flavors the company used—but they had sounded interesting. Shooting for something safe for the first bite, though, she snatches one of the absinthe truffles, moaning dramatically at the tasty combination of dark chocolate and fennel and pastis liqueur. “Oh man, this is so good, Wes. Thank you!”

“I had you open that one first to butter you up for the next box.”

The gold package is at the bottom of the pile and weighs a ton. “Hey, nice of you to get me a gold bar. Was a bit much wrapping it though, don't ya think?”

He shoots her a steely glare as he returns to the sofa and pours her a finger of the dark amber liquor. “Just open it, Faith,” he says with a sigh full of mock-suffering.

Making a great show of ripping off the paper, she's puzzled at the result. “Is there any reason you're giving me a box of weird knives? Is this leading to some mad kinky punch line?” She looks at him questioningly before the light bulb goes off and she recognizes the name of the shop on the sticker that's attached the bow she'd unceremoniously ripped through. “Oh. Oh, no, you didn't!”
“I’m afraid I did,” he says with a wolfish grin. “Would you like to try a little bit now? I’m afraid it’s not exactly best paired with whiskey, but we can make an exception in this case.”

“Whatever, all right. Just as long as it’s not too stinky.” She whacks him on the thigh as he brushes past her on his way back to the kitchen, leaning in and planting a kiss on her forehead.

“I assure you, it’s not. It’s very mild.”

He returns, this time bearing a tray with a slab of hard, cream-colored cheese and a cluster of red grapes. “It’s Idiazábal. A smoked Spanish cheese made from sheep’s milk.” She wrinkles her nose, but he cuts of a chunk with one of her new knives and pops it into her mouth after stroking her cheek with his little finger and giving her a very stern look indeed. But he’s right, it’s a little stinky, but in a good way—tangy and smoky at the same time. And yeah, she hates to admit it, but it’s totally good.

“I knew you would like it,” he says, intently watching her reactions. “And I’m sure the rest of the Cheese of the Month club selections will be just as good.”

“Wait, let me get this straight, Wes. I’m getting a fancy, stinky cheese every month?”

“Well, it’s actually more like three a month.”

“Three! And how exactly am I gonna like, eat three stinky cheeses a month by myself...” she trails off when a dark look crosses his face, his forehead scrunching tight.

Brilliant, Faith, just brilliant. Way to ruin the moment, a cranky voice rattles in her head. Well, they were gonna have to talk about this eventually. She just wasn't expecting it to be so soon.

“Well, I admit...” he stammers, unable to look up at her. “I admit...”

“You admit what, Wes?” She's grateful for the alcohol while she waits for him to sort out his thoughts, that's for sure. Grabbing the snifter off the table, she swallows it in one gulp, waiting to flinch when it burns the back of her tongue—but instead it goes down smooth.

“I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't drink this as if you're at a dive bar, Faith.”

“Don't change the subject.”

He sighs and he's nervous, he's hardly ever nervous. “We haven't discussed exactly what's going to happen after these two weeks are up.”

“And we don't need to,” she says, sliding close to him again, picking up his hand and kissing it softly. “Not right now.”

He seems as happy as she is to push the discussion of how this idyll will end to another day, turning his hand within her grasp as she kisses it and cupping her face. “Very well.” He gives her a smile that's just the slightest bit anticipatory and asks casually, “Wasn't there one more gift for me, Faith? The third photograph? I confess to being quite eager to see that.”

“Hmm?” she says, and no, she's not getting revenge for the sprout—much—but she can't help giving him some of his own back. “Oh, yes. Sorry, Wes, but I changed my mind. That's going to be for your birthday now.”

“Oh.” He sounds a little nonplussed, but he's far too well-brought-up to argue. “Of course, although I'd hoped to get it framed before you left so that you could see how it looks with the others.”
And they're back in dangerous territory again so she settles for a blank, polite smile and watches him go narrow-eyed and perilously close to huffy, even though he can look at the original on her ass any time he wants to.

He glances at his watch and she sighs, but not too sadly because she's got longer than Cinderella had, even if midnight's behind her. “Is it over?”

He nods. “Just the day itself,” he says softly, giving her a kiss that starts out as a quick brush of his lips against hers and ends with her being scooped up into his lap so he can kiss her properly; slow, gentle kisses that stay that way because they're both tired.

“Tomorrow,” he says when they finally break apart and struggle to their feet, “I might relent and let you go shopping.”

She follows him into the bedroom. “Window-shopping, maybe,” she says. “I've got everything I need, and more. Though I want to take Darla something back from one of the fancy shops. Something all gift-wrapped.”

“I'm sure she'd like that,” he agrees. “And it's going to be a little busy to shop in comfort I imagine so that works well. We can save shopping for your dress until later in the week.”

“Dress?”

“I'd thought about taking you to the opera,” he says, “but I don't really care for it myself. The ballet, though; I'm sure you'd enjoy that, and Rupert arranged for us to go on Wednesday night, in the seats Travers & Giles rent at the NYC Ballet each season at Lincoln Center. They're performing 'Giselle'.”

“Ballet?” she says a little doubtfully. “Not sure that's really me, but I guess it'd be fun.” She takes a deep breath. “This Rupert—Wes, does he know about us? I mean...”

He gives her a curious look. “You get the oddest look on your face when you talk about him,” he comments. “He's really very nice, you know.”

“He set you up with that Anne,” she says, aware of the fact that she sounds sulky and about nine.

“Before he knew you existed,” he reminds her. “And when I knew that we—that there was a chance we'd be together again, I spoke to him about it and he was most apologetic.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Get in bed,” he says firmly. “You're shivering.”

He walks into the bathroom and closes the door and she glares at it. He's being evasive, but she's too tired, despite her nap, to push it. Not going to get into bed though. She wanders around the room, smirking proudly at the photographs of her on the wall and thinking how pleased Drusilla would be if she could see them, and getting little shocks of recognition when she sees something of Wesley's that she remembers from his old house.

She ends up on her knees in front of a bookcase close to the bed, scanning the titles of books that, unlike most of Wesley's, look new, and in some cases are in paperback.

He comes out of the bathroom and she twists around to stare at him. “Wes...”

“I thought I told you to go to bed,” he says.
“Yeah, in a minute,” she says. “Wesley—these books on the top shelf—”

He flushes and turns down the covers of the bed, not meeting her eyes. “Yes?”

She turns back to the books and runs her finger along them slowly, reading out each title as her finger bumps the spine. “'Lolita'. Yeah, that came first. 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'—God yes! And you spoke to me. Actually said 'hello' and then 'Good night, Faith' and I can't tell you what that did to me, Wes.” There's silence behind her but she thinks she hears his breath quicken and in some ways this is like when they were talking on the phone, when she'd have to snatch at every tiny clue as to his reaction to what she was saying. She could just look now, of course, but she doesn't, just carries on listing the books she read to his waiting silence every Sunday.

“'Tender is the Night'—and by then you'd sent me that first parcel and I spent my whole time in this, like, waiting space. Waiting for you to—”

“Give in? Capitulate? Surrender?”

He kneels down beside her, resting his folded hands in his lap. “They're all there, Faith. Every book. You'd read to me on a Sunday, and I'd stop off at a bookshop on my way into work on Monday and pick up a copy.” He gives a frustrated sigh. “I do so look forward to getting my books out of storage,” he mutters. “Half of these I already own.”

“You never told me,” she says wonderingly, because she's seeing him doing that, and then, all brisk and business-like, with his briefcase in one hand and a small carrier bag in the other, walk into his office to start his day.

“I used to make a point of keeping Monday night free so that I could read whatever book it was,” he says, moving to lean against the bed behind them. She smiles at him, reaching out to take his hand, and he carries on. “When I'd reach the part you'd read to me it was as if I could hear your voice again, and I'd close my eyes for a moment and pretend you were sitting beside me, that when you'd finished, I'd be able to take the book from you, set it down, and kiss my darling Faith for reading it so well.”

“Wish I had been,” she whispers. “God, Wes, I missed you so much and I was so happy when we started to talk.”

“I wasn't going to,” he confesses. “I came so close to weakening so many times, but I don't think I would have.” They're doing it again, she realizes; falling into one of those conversations they can't seem to avoid, and maybe they shouldn't, when a tiny bit more of the blank time they'd spent apart is colored in each time.

“Then your first e-mail arrived and—” He stares at her with a helpless, vulnerable look on his face. “I opened it without letting myself even consider the matter, because I was terrified that if I did I'd reason myself into deleting it unread.” She shudders, because if he had, maybe she wouldn't be here now, and his grip on her hand tightens. “'Conflicted' is probably as good a description of my emotions as any. I remember my heart pounding, I couldn't calm myself—”

“I know,” she tells him. “Felt that way when I sent it. I know.”

“You sounded so—it was just you there on the page, vibrant with anger and hurt, but with a curious dignity too,” he says, choosing his words with a deliberation she suspects is designed to hide the fact that his voice is trembling a little. “Once I'd read it, I went back, read it more carefully—God, I practically memorized it!”
“No way!” she says, as if she hasn’t got a head full of memories just like it.

He grins at her. “I really did.” The smile fades a little and he frees his hand and scratches at the side of his nose, looking a little embarrassed. “You said, let me see... I hate that you’re there and I’m still here and there’s nothing I can do about that. That wasn’t entirely true though was it, Faith?”

There’s something dryly amused in his voice after he’s finished quoting her words back at her, but there’s a familiar gleam in his eyes too. He’s recovered his composure and she’s in trouble. She stands up and discards her robe before jumping into bed and pulling the covers up high to her chin. “Don’t know, Wes. You coming to bed now?”

“Indeed I am,” he says, following her example and getting undressed, although, being Wes, he drapes his robe over a chair. He reaches out and tugs the covers down in one swift jerk, ruthlessly exposing her.

She yelps, curling into a ball. “Wes! Really am shivering now!”

“I asked you a question,” he reminds her. “And I’m sorry to say that the answer wasn’t as complete or as truthful as I’d have liked it to be.”

She gives him a pleading look. “Fuck, Wes, I really don’t—”

“You flouted my explicit instructions by contacting me—”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Began what I can only call a determined, organized campaign to wear my resistance down—”

“Hey, you called me, Wesley!” she says as he kneels beside her looking pretty fucking determined himself.

“Made yourself irresistible,” he says softly, taking away her next protest before it’s voiced. “Reminded me of how very difficult it is to deny you anything.” She gapes at him because that’s really not the way she sees it, and he has the grace to smile, just a little. “I don’t think we can count leaving you sexually unsatisfied for a matter of minutes, or even hours, as much of a denial,” he says airily.

“It totally is,” she says with feeling. His hand comes down on her ass in a gentle tap. “What was that for?” she asks warily, jumping as if it’d been one of the stinging slaps he usually delivers.

“That’s your punishment for that particular piece of disobedience,” he says, straight-faced. “And let it be a lesson to you,” he adds sternly, switching off the bedside light and turning his back on her as he pulls the covers up over himself.

She hisses with indignation and reaches down for the sheets on her side of the bed. “All you had to say was that you were glad I sent it!” she says in an infuriated whisper. “I thought you were mad at me!”

“Would you like me to be?” he asks mildly. “I could possibly work up enough righteous anger to spank you but I’m far too tired to fuck you again, so...”

And she’s looking forward to him spanking her properly, until all she can do is wait for the next time his hand strikes her, because that’s all she’s capable of, but she knows him well enough to be sure he means it when he says he wouldn’t follow it with anything but a kiss good night, so she settles for a sniff that makes him chuckle, and she’s asleep before he stops.
Chapter One Hundred and Fifty-Four

She must be really exhausted because she doesn’t even hear him get out of bed in the morning; when she wakes his side of the bed is cold and the covers have been carefully rearranged. Bleary-eyed, she peers at the clock. Ten. He’d probably bolted awake at seven or something equally ungodly, and already gotten tons of dry legal tome reading done.

She can smell coffee wafting in from the hallway and it’s enticing enough to draw her out of bed. She reaches for her discarded robe only to find it missing. Ever-fastidious Wes must have hung it up. Hmm, bathroom, or closet? This being a New York apartment there’s only one. So she pads across the room, shivering slightly at the crisp air, and starts rooting around in there. It’s not with her things (like, all three of them), so she starts going through his side.

Nothing but suits, suits, suits. Black, charcoal gray, dove gray—a whole panoply of expensive labels and rich fabrics. But the robe is nowhere to be seen. She shivers again. Wouldn’t kill him to turn the heat up, would it? she thinks. Frustrated, she’s just about ready to put on one of his suit jackets when she sees it, a familiar, worn piece of fabric, hanging on a padded Barneys NY hanger like it’s something precious. She’s amazed that she’d almost forgotten about it, but she’s hardly surprised to find it in a place of prominence.

She takes it reverently off the hanger, wrapping it slowly around herself. The warmth she feels is mostly from the onrush of memories it brings, but the final one is too painful, and she pushes it away, because there’s no place for it right now. And anyway, it’s not something she’s going to linger on, not when they’re starting over. Not when he’s waiting for her in the other room with fresh coffee and the NY Times crossword and that maddeningly intent look he gets when he’s trying to remember the Greek word for a trade wind or his tut of frustration when the editors get a Latinate wrong.

As she meanders quietly down the hallway toward the kitchen, she wonders how long he’s been toying with the idea of waking her up, but stopping himself at the last minute because he doesn’t want to deprive her of anything.

She smiles softly at that.

She’s so quiet that he doesn’t even hear her come into the kitchen, so assiduously is he poring over the Arts section.

“Morning,” she says, softly, her voice cracking a little.

He smiles and barely looks up from the paper, his cheerful “good morning” purely reflexive. When he finally looks at her, properly, his expression is a bit stunned. “Oh,” he says quietly.

The next few seconds feel like hours. She wonders if he can hear the accelerated beating of her heart, or the nervous little gulp she takes. Surrounded by a stark silence, she can’t help but feel like she’s made a grievous error, that in putting his shirt on she’s dredged up all the bad things that they’re not quite ready to talk about. Can she take it back and get a new entrance, like instant replay or something, only this time she’ll walk in bare-ass naked? Because, yeah, that’d be a better choice, even if she’d be freezing.

Finally his face breaks into a broad smile. “I was wondering when you’d find that.” He looks her over approvingly. There’s a flicker of amusement there. “You know, I hardly think we need to go shopping for the ballet. You look absolutely stunning.”

“You’re kidding, right?” She feels like she’s blushing all over. Hell, she is blushing all over.
“No.” He looks surprised that she would even think such a thing. “Come here.”

When she’s near enough he slips his arms around her and pulls her close. Slowly, reverently, he starts to undo all the buttons that remain. That task finished, he doesn’t part the fabric, expose her naked body to the cool air, he just slides his arms under the fabric, wrapping them loosely around her waist.

“How come you let me sleep so late?” she asks, genuinely curious.

“And risk your not inconsiderable wrath if I woke you?” he asks, looking really fucking bemused.

“Did you hide the robe so I’d find this?” Now her curiosity is moving into killed-the-cat territory.

“I’ll never tell,” he replies, his hands slipping down farther, coming to rest against the curve of her ass.

“Never?” She’s surprised when it comes out sounding like a dare.

He doesn’t speak, just leans forward to kiss her. How he can kiss so gently and intensely she’ll never know; all she knows is they leave her breathless every time. When he pulls away and she finally tastes oxygen again, he whispers, “I think it's time I took this shirt off, don’t you?”

She opens her mouth to agree fervently and her stomach gives a protesting gurgle that leaves the mood shattered and her giggling.

“I should have remembered that you wake up ravenous,” he says with a resigned smile and one last, swift kiss. “Go and put something a little warmer on and I'll be right back.”

“Back from where?” she asks, folding her arms around herself because it’s not worth buttoning the shirt up again. “Hey; maybe we can go out for breakfast? That place you went to and sent me the menu?” Because she's here in the middle of the city and she wants to go out and see it when it's awake, not wrapped-up in Christmas quiet.

“That would have been lovely,” he agrees, “and tomorrow we will, but for now...” He tilts his head. “Did the inclement weather escape your notice?”

“Is it snowing?” she asks eagerly.

He shakes his head. “Nothing so seasonal.”

She leaves the kitchen and goes over to the picture window, her steps slowing as she takes in the black skies, lashing rain and high winds. “It's raining,” she wails. “Wes, it's fucking raining and I wanted to go out!”

“You say that as if you expect me to be able to make it stop,” he says dryly, joining her. It's close enough to the truth to make her smile and when the sulky pout’s off her lips he kisses them. “It's supposed to clear up by nightfall,” he tells her. “And we did agree that it's an awful day to shop on.”

“So where are you going?” she asks as he goes to a closet and takes out a heavy overcoat she bets he never used once in Florida.

“I have to deliver a Christmas tip to the doorman,” he says, and she flashes back to her first e-mail to him where she speculated that he’d be totally tight with the man in days. “And then, because I love you, I shall venture out to the closest place that sells coffee and pastries.”
She murmurs an unconvincing, “You don't need to do that, Wes,” that has him rolling his eyes and then she floors him completely by adding, “But if you do, take your new brolly!”

“My what?”

She frowns. “Your umbrella,” she clarifies. “Thought you Brits called them—”

“Yes, yes, we do,” he interrupts. “It's just—”

“Yeah?” she drawls out, finding it really hard to keep her face straight but managing it somehow.

He gives her a hunted look, picks up the umbrella with the pink flamingoes strutting their skinny-legged stuff all over it, and says, “It's very—pink, isn't it?”

“Totally!”

“Yeah, well,” he mutters, tucking it under his arm. “I won't be long.”

She spends ten seconds snickering after the door closes, wondering if he'll come back with it still tightly-furled and dry, and then heads to the bedroom to return the shirt to its hanger, adjusting it carefully until it's hanging perfectly straight, just the way she found it. Once she's snug in a soft red sweater and black pants she grabs her cigarettes and lighter, thoughtfully returned to her purse by Wes. She wants coffee, yes, but she's about half a pack down and it's killing her.

The balcony door won't open at first and she wonders if Wesley's way of stopping her from smoking, and he's locked it and plans to make her, like, beg for the key. Nah. Too easy to make her crack; he likes it to be a challenge. She's proven right when an extra-hard shove from her shoulder gets it to un-stick and it's almost wrenched from her hand by the freaking wind.

It's fucking freezing out there and if it isn't snowing, it's a miracle. The rain that smacks her face in a spiteful slap is stiff with sleet, or hail, or something else she can't label because where she comes from, rain is warm, and wet, and that's about it.

She shuts the door really fast and glares out at the tempest. Fine. No way she can smoke in that, and even having the door open for, like, twenty seconds, has left a damp patch on the carpet.

She contemplates going downstairs and seeing if Wes' tip has left the doorman amenable to showing her somewhere a girl can grab a quick smoke, but Wes wouldn't like that.

But she's spent too many years being craftily creative about breaking rules to give up now. There's an extractor fan in the bathroom, a toilet to dispose of the evidence, and Wes is going to be a while yet.

The first drag is heavenly, but by the time she's halfway through the cigarette she's jumpy as hell. The muted roar of the fan means she can't hear the front door open and the thought of Wesley catching her isn't a good one. Like the way he stacks the dishwasher, or organizes the fridge, the ban on smoking inside isn't something he's willing to compromise on. With one final, long inhalation, she flushes the remains away and spritzes the air with some of the body spray Darla got her, so, to her anxiously sniffing nose at least, the room smells of roses.

She opens the door, peers out into the empty apartment and dashes to replace the lighter and cigarette pack in her purse. By the time he gets back, she's watching MTV and he's too busy shaking himself dry and being really English about the 'slight drizzle' to notice that she's a bit hyper.

He sets the dripping umbrella down where it can dry and smiles at her. “I received two compliments
on the flamingoes,” he tells her, sounding proud about it. “But I think I'm still sufficiently damp, despite having it to shelter under, that I need to change.” He nods at the coffee and bag he's deposited on the hall table. “Off you go, then.”

“Thanks, Wes,” she says, and it's for more than getting her the coffee. She turns off the TV, gives him a kiss, shudders in sympathy because his face is freezing cold and damp and takes her breakfast into the kitchen.

She's three gulps into her caramel latte when it occurs to her that he's going to have to go into the bathroom to towel off his hair. When he joins her in the kitchen, leaning against the door and staring at her, she gives him a quick, nervous smile and shoves a huge chunk of pain au chocolat into her mouth so she's got an excuse for not answering at once if he asks her anything awkward.

He doesn't move and he doesn't speak. She reaches for her latte and uses it to help her choke down the sweet, flaky pastry which doesn't taste so good anymore.

“Hey, Wes,” she says beginning to babble. “So that doorman; did I nail it in that e-mail of mine? Has he got a—”

“Faith,” he interrupts, tapping his leg slowly with his fingers, “it's been some months since we lived together, hasn't it?”

“I guess,” she mumbles.

“Do you perhaps recall that one rule of mine was that you were not to smoke indoors? Ever?”

“Well, I—”

“A simple 'yes' or 'no' should suffice.”

And no one's ever made her feel this shame-faced and on-the-fucking-spot, but she reacts the way she always does when she's in trouble and channels her inner-brat.

“Wes, get the fucking stick out of your ass! Yeah, I smoked inside, but have you seen it out there?” Okay. Not the best argument she could've come up with. “I tried and it was cold and wet and I just had one and the fan was on.”

He nods coldly. “I see.”

She jumps up and goes to him, hanging onto his arm. “God, I'm sorry!” she says. His hair's still damp, darker than usual and his eyes match it. “I won't have another today, I promise,” she says earnestly.

“I think that's a given, don't you?” he says without a flicker of amusement. His eyes narrow. “I'd come up with some rather good ideas to entertain you as I felt sorry that your plans had been spoiled.” She swallows, because she's sure they would've been the kind of plans that she'd choose over shopping any day. Wes indulgent is hard to beat.

“But I'm annoyed with you now, Faith,” he tells her, without anything to make her doubt that he means it. “And so I think we'll have to change our plans yet again.”

Her mouth's dry but she manages to say faintly, “How?”

He smiles at her, all winter-ice eyes and inflexible mouth. “Why, we'll just entertain me, instead,” he drawls. “I can't promise you'll have a wonderful time, Faith, not now, but you won't mind if I follow
your example and be more than a little selfish, will you?”

She stares at him in mute misery and his lips tighten. “Answer me please, Faith,” he says with a smooth politeness that chills her.

“No, Wesley,” she says, because he’s left her with nothing else to say but that.

His eyes soften the barest amount possible but then he nods at the table. “I'd like you to finish your breakfast first.”

“I'm not hungry,” she says, which is the truth, because her stomach's a tight knot of apprehension mixed in with curiosity, because she's wondering if this is some sort of game after all.

She's starting to relax, just a little, when he leans in close and says in a dangerously quiet voice. “Faith, I told you to do something. You're not doing it. Why is that?”

“Wes, you're fucking freaking me out!” she says, taking a step back and waving her hands in this futile flapping that she stops because she must look fucking ridiculous. He blinks at her in silence and waits for her to carry on. “You're just way over-reacting, and I don't know if you're playing, and I'm not—I don't like it.”

She gives him a beseeching look and she's trying so hard to get through to him that she's rigid with tension, feeling the bitter ache of it in her muscles.

“Faith,” he says softly, and now it's him pleading with her, “this is what I was afraid of. I'm not playing. I never was. This is what I am.”

“I know that,” she says. She gropes for his hand and it's cold and unmoving in her grasp but he allows her to hold it. “Wesley, you know I said I got that, wanted it all.”

“All?” he repeats. “Well, yes, I imagine you do. So do I. We're both rather similar in that respect, aren't we? But 'all' isn't just the fantasies, the pleasure, the sex...although if you think that I get no small pleasure out of watching you obey me outside the bedroom, when you're fully-clothed and not aroused, then you'd be wrong. I do.” He smiles and there's so much implicit in that curve of his mouth that she's glad she's still holding his hand because it's anchoring her as a sharp, sweet pang of lust leaves her trembling.

So many books, so many earnest discussions, so much careful research...and it's all distilled and held within that smile for her.

“Did you ever read the letter I left for you when you weren't angry with me?” he asks, his eyes intent. “Because I told you—I made it as clear as I could, what I was.”

“I read it a lot,” she answers, “but I can't read it without getting angry and starting to fucking cry, so, no, guess not.”

“But you remember it?” he presses.

“Fuck, yes,” she says. “Every word.”

He glances around, shakes his head, and leads her over to the couch. “If we're going to discuss this, we might as well be doing it in comfort,” he says. He turns to face her but he folds his hands in his lap and she doesn't reach out to take one again. “Every word. Then you'll recall the part where I told you my eccentricities weren't merely charming.”
“Yes, but—”

“Well?”

“They kind of are,” she admits, peeking up at him to see if he’s going to get pissed at her.

“I have an excellent memory, Faith,” he says. “Your comments on my quite logical approach to certain matters, such as how a cupboard should be organized, were brutally frank, profane to the point where I was tempted to reach for a bar of soap, and I didn’t seem to strike you as at all charming, if I’m to be honest.”

She can’t keep saying, ‘Yes, but’, tempting though it is. She settles for a frustrated sigh and he echoes it.

“Faith,” he says and he’s really making an effort, she can tell, “I don’t want to lose you again. I don’t.”

“Wes!” And when he says that, even though he’s telling her he doesn’t want her to go, she’s swept into an unreasoning panic that has her flinging herself at him, hands beating at his chest. “No! Don’t fucking say that! Don’t. Because you’re gonna do something stupid again and I’ll fucking die if you go again, I can’t—”

She’s never been held by him on his lap and not felt loved, not felt safe, and that’s where she ends up, cradled against his chest as she gives up the attempt not to cry, and fails totally in the attempt to do it without ending up with a revoltingly-runny nose and a damp neck where the tears have trickled and dripped down.

“Are you quite done?” he asks finally.

“Hanky?” she says, sniffing desperately.

“I don’t have one,” he says.

“What?”

“Not to hand,” he says, staring at her in horrified fascination. “Good Lord, Faith. You look. Would you like to go and wash your face, perhaps?”

She makes it to the bathroom and decides, after one fleeting glance in the mirror that if he thinks she looks bad now, well, he’s right. By the time she emerges, she’s done what she can with cold water, a brush and the fastest makeup, like, ever, and she’s feeling a little abashed.

The raised eyebrow from Wes as she sits back down doesn’t help.

“That was probably very cathartic but a little unnecessary,” he tells her. “I’ll let it pass as I doubt I’ve given you much reason to trust me with all that’s happened.”

“I do trust you,” she assures him, “but when you start being all noble and thinking about me, I panic.”

He snorts and starts to laugh and he’s looking as if he’s not far from tears himself, so she leans over and pinches his arm. “Stop it!”

“Oh God, I’m trying.” He gets himself under control and takes a deep breath. “Right. And I warn you, I’m absolutely determined to finish this discussion, Faith. Now, where were we?”
“You were saying you don't want to lose me,” she reminds him a little tartly.

“Ah, yes.” He stares at her until she starts to fidget and then says, “I could try and change. If you came, if you stayed.”

The intensity's back and she's not panicking in the same way, but she's still so close to fucking despair because they're blundering around trying to connect and they're missing each other and she doesn't know how to fix it.

“You said you couldn't. In that letter. Said you were too old.”

“I hadn't spent seven months without you then,” he says quietly and that has to be the sweetest, most fucked-up compliment she's ever had.

“I don't want you to change,” she says with an absolute certainty. “Not ever.” She frowns. “Do you want me to? Like, I know I swear too much, and you don't like me smoking and...oh...”

“Let's just say you have some charming eccentricities of your own, and leave it at that, shall we?” he says dryly. “I think I'll continue to nag you but I wouldn't dream of controlling you to that extent.”

“But that's how all this started!” she blurs out. “Over me smoking!”

He gapes at her. “Sometimes you can be appallingly dense, Faith,” he says crisply. “You've smoked seven cigarettes since you arrived, not including the one this morning; have I expressed any displeasure over that in word or deed?”

She doesn't have to think about it. He'd followed her out onto the balcony fussing because she hadn't put a coat on and wrapping her up in the throw from the couch, he'd provided her with an ashtray and placed it on a table by the chair he'd placed in a sheltered spot.

“No, Wes.”

“Then—if it's not taxing you unduly—what was different about the eighth?”

She sighs. “Wes—do I have to say it? I'm sorry—”

“Until you tell me what you did wrong, how can I be sure you are?” he asks and there's no edge to it; he really fucking means it.

“I smoked inside and you don't like that-” she begins.

“Utterly forbid it,” he corrects her. “And the man I'm renting this place from is equally firm on that matter, so you not only disobeyed me, you caused me to flout one of the agreements I signed when I took the apartment.”

“I'm sorry,” she whispers.

“You haven't finished,” he says with a gentle, but unswerving determination.

She swallows. “I tried to hide it.”

“Yes.” He's silent for a moment and then says. “I'd appreciate it if you answered me honestly—”

“Wes, I won't lie to you again! And I didn't, not really. If you'd asked, I'd have told you—”
“If I were normal, I suppose this is the point where I’d assure you that it didn’t matter, that you were entitled to your small deceptions, your privacy,” he murmurs and she’s left breathless because he’s doing it again, he’s making her aware, so very fucking aware, of what he is and there’s nothing in her that’s turning away.

“But you’re not, Faith,” he says with a terrifying gentleness. “You have to respect me far too much to ever lie and you have to trust me enough not to want to. I’ll allow you your thoughts, I’ll allow you your dreams, your hidden secrets, but I won’t have you lying to me. Do you know why?”

She shakes her head, staring at him, utterly unable to look away.

“Because it would mean you were afraid of me.” He meets her eyes with a direct look. “You’ve lied all your life, Faith. If I can offer you anything, it’s a place where you don’t have to.”

She bites down on her lip. Not going to fucking cry again. Not.

“So, I’ll ask you; did you think—did you disobey me deliberately? It occurred to me that I might have misread the situation—and yes, I’ve noticed that you’re pushing at me, testing your limits, expanding them.” He takes her hand, stroking it with his thumb. “Was that it? A game? Did you expect me to smile and spank you and that would be all?”

And it’s an out, it’s a way of shoving the guilt that’s still with her onto him, but how can she?

“No, Wes. I wouldn’t—that’s not something I’d try and mess with. I just—” She shrugs and gives him a rueful smile. “I wanted a smoke and it was raining outside. And I knew you’d get mad, and, yeah, I totally hoped you wouldn’t know.” She sighs. “You’re still gonna go ahead with the whole, ‘make Faith miserable day’ aren’t you?”

“I might amend it slightly,” he says. “In light of what I think was a useful discussion and a sincere repentance.”

Sticking her tongue out at him for being so very fucking stuffy is something she doesn't even think twice about doing.

“And now,” he says, ignoring her so she feels like a complete idiot, “let’s get on, shall we?”

“What do you want to do, Wes?” she asks, hoping it involves some seriously romantic make-up sex because this counts as an argument, it really does.

He stands up. “You have a breakfast to finish.”

“It'll be cold now,” she says. “And really, I'm not all that hungry.”

He glares at her. “Faith. You’re welcome to reheat it but I went out into a bloody flood to get it and I'd like you to finish it.”

“Make me?” She clears her throat. “Please?”

And there's this moment of stillness and she has to look up, has to see if it's okay, if he gets it. There's a faint question in his eyes and she can tell he wants just a little more from her.

“I want—we can talk, but we've got other ways of dealing with stuff, yeah? And I’m not gonna tell you’ve I've been naughty and deserve a spanking because that's like, totally lame, but—”

“But you have, and you do,” he says lightly, watching her. “And you want it, don't you?”
“It's different when you say it,” she whispers.

He nods. “Very well. For the rest of the day, I want absolute, unquestioning obedience from you. I don't want you to say anything about an order I give you other than to acknowledge it where appropriate or ask for clarification if absolutely needed.”

“Like at the cottage,” she says. And she's almost forgotten what it's like to have him take over this completely, leaving her with nothing to do but comply, be perfect for him.

He nods again, says, “Stay here,” and walks away. She watches him go, as this weird mix of thrills and chills race over her, because she doesn't know what he'll do, what he'll be holding when he comes back.

Turns out it's a black silk scarf.

“Wes? Thought you—”

“I don't think you need to use your mouth to speak right now, Faith.”

She doesn't struggle as he ties her wrists behind her.

“And, Faith? I'd be very much surprised if you don't use your safeword today.” He draws his finger across her mouth, too fast for her to purse her lips and kiss it in the hope that it'll slow down and be replaced with his mouth. “In fact, I'm looking forward to finding out what I have to do to make you use it.” He taps her lips once and lets his hand drop before nodding toward the kitchen “Although I've got some ideas. Go in and kneel by the chair you were sitting on, please.”

It's that 'please' that gets her every time.

Maybe not just the please. But both the simplicity and the complexity of his orders that don’t leave room for anything like doubt or uncertainty. So she’s not thinking, not panicking, not doing much of anything but standing up and walking to the kitchen so she can kneel, just like he told her, on the cold tiles with her head lowered by the time he steps into the room.

He doesn’t say anything, just picks up the Styrofoam cup with her coffee in it and gives her a thoughtful look.

“It's lukewarm but should be drinkable,” he says softly and he hasn’t asked her a question so she says nothing even though she wants to squinch up her face and protest loudly that lukewarm coffee is an invention of the devil.

He pulls out the chair she’s kneeling next to and sits down so his knee is brushing her shoulder and he barely has to lean down to cup her chin and hold the coffee to her mouth.

“Drink it, please, Faith.”

She gulps it down even though lukewarm was being way generous and a couple of minutes more and a couple of degrees colder and it would qualify as iced. But she’s good; doesn’t so much as flicker an eyelash and when she’s managed to force down the last mouthful without wincing she looks up at him and she realizes that she’s waiting for that smile of approval she always gets when she’s obeyed an order and he’s pleased with her.

This time though she gets jackshit, just that blank face he can wear as insouciantly as the most beautifully cut suit. As he picks up her half-eaten pain au chocolat, which is looking as limp and as unwieldy as one of Darla’s experiments with home baking, she’d kill for just a smile from him.
Never mind a spanking and then some fierce but tender make-up sex.

So she stays where she is even though her knees are starting to ache and when he tears off hunks of pastry and pops them perfunctorily into her mouth, she chews them down and waits for the conciliatory smile that she’s going to get when all that’s left are the flaky crumbs that are clinging to her mouth. Doesn’t seem likely he’s going to kiss them off her either, not when he’s getting to his feet and moving away from her like she’s not even there.

“Bathroom, Faith,” he says from the doorway and she gives up on ever having him smile at her again. Instead she’s staggering awkwardly up and thanking God for those yoga lessons because bound hands and kitchen floors and being on your knees; really not the best combination ever.

In the bathroom he tugs at the scarf so her hands free and she can scrub away the tiny specks of ash that are clinging to the sides of the wash basin that she was using as the world’s biggest ashtray.

“Very good, Faith,” he says peering at the porcelain after she’s done and securing her wrists again. And it’s the last nice thing that happens for hours.

It’s not like he really does make good on all those old allusions to Bluebeard. He doesn’t make her strip off, doesn’t bend her over any hard surfaces, doesn’t spank her. None of the fun stuff.

When he’s not ignoring her so he can read the paper and do the crossword and not even ask her for help on the one solitary clue about some lame VH1 band that they always have; it’s worse. Because he’s veering from neglect, to not leaving her alone for a minute. Making her shift from her kneeling position on the floor in inch increments until she’s leaning forward at a fucking 45 degree angle that finally seems to meet his exacting standards because he stops frowning and goes back to acting like she’s one of the dust motes floating around in the still air of the apartment.

If it was just one or the other than maybe she could handle it. Could handle his indifference even though she hates it. Could just about maybe kinda sorta deal with the relentless demands and orders to stand, sit, breathe quieter, eat the sandwich he’s made her for lunch from the stinkiest cheese ever, turn her face to the right, to stop shivering (“really it’s not that cold, Faith”) despite the way they chafe uncomfortably against her new-found independence.

By the time it reaches midafternoon and she knows that not by looking at the clock on the sideboard, which would be really hard when she’s been made to stand in the corner with her back to him, but by seeing the shadows start to lengthen on the wall in front of her, she’s cold, tired and fed up. She’s also starting to get the beginnings of a headache from all the thoughts that keep rushing through her head like they’re competing at a monster truck rally. Because when she’s got her clothes on and there’s not even a hint of a promise in what he’s doing, then it’s really hard to work out if it’s a game or if it’s punishment and what the hell is in it for him.

“Wes, can I ask you a question, please? Um, I need clarification on something.”

Her voice sounds scratchy from not being used all day and her words seem to hover in the air like they haven’t got anywhere else to go.

She hears him put down his book and there’s a moment’s pause. “What seems to be the problem, Faith?”

The urge to roll her eyes is too tempting to avoid and it’s not like he can see her anyway. “I’m just, like, confused about what you’re doing?” No, that’s not right. “I mean, why you’re doing this. Yeah, I sort of lied to you but I said I was sorry. And I’ve done everything you’ve asked me to and it’s just… you’re not stopping and it’s not fun and …”
“But maybe this is fun for me, Faith,” he drawls, cutting off her breathless babble at the pass. “I take immense pleasure in you being so obedient, so biddable for once.”

“If I was all submissive,” and she spits out the word, she really does, “all the fucking time then you’d never have any reason to punish me.”

“Have you ever stopped to consider that controlling you so absolutely and having you obey me without question is very arousing?” he asks her and she can feel him weighing out each syllable almost like he’s thought them a lot but never said them out loud.

“It’s not doing anything for me!” she bursts out before she can stop herself because what’s the point of this whole hideous day and all his stupid hoops that she jumped through, if she’s not even wet and on the verge of begging him to fuck her?

“You have a word you can use,” he reminds her mildly.

“But then you’ll stop…”

He sighs. “Turn around and face me, please, Faith?”

She whirls round so fast that she almost falls over and she knows that her bottom lip is sticking out in the poutiest pout since records began, especially when he folds the paper, places it on his lap and says, “I think we can dispense with the sulky expression, Faith.”

It’s the first of his commands that she really has to struggle with especially as it feels as if her face has been set in concrete but eventually her features manage to right themselves into some vague version of normality.

“I thought the whole purpose of this somewhat enlightening conversation was to get me to stop, Faith. Is there anything else you’d like me to clarify before you face the wall again?”

Yup, there totally is. “What happens if I use my word?”

She finally gets a smile out of him, a small wry quirkling of the lips, but she’s starting to feel so on edge that it doesn’t really register any more.

“ ’I’ll take you over my lap or possibly bend you over the arm of the couch, I haven’t really decided yet, then I’m going to give you a bloody, good spanking before I fuck your arse,” he remarks conversationally, like he’s talking about what he wants for dinner. Then he casually removes the folded up copy of the business section of The New York Times so it’s lying next to him on the sofa and she can see the hard outline of his cock through his jeans. “Just for the record, Faith, this is doing plenty for me. Now turn around and face the wall again.”

And just for the record she’s plenty wet now and so ready to fall on her knees and crawl to him and get his cock in her… anywhere. But she turns round and tries to summon up the calm, Zen feeling she was managing before when it was all quiet but the monster trucks are back with a vengeance.

See, if she says her word, maybe she doesn’t mean it. She just wants out of the corner so she can go and haul on another jumper and possibly slug him round the face for ignoring her and confusing her and then he’ll have a fucking good reason for punishing her too. Then she thinks of how rigid his cock was imprisoned in all that denim, which can’t be comfortable so if she said her word, she’d get to alleviate poor Wes’ suffering. Not that she’s sure she wants to do that. Bottom line, she just doesn’t know.

All she knows is that she wants him to spank her. Like hard. Really, really hard. As hard as she can
then before she can stop it, this tiny little groan of frustration makes a bid for freedom but he’s not snapping out an order to, like, stop breathing in oxygen and let out carbon dioxide because she can hear him getting up and walking over to her, standing so close that she can feel the heat from his body on her cold bones.

“I’m not the easiest person to be with… to live with,” he whispers, bending his head so the words caress her ear, making them intimate, even though he sounds kind of sad. “Do you see the difference, Faith? The finely honed, exquisitely rendered difference between what gives me pleasure and what gives both of us pleasure?”

She can feel icy, cold fingers trailing down her spine. “And which one gets you off the most, Wes?”

“Oh, Faith,” he sighs as his arms steal round her waist and he can rest his chin on the top of her head. “Do you need to ask?”

“Yeah. I mean… you do like it when it’s the both of us… you like it more?” She’s got this fatal note of begging to her voice and she’s leaning back against him now because he’s so close that she can’t not.

He kisses the edge of her ear and his arms tighten around her. “I can’t live without it,” he admits unsteadily. “But I want to know if you enjoyed my salient lesson in how utterly I’d like to own you?”

“I like belonging to you, Wes, I do and you belong to me too, you know you do, but I didn’t like what you did today,” she chokes out and she’s absolutely fucking determined that she’s going to splutter through this without crying. “Hate it when you ignore me, it hurts worse than anything…”

He turns her gently round in the circle of his arms so she can see his eyebrow winging up in an eternal question. And she goes from waiting to not waiting.

“Okay, Neruda,” she mutters defiantly. “I said it! Neruda, Neruda, Neruda!”

Her voice is rising to the kind of pitch that only bats can hear and he takes a step back before she can perforate his eardrums, which gives her the space to raise her arm and smack him pretty gently, all things considered, around the face.

“Guess you should know, Wes, that maybe I’m not the easiest person to live with,” she tells him with large dollops of satisfaction. “And I won’t have you ignore me even if it’s your biggest ever turn on. And yeah, now you’ve got another reason to punish me but can you crank up the central heating before you do it?”

Weird thing is that his mouth doesn’t flatten out and his eyes don’t start darkening like storm clouds and he’s not even trotting off to put some fucking heat on, instead he cups her cold face in his warm hands and bends down to press a sweet, clinging kiss on the tight, pissed off line of her mouth.

“My darling, angry girl,” he purrs when he realizes that he’s kissing a Faith-shaped statue. “I’m very proud of you for saying your word.”

“Big whoop,” she hisses, knocking past him so she can stomp to the bedroom and hurl herself on to the bed, rolling over and over until she’s all wrapped up in the quilt and the only thing he can see when he walks in a moment later is the top of her head and the narrowed slits where her eyes used to be.
“You always give too much away, Faith,” he chides her as he sits down on the edge of the bed and yeah, he’s definitely not looking like he thinks she’s the bestest girl in all the world for spitting out her safeword in the face of, like, extreme provocation. “Now that I know how intensely you dislike being ignored, it becomes a very effective means of reprisal if you’re set on behaving like such a brat.”

“I’m not being a brat,” she protests indignantly, sitting up. “I’m pissed with you and I have every right to be because I did everything you asked me to and you asked me to do all sorts of stupid shit and you weren’t even pleased and then you acted like I wasn’t even there and you hurt my feelings and you kept changing it so I could never get into a space where I was happy and you forced me to say it!”

“And I’m glad you did,” he says harshly. “And I’m going to keep forcing you to say it but whatever means I have at my disposal until it springs readily to your lips every time I hurt you in a way that doesn’t bring you pleasure. Is there anything you’d like to clarify, Faith?”

“Only that you’re a sneaky bastard,” she pouts with maybe just the slightest hint of grudging admiration.

“Duly noted,” he says smoothly. “And now that we find ourselves in rare agreement, I believe that I promised you a couple of things if you said your word, not to mention the more serious matter of your exceedingly petulant behavior.”

And he's had a whole day of pushing her and not in a good way and she reckons that payback could be all kinds of sweet because there ain’t no way in earth she’s going back in the corner.

She slowly unfurls herself from the covers so she can crawl over to him and straddle him. Then when she's arranged to her liking on his lap, facing him so she can maneuver the still-hard jut of his cock between her legs to get that good old ache a going, arms wound tight round his neck, she's ready.

“You gonna spank me, Wes?” she husks in his ear. “I want a really fucking hard spanking. Want it to hurt, so I know you mean it.”

His eyes are glittering like blue diamonds and his lips are curved in a wicked smile. “You deserve a fucking hard spanking,” he corrects her. “And then what do you want me to do to you?”

She bites down on the tempting plumpness of his earlobe which works out really well because he shifts so his cock is pressing into her and if she wasn't all that wet before then she's got to be fucking dripping now.

“Want you to fuck my ass, Wes,” she says steadily, leaning back so she doesn't have to miss the delicious expression on his face, which is equal parts tenderness and cruelty. “We on the same page?”

In lieu of a reply he pushes her off his lap so she's standing with bare toes curling into the carpet. “I think so, Faith. Take off your clothes. Slowly.”

And that was just what she wanted to hear and she's got her answer all ready. “Make me,” she demands with a challenging smile.

“And how do you suggest I do that, Faith?” he asks, leaning forward, chin propped in his hand, elbow on his knee, looking so relaxed it's ridiculous when she knows how hard he is, how long he's been that way. “I'm hardly going to tear your clothes from you, now am I?”

She gives a little shake of her head in answer. So not his style.
"Perhaps I could threaten you," he muses. "Tell you that if you're not absolutely naked within sixty seconds I won't permit you to wear my collar until the New Year." He watches her carefully and although that's pretty effective as threats go, she just about manages to keep her dismay from showing and her smile from dimming.

"But, really, a threat is a sign of weakness, don't you think? I don't need to resort to them to control you, Faith, to exact obedience from you, as I think I've already demonstrated." He shakes his head slowly. "No. I won't make you strip bare so I can spank you, Faith, so I can fuck you. I won't force you to do anything." He gives her this polite, knowing smile and says softly. "Because I don't really have to, do I? Because you want to, so very much. You want to show me that perfect, beautiful body and watch me shiver, just a little, at the sight of you, because it's been hours since I saw you naked and really, that's something I hate to deny myself."

She's not smiling now. She's listening to him, hearing that husky drawl, the voice that murmured detailed instructions to her as she held the phone pressed to her ear, her other hand roaming her body, touching it exactly as he wanted her to. And she's seeing his jaw tighten as he speaks, as if, yeah, even Wesley's reaching the limits of his self-control.

"But perhaps you're shy, Faith," he says in this voice that's oozing fake understanding and sympathy. "I recall you said you disliked being naked when I wasn't."

"Don't dislike it," she says, fighting to stay in charge—if she ever was. "Just makes me feel—"

"Shy," he says, nodding earnestly. "Of course you are."

"I'm not!" she says indignantly.

"Oh? Well, that's a relief," he says solemnly although he is so fucking smirking inside, she knows he is. "Because fucking your arse—you do recall that's planned for later? Of course you do—is such a very...intimate activity, wouldn't you say?" He glances down at his right hand, and holds it out, palm down, fingers spread. "After we've dealt with the little matter of that well-deserved chastisement. My hand gets quite hot when I spank you, you know. It's almost painful." He smiles slightly. "Somehow I doubt you'll be very sympathetic about that, given the far greater discomfort you experience, but, yes, it stings and I've even known it to get quite swollen."

She's staring at his hand now, and thinking where it's going to be soon; on her ass, fingers inside it; making her whimper, making her scream. God, she so fucking wants to scream. She used to need that pain, raw and real, to make her fucked-up life make sense. Well, it's not so fucked-up now, and with Wes back in it, she's really happier than she's ever been...but she still wants to scream.

Her hand's moving to start unbuttoning her pants because yeah, good going, Wes, the tingle in her nipples has intensified to an ache, and she's soaked through her thong, when he shakes his head.

"Please put your hands by your side and stay quite still," he says and it's the voice she never wants to disobey, the voice that flicks against her like his tongue on her skin, promising everything in return for something as simple to give as surrender. It's the voice that told her he'd like her bent over the desk, like her to bring herself off, like her to use her tongue on his cock, like her to come, not come, stay silent, moan.

"Good girl, Faith," he says without a hint of irony, as her hand drops away. "Where were we? Oh yes, of course. My hand." They stare at it and he flexes it which brings a whimper to her lips that's verging on desperate.

"Perhaps I should consider using something else," he says. "Your hairbrush is always effective, I've
found. Or possibly a glove would help? I have a rather nice pair of riding gloves somewhere and I'm sure the leather would afford me some protection.”

And like he fucking needs it, but she's flashing on an image of his gloved hand spanking her and how it would feel cool at first, how the sound would be different, but she's not sure how—softer, louder? Would she lose that crisp, clean smack that she swears changes the hotter her ass gets? And she's lost in thinking of how the leather would warm so fast, soaking up the heat from her burning skin the way his hand does and wondering if it'd hurt more, or less.

“Why, Faith, you look quite intrigued by that notion,” he says, lifting his eyebrows in pretended surprise. “Am I to take it you'd approve of my efforts to spare myself some pain?”

“I like feeling your hand on me,” she says without hesitation because she's too aroused to be in the least bit fucking shy—can barely force the words out because she's struggling to breath evenly. “Like it more than the brush or a belt, or my collar, even, but yes, I'd like that.” She meets his eyes. “I want you to experiment, want you to try out stuff you've—we've not done. Guess I won't like all of it, and maybe you'll find you don't either, but we won't know until we do.”

“Indeed we won't,” he agrees amiably. “That's quite an intoxicating prospect, isn't it? What a pity we can't proceed though, given your inability to follow a simple directive.” He pulls a regretful face. “I could spank you over your clothes, and I suppose I don't need to remove them all to get at your arse, but, no, on some matters one really shouldn't compromise. I wanted you naked and nothing else will do.” He gives her a level look. “I'm not going to tell you remove your clothes slowly again, Faith,” he tells her.

“But I want to! I will,” she assures him.

His slow head shake and pointed look at her hands which have moved to grab the hem of her jumper freeze her in place.

“I said I wasn't going to tell you again,” he says. “I meant it. I dislike repeating myself. And the order to stay quite still hasn't been rescinded.”

“But I want—”

“To be spanked? To be fucked?”

She nods with the barest hint of a pout and gets a positively fucking evil smile from him that chills her because she's waited so long already and it looks as if she's going to be waiting some more.

“Quite a dilemma, isn't it? I'm curious as to how you're going to solve it, Faith, but your ingenuity is always so inspired.”

She closes her eyes and thinks of—nothing useful. She can't concentrate when she's practically coming just from the look in his eyes and all the pretty fucking images he's put in her head.

“I could say I was sorry?” she asks tentatively, opening her eyes and looking at him hopefully.

“You don't need to,” he says. “You didn't actually refuse to obey me, after all.”

“No, I totally didn't,” she says eagerly. “I just wanted to, umm—”


“A fucking plus, now can I—” She takes a slow, deep breath. No. That won't work. “May I please
take off my clothes—” His eyes narrow and she adds, “slowly? Please, Wes? I want to, I really do.”

She swears her quivering lip is totally unforced.

“Yes, Faith,” he says finally. “Of course you may.” He gives her a kind smile. “You only had to beg.”

And she gets that flash of anger, just for a second, that he’s so much better at the game than she is. But then, it’s not about win or lose so long as both of them end up sprawled across the bed, wrung-out and orgasmed-out, breathless and exhausted. Which they will. It’s an inevitability.

And no, he’s not better. They both—well, they know how to play to their advantage. And so long as she’s clothed, she’s got the upper hand. So long as she can feel the tension in him, the strain caused by the long hours of holding himself in check like that when all he really wants to do is tear her clothes off and fuck her into the floor.

Another inevitability? Yeah; good things come to girls who wait.

She slips back onto the bed, straddling him. And he lets her, because it’s time to. Now they’re both vibrating with a new, unresolved kind of tension; there’s this hitch in her throat because he’s so fucking close, looking right into her eyes and there are so many emotions there she could write a fucking book. God, she can’t ever resist that forceful blue stare. But then she remembers her resolve, that she’s finally got him right where she wants him. She smiles to herself because she knows, knows that he’s poised right on the edge. And even though she’s been there herself numerous times over the course of the day, she can’t help but think, with great satisfaction, that the tide’s finally turned in her favor.

“Promises, promises, Wes,” she whispers in his ear, and does he smile? Maybe he does. He turns his head so she can trace her tongue along the taut line of his jaw, can feel him swallow, see the slow drift of his eyelids as they shut and he sighs.

She knows it’s only for a moment; he never lets anything slip for long, and anyway, doesn’t she have a little agenda of her own to get to? She’s momentarily annoyed at how easily she’s distracted. That’s yet another gulf that separates her from Wes, who’s so fucking single-minded it’s almost inhuman.

She shifts against him, and hmm, she’s got his cock right where she wants it too. Except there’s entirely too much clothing in the way. She lifts herself up off him, and his eyes are open again, watching her with an avidness that’d get her really fucking wet if it weren’t already too late.

The sweater goes slowly, so expertly she’d swear she was Gypsy Rose Lee onstage at a swank supper club instead of a bedroom. Off it goes, one sleeve at a time; she plucks at the edges of the hem with graceful fingers and shimmies it up over her head like she’s got this great reveal planned. And, well, she kinda does.

Her fingers are poised on the button of her jeans when he grips her suddenly by the wrist, stopping her; his free hand cups her breast, feeling the weight of it before leaning forward to take her nipple in his mouth. She almost jumps at the surge of warmth, shock of the sudden heat; in her periphery she can just see the edge of a smile curled against the pale pink blush of her skin.

“You got a good reason for interrupting me, Wes?” She sounds so fucking stern.

Bastard’s still smiling. “I can’t seem to resist you when you offer so prettily.”

She shimmies against him, and oh yeah, friction’s a wonderful thing. “Can I keep going, or do I
have to beg for that too?” She tries to sound as perfectly in control as she knows he would, but it’s not so easy. Not with his hard cock nudging against her.

He doesn’t answer, just lets go of her wrist and lets her nipple slip free. He leans back against the bed, his body a single taut line, his eyes flickering greedily over her form, and she picks up where she left off. The pop of a button, the slow drag of a zipper and she milks that for all it’s worth. The room is so still that the sound is practically deafening. He eyes the newly-exposed triangle of flesh and smiles.

“You’re soaked through, aren’t you, Faith?” he drawls. “So fucking wet because you can’t wait for my hand on your arse, for my fingers to slip into that beautiful pussy of yours. Isn’t that right?”

And God, if he doesn’t know how to derail everything with that voice of his. She’s stunned to silence, any hope of a retort dissipating as quickly as his fingers insinuate themselves under the fabric and brush up against her skin. And while she’s not going to blurt out, “Just fuck me, I need you to fuck me,” she realizes that she’s had quite enough slow burn for one day. And that maybe he has too.

Which necessitates a slight change of script. And hey, if she gets some extra spankings for that, it’s still win-win, right?

It takes everything she’s got to evade his fingers, pulling abruptly away from him. As he watches her, he doesn’t look angry, just a little curious at her boldness, perhaps. And it’s not curiosity that plays across his features when she arranges herself across his lap, grabbing his hand and placing it resolutely on her ass.

“I think your impatience seems to be the over-riding theme for these last few months,” he says prissily and it’s not as if he’s telling her anything new. All that she can concentrate on it how fucking good it feels just to have the warm weight of his palm molding the curve of her buttock, the rigid, throbbing length of cock digging into her belly, his fingertips stroking over her skin like he’s fascinated by the way it covers her before he crooks his fingers around the elastic of her thong and gives it a gentle tug.

She’s already for him to rip it right off her. God, the way she’s feeling, like every inch of her is about to woosh into flames, she’s surprised it doesn’t just combust while she’s still wearing it. Instead she helps him out because she’s caring like that, wriggling on his lap and lifting herself up slightly so he can just free her from the damp cotton and lace.

“C’mon, Wes,” she snaps imperiously, punctuating it with another little shimmy that’s got his cock practically standing up to say hello. “Take it off or leave it on, just want you to spank me like you…”

“I’m sorry, Faith,” he interjects smoothly. Way too smoothly. “I was momentarily distracted by the unwelcome notion that you were having an attack of Saint Vitus’ dance.”

Huh and what the fuck? “I was just…”

He doesn’t smack her. Wouldn’t do that when he knows how much she wants him to. He just pinches her sharply so she squeals. “You were moving, even though I hadn’t given you permission, Faith,” he snaps and she stops kicking her legs and lies motionless on his lap because this is so fucking typical of him to delay something they so badly want just a little bit longer. “That’s an extra five blows you’ve already earned.”

“Oh, Wes…”

“And then there’s the small matter of your underwear,” he says and she glances up, because yet
another five blows sounds like the cherry on top of the icing on top of the cake, in time to see his lip curl as he hooks his finger round the thong elastic and gives it another tug.

“Wes, can’t we schedule in this conversation between the spanking and the ass-fucking?” she asks reasonably though she thinks that maybe she left reasonable oooh, around the same time that she plonked herself down on her lap.

“No, we really can’t,” he replies equally pleasantly. “Not when it means I’ll have to adjust my running tally of spanks pending yet again. You really do seem intent on making my life complicated, Faith.”

“You just make it up as you go along,” she sighs because nothing is going to delay the inevitable of Wes’ not-at-all endearing habit of holding off on all the lovely things he’d promised. Just because he fucking can, the bastard.

“I can assure you I don’t,” he says all huffily, even though they know that’s a lie. “And I believe I was quite explicit in what I considered to be suitable underwear for you, Faith, especially when you know the consequences of such flagrant disregard for my wishes.”

She’s so going to get her spanking any second now. “Why do you think I packed six of them, Wes?” she asks sweetly and waits for his hand to lift up and connect with her ass. Instead she lands on the carpet with a soft thud when he pushes her off his lap. “What the fuck did you do that for?”

She gives him the most filthy glare in her entire repertoire when he smirks in the most annoying way ever. “Another five,” he says almost dreamily and his voice does a complete 180 degrees with one swift exhalation of breath on his part so it sounds like it’s suddenly been coated in ice. “Hands and knees, Faith, now.”

She doesn’t get a please but she’s already lifting herself up into the desired position and looking at him expectantly because maybe he’s decided to move up the ass fucking portion of the schedule.

He gestures toward her open suitcase because she still hasn’t got round to unpacking the stuff that doesn’t need hanging up. “I want you to fetch every single one of these disgraceful garments,” he intones darkly. “And you’re not to use your hands, Faith.”

She crawls over to the case and it’s only the certain knowledge that he can’t take his eyes off the tantalizing sway of her ass (which she puts a lot of effort into), which stops her from lying on the floor and having a full on, fist banging hissy fit until he hauls her up and spanks the living, fucking daylights out of her.

And it shouldn’t be so hot to crawl back to him with five pairs of thongs clutched in her mouth but it is. Because he’s deliberately stroking the hard-on which looks fit to burst out of his jeans and all the time his dark-blue gaze is fixed on her. And when he takes the panties out of her mouth, tosses them in the wastepaper basket next to the bed and strokes her hair like she’s a goddamn Golden Retriever, she shouldn’t be resting her head against her knee and waiting for the next order. But it’s him and it’s her and this is what they do and she does.

“I really do have to confiscate them,” he tells her softly as if it was the last thing in the world he wants. “But I’ll take you out and buy you new ones, Faith. I’ll take you with me, let you try them on, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? Parading round the changing room in front of me, knowing the sight of you was making me hard and there was nothing I could do about it until I got you home?”

She presses up against his stroking hand. “I would, Wes. Really, really would.”
He smiles down at her and in the dimming light he looks like a satyr. “I know you would, you deplorable little tease. Anything else you’d like?”

This time she peels off her damp thong herself before she throws herself on his lap. “Not like, Wes,” she whispers hoarsely and she’s so close to the edge now that she’s convinced that she’s going to come like a fucking waterfall, when he finally puts them both out of her misery. “I need you to spank me, please. Want it so badly, Wes. Don’t make me wait any more. Please.”

“You beg so beautifully,” he says fondly and there’s one last delicious pause that she doesn’t mind at all because his hand delves between her legs and skates over her sticky smooth flesh to graze the tips of his fingers over her clit and he makes this appreciative noise and she’s just trying to decide where it could be classified as a moan when his other hand crashes down on her left cheek.

He used to hold back when he was spanking her before. She knows that now because this time he’s giving her everything he’s got while her arms are curled and clinging to his outer thigh because he’s got one hand splayed across her pussy, not holding her steady at all but giving her something to grind against and his other hand… sweet fucking Jesus.

The slaps start off slow and he stops after each one so she has time to get used to the slow burn, the tingle and sting, and just when it’s starting to fade out and the heat begins to thaw, she gets another blow that makes her give a harsh, startled cry.

Another blow that makes her part her legs so his fingers slip inside her just a fraction.

Another blow that makes her beg him to hit her harder.

Another blow that makes her shift against his cock and force a growl out of him.

Another blow another blow another blow another blow another blow ...

And they’re fast and furious now so she can’t separate out the small flurry of air when his hand lifts because it feels like it never does. And she doesn’t know why it seems to be everywhere at once; her left cheek, her right cheek, the tops of her thighs all burning hot and he tells her how beautiful she looks because he’s been talking to her all the time but she can only hear snatches of it over her shaky gasps for air.

“...needy little girl...your arse looks so gorgeous, Faith, I can’t wait to fuck it... you want more, don’t you?...” And then he’s quiet because he’s letting out every breath that she’s taking in.

The whole world has shrunk down to the edge of the bed where he’s sitting with her squirming and screaming on his lap and nothing but this velvety darkness surrounding them because there’s nothing and no one but them. Maybe it’s even less than that just his hand on her ass, his voice in her ear, nothing else but a series of disparate sensations that make her complete.

His hand slows down by the smallest, sweetest of degrees until the room telescopes back to normal size and, man, her ass feels like you could fry a fricking egg on it. And then the last spanks aren’t even that, just his hand stroking her buttocks as softly as a baby’s breath and it all starts to feel good. Just an itch that’s a perfect pair with the soaked flesh of her cunt as his fingers thrust a little deeper inside her.

“Thank me for spanking you, Faith.”

She does better than that, hauling herself upright with shaky arms that have to clutch onto his shirt front so she can kiss him long and hard. “Thank you, Wes,” she says against his lips. “Thank you for spanking me.”
And when she winces as her ass scrapes against his jeans, he gives her a beaming smile of approval just like the one she never got this morning and she has to kiss him and thank him for that too.

“Faith,” he says warningly, gripping her upper arms and holding her away from him so she can’t carry on with her quest to kiss every inch of his face. “I’m trying desperately hard not to give in to my urge to forget all the things I was going to do to you first and instead bend you over the chest of drawers and fuck your arse, so will you stop squirming about quite so delightfully?”

She smooshes right up against him so the cotton of his shirt rubs against the aching tips of her breasts and she can feel how burning hot he is underneath the creased material. “Can if you like,” she offers throatily, before she reaches up to kiss him again.

He turns his head away. “If you kiss me, I will lose every last vestige of control,” he says. “So don’t. Please?”

“Wes, I'm gonna die if you don't fuck me, like right now,” she begs him, trying to hold still. “And I want you to lose it, I really do.”

There's a glint in his eyes that she can't interpret. “I think we define it differently, Faith.” He pushes her up so that's she's standing on wobbly legs and goes over to rummage in the drawer of the night table. “If you want that to happen because you think it'll get you one of those fast, furious fucks you seem to crave, then I have to tell you I can deliver those any time.”

“Can doesn't mean you do,” she matters.

“Well, that's a different matter altogether, isn't it?” he says pleasantly, straightening with a tube of arnica cream and—a small bottle of lube. “To me, a loss of control means, not that I'll get carried away on a tide of passion—” He rolls his eyes at the very idea. “No, it means through my own deplorable weakness I'll be deprived of something utterly precious.” He smiles at her. “A few more moments making love to you.” And just as she's all set to melt from the warmth in his eyes he adds, “And I derive so much pleasure from the way you squirm and beg and whimper and—”

“I get it, Wes!” she snaps.

He sits back down again and as she gapes at him, because shouldn't he be, like, getting undressed or something?


She eyes him warily. “Are you going to spank me again?”

An eyebrow lifts. “Dear me, Faith. Am I going to have to? Because you forgot that when I give an order I expect you to obey it at once, without putting me to the trouble or repeating it?”

“No,” she says. “I'm doing it, see?”

Her body protests the resumption of the position he'd held her in for so long, and the skin on her ass, still hot to the touch, as she knows for a fact, because she'd gingerly fingered it when he was getting the supplies, stretches and pulls, making her gasp as she copes with a new wave of pain. It sends her arousal a notch higher and she realizes she's scrabbling at his jeans, trying to grip something in her fists, needing something to—

“Here.”

His voice is gentle as he leans back and grabs a pillow, pushing it under her so she's got something
to hold and, yeah, something to bite down on, because the next thing that happens is an icy handful of cream that hits her super-heated skin and practically dissolves.

The yelp she gives, even muffled by the pillow, is loud enough for him to chuckle at. “It's not really cold,” he says.

“Fucking is” she hisses. “And I don't want it!”

“Why not?” he asks mildly, dropping another splodge on and working it methodically into her ass.

“I earned that sting,” she says. “Don't want to lose it.”

She can hear the smile in his voice. “I don't think you need to worry about that. You're so very, very red that I think you'll be feeling the after-effects for a long time to come.”

“So why are you putting it on?” she asks curiously, trying to twist her head to look at him which makes him bite down on his lip as her stomach rubs against his erection.

“Ah, because I want to?” he says, not entirely pleasantly.

“Thought you liked the bruises,” she says, and yeah, she's needling him a bit.

“I do,” he says. His hand comes down in a sticky-sounding smack that smarts like hell, even though compared to the spanking, it was a love-tap. “I do, and you're going to bruise beautifully, Faith. But right now, you're this mass of scarlet and until that fades a little, I won't be able to see them.” He sighs and the hand smoothing the cream across her ass slows, the movements more deliberate, even sensuous. “Blue and purple shadows under the skin, and I can see the shape of my hand, my fingers in them.” His hand stills against her and his other hand brushes along the words etched onto her skin. “Less permanent than this, but no less lovely.”

“Glad you like it,” she murmurs, resting her head on her arms, folded on top of the pillow. The arousal is there still but she's almost glad of this small lull, the chance to let the pain and the fever of wanting more die back, just a little, to gather force again.

“Someday, soon, I'm going to spank you like that every day for a week,” he says. “Until you cry out if I drag a fingertip across your backside as you walk by me, sob with the first stroke of my hand.”

The lull is over. She's drenched in heat, literal and lustful, feeling her body flush and shiver all at once.

“Oh, you like that, don't you?” he whispers and he sounds dazzled.

His hand starts to move again and now he's spreading her ass apart with his fingers, sliding them down, between, to coat cool, untouched skin with something that's not as dense and rich as the cream. The lube trickles down, a small shivery shock against her hot folds that makes her mewl and shift, trying to get something, anything, to touch her clit, which is throbbing steadily.

“Stay still,” he says in a remote voice, as if he's distancing himself from what his fingers are doing because it's the only way he can deal. “You're not to move or I'll stop.”

And it's an empty threat, because not even Wes can walk away from her now, but she obeys him anyway, taking satisfaction in the small victory even though she's breathing in these shallow, fast gasps and getting light-headed from wanting him inside her, wanting to come.

He's using the lube lavishly, but he's dipping his fingers inside her cunt too, finding the wetness there
and dragging it up, so that when he pushes a finger inside her, slowly, carefully, it's slick with her juices.

She cries out because she remembers this, how it feels, and it's been so long. It's not enough though, not when she's feeling like this, and she disobeys him, her hips lifting so she can get him in her deeper.

His hand stops. “You're to stay still,” he reminds her, and fuck he sounds as if he's gonna grind the enamel off his teeth because he's not calm, not collected, not with a groan punctuating his command. “Faith—”

“Please,” she moans, “Just do it, Wes. Need you in me. Need you to fuck my ass so much—”

There's a harsh, ragged whimper from him and he pushes her off his lap so he can stand.

“I can’t wait any longer,” he whispers in her ear as he half carries, half drags her over to the chest of drawers, the bare wooden surface level with her hips, so that as he pushes her down she feels the rounded edge dig into her hips which brings back more memories.

She's shaking, barely able to stay in the position she's fallen into so easily, so naturally, and she has to reach out and hook her fingers onto the far edge of the chest, between it and the wall, to steady herself.

He's stripping down and doing it fast. She can interpret each soft rustle of fabric being dragged over his skin by hasty, shaking hands and she knows the exact moment when he's naked and she spreads her legs just a little wider, arches her ass in the air just a little higher.

There's a moment when she feels as if she's been waiting an eternity, knowing he's staring at her, knowing he's hard, so ready she doesn't know how he can bear to touch his cock as he slicks himself up. She's on the verge of coming herself from the cumulative effect of so many small things and some are memories, old and new: the fading feel of his finger in her ass, the smart and sting where his hand belabored her skin, and some are right now, insistent, like the way when she pushes forward she can feel the unyielding edge of the chest that's going to leave more bruises when he slams into her. And yet it's thinking of what's to come that's the most dangerous of all, that's threatening to rob of her control, because she's empty and hurting with it and soon, soon—

His hand comes down hard on her, curling around her hip and holding her in place as his finger jabs inside her ass, fast enough to make her give a guttural sound that's nowhere near a word but if it was it'd be one that meant 'yes' and 'more'.

He's not touching her clit, her cunt, her breasts, not doing anything but push his finger deeper, in fast, jerky, still-not-enough-jabs that have her squirming and writhing around it. Desperation gives her the gift of speech again and she gasps his name, “Wes—fuck, Wes—fuck me—”

And when his finger returns, no, two fingers, stretching her in a warning, in a promise, of what's imminent, she's ready to scream with frustration, but she saves it for the moment they're taken away and his cock pushes into her, steady and smooth, pausing, retreating, repeating, both his hands holding her still now, his fingers biting into her skin hard enough to distract her from the tiny flashes of something she can't call pain, not when it feels like this, not when she craves it so that when he's finally satisfied she's open, she's ready, and he starts to fuck her, she almost comes on the first stroke, deep and strong and violent.

His hands loosen their grip and shift so that his palms lie across her scarlet skin, fingertips brushing the words that repeat what that angry flush of punished skin says: that she loves him, that she's his.
“Faith,” he says, “My Faith...” and it's all he says but it's enough to make her come, even as he drives his cock into her, over and over, in a relentless rhythm that falters only as he starts to climax, when he cries out and stiffens against her, muscles locking as he shudders, pushing deeper still, the distant sensation of his come spurting inside her lost in the continuing echoes of her release.

He leans forward, his hands sliding up her arms, his mouth warm on her back as he kisses her heated skin as if he can't stop, openmouthed kisses, dragged across her skin as he pants, breathless and spent.

He slides out of her and she can't stop the moan as she feels the loss of that connection.

“It's all right, Faith,” he murmurs. “I'll take care of you.”

She lets him help her up and turns so that she can wrap herself around him, feeling the sticky heat of his cock press against her, not caring about anything but being held as tightly as he can.

His hand strokes her hair as he kisses her flushed face. “Sssh,” he says again, though she hasn't said a word. “My darling girl.”

And she realizes that she's saying his name and telling him she loves him, and she doesn't stop until he says it back, telling her as he scoops her up in his arms, telling her as he lifts her into a bath warm enough to make her wince as the scented water strokes her bruised skin, telling her as she goes to sleep, telling her when she wakes to a new day, filled with pale, crisp sunshine and a blue-hazed sky.
Of course, there's a big part of her that would rather roll over and stick her head under the cool pillow and sleep another hour or two, or five when he whispers those endearments in her ear, soft breath on her ear raising a twinge in parts she's pretty sure should still be satisfied from his ministrations of the night before. Perched on the edge of the bed, he brushes her sleep-tangled hair off her face and plants a sweet kiss on her lips. Already showered and dressed, the delicate scent of bergamot and sandalwood on his skin is enough, along with the sunshine and the freshly-brewed coffee waiting on the bedside table, to at least allow her to shimmy delicately into a sitting position instead of mumbling an incoherent protest at the early hour and rolling back into sleep.

Though her ass has stopped throbbing, it's still not the most comfortable position to be in, and if it wasn't for his arms curling possessively 'round her neck, the mischievous twinkle in his eye, she'd totally already be out of bed and in the shower already—anything to keep from resting on her really tender laurels for any longer than necessary.

“Oh, Wes, it's too early for you to be looking at me like that,” she says through a yawn, sliding out of his embrace and reaching for the coffee, taking a tentative sip before downing half the cup in two greedy gulps.

“Like what, my darling girl?” The corners of his mouth twitch with a faint amusement that always seems to come hand-in-hand with his chipper early-morning mood.

“Like you've got some kind of your plan up your sleeve, Wesley.” She drags his name out in a snarky drawl. “So, what's on the agenda?”

“Whatever you'd like,” he says, running his fingers lightly up and down her forearm possessively. “Within reason, of course.” Bold as brass, he winks at her as the memories from the previous evening's activities slam vividly about in her brain.

“Shopping,” she whispers reverently, biting back the urge to demand that he take her to the nearest swanky lingerie shop, stat. “And sightseeing! And, I wanna take the subway and cabs and I wanna see like, the Statue of Liberty to the Cloisters, and everything in between.”

He laughs, pulling her close for a proper kiss that activates little twinges of need, which she pointedly ignores because she's going out shopping today if it kills her. In fact, she wants to collect an armful of stiff cardboard bags so badly that she's happy to forgo several hours of bone-melting orgasms that the glint in Wes' eye promises. “We still have a week, Faith. You can't really want to do everything all in one day.”

“Well, if I only get one activity for today, that activity better be shopping, and our shopping list better have 'Buy Faith new six new pairs of really fancy underpants' in capital letters at the very top.”

“I could make you go the rest of your stay without any,” he muses, lost in thought and gazing over her shoulder at some unfocused place where she's sure she spends every minute on her knees, collared up and completely naked. Which, when she thinks about it, wouldn't be the most horrible fate.

Still, a girl's gotta keep her dignity, and a little mystery to boot. “You wouldn't!” Her playful punch
lands squarely on his upper arm and sends his dreamy gaze snapping back to meet hers.

“Wouldn't I?”

“Okay, okay. I wouldn't put it past you to make me do it, but really, Wes, it's too cold for that, don't you think? And I don't even want to think about the possibility of my bare ass accidentally resting on a subway seat or the backseat of a cab.”

He laughs at that, shaking the bed so hard she nearly spills her coffee. “Very well then, we'll replace your inappropriate undergarments first—but then we'll be following a very strict timetable.”

She just rolls her eyes at him before climbing out of bed and heading for the bathroom. “Whatever, Wes. This is a vacation, y'know?” And in half a second, she's turning on the taps to drown out his snappy retort because he's way too coherent for eight in the morning.

When she emerges from the shower, a pair of black satin underpants have been carefully laid out for her on the bed, along with her red dress and the pair of black woolly tights that she's really fucking glad she bought. She doesn't ask any awkward questions about why he's had a pair of her panties stashed away, just gratefully steps into them, sliding the cool fabric over her bruised ass as he watches her dress, leaning against the bed with a faintly amused smile.

Half an hour and one minor disagreement about her clompy, engineer boots later, she's shoveling the biggest breakfast she's ever eaten into her mouth as fast as her hands can move. Her tummy's not happy about missing dinner the night before but it was worth it, not least for the faint smarting of her ass and the pretty fucking besotted expression on Wes' face even as she starts on the second side of bacon that he made him order.

And of course, he wasn't kidding about the timetable. Once he's finished pigging out in a really polite, English way that involves oatmeal, he's pointing out the nearest subway stations on an MTA map, showing her the various lines that will take them to Soho, Greenwich Village, Times Square. She's studied the map millions of times, alone in her room, stereo blasting—back when she was sure she'd never be sitting with him here, over the remnants of French toast, planning their day, and the next, and the one after that, just for good measure. The lines were so clear then, but now she's sure she'll never remember them all, especially when he's telling her about closed stops and re-routed lines and express trains.

He carefully folds the map back in to crisp sixteenths about the same time she realizes that her forehead is scrunched up into a confused frown. “It will be fine, Faith, I assure you. My navigation of the New York subway system is second to none,” he says breezily as he helps her into her coat. “Though I insist that you hold my hand at all time.”

“I'm not gonna get lost, Wes and I'm not five either!” she pouts and he presses a soft kiss to her lips. “Of course you're not,” he agrees gravely. “But I do like holding your hand so maybe you'd be kind enough to allow me that indulgence.”

And when he puts it like that, then it's not like she's going to put up a fight, especially when their hands are tightly clasped and his fingers bypass her mittens so he can stroke her wrists all the way to Prince Street, even when they have to change trains.

He tells her that they're in Soho but that doesn't really mean anything to her. It all looks like every shot of New York she's ever seen from the movies or TV and she knows she's wide-eyed and openmouthed because every step turns up something new. Like the Apple store where Wes tells her he bought her iPod and the shop that sells only paper and Dean & Deluca where they stop for coffee
that even meets Wes' exacting standards and she can't help but squeal at how they sell slabs of chocolate by weight and almost slides to the floor in ecstasy when the assistant lets her try before she buys.

After that, the morning is a blur of shops—though she always asks very sweetly before crossing each threshold if each shop meets his approval, which they always do. Even the bizarre Japanese toy store Kid Robot, which makes her feel a strange pang of Xander sickness because he'd totally want to buy everything in it.

More than that, she's bewildered by the sheer amount of people jostling past her so she's clinging onto Wes because he's the only familiar thing in this strange, mega-speed world. Finally, she gives a start of recognition when she sees her coat in the window of Miu Miu and she doesn't even have to give Wes a plaintive look because he's already opening the door so she can step inside.

“Maybe we'll find a suitable dress for the ballet in here,” he says and lets go of her hand so she can practically run over to the display of six inch high wedge sandals. Everything is so lovely apart from the shop assistant who's dogging her heels like she knows she's got a rap sheet for shoplifting and she's about to put the adorable ruffly, red dress she's sighing over back onto the rail and tell Wes to get her the fuck out of here, when she's being told that she looks like she's a size 4 and she's being hustled into a changing room while Wes nods away like he's down with it all.

“It's not really fancy enough for the ballet,” she tells him wistfully, when him and the shop assistant have coaxed her out of the changing room so she can give them a twirl.

“But you do look so enchanting in it,” he says firmly, already reaching for his wallet and when her mouth opens to voice a protests, he gives her a pleading look. “Faith, please, I'd very much like to buy it for you.”

“But, Wes, it costs…”

“You can buy me lunch,” he points out hastily. “And it won't be cheap either, I'm still disgustingly hungry after you forced me to forgo dinner last night.”

And telling him exactly how he's got that wrong takes quite a while and before she knows it, she's tripping down the street with her first stiff cardboard bag looped over her wrist.

She decides then and there that she's going to make good on what she really wanted to get him for Christmas. That even if she has to drug his oatmeal, she's heading out on her own one day so she can spend her bonus from Monty on stinky cheese and cacophonous classical music CDs and a gazillion other little trinkets designed to righteously spoil his birthday boy ass.

She's just about to ask him where he wants to go for lunch when he's practically dragging her across the street. “Oh, we have to go in here,” he insists forcefully as another black-clad assistant with impossibly shiny hair and sharp cheekbones opens the door for them.

Wes is like a five year old kid doing a trolley dash in Toys 'R US. She's never heard of Celine before but they do a nice line in severe black dresses and skirts that Wes is all but drooling over as his gaze flicks over her and then drapes another beautifully cut, black something or other over his arm.

During those months apart when all she had of him were the things he'd bought her that she couldn't bear to wear, she'd wondered whether they were payment for services rendered. Whether they were guilt gifts and that every shoe, every scrap of silk had been an apology for every time he'd hit her, every time he'd fucked her ass or her mouth or tied her up. But now watching the delight in his eyes as she parades in front of him wearing the clothes he's picked out and he keeps telling her that she's
gorgeous and coming closer to begging her than he ever has when she blanches every time she sees a price tag, she realizes that it was nothing more sinister than dressing her up so she looks beautiful and taking pleasure in that simple fact.

Still feels weird to have him spend enough money to pay her rent for, like, five years on two dresses. A black, scooped neck slither of satin which clings to her breasts and waist and then falls to her knees in an elegant swoosh, which he wants her to wear when they go out for dinner with Rupert fucking Giles. And her ballet dress, which is so swoon-making, that she has to keep peeking in the bag and carefully unwrapping the tissue paper to make sure she hasn't dreamed it. It's a strapless, oyster silk covered in a thin layer of black lace that pushes her breasts up to the heavens and rustles when she walks. She looks like a girl from a 1950's film and Wes can't take his eyes off her tits the whole time she has it on, which is her new criteria for choosing clothes.

They have lunch at Tea and Sympathy, this tiny, hokey little restaurant in the West Village which is so damn English that there're tea pots everywhere and she has to stop everything to witness the sight of Wes eating more food than she's ever seen him take down in one sitting. He starts with Welsh rarebit which is weird British talk for cheese on toast, makes her burst out laughing when he orders bangers and mash and then totally goes back on everything he ever said about not having a sweet tooth by ordering treacle pudding for dessert and asking them to put more of this hot yellow gunk all over it which he calls custard and she calls gross. He washes the lot down with a pot of tea and then puts his hand delicately over his mouth so he can, like, belch.

She pushes away her bowl of chocolate pudding, which even she can't manage, and shoots him an accusing look.

“Manners, Wesley,” she hisses primly and he gives her a carefree grin which makes her heart flutter and she thinks that she just fell a bit deeper in love with him, despite the whole burping thing.

“They have a shop next door,” he says with just the barest trace of a smug smile. “I need to stock up on a few things. They might even have some Orange Kit Kats in.”

They don't but he's way too busy buying disgusting things like Marmite and getting over-excited about pyramid-shaped teabags to notice when she buys a tin of Ambrosia creamed rice, which he'd told her his nanny used to make for him and can be the first item in his secret birthday box, though she's not eating any even if he spanks her so hard that she can never sit down again.

“You're starting to freak me out, Wes,” she tells him as they start walking through the West Village while he munches on salt and vinegar flavor potato chips though he calls them crisps, like that makes the mindfuck easier to process. “You have pudding and you eat between meals and you bogart the chips. Guess I'm not the only one who's learnt some bad habits.”

“I'm sorry, Faith, would you like one?” he asks her sweetly and then holds the bag out of her reach by the time she's tugged off her mittens. “Sorry, darling, I'm afraid you just weren't quick enough and I appear to have eaten them all.”

“You are so getting a birthday spanking,” she snarls at him and then ruins her whole bitch goddess vibe by clapping her hands together in joy and squeaking. “Marc Jacobs! Wes! There's three Marc Jacobs shops... and one's just for accessories...”

She gets a contact high from the smell of all that expensive Italian leather as she elbows her way through the designer-clad throng so she can sigh longingly at the bags and the shoes and, oh, the boots... There's this little voice telling her to put up a fight, even if it's just so token that it doesn't even register, but the salesgirl who recognizes Wes immediately is already hurrying off to get her the pink strappy sandals and the polka dot pumps with the bow in her size. She's sitting there
dumbstruck with her head on Wes' shoulder as he points at bags and shakes her head, mute with want, until she can't help the tiny groan of greed at a multi-pocket bag with the heavy silver fastenings that the girl calls “washed rose” as she wraps it in tissue paper and beams the beam of a girl who's just racked up a fortune in sales commission.

He's already trying to push her in the direction of the next part of the Marc Jacobs empire but she curls her fingers round his arm and tugs him to a halt.

“Wes, no,” she says in a choked voice and right there on the middle of Bleecker Street, she bursts into tears. “It's... you've already... so much money,” she splutters and he's pulling her down a deserted side street so he can pull off his gloves and stroke the tears away.

“But I love to spend it on you,” he says simply. “I love you. And I want to make up for every birthday and Christmas present that you never had.”

And that just makes her cry harder, and fling her arms around him. “You're it,” she mumbles against his neck, before peppering his lovely, Wes-scented skin with frantic kisses. “You're every birthday and Christmas present I never got. And I don't need any more clothes—already got enough and I just want to go home now, Wes so I can not wear anything...”

“I don't expect payment, Faith,” he says, face tightening and darkening and her kisses get faster until she pets away his frown.

“Didn't mean it like that, Wes,” she assures him desperately. “I just want to show you how much I love you and that's the best way I know how.”

“You just have to say thank you, as charmingly as you already have the last fifty times, and let me have one last kiss.”

The one thing she's learnt about New York is that people don't give a rat's ass what you do so she has no hesitation is giving him a long, slow smooch, her tongue dipping into his mouth in a preview of exactly what he's going to get when they're home and he can just damn well like it.

“Thank you Wes, for all my lovely presents,” she says demurely. “Can we go home now?”

“No,” he says imperturbably, taking her hand again and smiling at the furious expression on her face. “I do owe you six pairs of knickers. There's no need to smirk, Faith, it's a perfectly acceptable word.”

And just like that he chases away all the weird feelings of guilt and debt and unworthiness that have been clamoring around her head. “Six pairs of knickers and that's it!”

“We'll see,” he drawls. “If it makes you feel any better though, you can pay me back by modeling anything else I want to buy you the second we get home. Or we can see what their changing room policy is. I rather like the idea of watching the bruises on your arse disappear and come back into view as I make you try on all manner of fripperies.”

She rather likes the idea too. Can see it already. Her standing in front of a mirror and sliding into something that suddenly covers her up and the Wes in the reflection will lick his lips and she'll know he's getting hard. Know that he wants to fuck her and, for once, he'll have to wait because he can't. Or maybe he will. Maybe he'll turn her around and push her up against the mirror and tug off the panties that he hasn't even paid for and fuck her right there.

“I guess that might be negotiable, Wes,” it's her turn to drawl as they step into a rose-scented salon that's done up in pink and black and she has to reassess everything she's ever thought about underwear.
She never thought that bras and panties were anything more than things you wore to get someone hot so you could take them off again but the delicate wisps of lace and silk that she fingers are more than that. They're like an exercise in seduction. Each one starts off a fevered fantasy in her head. Sprawled out in stockings and suspenders on the bonnet of Wes' car. Bent over his desk in nothing but that pink corset. On her knees with his cock in her mouth as she pinches her nipples spilling over the cups of that barely there bra.

And when she lifts her head from her quiet contemplation and catches Wes' eye and his predatory smile is a perfect match for hers, she feels this calm sense of purpose fill her.

“Did you have a spending limit in mind, Wes?” she asks him and he can't know what she's thinking but he just shakes his head and arches an eyebrow inquiringly. “Good.”

“Whatever are you planning in your pretty little head, Faith?”

“That's for me to know and you to find out,” she coos and holds up six pairs of panties with ribbon ties and a sheer back panel for his inspection. “I want these to replace all my thongs. And, look, Wes, won't even have to take them off for you to be able to see all those bruises on my ass.”

He doesn't even care that they've both just got a totally speculative look from this blonde girl who has to be a model, he just stares at them with a really unsettling gleam in his eyes. “Perfect,” he breathes, holding out his hands like he has to touch them now or he's going to throw a tantrum.

She points to an over-stuffed gilt chair. “Go and sit there and I'm going to try some stuff on that I'm not going to let you choose. And then we're going home and I'm going to show you every last thing, Wes. gonna put them on and take them off and you're not allowed to do anything but watch.”

“Faith, no thongs, I really must insist…” he starts so she has to wag her finger at him and shake her head sorrowfully

“Do you need something clarified, Wes?” she purrs, hands on her hips and a smirk on her face.

“Will I be allowed to fuck you once this charming-sounding fashion show is over?” he bites out with a lemon-sucking smile.

She doesn't answer at first, just pats his cheek with a condescending hand. “Wes, you're really getting the hang of the small print. I'm so proud of you. Now go, sit!”

And the malevolent glare he gives her as he obediently trots over to the chair promises fun times. She tries on five sets of underwear with names like Fifi and Stella and stares in amazement at the Faith in the mirror; all legs and curves, so much skin waiting to be kissed, fondled. She's never looked this beautiful, never felt this beautiful, despite his constant assurances. And she wants to share this with him, wants him to open the door and fall to his knees in front of her. But instead she just tells the assistant that she'll take everything and the pissed-looking guy sitting on the chair outside will pay for it.

Wes is looking about as long-suffering as it's possible to look when she finally sidles up to him and taps him on the ass with the last little treat she's picked out so he whirls round in a flurry of black wool and glares at her.

“Stop pouting, Wes,” she tells him pleasantly. “I'm done.”

“Faith,” he snaps, eyes flashing oh so fucking furiously. “You really have reached new levels of …”

He stops from embarking on a litany of her worst character traits when he sees the thin black leather
whip she's holding by its crystal encrusted handle.

“Do you like it? She flexes its length between her hands so he can admire how flexible it is before she offers it to him. “Thought you might like to buy yourself an early birthday present.”

His bad mood melts away in an instant. Or, like, in the time it takes for him to lick his lips and send the whip arcing through the air so it makes a swishing sound which makes her break out in goose bumps. The good kind of goose bumps.

“Oh, this really is an excellent choice, Faith.” His eyes are hooded as his fingers run over the leather. “I think we should get a cab, don't you? I'm really most anxious to get home and break in my new present.”

Even for Wesley, city cabs don't screech to a halt, but he still manages to get one in less time than she'd expected, and she's tired enough to want to lean into his waiting arm rather than rubber-necking. Besides, it's dark now, and the dazzle of the city is kind of nice when it's just a little bit blurry, as she sighs and snuggles and peeks at it through half-closed eyes.

She's clutching her purchases in a death-grip as they get into the elevator, refusing to let him carry anything, until he points out, very reasonably, that with her hands full like that she's completely helpless.

Like she's going to be fighting him off when all he's doing is kissing her, sweet, hungry kisses that seem to slow the upward rush of the elevator so that when she stumbles out of it, her lips are soft and tremulous, kiss-bitten and pouting.

He opens the door with a deliberation she doesn't mistake for indifference anymore. When it's something he wants, wants desperately, Wesley slows right down.

He holds open the door for her, and as she works her way past him, bags bumping against the wooden surround, he reaches out and threads his fingers through her hair, before curling his hand around the back of her neck. She pauses at the first touch and stands still, waiting.

“I want you naked,” he says, in the conversational tone that's so at variance with his words, making them doubly arousing. “Right away. I want you to walk through the door, place the bags on the floor, take six steps forward and strip.”

He lifts her hair away and kisses the back of her neck, raising every fine hair on her body, sending tingles chasing shivers over her.

“Well?”

“Yes, Wesley,” she says obediently, walking in, pausing to release her hold on the heavy, promising weight of the bags and then taking the six steps needed to bring her onto the carpet. She faces the city, that watches as she undresses, with a thousand unblinking eyes, draping her clothes carefully over the back of the couch that's—of course—within reach of her outstretched hand, as it wouldn't have been at five steps.

She can hear him moving around, hanging up his coat, kicking off his shoes, and by the time she's naked he's pouring himself a drink over ice—which means it's not whiskey—and walking over to her.

His fingers, cold from the glass he's been holding, that's now in his left hand, touch her nipples, already stiff and aching, and he leans forward to kiss her again, timing the hard pinch he gives one of them so that her mouth opens on a gasp and allows his tongue to slip inside.
“I don't think I've ever waited so long to fuck you,” he murmurs, releasing her lip that he's caught in his teeth, fingertips tight on her flesh. “And I'm going to have to wait a little longer, aren't I?”

And she'd love to tell him that no, he doesn't, and God, could he just bend her over the couch, but she's absolutely certain he'd rather wait just a bit longer really and she presses her lips together to hold back the words until she's sure they'll come out right.

“Yeah, you are, Wes,” she says, striving for coolness, “but it'll be worth it.”

“I know,” he says, releasing her finally and bringing up the ice-heavy glass and pressing it against the tender, punished flesh so that she whimpers. “But even so, I suggest you hurry, Faith.” He nods at the bags. “Take them into the bedroom; sort out what you need.”

“Where will you be?”

He smiles and his gaze drifts to a huge leather chair over by the fireplace—not a real one, not here, but it's a pretty good imitation of a coal fire. Sitting there, he'll be able to watch her walk across the room to him, dressed in those sumptuous scraps of silk and satin, lace and ribbon—and she'll be able to see his face.

“I'll be really fast,” she promises.

She's halfway to the door when he halts her with a gentle cough. “But not when you're walking toward me,” he says. “Not then.”

She gets to the bedroom and sorts through the bags, fingers clumsy with tension because this is just so different. She's never, well, performed for him like this, and her head's full of panicked thoughts about looking awkward, clumsy; worse yet, boring him.

Then she remembers the Faith she saw mirrored and reflected, the beautiful Faith, and the calm she needs rushes back in.

And she stops hurrying. She's not going to make him wait for too long—that's another thing she's learned about Wes; he's not too keen on waiting for other people, not keen at all. She wants him full of anticipation, not irritation, a sharp edge of burgeoning impatience that's all, to give him all the scant justification he ever needs to make her pay for every second he's spent staring at the door she's closed so firmly behind her.

So she drifts to the bathroom and freshens up, spending long moments staring dreamy-eyed at herself as she draws her brush through the hair a day of trying on clothes has left wild, spending even longer staring back over her shoulder at her ass, where the dark shadows left by his hand are stark and unmistakable against her pale skin.

Finally, she walks with a purposeful step back into the bedroom, sorting through the bags, hiding his present in her case, and setting aside the bags from the final shop.

She empties them onto the bed, all divested of tags and ready to wear, which she knows is down to Wesley's forethought, all pretty, so very fucking pretty.

The whip tumbles out last, and that's not pretty. It's elegant, wickedly erotic, and although the crystal-encrusted handle, with the dangling leather and crystal loop are baroquely extravagant, there's very little of the toy about the whip itself. She imagines it could hurt her very well indeed and she wonders if he will, how he'll use it on her. She pushes it away. If he wants it, he'll tell her to bring it to him; otherwise she'll leave that until the end.
He's told her he wants her naked, so it's with a perverse sense of conflicted obedience that she
dresses again, but really, she's close to being naked in this. The black, be-ribboned demi-bra cups her
breasts, so low-cut that the edge of her nipples show clearly, an insert of pink satin in the cup
exposed by teasing, tautly-stretched laced ribbons. She slips into the matching panties and then,
because she can walk in them better than bare feet, her office shoes, black suede and high, so high.

And it's easier than she imagined to walk through the dark room, lit only by the city and two lamps,
set far enough from his chair so that, after all, she can't really see him, but it doesn't matter, because
she hears him sigh softly, an exhalation of breath that's the perfect tribute.

And it's like dancing in the clubs, like walking in a slow, arrogant strut to the bar, watching the
hunger and the lust spark and flare in a dozen faces as she dares them all to be the one to risk
rejection for the sake of one of her smiles, one of her cruel, careless kisses.

Silence as her background music, an audience of one, and yet she's still walking that walk, still so
very fucking sure of herself.

She pauses in front of his chair and bends over, placing her hands on the chair arms and smiling into
his face, so carefully controlled that it's mask-like, with only his blue eyes alive.

“Remember I said you couldn't touch me, Wes?” she asks. “Remember you had to wait?”

“I remember that's what you said,” he answers with the faintest stress on 'you'. “But, as ever, you
failed to clarify the fine-print.”

She straightens up and gives him a tiny, pouting frown. “Hope you're not going get all impatient,
Wes,” she says. “Because I've got more than this to show you.”

He lifts up his hands. “I won't touch you with these,” he says, “but I rather think, I'd like
you to be carrying something when you return.” He smiles at her. “Tell me what I want, Faith.”

“Your present,” she says. She knew it.

“Oh, yes,” he says with an approving nod. “And I'll leave it up to you to decide how to bring it.”

She spins on her heel and marches off, ass swaying and twitching like an angry cat's tail because
she's able to keep it together when she's walking over to Wes, but Wes holding a whip? Drawing it
through his hands, so the diamante handle and tassel twinkle in the light, dazzling her eyes; laying it
in an uncompromising line across his knees or beating it in a slow, gentle tempo against the palm of
his hand? Fuck, she'll be on her knees before she gets halfway to him, begging him to use it on her,
begging him to fuck her.

She changes into one of the see-through pairs of, yeah, fine, call 'em that if you like, knickers, red,
with black and red bows, saucy and begging to be tugged open, matching them with sheer black
pull-on stockings and something that's so over-the-top she'd rolled her eyes in bemused awe when
she saw it, because, really, it's not a bra, it's the outline of one, cupless and saved from severity by the
black bow in the center that, wide and lavish though it is, still does nothing to cover her bare breasts,
thrust upward impudently.

And she could crawl to him, whip between her teeth, and he'd love that, but she's not in the mood for
the obvious, not tonight, when the fizz from seeing herself looking fucking spectacular in a dozen
fancy mirrors is still making her dizzy.

She holds the whip in front of her, gripping it firmly and then lifts her hands and rests the whip
across the back of her shoulders, so it's rubbing her neck where he kissed it, so her breasts couldn't
look sassier if she tried, so she's sauntering toward him, with an exaggerated, deliberate placing of her feet, so that her hips sway and she's saying, 'come fuck me', not begging for it, but she's had that, she's done that, and it wasn't enough and so she pauses and waits, standing still, letting him see her and then she turns, slow, slow, slower, until he can see her ass and she holds position for long enough to let him appreciate how the thin, translucent scarlet recalls the way it looked the night before.

Then she goes to her knees, back beautifully straight, lifts the whip over her head and sets it down on the floor beside her, keeping her hand on it.

She's kneeling as she was in the photograph and she turns to look at him over her shoulder and stares at him, finding his face in the dim light, seeing the way he's looking back at her in silent contemplation, hands curled tightly around the arms of the chair, his eyes narrowed.

He stands up in a smooth, unhurried movement and walks over to her, extending his hand. She glances up at him and, still kneeling, places the whip in his grasp.

“Thank you,” he says.

The tip of the whip strokes the upper curve of her breasts and then he rests the whip across them, for a long moment so that she can feel its weight.

“Are you still going to make me wait, Faith?”

And she doesn't even have to think about it.

“Always, Wes. You going to make it worth my while?”

The whip lifts up just high enough to make the downward stroke sting and she sees a single red line rise up, thin and straight.

By the time she'd shown him everything, her skin's crossed with half a dozen faint lines and each time she starts to walk toward him she thinks this will be the last time, that she'll beg, that she'll kneel, because she's barely able to walk now, with the heavy fullness between her legs making each step a torture that never ends because each flick of the whip deepens her arousal without satisfying it.

But she makes it back to their bedroom and there's nothing more to wear, so she strips off the thong she bought to make quite sure they ended where she wanted them to, and, naked, with the collar in her hand, goes out to where he's waiting for her.

The whip's been set aside on a table and as she walks toward him, she feels the tingle of each mark it's left on her and grips her collar a little tighter just thinking of how it sounded as it cut the air. He'd applied it to her skin with such care; one stroke to greet her as she reached his chair, one as she turned to walk away, and yeah, although he’d watched her walk toward him half a dozen times, skimming his gaze appreciatively over her, by the end his eyes were lingering not on satin and silk but those red lines left by his hand wielding the whip.

And she'd stared in the mirror as she changed from one outfit to another and she'd been looking at them too, tracing them with her fingers, her breath coming faster with every brush of her hands against skin he'd woken to life with a stinging kiss of leather.

“Thank you, Faith,” he says, sounding polite and formal, as she kneels down by his chair. “That was —yes, worth waiting for. You looked beautiful. Breathtaking, in fact.” His hand smoothes her hair back off her flushed face. “Though never more so than the way you do now.”
“Glad you liked the show,” she says, rubbing her cheek against his knee. She's still holding the collar but his hand reaches down, palm up and she sighs and relinquishes it.

“There's no need to be so reluctant to return my property,” he chides her softly. “I fully intend to fasten it around your neck, you know.”

“Now?” she asks, looking up at him eagerly because she wants to see his face when she's wearing his collar as well a dozen whip marks. He might even just fuck her, right here, right now, because he's got to be as aroused as she is and she's not sure how much longer she can wait to come. “Please, Wes?”

“After you made me wait like this, do you really think I'll be that ready to indulge your whims?” he asks, looking pretty fucking tempted all the same.

She grins. “Yes,” she says simply.

“Come up here,” he says, crooking his finger at her, which, if it were anyone else doing it would leave her growling, but when it's Wes it triggers this quiver of lust instead. She settles herself in his lap, giving him a knowing little smile as she feels how hard he is, and winds her arms around his neck, sighing as he kisses her, his hand coming up to cup her breast and tease at her tight, aching nipple.

“I'll allow you to wear it now,” he says slowly, thinking it through with the concentration and focus he always brings to the games they play, the bargains they strike, “but there's still the matter of the unconscionable time I had to wait outside that changing room for you.” He forestalls her indignant reminder that he liked the results well enough with a stern tap of his finger against her lips, and carries on. “I waited twenty-six minutes, Faith. Do you think you can wait that long to come?” His hand goes between her legs, which nearly makes her answer ‘no’ right there, and he tests how wet she is with this satisfied look appearing on his face. “You do seem to be rather...excited.”

She arches up, trying to keep his finger inside her, gasping as it's withdrawn mercilessly slowly. “So do you,” she points out, with a squirm that has him breathing a whole lot faster. “Can you wait that long?”

He tips her off his knee, setting her on her feet and says, “Yes, I most certainly could, but I don't have to, do I?” He leans back, fingers tapping against the arms of the chair and stares up at the ceiling, lips curved in a dreamy smile. “I could tell you to get back on your knees and use your mouth to bring me off, or just your hands. I could even do it myself while you stood there, my collar snug around your throat, watching me and forbidden to move, or touch yourself.”

She blinks and swallows. No way she can do that—any of that—and not come whether she's touched or not. She's so close she's having trouble standing still, feeling warning quivers running through her cunt as her body tries to go ahead with or without permission from Wesley. “Well, yeah, you could,” she says cautiously, “but doesn't it seem like a waste? When I'm here, and you could just fuck me instead, and, if I'm gonna be honest, Wes, I'm really not sure I can wait that long.”

He shakes his head. “No. Not a waste at all.” He gives her a fondly exasperated look. “And of course you can wait a mere half an hour—”

“Twenty-six minutes! And we already started right? So it's like, twenty-three, maybe?”

“It won't start until you're wearing this,” he says, holding up her collar so it dangles from his hand like the pretty black and silver bait it is. “But I'm gratified by your new-found appreciation of the importance of exact time-keeping—”
“Wes!”

“Yes, Faith?” and he's arcing his eyebrow in pretended surprise and she has to bite back an anguished moan because he's such a fucking bastard, he really is.

“Let me come. Please? I'm so fucking close, I really am.”

He draws the collar between his hands and snaps it, making her jump. “Shouldn't the first step toward that goal be begging me to put this on you? As I thought I made it quite clear where your—eventual—climax comes in tonight's events, and it's most certainly not while your neck is bare.”

And she's never sure when he's teasing her because he can do it with a totally straight face.

“But I think, to be fair, I should wait too,” he says generously. “And I haven't really explored the possibilities of my present, now have I?” He stands up and begins to fasten the collar around her neck, smiling slightly as she gives a convulsive shudder at the touch of the leather, her nipples hardening with a sharp throb echoes in her clit. “How does it feel? The whip, I mean? It's very decorative, but not exactly a toy.”

“I don't know yet,” she says, glancing down. The first mark, across her breasts, has already faded to pink. “You didn't really hurt me, if that's what you mean.”

“Would you like me to?” he asks. “Hurt you?” And there's a trace of doubt there, where she wants to hear nothing but certainty, which has her squeezing her eyes shut in momentary panic. She needs him unswerving, unwavering, utterly determined, giving her nothing to do but what he says.

“Yes! No. I just...” She shakes her head, irritated by her inability to express her thoughts with anything like coherence. “Wes, I don't want you to leave more marks than the four already on my ass. Marks that stay, I mean. That's like, a limit, okay?”

“God, Faith,” he says, sounding shaken, “you can't possibly think I'd ever inflict that much damage on you again.”

“No,” she says. “I don't.” She takes one of those deep breaths that are supposed to help and says, “But you want to go right up to that limit, don't you, Wes? Not always, but sometimes? I know you do. I can tell because—”

“Because what?” he asks, and his eyes are intent, almost anxious and God, way to totally fuck-up an hour of foreplay in sixty seconds or less, Faith.

“You spanked me last night and it was...different.” She's groping for the words and for his hand, linking their fingers and bringing them up to the collar she's wearing, rubbing his knuckles against it for a moment. “You weren't holding back; you were doing it as hard as you could, as hard as you wanted to...” She bites her lip. “Fuck, you've no idea how that made me feel!”

“I know how I felt,” he says slowly. “So very aroused by it. By you, by what you were letting me do—wanting me to do. And it's why, when I'd finished, I came close to fucking you while you still had tears in your eyes.”

“Wish you had,” she whispered.

He shakes his head. “No. I needed to regain some small amount of control at least.” His mouth twists in a half-smile when he sees how unconvinced she looks. “Really. Allow me to know best when it comes to that.”
“But you'll do it again?” she asks. “Because, and I may be way out of line here, but you flinched when I mentioned those marks—”

“Scars,” he says bluntly. “They won't fade like these will.” His fingertip follows one of the deep-red lines crossing her stomach and she sucks in a sharp breath, grabbing onto his arm.

“Did that hurt?” he asks, sounding detached, although there's a pulse jumping in his neck. “Or do you wish I'd struck you harder?”

“Harder,” she says. “Way harder. You can, can't you? Without worrying that you're going to really mark me up?”

He nods slowly. “Yes. But I'm not sure I will.”

“Because of the scars?” she demands. “Is that still bothering you? Wes, I've told you my limits, some, anyway and I fucking trust you not to go beyond them so don't even say a word! And I'll stop you if you don't get it right, so there's nothing to make you hold back any more.”

“It's not a matter of holding back—” he begins.

“Then pick up the whip and hurt me with it,” she says. “Don't think about that night in your study, don't feel guilty that you hurt me, or guilty that a part of you got off on it—or both.” She gets a look at the conflict in his eyes. Oh, yeah. Both. “That's not what this is about now.”

“You make it sound so simple,” he murmurs.

“Because it is.” She digs her teeth into her lip and shoves two fingers into her cunt, bringing them up wet, showing them to him. “I've been like this since I saw the look on your face when I gave you that whip. I've been waiting for you, Wes and I've been doing it for hours now. Waiting for you to show me—”

“What?” he whispers, moving closer, reaching out to capture her hand and stroke her damp fingers with his. “What do you want to see, Faith?”

She's shaking her head. “Want to feel, Wes—”

“Feel? Like this?”

His teeth close around her nipple and she cries out because it's almost enough, almost—

“You're not to come,” he says harshly, lifting his head and hooking a finger under her collar. “I'll take this off you if you do.”

“How much time do I have?” she asks, forcing out the words.

He tilts his wrist and studies his watch. “Seventeen minutes.”

She laughs because it's impossibly far away. “Oh God. Can't make it, Wes. Can't.”

“Allow me to distract you,” he says smoothly and nods toward the bedroom. “Hands and knees, Faith, until you reach the bed.” And he's right, it does. Dropping down and feeling the carpet rub against the palms of her hands, the curve of her knees, her feet, she regains enough control now that she can't see his face, his eyes so full of love and lust and longing, that she thinks she might just make it to the end of the minute. The whip cracks down across her ass, making her yelp and for
off you go.”

He sounds so fucking *chirpy* all of a sudden, she thinks as she crawls, head up, cunt slicked, ass and thighs getting flicked by the whip every few seconds because she's going too fast, too slow, not keeping her back straight, but it beats uncertain.

She reaches the bed and stops.

“Up on it, lying on your back,” he says.

She turns her head and he's leaning against the door jamb, one hand unfastening the top buttons on his shirt, the whip grasped loosely in the other, tapping against his thigh in a restless, eager rhythm. He gives her a smile that's equal parts cruel and tender.

“And spread your legs wide for me, Faith. I want to see how wet you are.”

She's taking in tiny little gasps of air, heart hammering, by the time she's in position, and he comes over and crouches by the bed, making a soothing sound as his fingers go back to the nipple he's been tormenting all night, twisting it slowly.

“Do you think I'm terribly cruel, Faith? Not letting you come when we both know you're capable of climaxing again, so very quickly, after all?”

She manages to give him a smile. “Yeah, but you never do, Wes, so I'm not—oh God—” She shudders as his mouth replaces his fingers, no teeth this time, just a hard suck on the swollen flesh, with his tongue lapping at it slowly. “I don't ever really think you will.”

He straightens up. “I don't, because it makes it easier for you,” he says in a matter-of-fact voice. “You can bear so much more when you're aroused.” He gets that thoughtful look and purses his lips. “Although we haven't tested that, have we? Perhaps I should make you come one day and then spank you.”

And he might be right but she's hot and trembling and she's willing to take the chance. “Do it now, Wes,” she begs him. “Make me come and I don't care what you do after that.”

“But I want you to care,” he tells her, “and no.” He stands up, the whip in his hand. “Can you hold position?” he asks. “Or should I restrain you?”

It's a serious question but one she can't answer, moving her head on the pillow in a negation, not of anything he plans, but the impossibility of deciding.

He frowns. “Really, Faith! I think I'd like you to be a little more responsive when I ask you a question.”

And as he's only got to touch her to have her body jerking helplessly, every muscle locking, and her cunt's a sticky, glistening mess, she thinks that's enough response for anyone.

He ties her in the end, wrists and ankles. “I must get something a little sturdier than these scarves very soon,” he says as he tweaks at the final knot. “Would you like that, Faith? Cuffed and collared, you'd look quite stunning I think.”

“How much longer?” she says, ignoring him because she so doesn't need any more pictures like that racing through her head. “Wes—”

“I think if you ask me that again, I'll do away with it all together, and make you wait as long as I see
“fit,” he says, sounding annoyed. “And trust me; it'll be longer than the original time limit.”

“You wouldn't!” she spits out, furiously. “Wes, that's just so—”

“Then I suggest you pay attention to what I'm doing and stop anticipating,” he says sharply. “In fact—” He stands up and gives her a look that's pretty anticipatory itself. “I'm going to use the whip on you now, Faith. Not very hard, not yet, but with rather more force than before.”

And maybe she'll come from that, she thinks hazily, and he couldn't blame her because she really doesn't think she'll be able to stop herself. “Yeah, Wes,” she says thickly. “I'd like that.”

He bends over and undoes the scarf that's holding her right wrist pinned and she blinks at him, puzzled.

“What are you doing?”

“You'll need one hand free after all,” he tells her. “I think a good way to focus your wandering attention on the here and now is to make you a more active participant, don't you?” And as her forehead squinches up in a frown he smiles. “Touch yourself, Faith. Show me exactly where you want to be whipped.” He's looking so fucking pleased with himself. “We'll take it in turns,” he adds. “Six strokes each, I think. Off you go.”

He's done this before; given her the illusion of control, but it's never been more of a mockery than this. And she'd argue, she'd beg for him to take all twelve strokes, make them as hard as he likes, anything to spare her having to choose where they land, but she knows he won't relent.

Knows she really doesn't want him to.

And the pride in her that flashes across his face as she strokes her finger across the top of her breasts, carefully avoiding her nipples for now, makes her glad she didn't even try to change his mind.

“My brave Faith,” he murmurs.

And she guesses she is, because as she lies there, watching the whip come down—and she tries to look at his face, because he's so fucking beautiful right now, lips tight, eyes dark with arousal, cheeks flushed, but she can't, she can't—she tries not to move so each slash lands precisely where it's supposed to.

And she manages it, mostly, but the scarves aren't enough to keep her in place as the final stroke—chosen by her, not him, because she'd forced open her eyes after the penultimate one and said, “Again,” —lands on her clit, and she comes, free hand flying down to cup the punished, bruised flesh protectively as her body's wracked with a release that's too intense to be pure pleasure.

She's too exhausted to open her eyes for a while, not making the effort even when Wesley unties her, kissing the palm of her hand gently.

Then he says, “Turn over,” and they fly open.

“Kinda not able to move here, Wes,” she murmurs.

“But able to come,” he says.

And he's looking—not entirely pleased, which brings her back to life really fast.

“I couldn't help it!” she protests. “And it was way past when you said I could!”
He starts to undress. “Are you sure?”

And of course she isn't. He's the one with the fucking watch after all. And it's all he's wearing now, which means she's humming with appreciation, as she stares at him, her eyes going to his cock, which is nearly flat against his stomach, darkly flushed and wet-tipped.

Remembering that he wanted her to turn over and yeah, the thought of being fucked is enough to make her all kinds of motivated because she's riding a high from the whipping that's going to take more than one solitary climax to ground her, she rolls to her stomach, letting out a whimper as her skin touches the sheets.

“Do you want me to fuck you now, Faith?” he asks.

“You know I do,” she says throatily. “I always do, Wesley.”

His hand comes down and takes hold of her wrist, pulling it up to the headboard. “Hold it,” he instructs her. “Tightly. And with your other hand too, please.”

“Wes?” she says uncertainly, obeying him, but turning her head to look at him. “What are you going to do?”

“I'm going to give you four strokes on your arse, Faith.” And she's not sure she wants any more, not really, just his cock, and she's all set to tell him, maybe even use her safeword, because he likes it when she does that, when he continues, “And I know exactly where they're going to land.”

And so does she, and she knows why he wants to do this, and she curls her fingers around the frame and waits in silence, remembering the order, there, oh yes, and the next one lower—third one so close to the second, so the marks almost touch, and the fourth—

It's hard enough to tear a scream from her throat and she hears the clatter as the whip lands on the carpet, the jeweled handle knocking against the night table.

“Faith,” he says urgently, his hands warm on her back, “I'm sorry, I just—”

“Fuck me,” she says, not turning to look at him, her voice tight and strained. “Wesley, fuck me now.”

And she thinks if he hesitates, if he says a word, she'll scream again, but his hands lift her hips and his cock slides into her in a slow, smooth push, into the heat and the slicked softness that her fingers never fill the way this does, and he's muttering her name over and over as he speeds up, fucking her harder now as her hands release the frame and she braces herself so she can feel every lovely, perfect slam of his body against hers.

Chapter One Hundred and Fifty-Six

She can't remember every being this happy. Not even during those other weeks when she lived with him, loved him, because then the happiness was brief and spurious, clouded from view by doubt and uncertainty and all the lies that were buried deep inside her heart.

But now she falls asleep in his arms, and he stays awake so the last thing she hears before she gives in to sleep is his voice telling her how much he loves her. And even though she knows that he likes to jump out of bed when the cock starts crowing or whatever, he stays there still holding her tight and as her eyes slowly open, he tells her he loves her, and as everything comes into focus the heartbreakingly tender expression on his face is the first thing she sees.
He never makes her wait in the morning. Not the last two anyway. Just strokes and fondles and kisses flesh still sore from the night before, because they're working their way down the list, and then pulls her down on top of him so she can loll her hips lazily, relishing the feel of him hard inside her.

She notices now how she's not needy like last time either. Maybe because she doesn't need anything, she's got it all, even if he makes her wait and beg for it. And they haven't sat down and talked about what will happen when she has to go back to Florida on the 3rd. Like, if she's coming back and when and where they're going to live and how she'll have to find a job because she's not being kept by him and he can just fucking accept that. But she's not freaking about it. They haven't talked about it because it's already a done deal when he speculates on whether her hair will have grown back by the summer. Or she tells him that they're going back to the cottage with nothing but a baggie of weed and some suntan lotion.

Not like they've spent the last two days gazing into each other's eyes and holding hands in Central Park though. She's been treated to the Wesley Wyndam-Pryce New York guided tour, following his dementedly organized itinerary that took in the Guggenheim, the Whitney, MOMA, the Frick and the Met in just one day and then he decided when she was sat in the cab with a pounding head and a slideshow of pictures still kaleidoscoping in front of her eyes until she wasn't sure whether she could tell the difference between a Warhol from a Watteau, that they still had time to do the Guggenheim Soho. If her feet hadn't been throbbing so much she'd have jumped out of the cab and thrown herself on the sidewalk in protest. As it was she had to promise that if he took her to the movies and bought her Chinese takeout instead she'd let him spank her tits with her hairbrush and that worked out pretty well. He'd been so pleased with her and the bruises on her breasts that she got to wear her collar in bed that night.

And today they'd gone on the Circle Line tour even though the wind coming off the water was so cold that she thinks it might have blown the top layer of her skin right off. Then they'd done the Statue Of Liberty and the Empire State Building and despite a minor spat because she wanted to give him a blowjob at 1,453 feet, she'd got over her hissy fit at his refusal by the time she was teetering around the ice rink at the Rockefeller Center while Wes drank coffee and winced theatrically every time she fell over. She'd tried to get him on the ice because Wes clutching her hand and swearing under his breath while he…

“Oh, bloody hell!” His anguished groan from the bathroom snaps her out of the adorable picture of Wes clinging to the side of the ice rink and begging her not to let go of his hand. She's not even dressed yet, just sat moony-eyed on the edge of the bed in her Fifi set of underwear with her Celine dress still wrapped in tissue paper.

“Hey, Wes, what's the trauma?” she calls and then catches her breath as he appears in the doorway of the en suite in starched white shirt and black trousers. Never realized just how much she'd missed his suits. And Wes in black tie and tux? She thinks she might have just come right there.

“Faith! You're not even dressed,” he snaps, this little crease of agitation appearing between his eyebrows. Then the tight line of his mouth curves into a wolfish grin at the pale, bruised skin of her breasts. “You won't be able to wear a bra with your dress.”

“I guess,” she agrees equably, reaching round to unfasten it and watching his tongue snake out to lick his bottom lip as her nipples make a guest appearance.

“This sodding tie is going to be the death of me,” he complains, not taking his eyes off her breasts for a second. “And really, Faith, I think it's only fair that one of your future duties should be to assist me in fastening it.”

“But I don't know how!”
“Then it's high time that you learnt,” he tells her without an ounce of sympathy. “It's an accomplishment that every girl should have.”

She gets up from the bed and eyes the length of black satin doubtfully. “Maybe you should get one of those ones on a bit of elastic.”

He shudders just like she knew that he would. “Over my dead body,” he mutters faintly before narrowing his eyes. “Stop distracting me with your quite considerable charms and put on your dress. God knows we're late enough already.”

Seems like the ballet brings out Wes' most cranky mood so she bites back the snarky retort which she's got good to go, wriggles into the dress and contorts herself trying to get the zipper up while he stands and watches her with just trace amounts of amusement until he sighs good naturedly. “Come here, darling girl.”

The zipper follows his fingers' upward trajectory as he strokes up her spine and presses a kiss to the nape of her neck before turning her round and holding her at arm's length.

“Oh, Faith…” he breathes and she tugs at the full skirt nervously.

“Is it too much? Because maybe I should change. And is it too low cut for a swank ballet thing because I don't want to flash the other boxes and…”

“You look exquisite,” he says softly, cupping her cheek with his hand. “Beautiful. So very beautiful.”

She closes her mouth on the babble about how maybe her Claire's sparkly barrettes don't go with the dress and concentrates really hard on the top button of his shirt so she doesn't ruin her eye makeup by crying.

“You look pretty spiffy yourself, Wes,” she purrs, giving in to the temptation to press her hand against that crisp shirt front. “Really missed you all suited up.”

“That's very sweet of you, Faith,” he says, rolling his eyes because he's so shit at taking compliments. “And much as I relish your opinion on my sartorial choices, I'd like you to fasten this hellish contraption, please.”

She takes the black strip from him and it's all his fault that she's already picturing it tied around her wrists while he fucks her up against the walls of a bathroom stall in Lincoln Center.

“How the fuck does this thing actually work?” she asks him curiously, holding it up to his neck and squinting to see if there's some cunning little hook and eye device.

“It's very simple really,” he assures her as she gives him a “so why the fuck don't you do it?” look. “And if you do it to my satisfaction, then I'll give you a reward.”

And when he puts it like that so she's starting to think that maybe her bathroom fantasy wasn't so far-fetched, she's got it looped round his neck in the blink of an eye.

“First you need to make one end slightly longer than the other,” he says, smiling faintly as she stands on tip toe and gives the tie a quick yank. “And, please, Faith, try not to strangle me. Now you have to cross the longer end over the shorter…”

It only takes her two goes before she's got a perfect bow fit to have its picture taken and she's doing a little victory bump and grind.
“I fucking rule,” she gloats, giving the knot a proprietary pat. “What's my reward? Can I have it now or is it the kind of thing that's going to have to wait until later?” Her eyebrows swoop up suggestively. “If you know what I mean, Wes?”

He's already got his finger hooked into his collar so he can tug at it and pout so he looks like a little boy about to be sent to bed without any dinner. Sometimes he could be so fucking cute, it wasn't even funny. “I really think that whoever invented bow ties was, well…”

“A sadist?” she suggests daringly, feeling her stomach dip deliciously, as she goes maybe just a little too far and touches her finger to the one bruise that's just edging out of the neckline of her dress. “Takes one to know one, Wes.”

There's a second of highly charged silence before he bends his head so he can kiss the spot where her finger has been. “Indeed it does. And stop being so bloody provocative otherwise I won't give you the first part of your reward.”

“There are parts?” she asks eagerly. “How many?”

He crosses over to the nightstand and gets something out of the drawer and her tummy's doing the mambo again or should that be, like, a *pas de deux*? She gives a sigh of relief when she sees that he's got one of the black silk scarves in his hand.

“Thought we were going to be late, Wes? Don't think there's enough time to tie me up and have your wicked way with me,” she says and giggles. “Or maybe we could sneak in during the interval or something?”

“We most certainly could not!” His eyebrows have shot up in horror and he gives her his most aggrieved glare, which just makes her giggle harder. “I haven't witnessed one of your capricious interludes for quite some time. Maybe I should rethink the reward, Faith?”

“I'll be good!” Now it's her turn to be all huffy because it's mean to promise her something and then snatch it away.

“No, you won't,” he drawls, prowling toward her. “But I prefer you when you're being bad anyway so that works out rather well. Now stand still, please.”

She's motionless as he winds the scarf round her neck again and again and then ties it with a tiny little knot that's hidden by the fall of her hair. Then she lifts her head and looks questioningly at him.

“The collar wouldn't be appropriate,” he tells her almost wistfully. “But this improvised little choker is imbued with the same meaning. Tell me what it means, Faith?”

“That I belong to you. That you own me.” She doesn't even have to think about it. The words tumble from her lips with assured ease.

He nods and gives her an encouraging smile. “That's very good, Faith. And what else?”

“That when I'm wearing it around my neck it's because I've earned it and you're pleased with me.” It's more than that though. It clears everything out of her head and leaves her calm and secure like he's touching her all the time and never taking his hands away.

“I think…” he clears his throat and she waits patiently for the punch line. “It also means that we're in the middle of a game, Faith. When you're wearing my collar, or an adequate substitute, I want you to be on edge, waiting, expectant for an order, a command. If I tell you to get to your knees and bring me off with your pretty mouth, you'll do it, won't you?”
Doesn't need to think about that either. “Yes, Wesley.”

“And if you want to stop at any time, then what do you need to do?” His eyes are burning into her and she can't help but arch toward the heat.

“Say my word.”

The tension dissipates in the time it takes him to give her a dazzling smile and run his fingers through her hair. Then he frowns again. “Good God, is that the time? You haven't got your shoes on. And the car will be here imminently. In fact, I'm surprised the driver hasn't…”

And she listens to his adorably anal rant as she moves with all the slow grace of a fucking prima ballerina and steps into her shoes, brushes her hair one last time, slicks on another coat of lipstick and all the time she can feel the reassuring pressure of the silk around her neck.

Chapter One Hundred and Fifty-Seven

They've passed Lincoln Center a few times before on their adventures through the city. Sure, the complex of interconnected theaters, offices, and recital halls is massive and impressive during daylight hours, but at night—at night it sparkles and glitters and glows. And despite the chilly evening, couples and small groups mill around in the courtyard, admiring the giant fountains.

Of course, she isn't overdressed in the slightest, she realizes as they step out of the car and into the sumptuously dressed crowd. Most of the men are in black tie, or beautifully-cut suits. And the other women! She recognizes a few dresses from their shopping trips and so many of them are wrapped in ostentatious furs and jewels that make her even more unsure of the sparkly rhinestone barrettes in her hair. Still, the black silk scarf wound 'round her neck means more to her than any bauble from Tiffany's or Harry Winston ever could. Wes' arm is curled possessively around her waist as he leads her to their seats, and even when his hands aren't on her, the smooth warmth of the silk keeps her tethered to him.

And she is on edge—just as he'd ordered her to be—and the two hours (plus interval) indicated as the running time in the program is enough to make her fidgety already. The synopsis of the story doesn't sound too promising either—Giselle falls for the wrong guy, he breaks her heart, she goes mad and dies. Sounds like a real thrill ride, but the second act sounded more promising, maybe, when Giselle becomes one of the Wilis, a pack of jilted girls who lure young men into dancing to their deaths. But Giselle ends up saving the life of Albrecht, the one who screwed her over. Not very realistic, there—she's pretty sure that if Wes broke up with her again, the last thing she'd do is save him from a bunch of killer zombie ballerinas. With a sigh, she closes her program and decides maybe it's better to take in the atmosphere than try and understand the plot.

The box they're seated in is empty of any other patrons and there's enough room and seclusion to send a number of scenarios spinning through her head—Wesley casually slipping his hand under the voluminous folds of her dress, or pulling her behind the heavy curtains of the box, out of sight of the rest of the audience and pushing her up against the wall, his hands curling over the point where her breasts swell out of the top of her dress.

“...not altogether interested in music written specifically for the ballet, but the notes here on the score...” Her attention flickers back to him as his voice trails off and he leans in, lightly brushing his lips over an exposed portion of her neck before whispering, “A discussion of the music isn't interesting? So what are you thinking about, Faith?”

And for some reason—the scarf, the proximity of so many other people, or perhaps just that sweetly dangerous edge to his voice—sends a blush crawling over her cheeks. It's almost like thinking dirty
thoughts in church, she thinks. And just before she can pull it together and snap back at him with a witty retort, the conductor steps into the orchestra pit to polite applause and the lights dim slowly as the strains of the overture fill the hall.

As the curtain rises, the stage is full of activity—and for the first few minutes she's enraptured at the sight of all those dancers and their costumes and the grandeur of the sets, but then there's less dancing and lots of weird over-exaggerated mimed acting that sets out the plot and yeah, it's getting a little boring and the music's kind of making her sleepy.

That's when she starts to get a little fidgety. It's not too bad; just a little shifting around to keep herself from nodding off as Giselle's mother warns her of the dangers of dancing, or boys, or eating too much cheese, or something. But when the scene goes on and on forever, she can't help but chew the ragged edge of a torn fingernail and then discreetly examine strands of her hair for split ends. And she's just about to start drumming her fingers on the armrest, because like, isn't Wes bored yet too? Surely he must be—he had been the one who'd said ballet wasn't really his cup of tea anyway, right? But no, out of the corner of her eye, she can see his gaze locked on the stage—he's leaning forward slightly, completely transfixed and transported. So much for all those naughty little fantasies she'd concocted.

Though the moment her fingers roll once across the wooden bar that's separating them, his hand clamps down around her wrist, pinning it to the armrest. “Faith,” he breathes, “please try and sit still. You're very distracting.”

Yanking her hand away, she settles back, with a huff, in her seat, and when she sulkily folds her arms across her chest, there's a little tug on the scarf. To her complete surprise, in her boredom she's nearly forgotten it was there. Chastised, and wanting to make sure he doesn't get so annoyed at her that he removes it from around her neck, she straightens up and manages to remain interested through the rest of the act, even though Giselle's mad scene is kind of overdone in her opinion, and the only good part is when the ballerina falls onto Albrecht's sword and does a pretty good impression of someone so heartbroken that death is the only answer.

There's polite but not very enthusiastic applause as the lights come up at intermission.

“Hey, that was really something, Wes...” she begins, eager to make amends.

He cuts her off with a sharp snap. “Silence, Faith.”

Okay, yeah, she thought he'd be annoyed, but not like this. She's starting to apologize as he reaches behind her hair and begins to pick apart the knot in the black silk. “I'm sorry, Wes. I didn't mean to be so bratty.”

“How another word,” he says, pulling the scarf free and leaving a strip of cold flesh around her neck that had previously been cradled by the soft touch of the warm silk. “I'm more than a little displeased with your inconsiderate behavior.”

“I didn't mean—”

“Give me your hands.” His voice is even and low but he's got that frosty look in his eyes that used to scare her and turn her on in equal measure, sending her heart beating a mile a minute, and now's no different. She can't even look him in the eye as she extends her arms in his general direction, and it's all she can do not to give a little whimper of longing and frustration as he wraps the silk around her wrists and fastens it there with another tight knot. He gives a little unconscious nod, pleased at his work as he positions her so that her bound hands rest in her lap, a little too close in proximity to her now-wet and aching pussy, even if there are several layers of fabric between them.
“I'm going to the lobby bar for a drink,” he announces, his disapproving gaze boring right through her. “I'd ask if you'd like something too, but you'll be just fine, I think. You're to remain here and not move until I return. Is that clear?”

As if she could argue, retort, say no. “Yes, Wesley,” she whispers, her voice cracking a little. She wouldn't dare to move now, not even to shift in the seat or anything else to relieve the near-unbearable throb of longing that's making sitting perfectly still nearly impossible.

“Good,” he drawls smoothly. Rising to his feet, he strides out of the box, not even catching her eye as he leaves.

And she doesn’t really mind that he’s left her all alone, though if he doesn’t bring her back something to drink then he’s going to be in a world of trouble. At least all the prancing and ridiculous miming is finished and she can rubberneck at the audience, giving them marks out of ten for their fashion choices. Eat your heart out, Joan Rivers, she thinks to herself as she stares in amazement at a fat woman who’s made the mistake of wearing skin-tight red satin which makes her butt look like the business end of a fire truck. And, look, there’s Wes, and he totally has to start wearing black tie round the house more, making his way up some stairs with an ice bucket and a couple of glasses in his other hand. Can’t be that mad with her, not really, if he’s going to let her have champagne.

She wriggles in her seat while she still can, after making sure he’s not looking up at her to make sure she’s doing a statue impersonation and decides happily that she’s not going to be knocking back the Moet with her hands tied so he’s just going to have to put the scarf back round her neck so it doesn’t get all lost what with it being real silk an’ all or feed her the champagne. Either way is fine with her. But maybe she should practice a few of her deep-breathing, yoga-y skills so she can ixnay on the fidgeting because it was sweet of him to take her out and buy her a dress and Jeez, ballet is really not the new rock ‘n’ roll.

That’s the general plan anyway. That she’s going to sit still. She really, really is. But Wes is gone so long and when she leans over the edge of the box, she realizes why. Because he’s got some skanky blonde clutching his arm and throwing her head back like she’s having a hysterical fit. Okay, she’s not that skanky because actually she’s some Calvin Kleiny, thirty-something who looks like she was freshly delivered from the WASP assembly line that morning and would never go out to the frickin’ ballet with two-dollar barrettes in her hair.

It’s Anne. She knows it is before Wes looks up and gives her a little wave which she acknowledges with a cool nod of her head while her eyes shoot laser beams death rays at Anne who doesn’t seem to get the message because now she’s patting Wes’ arm like it’s her favorite thing in the world while she does a fucking good impression of a hyena.

Wes finally makes his escape and disappears into a throng of people all making their way back to the cheap seats and she manages to get at least five quality minutes of wriggle time in before he gets back and she fixes him with wide eyes and a dangerously trembling bottom lip.

“Even though you don’t deserve it, I’ve decided to let you have some champagne,” he begins and then stops when he finally gets a look at the frightened, little bunny face she’s giving him. “Faith, it was Anne,” he says softly. “I said hello, had a polite conversation about what we did over the holidays and then told her I had to get back to my box because my girlfriend was bored to tears and liable to start…”

She’s not having to fake the startled fawn act anymore. “Say what?” she demands. “You called me your girlfriend?”

“Well, I was hardly going to call you my exceedingly ill-behaved, teenage ex-secretary, was I?” he
asks her silkily, turning to expertly pop the cork out of the champagne with a minimum of froth. And she had been about to go weak kneed or cry (she wasn’t sure which) because he’s never called her his girlfriend before, until he made that last crack.

“It’s not that,” she murmurs tremulously. “Though someone should tell Anne that her updo makes her look, like, fifty.” She’s getting way off message again and Wes is getting way flinty-eyed and not being forthcoming with the champagne. “It’s just this woman came in while you were gone and she said she was one of your clients and then she got all freaked out when she saw I was tied up,” it might be a touch overkill but she forlornly waves her bound hands in his general direction to make sure he appreciates the severity of her predicament, “and then she went to get someone from management.”

Wes’ face looks like a cartoon character who’s just realized that a fifty ton weight’s about to drop on their head from a great height.

“What did she look like?” he demands, kneeling at her feet so he can unpluck the knot with nervous fingers.

“She was really fat,” she improvises. “And she had this red dress on, which I’m telling you Wes wasn’t doing her any favors, and she…”

“It’s rather strange because apart from when I was in the bar, I kept you in sight and apart from sitting up here and fidgeting with a sulky expression on your face, I didn’t see you talking to any garishly dressed larger lady,” he continues smoothly but she’s already got her hands free so she can grab the champagne and one of the glasses and pout at him. “Though I suppose it could have been Mrs. Van Der Tait. She is rather given to hyperbole.”

“Do you think they’ll throw us out? Because that would be beyond humiliating and we might end up on Page Six and, oh fuck, Wes! You’re not buying it, are you?”

“I’m afraid not, Faith. And if I were you I’d cherish the feeling of your arse nestling against the chair because come tomorrow I doubt that you’ll be able to sit on anything,” he tells her darkly but his lips are quirking even as he takes the glass off her and begins to pour the champagne into it with the bottle tilted so it doesn’t bubble over.

“Is that a threat, Wes?” she teases, leaning over to kiss his cheek. “Because it was sounding like all kinds of fun.”

“Well, I’ll spend the duration of Act Two thinking up a suitable punishment that’s less fun, shall I?” he asks her sweetly, handing her the glass and frowning as she downs it in one. “Really, Faith, you seem determined to behave like a hellion this evening.”

She loops one of her free hands around his neck and pulls him in for a respectable, little smooch so she doesn’t scandalize the Park Avenue dowagers in the next box. “Sorry, Wes,” she says, wiping a stray smudge of lipstick off his cheek with a finger. “Thank you for taking me out and letting me get all dressed up but I… y’know, my nana used to say that I had the devil in me when I got like this.”

“Naughty? Irresponsible? In line for a good, hard whipping?” he intones pleasantly and she shoves her chair over so she can rest her head on his shoulder.

“Yup, all of the above,” she agrees. “I promise that I’ll be really good now, even though I think the whole zombie, vampire ballerina thing is totally stretching it.”

The lights are dimming and there’s an expectant hush over the audience who are obviously more
down with the Wilis than she is. “Don’t be too good, Faith,” Wes purrs in her ear and trails the scarf up her arm. “Would you like one more glass of champagne before I bind your hands again?”

“You could tie it round my neck like you did before, couldn’t you?”

“Well, I could,” he says but he sounds pretty fucking doubtful about it.

“And I could get down on my knees and blow you right here,” she suggests and she’s only half joking because if Hilarion hadn’t just pranced on stage like a total wuss, Wes looks tempted enough to give her offer serious thought.

“Maybe later,” he says, practically shoving the bottle at her, so he can lean forward like Manchester United are two goals up or something in the final half. “Have some of this and if you behave yourself I might let you actually come tonight.”

It might be the fact that she pretty much drinks the champagne solo, or the fact that Wes isn’t jonesing so hard on the tutu action that he refuses to hold her hand, but the second act doesn’t suck quite so royally as the first. Queen Myrta and the Wilis are kinda cool in an anorexic, goth girl way and she can’t help but snicker to herself every time she catches sight of what one of the male dancers is packing in his tights. Wes squeezes her fingers warningly a couple of times when the giggles threaten to put in an appearance but really she’s about as good as she can be.

She even gets a bit sniffly when Giselle protects Albrecht from being burned up in the Wilis’ disco inferno, though she sniffs disdainfully and rolls her eyes when she lets him scamper off the next morning. Sucks to be you, she thinks, as Giselle is condemned to an eternity of heavy black eye makeup and carted off with the Wilis for all eternity; just another girl who’s been screwed over in the name of love.

The curtains swoop down and she’s clapping just as fervently as the rest of the stiffs because now they can finally get the hell out of here and Wes had muttered something about post-theater supper in the car.

“I’m starving,” she announces mournfully, turning to him and there, reflected in the house light, is the teeniest, tiniest, most perfectly formed little tear drop catching on the edge of his lashes before trickling down his cheek so he can scrub at it furiously. “Oh my fucking God! You totally just cried over a fucking ballet,” she crows and then wonders if maybe she could have phrased it a bit more tactfully when he gives her an outraged look that has nothing mock about it.

“I did not!” he snaps, standing up so he can look down and give her the full wrath of his glare. “The lights startled me.”

“Oh, whatever, Wes.” And standing up wasn’t really a good idea because she’s a little unsteady on the fuck-me heels and her panties are clinging damply to her pussy. “You so were but it was cute.”

He’s hustling her out of the box and down the steps so all she can do is cling to his arm so she doesn’t go ass over tit. “It was so fucking adorable,” she insists. “Like, you were all overcome with emotion and stuff. I totally dig that about you.”

And just like that his face softens even though his lower lip is still jutting out in a way that’s just asking for her to nibble on it. “It was a rather moving performance,” he admits unwillingly, arm around her to stop her being jostled by the crowd as they approach the exit doors. “But I can assure you, Faith, that I was not…”

“Yeah, you were!” she splutters incredulously and she knows he’s just about to stutter out another
denial when she sees Anne trying to shove her way through the crowd so she can paw at Wes with her skanky mitts. “C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

“Wesley, we really must stop bumping into each other like this!” Anne’s got one of these squeaky, little girl voices that kinda stop being cute once you’re not three anymore. “I just wanted to see if you… oh, you must be Faith,” she pauses uncertainly and Faith flashes her teeth in something that’s meant to be a smile but ends up turning into a snarl.

“Guess I must be,” she agrees, clutching Wes’ arm in a death grip and taking a step forward so she’s blocking Anne from even thinking about touching him.

“Did you enjoy the performance?” Wes asks politely, gently disentangling her hand from cutting off his circulation.

“Well, I think it was a little pedantic,” Anne laughs like she’s just cracked the biggest funny and then she turns to Faith. “Wesley’s told me so much about you.”

“Well, that’s funny because he’s told me absolutely jackshit about you,” she replies demurely and yanks and yanks at Wes’ hand until he starts moving toward the door. “Bye!”

“I’m really sorry,” Wes is muttering as she tries to drag him through the doors and gets them stuck in a bottleneck of people with the same idea. “A little too much champagne and excitement.”

“Wes, c’mon!” she hisses but it comes out at screech-like volume. “Wanna go home now!”

He doesn’t say a word for the whole ten minutes it takes to queue up for their car. His mouth has practically disappeared from view anyway and he’s got his arms folded and his back so rigid, she’s surprised that his bones don’t snap clean in half.

The minute they climb into the toasty leather interior of the car, he turns on her angrily. “You were unforgivably rude, Faith. I’ve a good mind to make you phone Anne tomorrow and apologize.”

“She was, like, completely coming on to you,” she says sulkily and then sidles over the two feet expanse of seat between them. “Do you think she’s prettier than me?”

“Of course she’s not,” he says instantly, like he doesn’t even have to think about it and so she decides to rethink the whole hissy fit she was just on the verge of having and give him a reward instead.

“Damn fucking straight she’s not,” she agrees, straddling him and smooshing against his taut frame. “Have I got nicer tits than her?”

“Yes, and get off me,” he bites out, hands already pushing at her shoulders as she returns the favor by nibbling on his earlobe.

“Nope. See, Wes, already told you got a bottle of champagne and the devil in me,” she husks in his ear.

“Oh, you’ll have the devil in you later, Faith, I promise you,” he drawls and he sounds so fucking dark that she tenses for an instant before she sees his eyebrow winging up challengingly.

And if he wants to throw down then he’s picked the wrong girl. Or the right girl. “Got me hot when you cried, Wes,” she teases as she tries to climb off him but ends up rubbing against his incipient hard-on, as his hands clamp around her waist. “Really. Fucking. Hot…’
And he goes silent on her for the rest of the journey. Not like she minds because she’s been prattling
on about that fucking teardrop for quarter of an hour, watching his eyes glinting at her in the dim
light of the car, his hands gripping her arms so tightly that she knows she’ll be wearing his bruises for
days to come and he’s getting harder and harder as she undulates on top of him. She’s wet enough to
have soaked right through her fifty-dollar panties.

The car pulls up to the curb and Wes is trying to shift her off him, trying to open the door, trying to
get her outside and then inside so he can do whatever the fuck he likes to her because he knows that
she’s going to let him. ‘Cept she’s not finished.

“Should have seen it, Wes,” she slurs, rubbing her cheek against his as he bites his lip down on a
little groan. “Just this one single, crystalline tear running down your face and I wanted to lick it right
off you…”

She never gets to finish the sentence because he’s dragging her out of the car, not even bothering to
slam the door behind them.

The uniformed man in the lobby glances up as they come through the doors and sums up the
situation—drunk girlfriend, pissed-off man—with professional ease. Considering Wesley usually
smiles, calls him by name and exchanges a few words, he deals pretty well with this new, tight-
lipped version who storms across the carpeted floor, his hand tight around Faith's wrist, heading for
the elevator.

Faith has to give the man points for managing to get there first, press the call button and turn, heading
back to the desk, without once looking directly at either of them.

And because it's Wesley, the elevator doors slide obediently open so he doesn't even have to break
stride as he stalks into it and stabs at the button to close the doors.

It's barely begun to move when he halts it, the same way she did the day she arrived, when she was
so full of panic she could barely breathe.

“I'm starting to reconsider the notion of keeping you naked and locked away,” he says, and he
sounds really fucking serious. “As it seems you can't be trusted to behave appropriately in public.”

“Like tying my hands up is so fucking appropriate,” she hisses, trying to make the words come out
the way they sound in her head, which is all reproving and dignified.

Seems she fails because his lips pinch together. “I think we both know your actions were fuelled by
insecurity and boredom rather than resentment at the way I chose to deal with your abominable
fidgeting. And as you don't seem in the least repentant, you can be silent until you're ready to
apologize.”

“Don't hold your fucking breath,” she says as distinctly as possible.

Wesley nods slowly and presses the button to send them up, up and away again. And there’s this
lurch which sends her staggering and when he catches her, the way he always does, she ends up
being spun around so that she’s pressed up against the wall of the elevator, which is all mirrors and
gray velvet padding.

“Five words,” he says into her ear, his left hand already bunching up the skirt of her pretty dress and
dragging it waist-high, exposing her ass. “Hands flat against the wall, Faith.”

He’s got all the room he needs to swing his hand and it lands squarely across her ass with a crack that
sobers her, bringing her surroundings back into focus as the sting spreads out. Given that they're on
the tenth floor he can't exactly make this last and the second slap lands before she's finished moaning from the first. He manages to hit more or less the same spot with every hard, punishing spank and she's biting down on her lip trying to hold back anything that sounds like a word because she's not sure she can take more than five this fast, this hard, not when she's got to keep quiet.

He steps back, releasing the crumpled ruin of her skirt, which falls down as delicately as a snowflake, into a semblance of order, just as the doors slide open.

The hallway's empty, thank God and she steps out into it, her gaze fixed on the door to Wesley's apartment which seems so very far away.

“Stand still,” Wesley says.

She turns and sees him draw the scarf out of his pocket. “I could fasten this once around your neck and use the remainder as a leash,” he says softly. “Make you crawl beside me from here to the door, like the beautiful, disobedient bitch you are tonight. Would you do that?”

“I don't know—” And though she's aroused by the idea of it, so very much, especially now with the champagne wearing away every barrier between his wishes and her limits, she's shaking her head, because the hallway's full of doors just waiting to open. “No, Wes, not here. Please. Inside I will, but not out here. Please.”

“You don't have to beg,” he says, slipping the scarf around her neck so it hangs, fluttering innocently in the faint stir of warm air from the heating vent at their feet. “You only have to say your word. And you don't even have to do that until I give the order.”

She's frowning, confused, as he continues. “But you're absolutely correct, Faith. Location matters and this isn't the place for anything quite that delightfully perverse.” And then she's being dragged along again as he growls, “And there's never a good place to show yourself up in front of a woman whose only crime is having the temerity to find me attractive.”

“Don't know what that means,” she says straightening up and poking him in the chest as he opens the door. “But she can fuck off and stop touching you, and stop laughing with you and smiling at you and—”

“This mood of yours is singularly unattractive, Faith,” he says, propelling her through the door and closing it firmly behind them. “I'm making every allowance for your excessive consumption of champagne—and trust me, you'll be drinking water when we dine with Rupert—”

“What?” And she launches into a tirade about how he can go out with Rupert all by himself, or yeah, take fucking Anne instead, when he turns on his heel, walks into the bedroom and slams the door, leaving her trembling with rage and disappointment and shame and really wanting to fucking break something.

There's a small cubbyhole of a spare room with an unmade bed, the corners stacked high with boxes she guesses belong to the man Wes is renting this place from. After she's glared at the closed door for, like five minutes waiting for it to open, and Wes come out with a plan to make her see the error of her ways, she gives up and goes to it, stripping out of her dress and giving up on doing anything in the small en-suite but peeing and splashing water on her hot face and dry, burning eyes. Curling up with one of the throws from the main room wrapped around her she cries herself to sleep.

She wakes a few hours later, dying of thirst and with a headache that's down more to the tears than the champagne. With the throw draped around her she goes to the kitchen and takes a bottle of water from the fridge, chugging it down until her teeth ache and she can feel the chill spread out across her
body.

Or maybe that's because she's just remembered how disgusted Wes looked when he walked away from her.

“Never did know when to keep your fucking mouth shut, did you?” she mutters to herself.

“No,” he says from the doorway. “You never do.” He's still dressed, but the tie's gone and his shirt sleeves are rolled up.

She looks at him and feels her face pucker up because his voice sounds so empty.

“This the bit where you tell me to fuck off back to my small town and not come back until I've got the hang of being polite?” she asks dully.

“You're capable of being perfectly polite, Faith as true good manners are based around making people feel comfortable no matter what. You didn't make Anne feel comfortable. You embarrassed her and really, it was ungracious of you, as in any contest between you two, you'd emerge the victor and you know it.”

“No, I don't,” she says, in no mood to be lectured. “She might not let you spank her and do everything we do but she's more your sort of person. She's part of your world and I'm not.”

“She doesn't know me,” he says heavily. “And you're at the center of my world, Faith. Please don't make me regret placing you there.” He turns away. “Come to bed. It's very late, and you're shivering.”

“Wes!”

He doesn't turn. “Yes?”

“Will you—” She has to swallow before she can carry on. “Are you going to punish me? For spoiling everything?”

He glances back at her. “You spoiled an evening, yes. One out of many we'll spend together, Faith, not 'everything'.”

And that should make her glad but she's still shivering as she goes over to him. “I want you to punish me.”

He nods, leading the way to his bedroom. “Of course you do. Just be thankful I've acquitted you of staging your behavior in order to achieve that goal because then I'd be really very angry indeed.”

She reaches out and grabs his hand. “I didn't!”

He removes her hand firmly. “I think I just said that I knew that.”

The bedroom light's on and there's a book lying on the bed. She realizes that he's been lying here awake waiting—for what? For his temper to die down, for her to wake up?

“So you're just going to be all cold and ignore me and—”

“I'm going to go to sleep actually,” he says, starting to get undressed. “If you choose to class that as being ignored, do, please, go ahead.” There's the tiniest glimmer of a smile on his face. “It means you'll have to stay awake to fully experience the agony of course, but if I put you on your honor not to fall asleep for, shall we say another hour, I'm sure I can trust you to—”
“You're fucking laughing at me!” she says accusingly.

“A little bit,” he says. His eyes narrow. “But make no mistake, Faith, I will be dealing with your actions which went beyond anything I'm prepared to permit, especially in public.”

“But not now,” she says giving him a narrow-eyed glare of her own.

“Absolutely not,” he says softly. “You don't deserve it, Faith. My attention, like my collar, is something you want and it's not going to come your way as a reward for being petulant, rude and tiresomely repetitive.”

And when she's still gasping over that, he slides naked into bed and places his hand on the bedside light. “Do get into bed, Faith,” he says impatiently.

“You could just fuck me,” she says as she slides in beside him, aware of the fact that she's so close to begging it's not funny, but he hasn't even kissed her. “Might have been all kinds of bad, but you were hard, Wes, you know you were.”

She reaches out and she's about to home in on what she'd been wriggling against all the way home when he rolls onto his side, way from her, leaving the light on as if he knows he's not going to be getting to sleep any time soon. “I took care of that while you were standing outside sulking,” he informs her. “If it's any consolation, I thought of you the whole time.”

“Wesley,” she hisses.

“I know I am,” he says, forestalling her recitation of his shortcomings. “Now go to sleep.”

“Not until you kiss me,” she says firmly as he starts to reach out for the light again. “Because, yeah, I get that you're ignoring me and I let you know I hate this worse than anything, so I guess you must be hating me right now, but if you won't kiss me good night, I'm going back in the spare room.”

There's this long pause and then a defeated sigh. “Come here,” he says, turning over again.

She's snuggled up to him in a split second and kissing him frantically, running her hand over his face and into his hair. He endures it for a minute, and she swears his mouth twitches in a small smile, but then he pushes her away. “I believe I was supposed to give you the kiss,” he reminds her. “Stay still.”

His lips brush hers lightly and when she sighs and presses up against him he draws back, but not before she feels his cock stir, hardening just from having her with him.

“Guess you didn't do a very good job, Wes,” she whispers.

He ignores her comment, despite the interest plainly evident elsewhere on his body. “Surely you don’t see Anne as a threat, Faith.” His voice is curiously flat; he doesn’t seem to have the energy to make it into a question.

Operation Distract Wes doesn’t seem to be going quite as well as she envisioned it. She should have known by now that it wouldn’t be so easy. She stops trying to writhe against him when she’s met with his tired, hard-edged stare, something she hasn’t seen in a long time and what do you know, really didn’t miss. Under his piercing gaze she feels horribly, irrevocably sober suddenly and none of the explanations running through her head seem like the right one. “I don’t—” She feels the familiar prickle of tears forming and she furiously blinks them away. “I didn’t…” Frustrated, at a loss for words, she just shakes her head, no.
“Something must have triggered your little …fit of pique. Tell me,” he says quietly, his tone completely changed. It’s like he’s given her permission to unload it all on him. He even adds that crucial little “please” at the end.

“I felt like I didn’t belong there, you know?” she blurts out, in a rush of feeling because she sees it all now, if not clearly then it’s starting to coalesce. “I’d never been to the ballet before, or surrounded by all those fucking upper-crusty society people, wearing my stupid two dollar barrettes and teetering around in a dress that would be, like three months’ rent back home. All of it, it was just too fucking much. I felt… so fucking out of place, like everyone was going to look at me like, like I was your…” She almost stops herself from saying the word but it’s too late. “Your whore, or, like, your stupid little backwoods, gold-digging… chippy? Is that the word?” She sighs heavily. “Fuck, I spent the whole night terrified I was going to say or do the wrong thing, and then when the time came—when I saw Anne hanging on your arm like she belonged there, well, I just couldn’t stop myself.” She rests her head against his chest, curling herself against him. “And when I saw her, and you, I …I thought she did belong there, Wes. For a second, just a split second, but that’s all it took.” She doesn’t feel like crying anymore but she’s got that tight ache in her chest that comes from holding tears back. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—I wanted us to have a nice evening. I didn’t mean to ruin it. Honest.”

Her words must soften him somewhat because he pulls her close, kissing the top of her head. “I know. I know you didn’t. But I must assure you that no-one was going to think those things until you started acting the part, Faith. “

“Yeah. I’m really fucking good at that sometimes,” she adds ruefully.

He smiles down at her—a real, unforced smile and he doesn’t look so furious anymore. “Most of the time I find it incredibly refreshing. But your reputation as a brat is not entirely unwarranted. Especially this evening.”

“My nana was always right, Wes, I gotta say.”

He laughs. “Well, you did warn me. I suppose it’s my fault for fanning the flames, as it were.”

She rolls her eyes. “God, you’re never going to let me drink champagne again, are you? Not even if I promise to—”

He actually arches his fucking eyebrow. “Promise to—?”

She smiles slyly. “Sip it like I’m a fucking lady, not glug it down like it’s a shot of Jäger and I’m trying to win the commemorative shot glass?” she answers, mock-imperiously.

“You would drive Miss Manners to fits, my darling girl.”

She’s relieved, because now he looks more bemused than anything. He strokes her cheek, almost absent-mindedly, and she beams. “Kinda proud of that, Wes, even if tonight wasn’t exactly the night to go about proving it.”

“Well, no. Now, go to sleep. It’s been a long, unexpectedly trying evening.” He kisses her exposed shoulder, lingering there for a moment before rolling back over onto his side, taking a good deal of quilt with him.

“Hey! Wes! Give that back!” she shrieks. “Unless that’s how you’re gonna punish me after all? Make me spend the night as a Faith-shaped popsicle?” Oh, she knows it was totally unintentional, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t enjoy ratcheting up the only-slightly-faux outrage to eleven. And anyway, she is frickin’ freezing. Her feet are like little blocks of ice. She presses herself tightly
against Wes, who, in typical boy fashion, is throwing out enough BTUs to power a small city. She’s just snuggling in, grabbing great fistfuls of quilt, when he grits out, “Good lord, Faith. You’re freezing!”

“What did I just say, Wes? Have I been speaking dolphin or something?”

“You feet are like…”

“Little blocks of ice? Deja-fucking-vu, Wes. The popsicle thing wasn’t an idle threat.”

“I can see that.” He rolls back toward her. “Short of putting you in some footie pajamas, what do you suggest we do about it?”

She doesn’t answer right away, if only because she’s momentarily distracted by the mental image of a young Wes padding around the great, drafty family manse in footie PJs, trailing a threadbare teddy bear behind him. “They have those in the, uh, mother country?”

And she’s raising her voice because Wes seems to have disappeared, lost to the great expanse of quilt until she hears a muffled, “yes, they do,” before feeling the comforting weight of him as he settles in between her thighs, parting them dexterously. “We may just have to improvise,” he mutters.

“Thought I didn't earn the right to have your attention tonight,” she says, half-teasingly and giggling, yeah giggling as his touch.

“You may receive a little reward, albeit a very small one, for being honest and forthcoming just now.” It only takes a small brush of his hand and his warm breath on her inner thigh start erasing the hours of sulking and crying and rekindle that spark of heat inside, making her almost instantly wet. Even if she is feeling about as far from sexy as possibly at that moment.

“How small?” The question comes out as a squeak as he slides one finger, then another, inside her, his only answer a little muffled noise of surprise when he finds her slick and ready—for whatever it is he has planned.

“I suppose that depends,” he says, after lazily finger fucking her for a few moments without making any advances toward her insistently throbbing clit, instead drawing his fingers out slowly and sliding back up to lie next to her. “On how indulgent I'm feeling.” He needs only just to rest the tips of his fingers on her lips before she's taken them in her mouth. “Of course, having your saucy little mouth sucking on my fingers like this leaves me feeling very indulgent indeed,” he says with a smile before dragging his hand away.

She can't help but smile back at his teasing because maybe, just maybe he's not quite so angry with her any more. And though there's part of her that wishes he still was, wishes he would take that anger out of her hide, the only act of rebellion she can muster up now is to thrust her hips up when his tongue traces lightly over her pussy lips, even though she knows she should lie perfectly still.

But then, his hands wouldn't immediately press her thighs open even farther, pinning her to the mattress. Oh yeah, there's times she knows exactly how to get what she wants from him, even in a precarious little game like this one.

He still won't touch her clit though, the frustration of deprivation slowly turning into a delicious agony, his hands still pinning her to the mattress as he tongue-fucks her, lapping up her juices with a fervor she wouldn't have thought him capable of just a few moments before.

Then he's stopping, lying next to her again, slipping one hand in her hair and drawing her in for a messy wet kiss that ends with her running her tongue along the salty and moist stubble of his chin.
“Still, I can't help but think that we should pause for a moment to allow for further self-reflection on your part.”

She's so lost in the realm of sensory pleasure now that his words hardly make sense. “Can't think right now, just want to come.”

“I know you do, my darling girl. That's plainly evident.” One of his hands slides over her breasts, tweaking one hard nipple, then the other; it sends her mouth to seek his out, to stop the chatter and get to the good stuff. She misses, as he shifts his head, voice deadly serious, but a naughty twinkle in his eye. “But I think I need to make one thing clear. A repeat performance of this evening's histrionics will not be tolerated. It really is beneath you, Faith.”

“I know,” she whispers, and she means it, really does. Finally snagging his mouth for that kiss, she hopes its intensity and ferocity and every other adjective she can't think of to describe her contrition is coming through loud and clear.

When he does finally drag his tongue lightly, gently over her clit, it's after he's devoted an untold, long number of minutes to sucking each nipple in turn, and it doesn't take long for the bundle of suppressed desire and frustration and anger that's all tied together deep inside to explode, leaving her shuddering and shivering in his arms, the very last of her tears finally spilling out unchecked.

And he doesn't tell her to stop—doesn't say anything at all really—just wraps her up in the blankets and holds her tight until the last tearful, weary hiccup has passed and she's fast asleep.

Chapter One Hundred and Fifty-Eight

He’s still feeling super indulgent the next day because as she blearily struggles out of the depths of sleep and winces as the pale sunlight hurts her eyes, he’s tugging her back down into the soft folds of the quilt.

“My head hurts,” she mumbles. And yeah, it feels like someone’s emptied the contents of a chemical toilet into her mouth but she doesn’t need to share that TMI because he’s already slipping out of bed and comes back in the blink of an eye with a glass of water and a couple of aspirin.

“The wages of gin,” he comments sagely as she gulps down the water and moans gratefully before slumping back down on the pillows.

“Wasn’t gin. Was champagne and crying too much,” she peers up at him groggily as he gives her a fleeting smile and then because she’s probably hallucinating or lucid dreaming or some shit, he climbs back into bed and curls up against her sleep-warm body so he can run gentle fingers through her hair. “Don’t think I’ve said sorry enough ‘bout last night.”

“Shhh, go back to sleep,” he murmurs and the rhythmic motion of his stroking and the steady burr of his voice as he finally tells her the story of The Princess And The Pea, lulls her into a fitful doze which is shattered when the phone next to the bed starts chirping and it’s too far away for her to yank it out of its socket.

“Wes! Make it stop!” She rolls over and burrows against his chest as he stretches out a hand and yawns into the receiver.

“Pryce here. Doyle? Hmm… Hmm… They did? Oh, really? That’s completely unacceptable, Francis.”

She smiles against his skin at a happy flash of déjà vu. Wes sat at his desk, getting medieval on some prosecution attorney's ass, while she sat there with hers quietly throbbing and her pen poised over
her shorthand pad.

“Three hours and I’m going to have to be intractable on that and I insist on billing them at double the normal rate,” he says in a biting voice that’s completely at odds with the way his hand is brushing the little wisps of hair back from her face as she kisses the tip of his nose and winds her legs around his because it sounds like he’s about to make a bid for freedom.

He finishes the call with a muffled laugh and a snappy, “Mind out of the gutter, Francis, for once in your sorry life,” and then responds to her attempts to cling even tighter to him by gathering her up so he can give her a sour-sweet morning kiss.

“You gotta go to work, yeah?” she tells him without rancor. “But just five minutes more, okay?”

“I think having a hangover agrees with you, Faith,” he chuckles. “And I don’t have to be in the office to listen to a deathly boring deposition for another two hours so I might even take you out for brunch.” And normally she’d pout in the face of his pre-coffee teasing and maybe wriggle against him so they could have one of those lazy morning fucks that she was getting in to the habit of after only two days but instead she just grunts and cups her hand over his heart.

She’s left in a warm cocoon of Egyptian cotton while he has the first shower and he’s just finishing his first cup of coffee and giving her another flash of deja ooooh because he’s all dandied up in a charcoal suit, when she wanders into the kitchen, dressed in jeans and T-shirt and little cardie and hauls herself up on the stool next to his.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?” he asks, pressing a cool hand against her forehead and she gives him a wry grin.

“Like, I’m never going to chug down a whole bottle of Moet in one sitting again. Gonna stick to the rotgut liquor from now on, Wes.”

“Oh yes, that sounds like an eminently sensible plan,” he drawls, eyes twinkling but that might just be because he’s tightening the knot on his tie and he’d have to be blind not to see the way she just gulped. “Are you ready to assuage your hangover with some bacon and eggs?”

“Yeah, totally,” she nods and then twists her mouth and takes a deep breath. “Just want to do something first. I should… I need to apologize to Anne so will you give me her number?”

He doesn’t say anything, just gives her a keen look while he takes a last sip of his coffee and then fishes in his shirt pocket for the famous Blackberry.

“Here you are,” he says mildly, handing it to her with Anne’s number and address right there on the screen, all smug and secure in its Park Avenue location. And then he gets up and walks out of the room, only pausing to tuck a loose strand of her hair behind her ear.

And actually it’s sort of okay when she talks to Anne. Plus, it’s a photo finish as to which one of them is more scared. The minute she says, “Anne? It’s Faith, from erm, last night at the ballet?” she hears this tiny squeaking noise like a mouse stuck inside a helium balloon. All the way through her stream of consciousness apology about being a bitch and jealous and drinking too much champagne “and, like, completely embarrassing you and Wes and what I said was just… it was mean”, the squeaks get louder and louder and more frequent and Faith gets the feeling that Anne wants to get her off the phone as quickly as possible. Which just makes her spin it out for another couple of minutes because yeah, she’s sorry, really she is, but the trust fund bitch still had her manicured mitts all over Wes and that’s a deal breaker as far as she’s concerned.
“So, y’know, just hope that you don’t hate me too much,” she finally finishes when her brain is passing on urgent messages to her mouth that it needs some oxygen.

Anne’s stopped squeaking and there’s this awkward little silence on the line before she says so sweetly that if Faith wasn’t such a fine, upstanding girl, she’d want to totally vomit from the sugar overload: “It was really kind of you to call and well… I’m sorry if… when Rupert, you see he never told me that Wesley was involved with someone and it’s so hard to find eligible, single men in New York and…”

She spends another ten minutes on the phone listening to Anne tell her the woes and wherefores of trying to date in Manhattan where all the men are emotional fuck-ups who can’t commit and by the time she rings off, well, she’s pretty much feeling lower than a snake’s belly. Plus, she really, officially hates Rupert Giles and his match-making bullshit.

Her emotionally fucked up, completely adorable boyfriend is so goddamn committed that he’s waiting in the hall for her, the Miu Miu coat draped over his arm and as she slips the Blackberry back into his pocket, he tips her chin so he can give her one of those smiles which might just be a reason for living.

“You’re always so brave, Faith,” he tells her softly. “It’s one of your most endearing qualities.”

And after that she guesses they’re frosty cool again, because he holds her hand as they walk to Café Joul and he doesn’t even go off into a rant about the four food groups when she decides that the complex carbohydrates contained in a basket of French pastries with the biggest side order of steak frites (or fries as they call them back home) she’s ever seen will see off the last traces of her headache.

In fact, he feeds her the fries one by one because he says he has a vested interest in “keeping her energy levels up” and gives her a lecture about the perils of New York City that would have Darla suing for copyright.

“Now you have enough money for cabs, Faith?” he asks her sternly as she walks him to the subway that she’s absolutely been forbidden from using in case she gets lost or abducted by white slave traders or ends up in Coney Island. “And you’re sure you’ll be all right on your own this afternoon because you could go…”

“Wes, I’ll be fine,” she says patiently, wrapping his scarf tighter round his neck because she’s got plans for him that don’t involve sore throats and hot lemon drinks. Besides, it makes her feel more girlfriend-y and she’d decided that that’s her new favorite feeling. “I could totally use the subway, but I’m not going to,” she adds hastily because he’s flaring his nostrils and beetling his brows.

“Gonna get Darla a present and try on a ton of things that I’m never going to buy.” And I’m gonna buy you a metric assload of birthday presents, she grins to herself which makes him bristle suspiciously.

“Well, if you’re sure,” he says doubtfully, tugging back his coat cuff so he can frown at his watch. “I need to go but you have my cell and you’re to call me…”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever Wes. If I get followed round Bloomingdales by anyone shifty looking, you’ll be the first to know.”

He doesn’t even rise to the bait, which sorta sucks because that usually leads to all sorts of dark promises. “I really am sorry about having to leave you like this, Faith. You’ll have to let me make it up to you.”
“You’d fucking better,” she gasps indignantly. “And I get to say how and when and for how long.”

And even though it’s the middle of the day and broad daylight and the wool of her coat impedes his progress, he gives her a kiss on the cheek good-bye at exactly the same time that he lands a slap on her ass.

“Imperious little baggage,” he intones darkly before heading down the steps.

Chapter One Hundred and Fifty-Nine

There’s a moment as he disappears from sight when she’s struck with panic. Like, suppose he gets run over—the traffic in this place lives up to every cliché, and he’s English; one moment spent thinking about just how he’s going to exact a suitable retribution for all the teasing about the tear—which hasn’t been forgiven and forgotten, not yet, because it’s a whole different thing to the being rude to Anne deal—and he’ll be looking the wrong way, the mother country way, and splat!

The blare of a horn jolts her out of her daze and she steps back from the curb hastily. Reminding herself that she’s on a schedule, because if he gets back to find her not there he’ll assume the worst and she won’t be able to hide his presents before he sees them, she spins around, gets her bearings, and sets off.

And maybe it’s the coat, purse, and stash of Christmas bonus cash, maybe it’s the faint tingle that won’t go away when she remembers that final swat on her ass, but she doesn’t feel out of place in this city. It’s noisy and brash and busy but it’s got a Wesley in it thinking about her and it’s going to be her home when she comes back—and just how long will it take to work out her notice with Monty and will he really retire when she goes, as Mrs. Monty wants him to?

She spots a used book store after six blocks; still on foot because she’s not gonna take a cab, not yet, when she’s still getting a high from sucking in frosty air, however laden with exhaust fumes it is, and hesitates. Anything Wes wants, and doesn’t have, is going to be way out of her range but even so.

The elderly man behind the desk of 'Looking Bookwards' gives her a smile and marks his place with a scrap of paper. “Browsing? Or looking for something in particular?”

“I don’t—” She spreads her hands helplessly. “I want to buy a present for someone. But he’s got, like, every book there is, and I don’t know.” She nibbles her lip. “There’s these kids' books he collects,” she says hesitantly, feeling guilty as if she’s exposing Wes to ridicule. “Biggles or something, but I forget the author.”

He nods briskly. “Of course. Highly collectable, in the early editions, if a little expensive for most pockets.” He doesn’t seem to be fooled by her fancy clothes and as he leads her through the narrow, dim corridors formed by the bookshelves he doesn’t mention ‘first edition’ once.

When they’ve established that not only is everything he’s got way beyond what she can afford, but that as she doesn’t know which ones Wes owns she’s kinda wasting everyone’s time, he gives a sad little sigh before brightening.

“He wrote other books, you know, oh, yes indeed! Adult thrillers, although, hmm, no, I don’t have any in stock and, yes, expensive, so very, very...”

She’s giving up on the idea and ready to go by now. “Yeah. Look, I don’t have a lot of time to shop and—”

""The Death Rays of Ardilla!"" he exclaims. He gives her a smug look. “Does he have that?”
“I don't know.” It's a far cry from anything she's ever seen him actually spend time reading and she's wavering because she's got a mental list a mile long, and, bonus or not, she's only got so much to spend. “I don't think so.”

He reaches out his hand, snatches a book with a lurid cover from the shelf and flicks through it. “Paperback re-issue, slightly foxed, hmm, hmm, got it marked at twenty but I'll let you have it for sixteen, how's that?”

“Do you gift-wrap?” she counters.

He rolls his eyes in answer but relents and throws in a cardboard bookmark with a bookworm in glasses on it that's so cute she thinks she'll keep it herself.

After that she's hurrying, dipping into the cab-fare Wes gave her, kept scrupulously separate from the five hundred dollars of her money that's melting away fast, and criss-crossing the city center to pick up cheese at Artisanal that actually doesn't smell too bad; something called extra-aged Pleasant Ridge Reserve from Wisconsin. It's selling for twenty-six dollars a pound which means the bit she tastes before nodding for them to wrap her up half a pound probably costs more than her lunch back home, but it doesn't matter.

She might have had lousy birthdays and Christmases before this one, but somehow she thinks most of Wesley's have sucked too. Not this one.

After going to town on some classical CDs because she knows what music he's got better than his books and there's one by some moody European minimalist he loves that jumps every time they really crank up the violins, she heads for Barneys and gets Darla a nightdress in her favorite hot-pink that manages to be elegant and sexy, even if her shopping trip with Wes has kinda re-defined her definitions of both those terms when it comes to undies and such.

She's heading out when she goes by the ties and there's one that's a strip of blue the exact shade of Wesley's eyes. She's savvy enough about the pitfalls of shopping for ties after being reduced to helpless giggles by Liam's face as he peered at some horrors Darla had inflicted on him, but this one, God, how could he not like it? She strokes the silken slither with a finger and sighs in appreciation. A sales assistant appears like magic; a young man extolling the virtues of the tie, hand stitched and made using an all-but-lost tradition of folding a yard of silk seven times and stroking it until—

“I'm in a hurry!” she snaps, grabbing it off the display. “Look, I just want to buy it. It's a good tie, right?”

“It's an excellent tie,” he assures her reverently, whisking it away before she's had chance to look at the price.

This gets gift-wrapped which is just as well, as she's all but numb at handing over eleven ten dollar bills and getting not a lot back in the way of change. It's a tie. It's a freaking tie and it's the color of Wesley's eyes. Fine.

She's heading home, loaded down, when she pauses, collapsing on a bench by a fountain and moaning slightly as her feet begin to throb worse than they did when she was walking on them. She's got him something to read, something to wear, and, after ten minutes of pointing at an array of chocolates, she's just him got a quarter pound of truffles that, because Wes is going to be sharing them if he knows what's good for him, include one, or maybe four, raspberry in dark chocolate ones. And although bloody Rupert kinda cornered the market on whiskey with his present, she one-upped him with the single-malt chocolates, she just knows she did.
Plus, Economy Candy had fizzy sharks in sour-lemon and he's getting a bag of them too, just because.

But apart from the last photograph of her, still hidden in her case, it's all stuff his mom could've bought him, and she wants something else. Something that's about what they are to each other.

She lifts up the bags and carries on walking, looking for a cab to whisk her from the Lower East Side back to Wes' place in the Upper East. She's a block down from the candy shop when she sees a place called Toys in Babeland and she grins. Bingo.

The cheerful red front is matched by the smile she gets when she goes inside, but she's left alone to wander the shop after they've offered to put her bags behind the counter so she can browse. She can see that the shop's fairly busy, with women older than Darla picking up stuff that makes her want to blush, because, damn, it's almost easier in the sleazy places and the casual atmosphere is freaking her a little, which makes no sense.

Then she spots a familiar shade of purple and homes in on her Rabbit like it's some sort of security blanket or something.

"That's a great vibe," says a voice behind her. She turns and there's this shop assistant with dreamy dark eyes that remind her of Dru, a little, and a long, shining braid of red hair hanging to her waist.

"I know," she says. "Got one just like it at home."

"Cool." The girl's wearing a name tag that says she's 'Lisa' and she gives Faith a smile. "You want anything, just let me know."

"Well," Faith begins, glancing around, "do you have anything more, uh—well, less vanilla, you know?"

Lisa's smile gets just a little bit speculative and her gaze drifts to a display of paddles that'd probably have Wes looking pretty fucking interested too and she raises her eyebrows in a silent question.

"Yeah," she says, losing her blush, because Lisa's really putting her in mind of Dru now. "But not paddles. Something—it's a present for my—"

Lisa walks off, not even looking to see if Faith's following. "Master? Slave?" she asks as they come to a halt in front of a row of floggers, mostly black.

"Fuck, no!" Faith says. She gives Lisa a slightly panicked look because that's just not—no. "My boyfriend," she says, and it's weird to call him that too, but she's really firm on the not going near 'master' because it's not something that fits them, somehow. "I want to give him something to use on me," she finishes in a hurry. "For his birthday."

Lisa's head is nodding now. "That's so romantic," she sighs. "How about this ruler? Acrylic, easy to clean and stings like you wouldn't believe."

She stares openmouthed at the slender strip of clear plastic and swallows. "I think something a bit more, I mean he's already got—no."

"Have you tried clamps?" Lisa asks taking three steps sideways and tapping her finger against a shelf. "No? If you're both into breast play, you'd probably love them."

Curious, she joins her and peers at oddly delicate chains attached to clamps and clothes pins that are never going to see a washing line. She feels her nipples tighten just looking at them and imagining
the relentless pressure they'd inflict.

“Yeah,” she breathes. “They'd be perfect.”

Lisa notices the ones she's focusing on and shakes her head. “Those clover clamps might be a bit much if you're just starting out,” she says. “They don't adjust, for one thing, and they'll tighten if you try and pull away.”

“Oh,” Faith says a little weakly. “Well—”

Lisa picks up some black and silver clamps connected by a wide, silver chain. “These should do. See this little screw on the side? You can ease them off a little.”

“I'll take them,” she says. She's not sure if she's supposed to be picking stuff like this out for herself but something tells her Wes still isn't totally certain of how far she wants to go.

As hints from her go, she thinks it's verging on the subtle.

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty

She’s just got time to stash the huge amount of bags she seems to have accumulated behind a pile of boxes in the spare room, toe off her sneakers and start contemplating the contents of the fridge when she hears a key turn in the lock and she’s tripping into the hall to greet him.

“Hey Wes,” she beams, scurrying over so she can help him take off his coat and scarf, even though he can manage it perfectly well himself. “Hard day at the office?”

His arms snake round her waist so he can pull her in and rub his cold cheek against her neck, which makes her squirm wildly and giggle. “It sucked,” he says solemnly. “But, well… it’s so very lovely to have you waiting for me, Faith. It’s something that I used to dream about when…” He straightens up but keeps one arm wrapped round her, fingers just grazing the underside of her breast. “I like coming home to you,” he says simply.

And Wes can be wordy guy and she still thinks that sometimes he needs to come with subtitles but sometimes it’s the plain and direct stuff he says (and not just when they’re playing a game) that gets to her, worms its way right into her heart.

“Like you coming home to me too,” she smiles and then plays her winning hand. “And I put the kettle on for you.”

She likes these quiet episodes of domesticity. Never realized just how much she missed them because she was so busy jonesing for the high octane drama of his cock, his hands, his voice, his tongue driving her crazy.

But as she ignores his pained expression and pops the top off a can of Diet Coke while he sips his tea and they work their way down a packet of digestive biscuits, she knows with an irrevocable certainty that just the utter simplicity of seeing him, sprawled tiredly on the sofa, tie undone and socked feet propped up on the coffee table is the picture she’ll tuck away in a hidden little corner of her brain. And she’ll pull it out during those weeks when they have to be apart and it will get her through.

The thought of having to leave him in, what, like five days’ time makes her lips twist and though she hasn’t said anything, he knows. Wes always knows. He must do because he’s stretching over the arm of the couch to reach for his briefcase and pulling out a yellow, legal pad.

“We need to start making some plans,” he says with all the fervor of the list geek that he is. And
maybe there’s just a hint of darkness in his voice, which means he’s been cataloguing all her recent
misdemeanors and spent the journey home thinking up new and exciting ways to punish her. Both
her and her nipples are sitting up at the thought of it.

“A list of what?” she asks all throatily but he’s already uncapped his fountain pen and is scrawling a
date: 7th March 2005 on it, which as deliciously decadent tortures go is kinda obscure.

“It’s a Monday,” he murmurs. “You’ll probably be here before then anyway, but Mr. Rosenberg
might need a little help in replacing you.” He gives her what can only be described as a cheesy like
Gruyere smile. “You are rather irreplaceable after all, Faith.”

“Thanks, Wes, I really am,” she agrees modestly. Then leans over him to see the next date he’s
written down, which is 21st May 2005. “What’s so important about then?” she asks.

“It’s when my lease on this place expires,” Wes explains, then takes a deep breath and he’s off with
plans about realtors and decorators and up and coming areas and dates scribbled down of when they
need to do stuff by but she’s flashing back to him moving in here. A week after he left her. A week
after he’d canceled his plans to rent the brownstone that looked over the garden square that he’d told
her about. The one with a room of her own and a bedroom that she was going to paint all white and
a fire escape so in summer they could sit on it while he read to her. And instead she knows that he sat
on this sofa night after night, working his way down a bottle of single malt, and hollowed out from
grief.

“What happened to the place you were going to get?” she interrupts and he blinks and looks almost
startled to see her sitting cross-legged next to him. He’s so fucking single minded when he’s got
some complicated scheme on a slow simmer, which is, like, the understatement of the year.

“Oh…” he pauses briefly, finger moving carefully over his little table of dates and boxes. “It’s been
over six months, Faith. I’m sure it’s already been leased.”

“I’m sorry, Wes. Must have cost you a fucking fortune to cancel like that.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” he snaps out so harshly that she jerks back but he’s already taking her hand
and trying to soothe away the fright with frantic fingers. “I couldn’t have lived there without you. I
signed the lease agreement solely because I knew you’d love the house but when I arrived here I
realized that if I even spent one night there, Faith, I’d see your ghost in every room, standing in the
shadows and I just couldn’t…” He closes his eyes and rubs the bridge of his nose with the hand that
isn’t still clutched compulsively around her fingers.

“When you’d gone, I’d see you all over town,” she suddenly bursts out, rubbing against his arm like
a cat that needs feeding. “Like, I must have seen your car a hundred times and I’d get a glimpse of
some tall, dark-haired guy and my whole tummy would lurch and it wouldn’t be you. Was never
you, Wes.” He’s staring at her so intently and in the dim light of the room with darkness creeping in,
it seems that his eyes are all pupil. “If I’d never stolen the checks, do you think things would have
worked out with us?”

He’s touching her everywhere now. Patting her arm, her leg, shifting so he’s pressed against her. “I
don’t know, Faith. I’d like to think so but we both needed to grow…” He won’t look at her, but his
fingers are gripping her wrist tightly, pressing down on the bones, like he’s trying to never let her go.
“I had to be without you,” he says heavily, placing a finger over her lips to quiet the hurt, little gasp
that’s just escaped. “If only to miss you so dreadfully, to feel so bereft that I realized that I could
change, that I wanted to change so I’d be worthy of you, my darling Faith.”

She’s scrambling up so she can kneel on the couch cushions and whisper in his ear because what she
has to say she doesn’t want to share with anyone else, not even the walls. “Still wish I hadn’t taken
them because everything we used to have feels dirty now because I was lying to you for weeks. I
fucking hate myself for that, Wes. You know… when I said it before you were so angry and yeah,
you had every right to be but you know… you know, I’m sorry, right?”

“Faith, it’s in the past and it was never…” He pauses and undoes the top button of his shirt as if he
the words are getting stuck in his throat. “I forgave you for what happened before I ever left,” he
says firmly. “It’s over, Faith, finished.”

She cups his face in her hands, traces her fingers over the hollows under his eyes. “But, Wes, I lied
to you.”

“Because you were scared,” he insists; lifting her onto his lap so she can rest her head on his
shoulder. “Circumspection is a wonderful thing, Faith, and despite your constant assurances that you
trusted me, I gave you little reason to. I hurt you. I kept changing the rules and when I did that it
meant that it was impossible to trust me and I couldn't keep you safe. So if we're getting all our
contrition out of the way, then I want to apologize profusely that you had to shoulder all those
burdens on your own.”

“I'm never going to lie to you again,” she chokes out past the lump in her throat. “I mean, I haven't
since then, have I? Told you all sorts of shit that you probably wish I hadn't.” His fingers glide under
her T-shirt to trace the words etched into her skin but he doesn't say anything, just lets her muddle
through. “And I trust you, Wes and you have to trust me to know that I'll tell you if I'm scared or if I
don't feel safe or that you're hurting me.”

“I do trust you, Faith,” he murmurs into her ear. “You've become so strong, so fierce that I'm grateful
for our time apart, no matter how distressing it was.”

And she knows what he means because although she wouldn't ever want to relive all those nights of
feeling rubbed raw from crying and the ache of not having him near, they did some good. And
maybe they had to go a long way to get back to where they were.

She sits there in the cradle of his arms for a while, just glad to be quiet with him until he stretches
slightly and then tips her off his lap so she has to sit on her own patch of couch.

“Hey, I was all kinds of comfy,” she protests and then smirks as she sees the little tic banging away
in his cheek. “But you did promise to make it up to me for being alone all afternoon.”

“I did, didn't I?” he smiles, until his features rearrange into this expression of severity, which she
knows he's totally faking. “But I also promised to exact retribution for your bizarre claim that Giselle
reduced me to helpless sobs.”

“I never said you were sobbing,” she huffs, throwing in her best Bambi eyes while she was at it.
“But there was tears, Wes, or like one tear…”

“Which was entirely due to the brightness of the house lights and was quite insufficient to warrant
half an hour of taunting from you. And there is the quite considerable list that we've barely begun to
work through,” he muses, throwing her a darkly glinting look, hand suddenly clamping round her
thigh.

“Oooh, you promised, Wes!” she snarls and because there's no good reason not to, she snatches up
one of the cushions and bops him over the head with it.

He looks so bemused, hair ruffled and eyes wide, that she bursts out laughing, doubling over at the
incredulous expression on his face and not quick enough to scramble off the couch and get away from him, when he suddenly pins her down on the seat and looms over her, hands dragging her arms over her head and his thighs tight against her so she can't wriggle free.

“I was going to make it up to you but I'm afraid that won't be possible,” he tells her sorrowfully, which really doesn't sound too convincing from the way he's leering down at her. “Now about these spurious claims of yours…”

“You were crying over a pansy ass ballet,” she bursts out, because he so was and hadn't she just told him she was a stickler for the truth? And that she was never going to lie to him again?

“Since you seem so taken with tears rolling down cheeks, Faith, perhaps you could shed some for me?” he suggests and she's never felt further from crying in her life. Unless it's an hour from now when he's spanked her and fucked her and maybe gone down on her and still not let her come.

Which seems like a fun way to get to dinner time. “And perhaps you can bite me, Wes,” she tells him sweetly.

“Maybe later,” he drawls. “After I've made you cry.”

And when he says it like that, it seems pretty damn callous like he's gonna pinch her until she starts weeping buckets. But it's worse than that. Like, way, way worse than that and ten minutes later she's curled into a tiny, little ball in the corner of the couch, tears streaming down her face.

“Stop it, Wes! Please, no more,” she splutters but he doesn't listen, just delves his hands into the Faith-shaped ball she's become and grabs her foot so he can tickle her instep, because her socks were the first thing he stripped off her, while he starts dragging her jeans down her frantically kicking legs.

“Those aren't crocodile tears, are they, Faith?” he asks her teasingly, one hand skittering over her stomach as she tries to wrench away from him.

“No! No! Swear they're not,” she squeaks, trying to pull her T-shirt down to hide all her over-sensitized skin from his wicked fingers. “You have to stop!”

“But you look so beautiful when you cry,” he persists, both hands running up her arms while she feebly flaps her hands and tries to swat him away.

“Fuck! Neruda!” she yelps and it's a completely moot point which one of them is more shocked. She reckons it's him because the minute she's free, she's launched herself at him. “Right, gonna see how you fucking like it.”

And it's so damn typical of him not to be ticklish. The bastard even peels off his shirt and lies back on the couch with a challenging expression. Five minutes later and she's just about managed to tease a stifled giggle of him when she tickles the arch of his foot but mostly he keeps sighing and rolling his eyes like it's all too tiring for words.

“You're no fun,” she snaps crossly, flinging herself back on the couch and folding her arms. “You could be, like, a little bit ticklish, Wes.”

“I'm very sorry, Faith. Maybe you should send me back to my mother and ask her for a refund.”

“I totally should. Dear Mrs. Wes, your son isn't ticklish so I'm returning him to you with the manufacturer's guarantee and a receipt,” she giggles, then gives him a sly look from under her lashes. “I should get compensation, you know.”
He gives her a heavy-lidded look. “Not to mention a reward for shedding such pretty tears and saying your word so charmingly. Would you like to go and get your collar, Faith?”

“That’s like the most rhetorical question in the world.” She’s already jumping up and practically vaulting off the coffee table to get out of the room, when he coughs slightly so she turns to look at him. “What?”

“When you return, I want you naked, Faith,” he says blandly. “And I also want you wet and ready, please.”

She doesn’t think that’s going to be a problem because all her insides have suddenly turned to liquid. “I’ll see what I can do,” she manages to say with a fraction of her usual sass.

That gets her an approving smile. “Good girl but I don’t want those busy hands anywhere near that demanding, little cunt of yours. Is that clear?”

There are no words, just a tremulous nod and when she comes back after breaking the world speed stripping record, the collar dangling from her fingers, she’s aching with the heavy dampness between her legs.

He holds out his hand for the collar and when she’s carefully placed it across his outstretched palm, he gestures to the easy chair a few feet away from where he’s sprawled out.

“Go and sit on that, please,” he orders her, his voice level and his cock hard. “Then I want you to show me how wet you are.”

When she drapes her legs over the arms, he leans forward so he doesn’t miss a single second of the show she gives him as she feels her lips spread open and she’s pink and wet, just like he wanted.

“Oh yes,” he purrs, licking his lips again and again and again. “I want to see you come, Faith. I missed seeing your work your fingers in that beautiful pussy. Missed it so much.”

And she’s missed that dark longing in his eyes too. Missed the way he tells her exactly what he wants her to do…

“I want you to push your finger into your cunt, Faith. You’re so very wet, aren’t you, my little Olympia? Good. No… not yet. Now touch your clit, Faith. A little lighter than that, please.”

He’s on his knees in front of her, head darting forward to swipe his tongue against any parts that she’s missing but as she’s got three fingers thrusting furiously inside her, her thumb rubbing at her clit, back arching against the soft velvet of the chair, it’s mostly just because he loves to taste her. That’s what he says before he pulls back, so he’s sitting on his haunches, cock twitching inside his trousers.

“Oh yes,” she breathes, trying to get another finger… fuck, her whole hand inside her cunt, anything to make the ache stop. “Gotta come.”

“I know, I know,” he soothes her gently, picking the collar up from the floor and trailing it up her thigh. “Use this. I want to see you fuck yourself with my collar, Faith.”

He pulls her sticky hand away from her pussy and curls her fingers round the leather, wrapping it tight then pushing her hand back toward her soaked cunt.

It feels strange in this really wonderful way. The leather rubbing against her, the edges of the collar catching against her swollen clit and she’s twisting in the chair, his hands tight round her ankles when she tries to bring her legs down so she can grind harder against the damp leather.
Just needs something more and she gives him a beseeching look. “Wes, please…”

“What do you want, Faith?” he asks her all concerned and it’s bullshit because he knows what she wants and as soon as he pushes one long finger into her, she’s clenching round him, head flung back as she worries at her clit with the pointed tip of the collar.

She hasn’t even come down, her hand still pressed into her pussy, trembling with a million tiny aftershocks, when he pulls his finger free and drags her off the chair, half carrying her across the room so he can tip her over the back of the couch and press himself up against her.

“I have to fuck you,” he grits out and she’s reaching behind her with her damp hand, trying to fumble at his cock through the cloth of his trousers. “Stop that and spread your legs.”

The grate of his zipper is the sweetest symphony and he’s lifting her up, hands biting into the skin of her inner thighs as he spreads them even farther and he’s in her with one hard shove, stretching her open and then pulling out so he can drive into her in a relentless rhythm that has her clutching at the cushions and begging him to go faster, harder, deeper.

“I love fucking you,” he hisses into her ear. “Always so tight and wet. You always want me.” He sounds dazed by the concept but she’s already fervently agreeing with him.

“Love it, Wes. Just want you to never stop,” she gasps, pushing back against him as his hand delves between them and he’s pressing his thumb against her clit with the same driving insistence as he rams inside her clutching cunt. She’s beyond words now, just moaning in a rising crescendo as his hips drive against her buttocks and the hard tips of her breasts smoosh against the soft nap of the couch. “Hurt me,” she barks and deliciously, immediately, his teeth sink into her shoulder, the sharp sting making her cry out and squeeze around his cock as she comes in shocking, violent waves that threaten to pull her under as she feels his come spurt inside her.

He presses a soft kiss against the blossoming bruise on her shoulder, cock still quivering against the walls of her cunt and smoothes her tangled, damp hair back from her face. “I’ve been dreaming about doing that all afternoon,” he says with a soft, little laugh, before pulling out, the damp head of his cock kissing the backs of her thighs as he tugs her upright.

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-One

The gentle click of the front door wakes her so she can roll into the Wes-scented hollow he’s made on his side of a bed for a few seconds before she recalls a vague memory of him saying something about croissants and maybe even coffee.

She’s up, even if she’s not capable of complete sentences, by the time he comes back with a really promising looking pink patisserie box, a couple of steamy cups of coffee and an exasperated smile when he sees her slumped all, glassy-eyed in front of Jerry Springer in a tank-top and boy-cut shorts.

“Caffeine,” she moans piteously, managing to lift her head a few inches before deciding it’s too much effort. “I’m fucking dying here, Wes.”

“And a very good morning you too, Faith,” he retorts snappily and then he’s withholding food or, like putting it down on the sideboard so he can hang his coat up while she hauls herself up and leans over the back of the couch where there’s a funny stain that wasn’t there until last night. Gonna be way unlikely if Wes ever gets his security deposit back, especially as she managed to smash the toothbrush holder clean off the wall the other morning when he she practically ended up sitting in the bathroom sink as Wes fucked her.
“Did you get croissants? And donuts—I could really eat about half a dozen chocolate sprinkles,” she sighs dreamily, tugging on to his hand as he tries to get past her. “Where you going?”

“To get plates,” he says, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “And forks,” her eyelids get a little kiss each too. “And to try and tempt you to eat at a table like a well brought up young lady,” he adds, giving her a tooth-pastey smooch right on the mouth.

“I’m not well brought up, Wes,” she grins, winding her arms round his neck and holding on until he rethinks the whole breakfast at the table madness.

“You’re having a disastrous effect on my routine,” he announces, as he watches her demolish an apple Danish in two bites. “Look at me, Faith, please.”

She swivels her gaze away from two cross-dressing grandpas having a knock-down fight over some fifty-year-old skankerama that they were both sleeping with. “Huh? What?”

“I keep missing dinner because I seem to end up fucking you,” he begins patiently, catching her chin between his fingers because she’s trying to turn back to the TV when she hears someone scream, ‘And that marabou trim ain’t doing you no favors, girlfriend!’ “Please, Faith, do try and concentrate or I’m confiscating the remote control.”

“I’m listening,” she protests and with a sigh, she swings round to face him because Wes is far easier on the eye that an old man in a pink muumuu. “You’d rather fuck me than eat dinner and somehow that’s my fault? Whatever, counselor.”

“And then you force me to sleep half the day away because you wrap that delectable little body of yours around me when I try to get up,” he adds plaintively as she clammers onto his lap and does just that. Though he doesn’t seem to mind, just lets her lean back against him so he can run his hand under her T-shirt and stroke her tummy. “And now I find myself getting crumbs all over the sofa and watching… Good Lord, what exactly are we watching, Faith? And why is that man wearing a mauve dress that does absolutely nothing for his complexion?”

She gives a gurgle of laughter and aims the remote at the screen so it fades into blackness. “We’re on vacation, Wes,” she reminds him, all of her aware that his index finger is idly tracing the low-riding waist of her panties. “We’re on holiday time.”

“Well, I suppose it’s silly to be wasting an hour eating food when I could be fucking you,” he agrees mildly, kissing the bruise that his teeth scraped across her shoulder the night before. “Though talking of which, what would you like to do see the New Year in? I daresay I might manage to scrounge up a dinner reservation.” He swallows manfully because he’s such a brave little soldier and slaps away her hand which is already creeping up to give his Adam’s apple a curious poke. “Would you like to go to Times Square and see the ball drop?”

And she really, really wouldn’t. But she pretends to consider it for a moment if only to see him trying to damp down the horrified expression on his face. “Do you think it’s true that, like, what you do on New Year’s Eve is how you end up spending the rest of the year?” she asks him.

“Well, it’s a charming notion but generally no,” he says decisively. “Though I did once spend New Year’s Eve at a quite horrific cheese and wine party and ended up vowing never to drink Chardonnay again. What are you planning, Faith? You look like you’re cooking up some positively Machiavellian scheme.”

“I’m not!” she protests indignantly, because what she’s about to suggest, she’s pretty sure that he’s going to be down with. “It’s just I have to go home in a couple of days,” she sighs heavily and he
seems to echo the sound. “And I just want to spend as much time as possible with you, Wes. Not like the city of New York is going anywhere, is it?”

“No, I imagine it will still be standing when you return,” he says quietly, fingers smoothing along the bump of her hip bone. “So you’d like to stay in tonight?”

She nods emphatically. “Yeah, I do, Wes. But, like, I want how we spend tonight to be like this dream of how we’re going to spend the rest of the year so I want yummy food…”

“Yummy food,” he agrees with a teasing smile. “I’ll cancel the sprouts and the asparagus, shall I?”

“Damn straight!” She takes a deep breath. “When the clock strikes midnight, I want you to be fucking me, Wes. Want us in bed and your cock inside me, and you telling me how much you love me. And I don’t care how fucking needy that makes me, I just…”

“You don’t sound needy.” He lowers his head so he can drag the tip of his tongue across the indent marks of his teeth, which seems to be slightly obsessing him this morning. “I think that it sounds like a very fitting way to welcome in 2005. Though, of course, I reserve the right to improvise.”

“How?”

“Oh, I’m sure between now and midnight, I’ll be able to expand on the theme,” he says airily. “Anything else I should be expanding on?”

Her hands are already resting on her throat. “I want to be wearing my collar,” she says firmly. “That’s, like, non-negotiable and I want champagne too because there’s not gonna be anyone round that I can insult. Well, except you, and that would probably work out well. And I want…”

She doesn’t even get to explain her really wicked idea that if it’s snowing they should totally go out and fuck in it, just so she can say she’s done it because his soothing fingers have become cruel, pinching her thigh so hard that when he takes his hand away she can still see the imprint of his fingers. She watches it fascinated for a moment and then lifts her head. “What did you do that for?” she asks him and there’s not a shred of censure in her voice, which makes him smile fleetingly before his face hardens into the tight, angry lines which she thinks she almost prefers.

“Because you seem to be laboring under the misapprehension that if you say ‘I want’ enough times in that over-bearing tone, I’ll capitulate to all your demands,” he bites out.

“But it’s New Year’s Eve, Wes!” she wails, fluttering her eyelashes at him and pursing her lips. “Don’t you want me to be happy?”

He’s already springing to his feet so he can haul her up. “Well, not too happy,” he concedes with something that might be a wink if she squints extra hard. “I do so like to keep you on your toes, Faith. And I do so like it when I give the orders and you obey.”

“Yeah, well I like that too,” she admits, as she follows him into the kitchen with the empty coffee cups in her hand. “But shouldn’t I get a say in some stuff… Hey! Hey! You total bastard!”

“Mind your language, Faith,” his mild rebuke is completely at odds with the stinging slap that he lands on her poor, defenseless ass. “And your exceedingly peevish tone.”

“As I was saying, Wesley, before I was so rudely interrupted, I do have rights. Got myself a contract and now I’m starting to realize why you’ve been all quiet about updating it.” She gives him an aggrieved look. “Okay, I know what I want to do for the rest of the day.”
“I want, I want,” he mutters under his breath, as he wraps a couple of pastries that escaped her tummy in foil. “I think someone wants a very severe spanking. Possibly with a hairbrush.”

There’s a pause while she contemplates that delightful little notion before she wags a reproachful finger at his back and hmmm, his ass as he starts doing his control freaky fridge thing. “Don’t you try and sweet talk your way out of this, Wes, I’m calling the shots today. And we’re going to go out and get some supplies for tonight because you’re cooking dinner and then we’re coming home and we’re going to rewrite that contract because I think you’re getting too used to having things your own way.”

He turns to her then, his expression veering from amused to deliciously stern in a New York second. “Oh, really, Faith? Is that what you think? Because we should have a talk about it. I wouldn't want you to feel as though I'm unreasonable about these things.”

She laughs sharply. “Oh, c'mon, Wes. I know negotiations get you really fucking hot and bothered. Why else did you become a lawyer?”

“Fair point, my darling girl. And negotiations with you tipped over my knee get me even hotter.” He finishes alphabetizing the eighteen varieties of gourmet mustard he's got in there or whatever the hell he's been doing, closes the fridge, and starts walking back to where she's curled up on the couch.

“Oh, but aren't you giving the game away, counselor?” She beams at him, thinking she's just about ready for her first guest-starring role on “Law and Order” when Wes sits down on the couch next to her.

“People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.” And the bastard looks really insufferably smug when he says it. His eyes are glinting evilly as he slips his hand under her tank top again. She almost swats it away, but she's still trying to figure out what the fuck he's talking about.

“Say what?” She's peering at him, her eyes narrowed to little slits.

“What I meant to say is that”—and his hand is straying farther up her top, making a play for one of her breasts—“I do seem to recall the party of the second being extremely ticklish.”

She shoots back against the edge of the sofa as fast as she possibly can, flattening herself against the cushion. “No way, Wes! That's totally fucking unfair! The party of the second calls a fucking time out!”

He tilts his head to one side, his expression thoughtful. “I wasn't aware that we'd begun anything, Faith. Are we on the clock as it were? Because I could retrieve the contract if you like. I've added some additions which would need to be drafted.” He closes his eyes and sighs almost dreamily. “I can't even remember the last time you took dictation—”

And sweet Jesus, how wrong is it that the very mention of the word gets her really fucking wet, conjuring up all sorts of dark, delicious images swimming in her head, some real, some imagined.

God, how she's missed being his secretary. She had almost forgotten how much it had meant to her—even now, the pain was just too new and raw; she couldn't even bear to remember all those afternoons she'd spent bent over the dark wood of his desk, skirt up, panties down, her ass as red as all those typographic errors he'd circle in perfect, neat little whorls. Both standing as symbols of her imperfections. And maybe they didn't need that ritual now, strictly speaking, but God, she still wanted it. It was their little world, and she loved it.

Loves it. Past, present, it didn't matter. Time stood still in the inner sanctum of his office.
“Shall I take a letter, Wes?”

And oh, yeah, she wishes she could bottle whatever it is, that heady power that's radiating off him now, sending her heart beating a mile a minute. He leans in close, catching his hand in her hair, pulling her head aside at an awkward angle that sends a thrill of deja whatever straight through her gut. If there was any question in her mind that the change of scenery would diminish the game, it was long gone now.

She almost gasps and pulls away because he's so intense, but his lips are already on her neck, her earlobe, and then he's whispering, whispering in a way he hasn't in months. “I don't think you're in the appropriate attire for such a task, don't you agree?”

And if her mouth hadn't gone dry, she'd be able to speak—but no words come, so she just nods mutely.

“I'm sorry, Faith—I didn't quite hear you,” he says, straightening back up, but not letting her go. The pressure of his hand still lightly pulling her hair makes it impossible to think, to remember her lines. That is, until she recalls that it's the easiest one of all. “Yes sir,” she manages to rasp out, swallowing down the lump that's rising in her throat. Dammit if this isn't nearly reducing her to tears.

Unraveling his hand carefully from her tangled hair, he smiles. “Good girl. Be dressed and showered in twenty-five minutes, please.”

It's all she can do not to bolt off the sofa like a rocket—instead she plants her feet carefully on the floor, which is a good plan because she's practically swooning.

“I'll be in my office,” he says, running his hand over the curve of her ass. “Be a sweetheart and bring me a coffee too.” He looks up at her, and that smile is back, the cold shard of what she now knows is his normal expression of pleasure.

“Yes sir,” she says, confidently this time, and her impertinence rates a swat on the ass, and they ricochet away from each other to opposite ends of the apartment like pool balls after a fast break.

He'd bought her a few outfits she'd classify as office appropriate on that trip to Soho, and there was no shortage of pleasing underwear now. But she decides to go with a tried and true classic, a severe little black wool number that Wes bought her back in the day. She takes what's probably the fastest shower of her life, pausing her hasty bath only to carefully lather up her pussy and run a razor over that tender flesh, her hands shaking a little. She can't possibly think how their game would play out here, with all that Scandinavian modern office furniture, all blond wood and hard angles. Perhaps it will be easier when they're together, conjuring up a shared hallucination of his old, dark office with the moss green heavy velvet curtains and heavy mahogany desk, the old creaking desk chair, and the cup of freshly-sharpened pencils and the blotter that saw more hot action than any office supply item ever should.

Her hair wrapped in a towel, she slips into the plainest black bra and panties in her new stash and settles on the bed to roll her stockings carefully over her legs. She pulls the dress carefully out of its garment bag and puts it on for the first time in a small forever. When she smooths it down over her body, she’s amazed at how much she feels like the Faith of old; right away she's this mix of self-confidence and nerves. And somehow that feels just right.

Glancing at the clock, she sees there's no time for much more primping. So she just leaves her face
free of makeup, save for running a dark wine lipstick 'round her mouth and twists her still-damp hair into a hasty knot pinned with a few bobby pins from the bottom of her makeup bag. Checking her reflection in the full-length mirror one last time, she can't help but think he didn't give her the full thirty minutes on purpose—just to make sure she appeared just as she is now, and was so many days back then, half made-up and hair slightly askew.

There's no mistaking the flip-flopping in her tummy, though, as she quickly raps on the half shut office door, balancing his cup and the fresh, blank steno pad he'd so thoughtfully left on the kitchen counter.

“Enter.” The word, clipped and efficient, makes her just the tiniest bit weak in the knees. Pushing the door open with one pointed toe of her precariously high shoes, she can't look anywhere but at him. Sometime while she was in the shower, he must have snuck into the bedroom, because he's wearing shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow, one pushed higher than the other and a thick silk tie that's perfectly knotted and nestled neatly against his throat.

And the moment he looks up at her, they're both thrown out of the game for just a moment in a split-second of self-consciousness, because they let out a little gasp at the other's appearance. If she concentrates hard enough, they've traveled back in time almost, back to some undetermined point in that six weeks—six weeks that seem so long ago as to be nearly antique. They're still the older and wiser Wes and Faith of now, of course, and there's something so encouraging about how easy it is to slip back into the Wes and Faith of then.

He blinks, as if she's some kind of ghost, before giving a little nod of approval that shifts them right back on track. “Sit, please, Faith.” And she complies after carefully setting the coffee on the desk, perching in the hard wooden chair that's infinitely easier to sit in than the old overstuffed things from his old office.

“We have quite a bit of work to do here,” he says, shuffling papers and files into neat little stacks. “There's the matter of our existing contract, which clearly needs revisions.”

She nods, face falling into that familiar neutral expression that she hopes is still serious and captivating and not completely ridiculous.

“We'll get to that in due course. But first, there's a number of letters to get through.” And before he can finish, she's flipped the steno pad open to the first blank page, the perfectly sharp tip of her pencil poised and ready.

She doesn't need to take shorthand this fast for Monty, not ever, not even when he's had his verboten three cups of coffee before noon—and it's actually a challenge to get her hand moving fast enough as he dictates the letter, then another, and finally a third, before she's actually asking him for a moment, shaking the cramp out of her hand. But she only had to stop and ask him to spell a name once and didn't ask for repeats of the tangle of Latin legal terminology that trip so charmingly off his lips. Which, she realizes proudly, is probably way better batting average than she ever had as his real secretary. Or, paid secretary anyway—because what's happening now is most definitely real.

“That's all for now, Faith,” he says, icicles dripping off each word. “I would hate to overtax you after such a long time away.” Slipping out from behind the desk, he crosses to a corner of the room and returns, pushing a tiny table with wheels, with, of all things, a quaint but modern Olivetti typewriter, and sets it at her side. It's not the old, familiar Selectric, but it's enough to send her head spinning and who knew a damn typewriter could get her so very, very wet? “You've earned a cigarette break. And I expect you back here in four minutes.”

“Don't need it, sir,” she says brightly. Bet he wasn't expecting that part, because honestly, she's cut
back so much since she's been there, that her hankering for nicotine has calmed down significantly.

“Faith, I really must insist that you take your break, as mandated by state law.”

And really, when he says it that way, she knows there's no point in arguing.

“Yes sir, four minutes.”

He's looking down, scribbling incomprehensible notes on a legal pad. “And when you return, you're to start on the letters. If they each pass muster, we'll move on to the contract.” It's all she can do not let a huge, bright grin flash across her face, but that would totally violate the rules of the game, even if he wasn't looking at her. He would know. “Oh, and Faith—three copies of each please.”

Oh shit, not the carbons! She opens her mouth to protest, but his head snaps up at the split-second of silence that follows his request, and she squeaks out another, “Yes, sir,” before leaving the room. Still, she's not too stunned to make sure she takes the walk to the door nice and slow, giving the slightest shimmy of her ass that sends the delicate edges of the skirt undulating around her knees.

She figures it won't kill her to have half a cup of coffee too, just to make sure she's bright and alert enough to wrangle the carbons into the typewriter. And she manages to get the balcony door open after shoving her cigs and lighter ungracefully into the waistband of her skirt, as the jacket's pretty tailored lines would be ruined by something as pesky and utilitarian as a pocket or two.

She started counting the seconds off in her head the minute she was out the door, but now as she whispers “sixty one thousand,” she can't remember if it's the second or third minute. She imagines it must be the third, because she's already nearly half of the way through her cig, but that kind of seems too long, and then she sucking it down as fast as she can because she's fucking stopped counting and who knows how long it's been if that was her last minute. Gulping down the last of the coffee, she stumbles over her feet and back into the apartment, slamming the mug down on the counter as she practically sprints back through the office door.

And standing there out of breath, she knows it's been too long, just from that frosty look he gives her as a whole side of her hasty updo comes sliding out of the pins and lands softly on her shoulder.

He sighs long and loud as if his disappointment in her less than stellar timekeeping and hair care is causing him immense pain. “This really is unacceptable, Faith,” he clips out. “You're three minutes late, which wouldn’t have happened if you’d been wearing your watch.”

They eye the pale band around her wrist where it usually sits snug, like the months in Honest Dave’s Pawn Shop were just a dream. “I’m sorry, sir,” she gulps nervously because for just one second, he’s not looking quite so much stern as kinda upset, enough that she has to carefully step over the lines they’ve drawn. “Took it off when I was having a shower, Wes.”

“You're to wear it at all other times, Faith,” he whispers fiercely, eyes burning into hers. “Promise me.”

“I promise you, Wes. I didn’t mean anything. I was just in a rush, y’know.”

He nods slowly, hurt still shadowing the blue of his eyes until he blinks, straightens up and gives her that cool, supercilious smile that can make her go from frustrated to skin-twitchingly horny in about the time it takes him to quirk his lips.

“I don’t require excuses, Faith, just an assurance it will never happen again,” he says snootily,
looking down that aquiline nose of his at hers. “Anyway I think you’ve squandered enough time, don’t you?” He glares at her as she gives him a half-hearted nod at one of those damn rhetorical questions that always catches her out. “I’m sorry. I don’t believe I caught that.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she mumbles, head down so he won’t see her eyes which she’s pretty sure are gleaming. “It won’t happen again.”

He sidles up to her and when they’re doing this, dressed like this, being this, the closeness of him is an invasion of her personal space that makes her head swim and her heart start pitter pattering.

“Your hair,” he hisses in her ear, picking up a lock between finger and thumb before carelessly flicking it over her shoulder. “It’s a disgrace.” His hand slides down the curve of her spine and that simple action suddenly makes breathing this really hard thing to do as she stares straight ahead, mouth open so she can take tiny sips of air, so painfully aware of the way his eyes are sweeping over her parted lips, the hot flush staining her cheeks, her breasts suddenly straining against the tight confines of her dress. “And you’re slouching,” he adds, the flat of his hand pressing into the small of her back, so the tips of his fingers just graze the upper curve of her ass. “It’s inexcusable that I spent months training you only to have all my good work in tatters.” His hand slides down a few crucial inches so it’s cupping her backside, and the warmth of his skin even through two layers of wool and silk feels so very fucking amazing, she’s pressing into his touch and letting the tiniest moan leak out of her mouth.

“Wes… Please,” she implores him and he clucks his tongue disapprovingly.

“I’m very far from pleased, Faith,” he snaps reprovingly and he’s word perfect, like he spent the months apart refining his lines. “Assume the position, please.”

And her body has a perfect muscle memory of how it feels to be bent over smooth wood, forearms flat and fingers spread. He gives this tiny exhalation of pure pleasure as she shuffles her feet apart and arches her back.

“Oh yes. I see some of my lessons were successful at least. Now lift up your skirt, Faith.” Her hands creep round to inch up the heavy wool and she wishes she could see what he’s seeing as the black lace of her stocking tops gives way to pale, white skin. Wish she knew what he was thinking but then one, indolent index finger hooks round the waistband of her panties and she decides that she knows exactly what he’s thinking.

“I think not,” he suddenly announces and that sneaky finger retreats leaving her panties exactly where they were and she almost growls in frustration because the only predictable thing about him is his maddening, deliberate unpredictability. “Just five for now,” he decides and before she can even steel herself for the first blow, he’s speeding through five stinging, super-charged slaps that have her rocking back and forth in her fuck-me pumps as she tries to keep some semblance of balance.

It’s over before it’s even begun and she’s waiting for him to do something, anything. Yank down her knickers and really go to town. Throw her over the desk and climb up after her so he can fuck every inch of her with his mouth, his fingers…

“Oh, do sit down, Faith,” he snaps and she comes to with a start as she feels the wooden chair he’s carried over pressing into the backs of her knees. “No, don’t pull down your skirt, just sit!”

She plops down on the seat as an involuntary reaction to the abruptness of her order and hisses as the hard wood connects with the tender skin. “Jesus, Wes, might want to ease me in gently.”

“I don’t see why,” he replies equably, placing the small Olivetti on the desk in front of her. “I really
must insist that you finish typing these letters before we can even begin to start on the contract.” He fixes her with the steeliest glare in his arsenal but even that can’t detract from the pretty blush of pleasure staining his cheeks. “And, Faith, I’m afraid that I simply won’t countenance any mistakes. You can’t expect me to be lenient with you.”

“No, sir,” she agrees, reaching for the linen bond and the carbons that he’s so thoughtfully fetched for her and inserting them into the typewriter. Like, riding a Wesley, she thinks to herself smugly, as she listens to the satisfying whir of the cartridge as she adjusts it to her liking and then places her fingers lightly on the keys, caressing a to f, and semi-colon through to j.

“I’ll be watching you very carefully,” he warns her from somewhere behind her. Remember that you’re absolutely forbidden from making any errors, Faith.”

And she’s damn sure she’s not going to make any. Call it a point of pride but the Olivetti’s smaller and slicker, so different from the unwieldy Selectric which she loved and loathed in equal measure. She’s also got used to the barely there pressure of the nifty little Dell that Monty got specially for her. She’s biting her lips as her fingers fumble and try to get used to the unfamiliar span of a different keyboard and just as she’s getting into the rhythm, sinking into that almost Zen state of staring at her squiggles and hearing the satisfying click of the typewriter keys as she transforms then into neat black lines of text on the clean, white page when that utter, ratfink, bastard blows her game completely.

He’s been standing behind her but then she hears his move away, step round the side of the desk so he can sit down at his chair, pulling it in close so he can rest his elbows on the polished table top and stare at her.

She tries to ignore him. She really does. Just gives him a narrow eyed look as she inserts the next set of paper and carbons into the machine to let him know that she’s totally on to him but he just raises an eyebrow in this beleaguered way, which makes her hate him just a little bit.

His chair inches even nearer and she knows that if she looked up, rather than at her sheet of paper with his bullshit letter to Congress about the appropriate skirt length for girls called Faith from the State of Florida on it, all she’d have to do is stretch forward just a fraction, purse her lips and they’d be kissing. As it is she can barely concentrate on the words, “…resting just on the knee…” because his scrutiny is making her self-conscious and painfully aware of how tight and swollen her breasts are, not to mention the tropical heat between her legs which his speed-spanking had just made worse.

“I’d forgotten just how adorable it is when your tongue pokes out the corner of your mouth when you’re concentrating hard,” he murmurs throatily, and her fingers slip and hit all the wrong keys and she’s just about to wrench the whole damn mess out of the machine when he hands her the bottle of White Out. “Here, use this. I’m sorry, Faith, I didn’t mean to distract you. I imagine it’s hard enough to focus on what you’re doing when your arse is throbbing and you’re all wet and ready for me,” he adds sympathetically. And it’s so not fair that he’s pushing her buttons without actually, y’know, bushing her buttons.

She stumbles through the last letter having to blink back tears of sheer fury as he won’t fucking shut up. Everything he’s ever done to her in his office gets recalled in the kind of loving detail which has her squirming longingly in her chair and she knows that the letter to the Supreme Court involving Wes’ acid-trip scheme to have National Secretaries Day replaced with National Stinky Cheese Day has become completely derailed because she’s inserting random words like “spank”, “fuck” and “you evil bastard” in where she feels it’s appropriate.

“I can’t wait to proof read these,” he purrs gleefully, when she’s typed ‘Wesley Wyndam-Pryce is a big, fat cheater’ at the bottom of the final letter and she’s snatching it out of her typewriter and
practically throwing it at him. “Thank you, Faith,” he says, delving into his drawer and pulling out a clutch of red Sharpies. “Now, where to begin?”

The first letter isn’t too bad. Just a couple of typos and one mis-placed comma. The second letter has at least one angry, red circle in each line and that damn third letter—well it’s pretty damn hard to see where the Sharpie ends and the letter actually begins.

“It’s not fair,” she bursts out as he circles her charming little pay-off line and tuts. “You weren’t being fair.”

His hand is already on his heart. “I’m hurt, Faith,” he gasps. “Are you suggesting that I deliberately distracted you because I was so very eager to administer, hmmm, let me see, forty-seven hard slaps to your pretty arse?”

“Yes!” she snarls and he has the fucking nerve to chuckle at her.

“I’m sorry,” he says, without one ounce of sincerity. “You have to understand my confusion at your little snit, Faith. Am I correct in thinking that you don’t actually want me to chastise you.”

“No… I mean, yes. I mean, sometimes, sir, you, like, completely work my last nerve,” she snaps out mutinously.

“Over the desk, please, Faith,” he orders her pleasantly. “And I think panties off this time, don’t you? Now, what on earth did I do with my ruler?”

He wields the twelve-inch strip of wood like the expert he is, alternating between slow, languid strokes across her buttocks and a furious flurry of blows against the backs of her thighs, periodically delving between her legs to make sure she’s still paying attention. By the time he stops, she’s convinced that her skin is exactly the same shade as her Stila Crimson Bloom lipstick or maybe that red Sharpie that he’s suddenly picked up and is eyeing contemplatively.

She watches in fascination as a secret, cruel smiles curves over his lips, eyes darkening to deep navy. “Oh no, Wes. Don’t even go there,” she hisses.

“I’m not going anywhere, Faith,” he assures her kindly. “On the other hand, maybe this will be an apposite reminder of the consequences of typing errors.”

She’s so over-excited, not to mention about to melt into a puddle all over the Aubusson, that the Sharpie doesn’t do much more than make her buck her hips and growl threats at him. And just when she thinks she’s going to come right there with a goddamn felt tip inside her, whether he says she can or not, it’s taken away and she’s growling even more threats at him.

“Wes, you are driving me fricking mad!” she all but shrieks at him. “Stop being so mean.”

“You wanted to take a letter, Faith. You asked for that privilege quite specifically,” he tells her smugly, perching on the end of the desk with the greased-up Sharpie tapping out tattoo against his palm. “And I don’t believe I care to be shouted at in such a querulous tone of voice. Not if you’re hoping to get me in a more conciliatory mood.”

There’s fat chance of that and really, she wouldn’t have it any other way. She’s still bent over the desk, skirt rucked up, panties somewhere down around her knees and she starts to straighten up, then thinks better of it. “Can I get up, Wes?”

“Of course you can, you only had to ask.” He’s pushing the chair up against her again like a well-trained maitre d’ and she sinks down gratefully on it, reveling in the friction against her tender flesh.
and spreading her legs wide because he’s got some delicious endgame in mind and if he can see how needy she is, how much she’s aching for him they can cut right down to the chase.

Wes seems to think so too because his head is tilted so he can get an appreciative eye view of her pussy that makes him smile fondly. “That’s good,” he breathes. “So very good. Well, Faith, now that I have you in such an agreeable mood, I think it’s high time we started on these long overdue contract negotiations.”

She closes her eyes in anguish for a moment and then opens them, fixing him with an imploring look. “Yeah, I’d like that, Wes, but we can take a break first, right?”

“You're not scheduled for another for quite some time,” he says primly, still staring right at the evidence of her arousal, as if her breathy voice and wild eyes weren’t giving the game away quite as much as the slicked-up mess the spanking and his games have made of her cunt.

“I don't mean for a smoke!” she grits out. “I want you to fuck me, Wesley.” She tries to moderate her growl. “Never used to mind doing that in the office.”

“I'm afraid the contract must come first,” he says regretfully. He gives her a wolfish grin. “Certainly before you do.” Oh, isn't he funny?


It's amazing how this totally lawyer look comes over his face as he launches into this speech about superseded by blah and negated by yadda and whatever, yeah, seems like it is. Good.

“Well, in that case,” she says, with a sigh of pure delight because she's got him, she really has, “I'm invoking clause 8b.”

A tiny frown crinkles his forehead. “I don't recall it?” he begins.

“Remember when you signed the contract after I gave you that fucking awesome blowjob?” she asks sweetly. “It was one of the bits you were arguing about, but it ended up in there anyway.”

He reaches out and pushes the papers on his desk aside, locating the contract in seconds and leafing through it.

“Oh. That one,” he says flatly.

“Read it out,” she suggests with her lips twitching as she struggles to hold back a grin. “Want to make sure I'm remembering it right.” And she knows she is, because she spent twenty minutes of the flight here reading the contract he'd sent to her and that had just jumped out at her.

“I'm sure we don't need to—”

She stands up and tweaks the contract out of his hand, holding it high as he snatches at it.

“Back off, Wesley,” she says. “You're, like, impeding the lawful execution of a legally-binding—”

“Oh, give it here!” he snaps. He takes it from her and recites, in a bored monotone, “The party of the second part shall be entitled to at least one orgasm following a spanking, the period of elapsed time involved to be no more than thirty minutes from the last blow.”

He tosses it aside and purses his lips. “I can't believe I allowed that to stay in,” he mutters to himself.

“It's been fifteen minutes already,” she says, sitting back, but letting her skirt sit a little more
demurely now. “And you wouldn't want to have to stop in the middle of the negotiations, now would you, Wes? Might as well get it over with now, and think how focused I'll be if I'm not sitting here thinking about how much I want you to fuck me.”

“But I rather like you thinking that all the time,” he purrs, taking back control of the situation smoothly. “In fact, I get a good deal of pleasure out of seeing that particular hunger in your eyes when you look at me.”

Her mouth goes dry. “Yeah, well.”

“So I'm not in the least pleased with the idea that at any time, night or day, pre, during or post-fuck, you don't want me.”

“I do! Always,” she says. “Wes, you know I—oh stop fucking snickering like that!”

“You rise to the bait so beautifully,” he tells her. “I simply can't resist teasing you.” His gaze travels from her face down to her heels. “But, as ever, Faith, you were woefully imprecise. I'm in no way obliged to fuck you.” His eyes narrow. “I just have to make you come. In, what? Twelve minutes?” His tongue runs over his lower lip. “I see no reason to begin right away. Not with that much time at my disposal.”

Outrage deprives her of speech for a good ten seconds and then she stands up, jabbing his chest with her finger. “And how much time do you plan on taking, then, Wesley?” she hisses. “Thirty seconds or less? Because I'm getting pretty fucking good at all that self-control shit and you know there's a penalty involved if you don't deliver, don't you?”

He rolls his eyes. “Oh, yes. You get to tie me up for thirty minutes. But didn't we already do that? And haven't we really moved into a better appreciation of our roles than to try it again?”

She purses her lips and nods slowly. “Guess you're right, Wesley,” she mumbles. “It's true I get more of a kick out of being the tied not the tier, but you want to know something?” He raises an eyebrow and she smiles. “You don't get me off, and I'm so invoking that penalty.” She grabs his wrist and studies his watch. “Nine minutes. Plan on starting now?”

She can see a rare flicker of indecision on his face because she's really twisting the knife here. He's too cautious to risk losing—and she's already got some nicely-fiendish ideas brewing for what she wants to do with a bound and helpless Wes if he does, oh yes she has—but he's got too much pride to admit that even as aroused as she is, if she puts up a fight he's going to need those nine minutes. And it goes against his nature to rush.

Then he gets an unholy gleam in his eyes. “I think I will,” he says, picking up the ruler again and slapping it against the palm of his hand. “You once came from a spanking, Faith. As we've already got you in a receptive state, perhaps we could see if we can't achieve release through that means again.”

“But I don't want—” She takes a deep breath. She can't take nine minutes more with that ruler, not with the state her ass is in, and she knows it will be that long because she's not gonna come that way today, she's just not. She wants his cock in her, or failing that, his fingers and tongue, delving and dipping into her wet, hot hole rubbing hard until she shatters and screams. “I won't come that way, Wesley,” she tells him. “Really, I just can't. Don't even bother trying.”

“You sound so definite,” he mumbles. “Negative and pessimistic, but definite.” He stares at her and there's nothing in his face to suggest that he's at all sympathetic to her plight, or the way her clit's still throbbing steadily, sending little shivers over her.
And fuck, she thinks angrily, what about him? He's hard, she can see it, and he could get to fuck her without waiting for once; she's given him the chance, but, no, he has to keep playing even past the point where it's really starting to piss her off.

“Bend over the desk again, Faith.”

She shakes her head. “Wes,” she begins, “I really don't want to—”

A flash of irritation that looks disturbingly genuine crosses his face. “Faith, either use your word, or do as you're told,” he snaps.

And she's so fucking tempted to snap back at him, but she settles for hitching her skirt up high and bending over, just like he wants. It's more like seven minutes now, and she's not going to use her word. Not yet. She'll trust him to make this work.

For another minute at least.

“Thank you, Faith,” he says, sounding surprisingly calm now, although that might be down to the sight of her bare, reddened ass, reminding him of just how bad she's been and how efficiently he dealt with all those terrible typos of hers. “Now, let me see—”

His hand, shockingly cool, strokes her ass, testing her reaction which comes in the form of a whimper that's on the ouchy side.

“You do seem a little tender,” he muses, and then he follows it with a light slap which has her turning around and skewering him with a glare. He smiles. “Well, suppose we compromise,” he says, all sweet reason and generosity. “I seem to recall you cut though some rather tedious negotiations with that blowjob of yours. Suppose I return the favor?” When she doesn't answer right away, because she's choosing her words really carefully, he adds. “My very best efforts to gratify you in return for an agreement that, hmm, 75 percent of the clauses read how I want them—”

“Wesley,” she says, in a voice as deadly calm as she can make it when she's shaking with anger. “You've got three minutes to make me come. And you're good with your mouth but you're not gonna be able to make me come that fast and you're not even going to try, are you?”

She straightens and moves away from the desk, smoothing down her skirt.

“Faith, I—where are you going?”

She doesn't answer, just speeds up, so by the time he catches up to her in the bedroom, she's already found what she wants and she's able to let him get a good look at Mr. Bunny before she slams the bathroom door in his face and locks it.

Her skirt hits the floor and she follows it, sitting across from the door with her back against the cupboard under the basin.

He tries the door just as she turns the vibe on.

“Faith, will you kindly unlock this door?” he says icily.

She pushes the welcome thickness inside her cunt, moaning loudly, staring straight ahead.

“Faith—”

“You gonna let me have a moment here?” she says. “Won't take long. We’re on kind of a tight
schedule after all.”

“If you dare—” He's sounding outraged by the idea of her letting Mr. Bunny come out to play, which, as he's the one who insisted she pack it, is more than a little ironic.

She's not sure she can come actually; there's nothing like sheer fury for shutting down arousal, but she's not going to let that stop her from faking it.

There's an ominous silence from the other side of the door as she yanks the vibe out of her, but leaves it running, so the buzz is loud enough for him to hear it—although maybe not once she starts to give some impressive, high-pitched 'oh God, yes' type moans.

When she's done faking a pretty impressive climax, and there's a charged silence in reply, she lets Mr. Bunny have a rest, wipes it clean, and pulls her skirt back on before opening the door.

Wesley's waiting, arms folded, face blank in a completely fucking pissed-off kind of way.

“Sorry, Wes,” she said. “Did you want the bathroom? All yours.”

She starts to push past him and his hand lashes out, curling around her wrist and halting her. It's a hold that she could break with a tug, but she stands quietly, looking ahead.

“If you were unhappy with what we were doing—” he begins, but she cuts him off.

“Not everything's about safewords, Wes,” she tells him. “You were out of line. Way out of line.”

“In what way?” he asks, letting go of her. “Do tell me how you intend to rationalize your little tantrum.”

She walks away from him and drops the vibe back in her case. “Word of advice, Wes. Don't piss me off any more than you have done, okay?”

“I'm still at a loss as to what I've done.”

She curls up on the bed, turned away from him. “Maybe, with some things you just can’t go back again,” she sighs, her voice sullen, flat.

He sits down next to her, gingerly, not making a sound. “I don’t know what I’ve done, Faith. Please —” And he sounds so genuinely upset—she can hear a tiny tremor in his voice—that she relents and rolls back to face him. She takes a deep breath before it all starts to spill out.

“I was angry, and I realized that it’d been there for a while. Needed to make you see, didn’t know how to—” She shakes her head roughly, as though trying to dispel the words and start again. This time she looks him right in the eyes, her gaze as unflinching as his when he’s in the middle of a particularly delicious game. “Sometimes I feel like, there’s no room for what I want. I mean, we’re not always in, like, perfect alignment, y’know? Well, most of the time we are, but… Sometimes you just don’t listen. It’s like you’ve got a script all written out in your head and it doesn’t matter what I say and I don’t know why but I just had to cut through it because I was frustrated and…”

She pauses to take a breath but she’s practically rendered speechless again when she sees the look on Wes’ face: pure stunned amazement, like she’s struck him. It’s so rare to see him truly flummoxed that it’s almost precious. Or it would be if she weren’t so angry with him. He touches her arm, softly, as though he expects her to flinch away but she doesn’t. She just waits for him to speak. And it’s so interesting when he doesn’t, because even though he’s good with words, his silences are eloquent too. She knows them intimately: she can read the indecision and the vestiges of shame there, all the
little lingering traces that flicker between the lines. All that stuff he’s slowly learning to acknowledge: the parts of him that are messy, chaotic, unsure. Maybe she knows them better than he does; she’s more comfortable with chaos.

She’d missed the office, she really had. But she hadn’t missed the inequality between them, or the sometimes frightening single-mindedness and control bordering on cruelty he could exhibit there. Yeah it’d gotten her wet, but it wasn’t—it wasn’t sustaining. If they’d carried on like that, they would have burned out in no time.

She doesn’t want that back—not the way things were; she realizes that all too well now.

“I want to try it again, Wes, but this time…” She decides to let him off the hook, just a little bit, and she smiles. “Just because you’re calling the shots doesn’t mean I don’t have a say in matters, right?”

He doesn’t say anything for a long moment, just reaches out to her and clutches her to him, and there’s such a fierceness to it, so much tamped-down feeling, that she has to hold back the tears that have been threatening to make an appearance.

When he finally lets go of her, it’s hard for him to look at her. He doesn’t hold her gaze when he says, in this dry, lifeless monotone that reminds her eerily of the Wes of old, “I fall into old patterns far too easily, Faith. I never meant to—”

He’s so upset and serious that she has to jolt him out of it. “Wes!” she snaps. “I know. I know, okay? It’s…it’s not such a big deal. I mean, yeah I was pissed off, but it happens. Just like I got drunk and pulled some stupid shit at the ballet. It happens, then we forgive one another and move on. It’s what we do. And we’re getting better at it.” She laughs sharply. “Although it was kinda touch and go there for a while, you know?” When he doesn’t laugh, just looks at her with his mouth set in this tight, hard line, she takes hold of him and won’t let go. “I love you, Wes, more than anything. I even love you when you’re being a total bastard, but sometimes you go too fucking far. And when that happens I need you to listen to me. Do you know what I’m saying?”

“Yes. Yes. Of course.”

He still looks ashen, shaken. Christ, he could be such a baby sometimes. Only one cure for that. She wraps her legs around his waist, pulling him close to her. “No harm, no foul Wes,” she whispers huskily into his ear, pressing her body tightly up against him.

She smoothes her hands over his back, like she’s trying to calm him. Maybe it’s working, she can’t quite tell. Until he asks, “You didn’t come, did you?” and the spark is back, along with all that silky, dark promise she loves so well.

“Nah.” She waves dismissively. “Faked it.” She giggles. “There’s a first for everything I guess.”

“First?” he asks, just to make sure he’s heard correctly.

“Yeah. Pretty fucking stellar track record you’ve got there, Wes. Really.”

“Speaking of stellar, your performance was very porn soundtrack.”

“It was, wasn’t it? You want that more often?”

She’s rewarded with the quirkiest quirk of eyebrow she’s ever seen on him. Which is really saying something. “It was rather novel, Faith, but I admit I prefer the sounds you make to be less dramatic and more genuine.”
She tries to look disappointed. “What, I don’t get to scream out ‘fuck me with your great big cock, you stud!’ in the throes of passion?”

“As charming as that is, no.” He pauses, then smiles slyly. “Not unless you are thusly moved.”

She nudges him. “So, you gonna?”

“What?”

“Fuck me with your great big cock?” Now it’s her turn to pause for dramatic emphasis. “You stud.”

“Not right now, no.” He looks tired, like he’s running on empty. And really, that’s not so surprising. But he doesn’t look so hard-edged and unhappy, at least. The smile he gives her is warm, and he slips his arms around her so their bodies are linked together and that’s lovely. He nuzzles against her shoulder. “Perhaps later?”

She nods, trying to hide her slight disappointment, even if she’s feeling kinda tired too and not exactly aroused anymore. Mostly she just wants to curl around him and sleep for a little while, maybe with the added bonus of his reassuring kisses and whispered sweet nothings to soothe her into sleep.

But it’s too soon for her to be able to drop off the edge of the world and lose herself in dreams of him that are pretty much like right now, with one hand curled in her hair, the other clutched round her waist, like he’s frightened she’s going to bolt.

His eyes are shut tight and she brings up a finger to carefully brush the smudges away. “I love you so much, Wes,” she whispers, not sure if he’s awake or not but then she sees a flicker of blue from under his lashes and he shifts on the bed so she’s cradled in his arms, rather than held, like she’s something precious. “Be so easy just to let you take me over,” she continues, and her fingers have slid down to his mouth, warning him to be silent and to let her say this. “But I don’t want that and neither do you. Not really. You’d hate it if I never kicked against you, Wes, you know you would.”

Her free hand is stroking his hair now and although the slight ache of arousal has quieted down to this barely there throb, she’s unprepared for the sudden wave of tenderness that almost makes her shudder. “But I don’t want to do the contract right now because there’s no point in having one, if you don’t honor it.” She closes her eyes briefly and when she opens them, he’s staring at her unblinking and solemn and she lets him see the hurt on her face. “Fuck, Wes! You wanna know why I got so mad at you?”

“I thought we’d already been over that,” he says warily, and yeah, he’s back to looking like she’s turned down the corners on every page of every one of his books.

“Well, we haven’t,” she says firmly and wriggles out of his hold so she can sit up and fold her arms. “I totally had you! I found a loophole and I was right and you were wrong and you wouldn’t fucking budge an inch. Like, what I was saying or what I wanted wasn’t important because you always have to have your way.”

“I always take care of your needs,” he says all affronted and now it’s his turn to sit up and give her a pissy look. “Is this your roundabout way of saying that you’re in a mood because I don’t want to fuck you?”

For one second she’s tempted to slug him. Just really belt that huffy, closed-expression off his face once and for all. “Jesus, Wes! You haven’t listened to a fucking word I’ve been saying,” she hisses, scrambling off the bed. “We can’t always fuck every time we have an argument and just expect things to be okay. And I’m pissed off with you right now so no, I really don’t want a mercy hump.”
He stands up, hands hanging listlessly by his side and walks toward the door. “Well as my presence is so obviously distasteful to you, I'll give you some peace,” he says quietly and while she's gaping at him, he walks out.

She cries in the shower where he can't hear her. Because if fucking isn't any way to solve a fight, then neither is bursting into tears so he start being nice to her again and they stop picking at the scabs because it hurts too much. She pulls on her jeans and a jumper, hunts around for her sneakers which have ended up under the bed and walks into the lounge where he's sitting on the couch and not even pretending to read the paper.

“You're such a fucking baby at times, Wes,” she tells him without preamble, before she throws his coat at him. “We're having an argument and maybe we should have had it before this. It's not the end of the world and it's not the end of us, but don't you fucking dare walk out on me in the middle of it.”

“I did not walk out on you,” he says indignantly and his eyes flash enough that he's lost the dead cast to his face. “I was merely giving you some space.”

“Whatever.” She sighs. They're going round in circles and the apartment is too small for this. “Can we just not? I want to go out and get some fresh air and I want you to come with me.”

His chin lifts up and her heart sinks at the mutinous look in his eyes. “It looks like it's going to rain.”

“So we'll get wet,” she says calmly, then gives him a sly smile. “Man, Wes, doesn't it make you wonder just how much of an asshole you're acting when I'm being the mature one?”

She knows he's working up to a really crushing retort, but she doesn't even give him a chance. “Stop being so fucking stubborn,” she says firmly, walking out of the room and almost sagging with relief when she hears him get up off the couch. “We're going to walk to the supermarket if they have them on the Upper East Side and we're gonna get some stuff for dinner and you can buy me a tub of ice cream to make up for being such a jerk. And when we've both calmed down we're gonna come back here and sort this out so we can have a totally kickass New Year's Eve.”

He's still sulking or, like, wallowing in self-pity during the ride down in the elevator. And she's ever so slightly hurt that he doesn't take her hand, just jerks his head to the right when they step outside into the blistering cold and starts marching up East 76th Street, without bothering to see if she's going to follow him. She has to scurry along to keep up with his long-legged strides and by the time they're in D'Agostino's and he's clutching on to the shopping basket like it's a life belt, she's ready to turn on her heel and stomp off in a strop of her own.

Instead she gives him a cold smile that she learnt from him. “Fine, Wes, guess it's your turn to act like a brat. I'm going to get some chips and something to drink and then I'm heading back. And if you get over yourself in the meantime, then let me know.”

And she lets herself have one second to savor the completely incredulous look on his face before she turns on her heel and flounces off to Aisle 5 in a flurry of Miu Miu coated pique. She's just picking up a six-pack of Diet Coke and resisting the urge to kick over the entire display when he brushes up against her.

“I thought that I could make chicken cacciatore, but I need to know if you'd like pasta or sauté potatoes with it,” he says politely, like she's an elderly aunt who's come to stay and he's making the best of it.

“Potatoes are cool. Unless you want pasta?”
“No, potatoes are fine,” he insists and he's looking everywhere, and especially the row of Diet Peppers, than at her. And she's just weighing up whether to tell him to fuck right off when he tries out a tentative smile. “Um, would you like to pick out some ice cream? I'm slightly bewildered by the staggering variations on the theme of chocolate.”

By the time they get to the chiller cabinets, he's linked his arm through her and yeah, it's subdued and he doesn't seem that interested in whether Double Chocolate Fudge Chunk is a better choice than Triple Chocolate Peanut Butter whirl but he's making an effort.

“Get them both,” he urges when she's read out the list of ingredients and still can't decide. “Really, Faith, I want you to have them both.”

“So, what? You're just going to agree to whatever I want now?” she asks him and the effort almost kills her because it's going to take more than ice cream to turn her frown upside down, but she manages to give him a very shaky version of a smirk. “Is this selfless act going to last indefinitely, because I'm totally going to take advantage of it if it is.”

The tiniest of smiles tugs at his lips and because there's this connection between them, always is, always will be, her smile steadies, becomes genuine.

“I estimate you have perhaps thirty minutes before my true nature reasserts itself,” he drawls. “I think that's enough time for you to fill the basket with items that will, and I'm really quite adamant about this, be utterly forbidden in the future.”

She walks past him, nudging him with her hip as she throws the ice cream—both of them —into the basket. “Whatever, Wes,” she says with an approximation of jaunty that'll do for now. “Guess we'll have to see about that later, won't we? When we're drawing up that contract?”

He sighs. “Your eternal optimism returns. Faith, once and for all—”

And the wrangling over his idea of delicious and nutritious, as opposed to the grease, sugar and additive-laden snacks she favors occupies them until they're back out on the sidewalk again, clutching bags filled with enough food to keep them from starving until the shops open again in the new year.

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While he's filling the kitchen with a smell she swears she could live on because it's so rich and garlicky, she sits at the small kitchen table scribbling some ideas for this new and improved contract down on a legal pad, the old contract in front of her.

The silence that's fallen isn't entirely comfortable, the way it used to be when they were reading at the same time, both lost in individual worlds, with Wes lying at full-stretch on the couch and her head resting against it, because she always ended up on the floor, his hand sometimes leaving the book to brush against her hair. No, not like that—but it's not awkward either. Guarded, perhaps, with both of them waiting for the discussion to start again.

“Do you make resolutions, Faith?” he says finally, his back turned to her as he drops a handful of freshly-chopped herbs into the pot, their green pungency cutting through the sweetness of cooking tomatoes.

She glances up. “Yeah. Doesn't everyone? Not sure I ever remember them by Valentine's Day though. How about you?”

He shakes his head. “It's tempting to view a new year as a chance to begin again, but there's no need
to wait for January the first to do that.” There's a pause and then he says softly, “I'm sorry.”

“What for?” she asks, and she's not being mean, but she really needs to make sure he's apologizing for the right reasons—and the right sins.

He places a wooden spoon on a rest so it doesn't drip and turns to face her. “For being a terrible loser.” She gets the rueful smile that always melts her a little, because he looks about ten; a little boy caught in mischief, stolen apples bulging out his pockets. “You have a way of being so direct and uncompromising, Faith—it's quite disconcerting to a lawyer like myself.”

“That a candy-ass way of saying I don't try and bullshit you, Wes?” she says bluntly, just to get him to wince at her language.

“I suppose so.” He pours himself half a glass of the red wine he's opened to cook with and comes to sit beside her, shifting her glass of soda out of the way. “And you're right; I was a little—my pride was stung that you'd found a way to get what you wanted so neatly when I wanted you to wait just a little longer.” He takes a reflective sip of Shiraz and reaches out to link his fingers in hers. “I don't relinquish control easily, Faith. It—the idea of it even—it disturbs me.” There's a shadow in his eyes now and his fingers tighten painfully before he relaxes; the effort needed to do that, a sign of his distress.

“I told you once that when I was with Lilah—at the end—I couldn't—”

Yeah,” she says softly, saving him from saying it. “But you're not going to tell me that would've happened today? That's just—” And the fire she'd thought was out, rekindles from a single spark. “Wes, you're so full of it sometimes!”

“Faith—”

“No!” She snatches her hand away and slams it down on the table with a satisfyingly loud smack. “Wes, you're you. You're like this God of getting stuff right. You're so fucking good at what you do with me, you could've dreamed up half-a-dozen ways to make me come that didn't leave you feeling manipulated by me and didn't leave me pissed as hell because I felt cheated. You just couldn't be bothered. Easier to mess me about, then try—” She has to suck in a deep breath because the outrage is back. “You tried to sell me my own property, you bastard. No, worse; you tried to make me think you were doing me a favor.” He's openmouthed with surprise but she's not going to give him an opening.

“And I'm not going to punish you for trying to get control over a contract we're supposed to be negotiating as equals by telling me you'd give me an orgasm you fucking owed me anyway.”

“That's good to know,” he murmurs with just a trace of sarcasm that lets her know they're edging back toward normal.

“But I'm going to make this contract real or we just forget about it.”

“I don't understand,” he says, frowning slightly.

She picks up the old contract and flips the pages. “This wasn't real, Wes. It was a game. It was a way to get me ass-up over your desk, and I played along because I liked being there. You were, like, giving me all these chances to get what I wanted in office hours. Good times.” She lets it drop back on the table. “But I'm not your secretary now.”

“I'm sorry I fired you,” he says suddenly. “Even sorrier that I neglected to provide you with a reference. That was unforgivably thoughtless of me.”
She shrugs. “Yeah. It didn't make life easier, but it's okay, Wes. I managed.”

“I know,” he says. His mouth twists. “If it makes you feel any better, the news that you owed your position—one I was very glad to see you in I hasten to add—to Lilah's intervention was a very fitting revenge. That was—galling in the extreme.”

“Don't think she meant it that way,” she tells him, although now she thinks about it… “But let's not get off-topic here, Wesley.”

“Of course,” he says smoothly, standing up and giving the contents of the pot a brisk stir. “We were discussing the new contract. The one that's going to, sadly, have no section regarding your clothing.”

She grins. “Not even my thongs?”

He purses his lips. “Hmm. Good point.”

“Do you want this to be something serious, Wesley?” she asks. “Something that's there for me—and you—when a safeword isn't going to cut it?”

“In what way?” he asks, sitting down again. “And I still don't quite understand why you didn't use your word today.”

“Because I didn't need it,” she says with a tired sigh. “You weren't hurting me, although my ass was sore enough that I don't know if I could've gotten through however many minutes of spanking you had planned for it.”

He flushes and looks a little bit shame-faced. “I did rather come to that conclusion when I saw it,” he confesses. “But I'd said I could get you to come that way and I—I don't like back-tracking.”

‘Typical fucking man,” she comments snidely but without heat. “But a safeword's not there so I can save you from being an asshole.”

“Touché,” he says after a moment where he's staring at her with a frowning intensity. “And very true. I think you have a better understanding of its limitations and uses than I give you credit for.”

“Yeah, underestimating me is one of your bad habits, Wes,” she says with a sniff. “Right up there with the way you keep screwing the lid on the toothpaste tight when you know I'm gonna be using it in, like, thirty seconds.”

“It oozes out—” he begins and then smiles.

“What?”

“I love you,” he says.

“Way to change the subject,” she says, trying to hide the way hearing that makes her feel which is a combination of utter delight and confusion right now.

“No, I think that is the topic under discussion,” he says, pushing back his chair. “Come here?”

She stands up and takes the two steps she needs to be standing by him. “My ass is still the same shade as those tomatoes you chopped,” she warns him.

“Really?” he asks. “Too tender for you to want to sit on my knee?”

She shakes her head and perches on his lap, snuggling into his arms. “You all over your snit?” she
asks.

“I think so,” he says equably. “Are you, er, all over your disappointment in me?”

And he’s targeted it so perfectly with that one word, because, yeah, she’s got to trusting him to always get it right and maybe that’s not fair either.

“You’re only human,” she says forgivingly.

There’s a pause and then he asks gravely, “Is that a promotion from fucking bastard or a demotion from God of getting stuff right?”

And when she looks up, grinning, he kisses her, a long slow kiss that leads to nothing but more of the same, with his hand stroking her breast gently until the sauce sticks to the bottom of the pan and she gets dumped unceremoniously off his knee as he curses and goes to rescue it.

And she’s not going to be so cruel as to snicker—even if she loves those few-and-far-between moments when he loses it—because their hard-won détente is still so brand-new and yeah, kind-of shaky.

He rescues it, of course. Not that there was really any question, but… She just sits back and enjoys the show, watching him reconstitute the sauce by adding some more wine and throwing in the remainder of the herbs, layering the impeccably sliced potatoes carefully into a casserole dish. She’d never realized before just how much she eroticized his competency, even if this whole debacle has underscored the fine line between competent and over-bearing. But at least she’s jarred Wes out of his sometimes cyclopean view of things. Again. After all this was over he was gonna owe her more than one orgasm. Oh, that would be fun to collect on.

There’s a clatter and a muttered “Bloody hell!” and she’s jarred out of her little reverie. And hmm, maybe she eroticized his incompetency too. If only because it was so endearing.

“Is dinner ruined, Wes?” She cranes her neck to try and see what just shattered on the floor, but, ever efficient, he’s already sweeping the mystery contents of the dustpan into the trash.

“Hardly. But I do hope that Mr. Greenwood has forgotten about that hideous fish-shaped platter that just put itself out of its misery. Or else the state of my security deposit may be in jeopardy.”

“Oh, c’mon, Wes, you know as well as I do that you’re gonna give him back this place in even better shape than you found it.”

He flashes her a wry smile. “Provided that I replace the toothbrush holder.”

“That thing was fucking ugly anyway.”

“Faith.” She’s rewarded with the stern voice. Yum.

“C’mon! It was!” she yelps indignantly.

“What’s next on your hit list?”

She narrows her eyes and slowly surveys the room. “Hmm, let’s see.” But she can’t keep up the pretense and she giggles.

He starts walking toward her. “Not going to be me, is it?”

“Don’t be too fucking sure of that, Wes. This is, like, the probation period. And you’d better be on
good behavior.” Now it’s her turn to work the stern angle. Pity it doesn’t quite have the same effect on Wes that it does on her. She’d pay good money to see him weak-kneed and slowly liquefying from the inside out. But yeah, she can just file that away in the folder marked “Not Going to Happen.”

“Oh really? And what would that entail?”

Her eyes practically glitter at the thought of Wes tied up and at her mercy for a contractually specified thirty minutes, but she doesn’t say as much, just smiles coyly and flutters her eyelashes at him. She’s not above using her feminine wiles to make a point. “I think you know damn well, Wes. But I’m not calling in my marker just yet.”

“I’ll ignore the metaphor mixing and just add that I’m pleased you’re willing to let me make up for my unfortunate behavior earlier.”

“Yup. Isn’t that big of me?”

“Very, considering.”

He’s close enough that she gives him a kiss on the cheek. “You tell me when I’m being a brat, and I get to tell you when you’re being an asshole. It’s that whole new quid pro quo thing we seem to do so well.”

“You seem to be better at it that I am. Your learning curve has been most impressive.”

“That the only impressive curve I got?” She’s not above arching her back and jutting her breasts out to make a point either. But then, he responds with a look that’s somewhere between appreciative and lusty, so hey, whatever works.

“Now you’re being a brat.”

She wraps her legs around him and pulls him toward her. “Yeah, but I’m so good at it.”

He clucks his tongue, seemingly ignoring her last comment. “Not to mention fishing for compliments, which is most unbecoming.” Now he’s smiling broadly at her, and she’s really enjoying the momentary thaw in the arctic temperatures, not to mention the lovely close-up view of him.

“Whatsoever, Wes. I think”—and here she smiles winsomely in return—"I think we should finish cooking dinner, get totally blitzed on champagne, and get to work on those resolutions. How does that sound?”

He must be agreeable, because before she knows it he’s pushing up the fabric of her T-shirt and kissing her stomach lightly.

“Answer the question, Wes. Not gonna distract me that easily.”

“Oh no?” He’s moving upwards, leaving this row of devastatingly quiet little kisses in his wake.

“No.” If her resolve is weakening, she sure as hell isn’t going to let on. Not when there’s a principle at stake.

“Would you like to start on the champagne now? I took the liberty of chilling it.”

Damn it. Score one for the home team. “If I didn’t know better, Wes, I’d say you were trying to get
the party of the second drunk so she’ll forget all about a certain clause in a certain legally-binding
document.”

He pulls back, looking stunningly self-assured. “Oh, but Faith, the party of the first part would never,
ever try to pull one over on you in such a nefarious fashion.”

She rolls her eyes at him, pulling her T-shirt back down at the same time. “Yeah, yeah. And I bet
you’ve got a bridge you could sell me real, real cheap.”

He laughs and gives her one last quick kiss before going back to his sauce, which has been
simmering along nicely. “Champagne it is, then.”

“I can’t win for losing,” she mutters under her breath.

“Did you say something, Faith?”

“I do so love champagne!” she chirps, a bit over-enthusiastically. She knows damn well she’s going
to get her way this time, come hell or high water.

But dammit, her resolve is totally weakening by degrees, watching him carefully and deliberately
open the bottle of champagne, the cork coming off the bottle easily with a soft pop, the depressurized
gases curling out of the bottle in a delicate wisp that dissipates as quickly as it appeared. He pours the
champagne just as handily too, after carefully checking the two fluted glasses for dust, which he tells
her in an aside is what keeps it from forming a head of nasty foam and overflowing when it's
decanted.

“We toasting to anything, then, Wes?” she asks, spinning the stem of the glass between her fingers.

“To us, of course,” he says, pinning her with that intense look that makes her heart all squeezed up
and proper breathing nearly impossible, and it's almost enough to make her wish they were skipping
the whole dinner thing and going straight to the bedroom, even if it does smell heavenly and she's
totally ravenous.

“To us,” she whispers, and the soft clinking of their glasses echoes the sentiment. What was that
about hell or high water again? And she's about to glare at him over the rim of the glass as she takes
a delicate sip when an idea hits her as the bubbles of the champagne tingle on her tongue. “How
much longer before dinner is ready?”

Her voice has gone back to that overly sprightly tone and she could very nearly predict that quirk of
his eyebrow. “Another ten minutes or so, I think.” He eyes her warily. “What are you up to, you
naughty girl? Your poker face leaves much to be desired.”

“Well yeah,” she laughs. “But I'm not telling, not yet. You just keep cooking, and I'll be right back!”

She's feeling quite pleased with herself as she sneaks Wes' copy of the contract off the kitchen table
when his back's turned—it's just like the old days, palming lipsticks at Walgreen's—and skips off to
the study, quietly closing the door behind her because it wouldn't do to have him sauntering and
ruining the surprise, a surprise he's gonna be damn grateful for and better leave him putty in her
hands for the rest of the evening.

She flips through the pages, rolling her eyes at some of his recent amendments (brisk walks through
the park every morning, only two double caramel lattes per day) before settling down in front of the
Olivetti, perched daintily on the edge of the chair.

It's rare that she's ever sat down in front of a typewriter to write something off the top of her head,
but as soon as she's finished formatting the page to fit the standard look of a contract amendment, the words flow right out and she only has to stop once to fix a typo.

The thing was, she realized she'd put that clause into the contract before she'd actually had the chance to tie him up that one time, before she knew it was totally like, as anathema to him as the whole incident with the zucchini had been for her. Well, maybe not entirely that much, but close enough.

And yeah, even if it would totally be the funnest thing ever to turn the tables on him like that. Well, hadn't this whole stupid argument and the ensuing fallout of a grumpy afternoon just kinda proven that both parties needed to be considerate of the other's comfort level and all that?

She finishes typing the last sentence with a glow of pride at her obvious maturity and fucking astronomic emotional growth, yanking the page out of the typewriter and carefully adding her signature to the appropriate line with the fat-nibbed fountain pen Wes uses for the sole purpose of signing documents. And if that doesn't make the piece of paper in her hand official, there's nothing that could—short of running down to Center Street and finding a late-night notary that worked holidays.

Cracking the door open slightly, she can see that he's set the table, laid out all the food, and is just sitting—and possibly lost in thought, though she can't really tell from there—waiting for her to return. And yeah, that just cements the decision she's made, especially as he didn't come barging in on her, even to say that dinner was ready. It was really too sweet fucking for words, really.

Reading over her words again and lightly touching the ink of her big scrawly 'F' to make sure it's dry, she slides the page, along with the copy of the contract into a manila folder from his desk.

“Everything ready then?” And really, he needs to quit it with the heart-stopping looks because one of 'em is totally gonna knock her dead one of these days. And when he smiles at her, well hell, she can't help but smile back.

“Indeed. I just finished setting everything out, so your timing is quite impeccable.”

“That's me, Wes. Impeccable.” She carefully and nonchalantly tucks the folder under her chair as she sits down.

“And I take it your little surprise is all prepared?” If she's not mistaken, he's bursting with curiosity under that veneer of polite but detached interest. Takes a little of the edge off feeling too grown up too freakin' fast, knowing that she's making him wait now.

“Mmm. Yes,” she says, noncommittally, after two slow and deliberate sips of champagne.

“And?” Ha! She was right. It's only in his eyes, but he sure looks like he's about to burst from not knowing.

“Don't you think we should eat first? I'd hate for this all to get cold after all the work you put into it.” And it's talking all the effort she can muster up not to burst into giggles at the slightly defeated look he gives her as he nods in agreement.

“Yes, of course,” he says, reaching for the salad, a slight flush rising on his cheeks. He takes a bit of everything without passing her any of the plates, and she's pretty sure what his strategy's about to entail. And when he drawls at her, “Come here, Faith,” she just smiles prettily and shakes her head.

“Nice try, but you're not gonna get it out of me that way. You're still in that probationary period, remember? No sneaky tricks like feeding me dinner while I sit on your lap—or kneel by your side,
for that matter.” And he's the one that almost laughs at that last bit, no doubt his vivid imagination's coming up with all kinds of resolutions to that hypothetical scenario. “Would you pass the salad, please, Wesley?”

And when he does so without the expected sour face or protest, she's feeling pretty darn vindicated.

They pass the meal making what can only be described as genial small talk, she compliments the meal and he tells her about the cooking course he took on alternate Wednesdays for a month when he first arrived in New York, one of those celebrity chef affairs, and he's got her laughing, really laughing at his description of the vapid Upper East Side heiresses trying to learn how to trim a hangar steak or truss a chicken or assemble a crown roast.

And when he clears away the dishes and presents her with a chilled, square plate upon which rests a perfect little pyramid constructed of dainty little scoops of her two ice cream selections, she finally capitulates a teensy bit and sits curled in his lap, feeding him the ice cream and gives him a big, sticky-sweet and cold kiss when he admits that he prefers Triple Chocolate Peanut Butter Whirl to Double Chocolate Fudge Chunk, and that he really likes it quite a bit actually—so much in fact that after they've decimated his little architectural folly of a dessert, they end up eating almost all the rest of the pint together, right from the carton.

When the food coma hits, they're wrapped in each other's arms on the sofa, too groggy to do more than snuggle and canoodle between declarations of fullness and oaths that they'll absolutely never eat that much ever again. And she's just found the perfect way to rest her head in on his shoulder without getting a major crick in her neck when he whispers, “What were you typing in there, Faith?”

“Wes,” she whines softly. “Too full to get up and get it now. You made it through dinner, you can like, totally make it through the whole digestion part of the program.”

“I barely made it through dinner,” he sighs. “But that ice cream was extremely effective in making me forget, though, as I only just now remembered to bring it up again.”

“Brain freeze, was it?” She laughs.

“Something like that, yes.”

She sighs, knowing that in the end he's gonna make her get up and bring the papers over, and frankly, she'd just rather tell him from this comfy spot on the sofa.

“I've made an amendment to the contract, Wes.”

“You can't do that.”

“I can too! I'm within my rights to do so. Of course, all it's lacking is your signature.”

“I see,” he says, voice seemingly stuck permanently in seductive murmur mode, sliding a hand across her back, leaving it resting gently on the curve of her ass. “And how exactly does this amendment read?”

She closes her eyes, and smiles—both at his incredulity and the deliberateness of what would be, so many other couples, just a simple caress—and recites:

“Per clause 8b of the contract signed on May 9, 2004 under the mutual agreement of the aforementioned parties, the party of the second part hereby releases the party of the first part from the
obligations heretofore laid out in section 8 per section 17a in said document, incorporated here by reference.”

“I don't seem to recall a section 17a, either. Faith,” he says archly and with a little petulant sniff. “I believe you're making that up this time.”

Her eyes snap and she sticks her tongue out at him—so much for that whole maturity thing. “Don't get cocky with me, counselor. Your track record for recalling some of the most important details of our contract is pretty crappy lately. And considering how many proposed amendments are currently penciled in the margins of your copy, maybe you shoulda spent more time checking out the fine print.”

He's definitely rendered speechless by that comeback and it's pretty freakin' exhilarating—that is until his hand traces a slow circle over one ass cheek, and she's totally about to call him on his underhanded tactics because like, they're totally working—when he plants a little kiss on the tip of her nose and smile brightly. “You're not only extremely beautiful, you're extremely smart as well, my darling girl.”

“I know,” she says, snuggling closer. “And you'd better not let that little fact slip your mind again either.”

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Two

Wesley doesn't come out and thank her for letting him off the hook with the whole tied up for half an hour bit, not in words anyway, but there's still this relieved, grateful look lurking in his eyes as he watches her tip up the champagne bottle and discover that, although it's really heavy, it's also empty.

“We have no more champagne,” she tells him, turning wide eyes on him so he gets the full significance of her discovery. “No more champagne, Wes!”

“I can assure you we do,” he says, as she leans back into his waiting, outstretched arm, “but I think you've had enough for the moment. I'd hate for you to fall asleep in the middle of what I have planned.”

She giggles. “Do these plans involve fucking me, Wes? Because I've gotta say, I'm not likely to fall asleep when you're doing that.”

“Well, no,” he drawls. “And if you were so very impolite, I'm sure I could rouse you quite easily.”

“Oh, yeah?” she says huskily, giving him a narrowed glance through rapidly batting eyelashes and spoiling the femme fatale look by breaking out into more giggles as he rolls his eyes. “And how would you do that. Wes? It wouldn't involve....” She shudders in mock-horror. “Spanking me, now would it?”

“Oh, I don't think so,” he says with a smirk. “Not now I've established at least three spots on your body so ticklish I could probably just breathe heavily on them and you'd start to squirm.”

“No tickling!” she says, sitting upright and glaring at him. “When we do this contract that's so going to be in there—”

“Tomorrow, perhaps,” he suggests. “I'd hate for you to claim I'd taken advantage of your slightly squiffy state—”
“‘Squiffy’? Is that even a word?” she demands. “You make them up, Wes, you know you do!”

“Indeed I don’t,” he says. “The English language is rich with words to describe the various states of inebriation; why should I feel the need to invent any?” He grins at her. “Squiffy, but not yet sozzled,” he decides. “Perfect. You’re too relaxed to resist my evil plans and yet—”

“You have evil plans?” she asks. “Do they involve, like, world domination?”

“Half right,” he murmurs with a meaningful twitch of his eyebrow. He glances at his watch. “Ten-thirty. Yes.” His hand strokes across her neck. “You’re looking under-dressed for such a momentous occasion as the last night of the year, Faith.”

And somehow, she thinks that much though she loves wearing his collar, Wes loves seeing her in it even more, because there’s this little contented sigh that slips from his lips after he’s finished fastening it and adjusting it.

“Does that feel comfortable?” he asks. “It's not rubbing you?”

“No,” she says, and she's wet already, has been since he sent her to fetch it. “It feels good.”

He draws his finger along the black strip of leather. “I ordered it over the phone,” he tells her. “Told them the exact length I wanted, the width. Oh, they had half a dozen questions I had to answer.”

“Yeah?” she says, getting a tingle at the thought of him rapping out the answers, with that intent, serious frown on his face because he would’ve been so focused on getting everything right, down to the pink velvet of the case.

He nods and moves the collar around so that he can tap his finger against the buckle. “And when they asked if I wanted to have it engraved...” There’s a pause as his gaze becomes distant and then he says, “Well, I was very glad I'd made the call from home, not work.”

Her imagination starts working really hard, but then she decides to just ask him, since he’s obviously willing to share. “I know what I did when I saw it, Wes, how I felt when I put it on—”

“Three unauthorized orgasms, I believe,” he says reflectively. “Yes, so you told me. I think I might deal with that shortly now you’ve reminded me.”

“I had to!” she protests. “Wes, I was so fucking turned-on...but never mind me. Why were you glad you were at home?”

“You know perfectly well why,” he says, finding her nipple through two layers of clothing and pinching it with a delicacy that makes her remember what's waiting to be wrapped in her case. The shudder she gives makes him glance at her in mild surprise but he carries on. “Because I was hard, and had been throughout the conversation, but that final question left me barely able to control my voice as I replied.”

“But you managed it,” she says with certainty.

Her faith in him is rewarded with a slightly harder pinch. “Well, yes.” He looks faintly aggrieved. “It was—disconcerting though. I hadn't expected to have quite such a profound reaction to something so distanced from you.” He smiles slightly and turns the collar so the buckle's centered at the back of her neck. “Seeing you in it, yes, I expected that to arouse me, but simply ordering it? No.”

“Did you come, Wes?” she asks him, kneeling up on the couch so that she can cup his face in her hands. “Tell me.”
His hands slide up her arms to grip her wrists, his thumbs rubbing against the sensitive skin there. “You're very curious, Faith,” he murmurs.

“I want to know,” she says. “When you called, I told you how it felt on me, remember, so you knew, even when you weren't there—I want to know, Wes. Please?”

His face warms beneath her hands and then he tugs down on her wrists and she releases him.

“I was sitting at my desk,” he says, shifting position so that her head’s on his shoulder again and her hand flat against his chest. “When I put the phone down I was so very hard.”

She can’t see his face like this, but she glances down and yeah, the outline of his cock’s jutting up, just waiting for her hand to cup it.

His breath catches as she curls her fingers around him and then goes to work on his zipper, but he lets the hand he raised in an involuntary movement fall back and carries on talking.

“I wasn’t in the mood to make myself wait,” he says. “Sometimes, after I'd spoken to you, or you’d sent me one of your rather provocative e-mails, I would—I had no choice at work, after all—but not then. If you’d been here, you might well have been fucked as fast and furiously as your heart desired, my darling Faith, but of course you weren't.”

And wasn't that an opportunity missed, she thinks, but all her attention's on his cock, which she's managed to release from his pants so that it's there in her hand, shifting against her palm as he takes a slow breath, and so very fucking hard already. As she watches, fascinated by the subtle changes it's going through, he slips a finger under her chin and tilts her head up so that he can kiss her.

“You're here now, Faith,” he says as her hand begins to move on him, slowly jerking him off. “But I don't feel inclined to rush I'm afraid.”

“That's cool, Wes,” she murmurs, speeding up for just a second and watching his eyes darken. “But don't stop there—” She eases right back, so she's holding his cock in the loose circle of her fingers, rocking her wrist back and forth slowly. “Or so will I.”

“Minx,” he mutters. “But really, what is there to say? I pushed my chair back, unzipped and did precisely what you're doing right now.” His hand comes down on hers and he squeezes so her fingers tighten around his cock. “But harder.” His hand begins to move, taking hers with it. “And much, much faster.”

She glances from his blurring hand to his set face, and she's seen Wes jerk off before, but just as she doesn't do it quite the same when he's watching, she guesses he didn't either. This feels closer to how he'd do it alone somehow, and it's so intimate it leaves her breathless. He won't let her hand slip free, staring down with an absorbed look on his face, but then he stops suddenly and gives her a distinctly predatory grin. “Like that. And I came thinking of you, my sweet, darling girl, came just from the thought of you wearing my collar, and I want to come now, but I'm not going to do it like this.”

It feels like forever since she's come, felt him inside her, so she's all in favor of that. She's wishing he'd made her strip before he put the collar on her, too, because she wants nothing more than to shift onto his lap and lower herself onto his waiting cock, her slow descent guided by his hands and voice.

“Fine by me, Wes,” she says, not even bothering to hide the eagerness in her voice, because he always gets this pleased look at the idea she wants him, which makes no fucking sense at all, because of course she does.

“And I'm not going to do it at all until midnight,” he says.
She's had about as much delayed gratification as one girl can stand. “That's an hour away! Come twice!”

He makes a sound that she's positive is a snicker, even though he tries to turn it into a cough, and she glares at him. “You're winding me up, aren't you, Wes?”

“A little,” he admits. “But tell me, Faith, if I promised that you could come whenever you liked, would you still be so concerned about my, possibly theoretical, self-imposed frustration?”

And it's one of those tricky conversations that end up with her hopelessly lost in a maze of Wes-logic, so she cuts right through it all by standing up and starting to strip.

“Tell you what, Wes,” she murmurs, “Why don't you just sit there and let me give you one of those lap dances you seem to know a lot about?”

“Do you know how to?” he asks, eyebrows rising in polite inquiry even as he's staring at her tits, which, considering she's wearing the demi-bra that leaves most of them on display isn't all that surprising. “I think there's a certain amount of training involved.” He clears his throat as her lips tighten. “Or so I'm told.”

She straddles his lap and leans forward so he's got a face-full of breast. “Training, yeah...but do they have my motivation?”

He's close enough to be able to lap gently at her nipple, making it pop up over the edge of lace that wasn't really covering it anyway. “And what is motivating you, Faith?” he says, glancing up at her.

“I want to make you happy,” she says simply, guiding his hand to the ribbon ties on her panties.

“You do that always,” he says gravely, plucking at the bow on one side so that the fabric parts for his hand to slip in and caress the indentation above her clit.

“I want to come,” she hisses, squirming as his thumb finds the ideal angle and pressure. “Want to come.”

“So direct, so uncompromising,” he sighs, undoing the other bow and tugging the dampened panties free. “It's quite charming really, now I'm used to it.”

His cock's flat against his stomach and she rubs herself along it, feeling the head bump her clit, each slow undulation of her hips leaving it slicker, making her wetter.

“Don't think I'm supposed to let you put this in me,” she says, pouting regretfully.

His hands are on her breasts now and whether or not he's ever sat in some smoke-filled dive with a lapful of skank, he seems to know that she's cutting right to the chase, because for all the way he's fondling them like they're his favorite toy ever, he's shaking his head slowly.

He leans back and gives her ass a smart, stinging slap.

“I'm not supposed to touch you either,” he purrs, “but as this is such a sorry excuse for a lap-dance, I think I'm quite justified in expressing my displeasure.”

“Hey!” she begins, but his mouth's taking on that slightly cruel curve that's never in the least bit assumed and she abandons her outrage and waits.

“Off my knee,” he orders. “You're being far too precipitate, Faith.” He glances down at his cock,
chuckles softly and somehow manages to get it back inside his pants, lifting his hips and pulling up the zipper carefully. “That's better,” he says, although it really fucking isn't.

He looks her over and then tosses her panties to her. “Go and put on some heels and—yes, just for once, I'll permit you a thong. It's the correct attire for this and I wouldn't want to fly in the face of tradition.”

She's got no one to blame but herself but she can't help giving him a plaintive look. It gets her no more than a bland smile, but as he stands and moves past her to put on some music he gives her ass a consoling pat.

And it helps that when she comes back in he's dimmed the lights and Nina Simone crooning 'I Want a Little Sugar in my Bowl' is loud enough to drown out her nervous, fast breathing and what she's sure is an audibly-thudding heart, but really, she can do this after all, because when the reward for every slow, exaggerated shimmy of her hips is Wes' tongue swiping across his lips, or his long fingers clenching, then it's easy.

Easy to sway and bend over him, so the soft, exposed curves of her tits get scraped by the prickle of stubble on his chin; easy to let the blaze of heat in his eyes guide her as she strokes her skin, touching lightly brushing fingers to her breasts and stomach and making herself believe they're his hands on her, so the moan that slips past her lips is heartfelt and real. Easy to strut and spin on her heels, knowing he's staring at the taut line of muscle running up the back of her leg and so very easy to let her hand return again and again to the collar around her neck, because every time she does, she swears she sees his control slip, and every time he regains it, it's with a look that promises retribution, in the form of his hand, is gonna fall on her defenseless ass.

And she wouldn't have it any other way.

When she's deciding that as careers go this is more tiring than she'd imagined, she stops teasing him with the almost-there kisses and just-missing thrusts that bring her thong-covered pussy inches away from his face. He hasn't tried even once to touch her now they're doing this for real and it's killing her. Her skin's craving the measured, deliberate caresses he gives it, the kisses that waken it in a dozen places until she's stirring restlessly, lost in need.

So she gives him a final sultry smile, turns and bends over, sliding her hands over her ass, parting it so he can see what has to be a soaked piece of satin barely covering her equally-soaked cunt, legs spread wide.

The track ends and he picks up a remote and mutes the one that follows before saying, “That was very nice, Faith.”

She straightens and turns, eyes flashing because, damn, he can do better than that! Then she sees the look on his face and it doesn't really matter what he says, not when he's staring at her like that, with an almost frightening intensity.

She ends up just how she'd imagined it, across his lap, still wearing that bra because he won't let her take it off, thong and heels abandoned on the carpet, with his cock easing into her, an inch at a time, as he grits his teeth.

When she's got every inch inside her he bends his head to nuzzle into the shadowed curves of her breasts and then flicks a wicked upward glance at her.

“Dance, Faith,” he whispers against her skin, his hands tight against her ass so every wriggle, every squirm brings her tender, bruised skin another reminder of the flurry of blows from the ruler earlier.
“Don’t stop—”

“No, never,” and her voice is so whisper quiet that she doesn’t even realize she’s spoken until after the words are out of her mouth. Concentrating on anything other than the comforting, hard weight of him against her—his hands on her ass, cock thrusting up inside her, mouth brushing hungrily against her breasts—is so difficult, she just gives herself over to sensation. She still can’t quite believe that he’s going to let them come, not this early, but decides not to question it. Yeah, best not to, Faithy, just enjoy his slightly glazed-over expression, simultaneously dreamy and intense, the feel of his fingers flexing tightly against the reddened flesh of your ass—

She’s starting the uphill climb to her first orgasm of the evening, her head thrown back, hands clutching at nothing. She’s riding him without care or decorum, and it’s forceful and messy and graceless and she doesn’t care, she just wants the purity of a quick, unmitigated fuck—when Wes, the charming, viciously single-minded bastard—decides he has other ideas. She practically growls in frustration when he stills against her, cock still inside her as deep as it will go, and puts a peremptory finger to her lips. “Shh, it’s not time for that reward just yet, Faith. That was terribly, uncharacteristically rash of me,” he whispers, the low, insinuating timbre of his voice making her shiver with anticipation. “But I do so love to watch you get carried away with passion,” he continues, a slight smile on his lips as his eyes flicker over her body.

“Just fuck me, Wes,” she hisses, still writhing against him, totally not caring if he’s gonna take that infraction out on her—well, maybe not her ass, but on something. He responds by tipping her up off him, his cock slipping slowly out of her as she practically squeaks with indignation.

“Eventually,” he drawls, his voice all detached, infuriating calm, way too fucking calm considering how hard he is, how ready, and she wonders if her frustration stems from the fact that she hasn’t been able to come or because she wants him to absolutely, unequivocally, lose it. She’ll never understand how he can be so fucking composed, while she’s so consistently undone, and so easily. But then, there’s a kind of symbiosis to it, a perfect symmetry. They really are a matched set.

Still a bit stunned, left wet and wanting and beyond frustrated, she sits back on her heels, not quite sure what he wants her to do but secure in the knowledge that he’d let her know sooner rather than later. She’s never known him not to have a scenario or three at the ready. It was just another of his many wonderful, maddening constancies.

“I do think your little outburst necessitates a change of scenery,” he lilts, and before she can protest to the contrary, he’s grabbed her by the arm and is dragging her to the bedroom. Practically flings her onto the bed.

Once there, he lies back against the pillows, arms sprawled out, looking so casual that Faith entertain a momentary fantasy of throttling him. But then her eyes glance down to his erection, jutting against his stomach, its very emphaticness almost obscene compared to the supine, clothed calm of the rest of his body. It’s a picture-perfect moment, really; she swallows, trying desperately to ignore her imperfect desire to get off at any cost, or the lust that’s making it so hard for her to think. She can’t touch herself, or climb on top of him, so she just sits there, mutely, legs tucked up under her, trying to ignore the heavy, disconcerting wetness between her legs.

They’re at a standstill. It’s not an uncomfortable one, either, it just… is. He watches her discomfiture with growing interest, his fingers resting lightly on the tip of his cock. “You look displeased, Faith. I really can’t imagine why.”

“Because you’re a perverse, smug liar, that’s why!” she spits out, more pissed off than she’d like to be.
“Am I?” He looks equally affronted and bemused. “Did you really think I was going to let you come?”

“Thought… both of us… Jesus, Wes. I just want you, I don’t always want it to be complicated, not after… not right now.” God, she hears her voice and she sounds so fucking needy. Sometimes she hates what he reduces her to.

“I don’t appreciate your tone, Faith. It’s peevish. I’d like you to kneel on the bed, please. Facing the wall.”

And she does it, because she can’t not, and his tone is making her wet (correction: wetter) and she knows, knows that she’s going to be screaming his name at the stroke of midnight, and not a second before, because he’s that goddamn precise. She arches her back and juts out her ass, purely for his benefit. Not that he deserved it or anything, the—

“You’re slouching, Faith, stop it. Really, I’m amazed at how much you try to flout my good-natured indulgence of you. Now be a good girl and straighten up, that’s it.”

Thank God for corsets and nosebleed high heels, she thinks ruefully as she follows his order, knowing damn well that she could balance a goddamn book on her head if he chose to test her thusly. She’s feeling all kinds of smug at that when she feels his hands touching her back and he starts to lift her arms, crossing them behind her. She can feel the damp head of his cock resting against the cleft of her ass. She lets out a little “oh” of frustration.

“I’m going to tie your hands together now. You are absolutely to let me know if this becomes uncomfortable in any way. Yes?”

She nods.

“Out loud, Faith. I need you to say it.”

“Yes!” The ‘goddamnit’ she mutters silently under her breath.

“Good.” That dark, insinuating drawl is back and he’s lashing her hands tightly together at the wrists with what feels like silk—one of the scarves probably—with her palms facing upwards. She sways unsteadily for a moment before finding her equilibrium. “Now”—is that a tone of bemusement she hears?—“Spread your legs, Faith. No, wider.” He taps her thigh imperiously and she complies, widening her stance as far as she can without strain.

She knows she’s not allowed to turn to look at him, so she stares at this fixed point on the wall in front of her. But she can feel the bed shifting, hear it creak slightly. For a few minutes the quiet is aggressive; the only sound in the room the muffled pop of shirt buttons being undone, the rustle of fabric, and her heart thudding in her chest. While he’s getting enticingly naked she stays perfectly, stock-still. Perhaps that’s worth a reward, however small…

Suddenly she can feel the heat from his body near and she wants nothing more than to lean into it, like a moth to a flame. But she doesn’t have to, because he’s there, his presence calming her even as she wonders what he’s got in store.

She doesn’t need to wonder any more when he starts to lift her leg so she can straddle his torso. He must know how unsteady she is without the use of her hands, so he positions her carefully, his hands gripping her thighs, as he pulls her backward, ass first and rather awkwardly, until she’s positioned right over his mouth.

At the same time his cock—still hard, still red-tipped and full—comes into view once again. God,
she wants it—wants to lean down and get her mouth on it, feel its heft, taste the delicate salt tang blooming on her tongue.

He must know that too, because he takes her by the shoulders and lowers her gently down onto it, careful to stop right before she’s choking on its length. She relaxes the back of her throat, taking it all in. She can’t use her hands to wrap around the base or cup his balls, so she settles for slicking him up with her tongue, feeling him tense up slightly underneath her.

“You have such an eloquent mouth, my girl,” he whispers, a little breathlessly.

He spreads her wide again, fingers dipping into her wet cunt. “You can’t see how beautiful you are, what a sight,” he tells her, his voice reverent. She doesn’t respond, just hollows out her cheeks, pistoning up and down along his cock. She goes slowly at first, her movements steady. But then she speeds up, stopping now and then to run the tip of her tongue down the underside, as he groans and thrusts up into her waiting mouth.

And so it becomes a kind-of push-me pull-you game between them, his tongue delving deeply into her pussy while she uses hers to circle delicately around the head; then she’d swallow him down again and he’d respond with more tongue, his fingers everywhere at once, the heel of one hand rubbing hard against her clit.

Somehow she manages to croak, “Fuck, Wes, I’m gonna come if you keep doing that, can’t fucking concentrate on your cock if you keep—”

“Shall I stop? You seem …nearly incoherent.” Only Wes could be frosty-cool when getting the blowjob of his life. Or one of them, anyway. On second thought, maybe it wasn’t that good after all, considering the fact that he could still string full sentences together. She redoubles her efforts, putting everything she has behind it. And that’s not easy, because without her hands as leverage she’s forced to hold herself up using any means necessary. It’s quite tiring, but she’s thankful for all those yoga classes with Dru that she bitched so much about at the time.

He’s not easing off either, but really fucking her with his tongue now. Nothing shallow about his thrusts while his deft fingers circle her clit and slip into her voracious cunt. She’s grasping around his fingers, wanting more, more, more, even though she’s nearly there. Nearly—

No. Focus. If Wes could do it then so could she. Desperately trying to ignore the orgasm threatening to crest, she gets back to work on his, using teeth and tongue and bingo! She’s rewarded with a sharp jerk of his hips and this needy-sounding groan as he fills her mouth. She’s not quite ready for it but she manages to pull back slightly so she can swallow it all down. She lingers on his cock for a moment before wrenching herself away.

“Mm. God, Wes, how do you do that? You always taste so fucking good. Is it diet? I’m just curious.” Suddenly she realizes that there’s been a cessation of movement where it counts. “And, you know, a little, uh, quid pro quo wouldn’t hurt right now…” She shimmies back a little, hoping to feel his questing fingers or tongue or all of the above any second now. But when she turns to look at him he’s back against the pillows, looking for all the world like the cat who just got the cream. And here she thought they were really going for the gold, or at the very least, bronze in the Simultaneous Orgasm Downhill Slalom. But then, Wes always was one step ahead of her. She’s shocked, but not exactly surprised.

“What the fuck, Wes? Don’t I get to come? And I thought you weren’t going to come before midnight, you liar—”

“I believe I was speaking about you, my willful little spitfire.”
“You are so full of shit, Wes,” she spits at him. “If my hands weren’t tied behind my goddamn back, I’d fucking bitchslap you!” She’s sorta kidding, but only sorta. If anyone’s earned an orgasm by now, it’s her. God, has she earned it.

Bastard doesn’t even change his tone of voice when he responds. “You’ll do nothing of the sort. And I do believe there’s a penalty for such impertinent language. And now that you’ve brought me off so beautifully, you won’t need that mouth of yours, which you’ve misused by spouting such obscenities…”

“No! I’ll be good, I promise…”

“Too late for that, I’m afraid,” and he sounds almost regretful as he reaches into the dresser drawer of the bedside table and pulls out another familiar black silk scarf. He draws it taut against her mouth, tying it tightly behind her head. She tries to call him a fucking pervert, but sadly, the effect is muffled beyond comprehension.

“I’m sorry Faith? Did you say something?” Now he sounds all kinds of bemused. And she’s working on that scheme to throttle him for real. Or at the very least to prevent him from coming for a couple of hours and see how he likes it. But it’s hard to glare daggers at him when he’s giving her his intense, steely gaze that gets her every time.

“You’re so eager for a quick release, Faith. It’s almost endearing. Almost. But I think I’ve devised a suitable punishment for you.”

She can’t do anything more than stare, wide-eyed, as he lowers her gently down onto the propped-up pillows and spreads her legs wide. “It’s a wonder there isn’t a small flood in here, Faith, you’re so wet,” he muses, tracing a fingertip from her cunt to her asshole, and she shivers, her anger slowly, predictably giving way to abject longing. He crawls up her body and kisses her through the scarf. It’s a slow, wet, indulgent kiss that leaves the fine material clinging damply to her lips and her more frustrated than ever. Especially when he breaks it off abruptly. He reaches into the seemingly bottomless drawer and returns clutching an equally familiar, purple, battery-operated monstrosity that’s really starting to piss her the hell off. She thought she’d put it in her case but he must have rescued it. No way on hell was he going to get thanked for that maneuver. He smiles warmly down at her. “I do believe Mr. Bunny owes you, Faith.” She shakes her head angrily, no, but Wes blithely ignores her.

“I’m not going to turn him on at first, Faith, I want you to be receptive. Although I do believe you’re quite wet enough.”

He slips the very tip of the vibrator into her, watching, fascinated, as it disappears, centimeter by centimeter. She groans against the gag, and she can’t help but arch her hips slightly so he’s got a better angle. “Do you want me to fuck you with this, Faith? I wouldn’t like you to be unwilling.”

She thrusts against it, and he pushes it deeper, looking quite pleased as she dilates around the glistening plastic. He’s watching her appreciatively, murmuring, “This does afford me such a marvelous view. It’s inspiring to watch, really. Although I can’t help but wonder if your poor clit is feeling neglected?” She gives him another shake of the head, no, as he thrusts the vibe in as far as it will go and flicks it to the lowest setting. She would have cried out then if she could have; instead she buries her head into the pillow with this silent scream and tries to exorcize the orgasm that’s been building up for almost an hour. She can’t contain it anymore, not with the fucking bunny ears flickering against her clit and the vibe pistoning in and out of her with maddening speed. Every muscle she has is taut, shaking with tension that’s only going to be released one way—

And then it’s over. The vibe slides out of her, leaving her empty and clutching at nothing, her whole
body quivering with suppressed effort.

She still hasn’t come. And if she could actually think coherently, think beyond her nearly acute need for an orgasm, she’d marvel at Wes’ singular ability to surprise her, time after time. Before she met Wes she never would have guessed that waiting and withholding would get her so fucking hot. Although she’s really had enough waiting for one night. Her arms are starting to ache, dully. Her juices have dried sticky against her thighs, and she can barely close her legs because her clit’s so sensitive to the touch.

Suddenly, Wes’ arms are encircling her, cradling her. He unties the scarf that’s gagging her with uncharacteristically clumsy fingers, freeing her so she can sigh with relief; her worn out body sinking back against him. “My arms are aching, Wes, please…”

“You have a word, Faith.” It’s just a statement of fact and his voice is perfectly equitable; he’s not pushing her either way.

And she’s silent, because she doesn’t quite feel as though she’s at that point yet. She’s equal parts fearful and curious as to what he’s got planned next, and she can’t quite bring herself to say the word. Can’t or won’t? No, it’s not pride that’s stopping her—she’s beyond that now. It’s definitely curiosity. She wants to see this through.

“Not there yet, Wes,” she says, hint of pride obvious despite the shakiness of her voice.

“Well, you’ve been so good, perhaps you deserve a reprieve. And we are working against a deadline, after all.” He undoes the knots binding her arms; once they’re freed, he brings each unsteady hand to his mouth in turn, kissing each white knuckle tenderly, gently massaging the red, raw skin of her wrists. “It’s nearly midnight,” he says, almost regretfully. “I suppose the rest of my slightly diabolical plans for you will have to wait for another time.”

“What, you can’t beat the clock, Wes? You going soft?” She might be exhausted, but one thing she never grows tired of is trying to provoke him. With some effort, she raises herself up and straddles him. “Oh, apparently not.”

“That’s a quite dreadful pun,” he murmurs. He reaches out and turns the small clock beside the bed so that she can see the numbers flashing out the last few minutes of the year.

“What did you do last New Year's Eve?” she asks suddenly. “Who did you spend it with?”

His eyebrow arches. “Who do you think?”

“I don't know,” she mutters. “Did you, like, go into the city and—” She pauses, not wanting to think about Wes lost in the crowd she’d been part of, his eyes skimming the flushed, drunken faces of the young girls, looking for some spark of similarity and finding nothing but a quick, fumbled fuck at best.

“No.” He pushes himself up to sitting and kisses her briefly. “I did not. I spent it alone.” His arm wraps around her waist and she finds herself lifted off him. “Hands and knees, Faith. I'm going to spend what's left of this year fucking you.” She wriggles into position and his hand comes down on her ass. “Among other things.”

“I'm still kind of tender,” she says, gasping as she rides out the flare of sensation.

“If I tell you that I already know that, just from looking at you, and it's why you're getting spanked, would you be surprised?”
“No.”

His hand comes down again.

“Would you be shocked?”

“No!”

“Would you be—” And each word’s accompanied by a slap now, a fast, sharp smack that's hitting the same place over and over.

“No!”

No, she’s not shocked, no, she's not angry, no, she's not going to tell him to—

“Stop, Wes—not there, not any more there, please—”

“Stay still,” he says, letting the hot palm of his hand rest against the crimson imprint she knows he's left on her ass as she starts to squirm. “Quite still.”

And it's so very hard because even that light touch is painful; but she's hurting everywhere, her whole body desperate for a climax he's withholding, so much so that she's crying without emotion, escaping tears trickling over her flushed cheeks.

“Oh, you're so very good, so very obedient,” he murmurs and sometimes she doesn't think he means it for her ears when he says stuff like that, as if his thoughts are given voices and he can't help speaking them aloud. “And when you are, you deserve a reward, but I'm not sure we agree on what that should be.”

“Fuck me,” she begs, finding the words though the haze of arousal and pain. “Wesley—”

His cock slides into her even as his hand comes down again, in the exact same place, and she's not sure which makes her scream, but she does.

“How many strokes do you think it'll take me to come?” he asks, with deliberate ambiguity, repeating the swift surge forward of his hips and the relentless accuracy of his slap. “And given you can't have one without the other, do you still want me to stop, Faith?”

Her arms are trembling now but there's a blur of red off to her left and she blinks until the numerals sharpen. 11.56. Yeah. She can do this.

“Want you to fuck me, Wes,” she says and gets another thrust, another spank, with his cock pulling part-way out of her even as his hand lifts up. “But you'd better come on the stroke of midnight—”

She arches her back to snatch back an inch or two of his cock and grins triumphantly as he stays in place, allowing it. “And you better let me come then, or I'll—”

He leans forward, his cock in her to the hilt, bracing himself on the bed. “Oh, Faith, you can come as much as you like now,” he says with suspicious generosity. His free hand slides up her back to tug gently at her collar and just that reminder that it's there is enough to make her cunt clench around him. He brings his hand around to cup her breasts, his hips not moving, so although she's filled with him, feeling the thickness she wants, it's not enough. He pinches her hard nipples with an approving murmur and then his hand skims down her stomach and his middle finger rubs hard at her clit, finding the exact place needed to make her world narrow to just that point; narrow and then explode outwards as she comes.
He stays inside her, still not moving, giving soft little groans as her climax hits and she spasms around him, and then, just as she's panting her way toward speech, though fuck knows what she wants to say, he starts to fuck her again, his hand slamming down on that blazingly hot mark he's branding into her skin, his cock finally fucking her properly, in a series of uncompromisingly fervent strokes that give her nothing more to wish for than that this would never end, because although one more slap and her skin's going to ignite, one more deep, hard slide of his cock through the wet heat that's all she seems to be right now and she'll have forgotten how to say anything but 'Wes', it's still everything she wants.

He comes as the city sky brightens with celebratory fireworks, soaring and spluttering into cascades of sparks Faith sees mirrored behind her closed eyes, and his hand finally stills, his fingers curling around her hips as he drives himself inside her in a last flurry of desperate, mindless thrusts, all rhythm lost, reduced, like her, to a state where he's making hoarse, primal sounds.

Her arms give way and she slides forward, taking him with her, so that when his cock slips out of her they're left spooned together.

“Happy New Year, Faith,” he whispers against her hair.

She turns, carefully, so that she can look at him as she says it back, their lips meeting in a soft kiss.

“That was one hell of a finish to the year,” she tells him.

He considers that for a moment, then gives her a grin and a small shrug. “It was one hell of a year,” he says.
Part Sixteen

Chapter Summary

The End

Part Sixteen
Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Three

“Happy new year, my darling girl,” he murmurs in her ear as she stretches luxuriously, blissfully uncurling her limbs and batting her feet against his legs like she’s turned into a little kitten overnight.

“You said that last night,” she reminds him with a yawn, nudging his arm with the top of her head until he finally gets a clue and wraps it round her waist, pulling her closer toward him for what she hopes is some primo snuggle time. “My new year's resolution is to make you cuddle me more,” she mumbles into the curve of his neck.

“I'm sorry, Faith.” He laughs softly, fingertips tracing the indent of her spine. “Could I have that again in English, please?”

She doesn't answer, just brushes her breasts against his chest and then pulls away to watch in fascination as her nipples harden. “So pretty,” he murmurs in agreement, even though she hasn't said a word. “Shall I make them even prettier?”

He hauls her up so she's sitting astride his cock, which is all kinds of perky this morning, so he can lean forward and delicately trace round the aching tip of one breast with his tongue. And when she's squirming against his mouth and the hard promise of his dick, because he's suckling her now, using his teeth, and she's so very wet, he raises his head and gives her a ferocious smile.

“Put my cock inside your cunt, Faith,” he orders her and she's never been so willing to comply, raising herself up so she can greedily impale herself with a satisfied grunt, legs splayed on either side of his.

And she loves these hazy, morning fucks when she's still chasing her dreams away. Yeah, she loves it when she's clutching the bed sheets and begging him to let her come and all of her is aching from what he's done and what he hasn't done yet but this is so uncomplicated. Just his cock slowly thrusting inside her, thumb gently resting on her clit, tongue working her breasts and when she comes in this never-ending series of little waves she's pressed so tight up against him that she doesn't think she'll ever be able to let go.

She’s barely got time to bask in the afterglow, before he’s yanking off the covers and dragging her toward the shower.

“You always take the first shower,” she grumbles, trying to dig her heels in to the carpet, like that does any good. Wes gives this really irritating chuckle and tips her over his shoulder like he’s a fireman rescuing her from a burning building. Though firemen don't deliver stinging swats on the ass. “Wes! Think my butt has to be a slap-free zone today,” she hisses, as she wriggles down on to her own two feet and they contemplate the slightly bruised, way reddened skin of her ass.
“It does look rather tender,” he says and his fingers brush against the biggest bruise, which looks like a prime contender for a Rorshach test. There’s this faint note of pride in his voice as if her butt just brought home a report card full of straight A’s. “I do seem to recall that you promised to get your arse Scotchguarded, Faith. I think it’s very unsporting of you to renege on the offer.”

“So if my ass is off-limits, what are you going to do if I misbehave?” she asks demurely, as he fiddles with the knobs on the shower.

“Well, I like to think that I’m flexible,” he murmurs and it seems like they have to take a second to bliss out remembering some of the positions he had them in last night, but then he comes to and gives her a glinty-eyed grin, as he pulls her into the shower. “I hope I’m not getting too predictable, Faith,” he purrs, smoothing back her hair to make sure it’s wet enough for shampoo. “I’m sure I can find other places on your delectable little body that deserve a good spanking.” His hands glide down to her breasts, her tummy, the back of her thighs, and she twitches away from that maddening, almost tickling touch.

“Don’t have to spank me, Wes,” she tells him, winding her arms round his neck so she can yank him in for a very wet, very long smooch. “Sure you can think of a whole heap of other way to punish me if I’ve been getting my naughty on.”

“I’m sure I could,” he agrees with this secret smile tugging at his lips but that might have something to do with the way one of his sneaky hands has delved between her legs so all she can do is clutch onto his shoulders tightly and get that mouth of his back on hers.

It’s an hour later that she wanders into the living room, finally dressed (by him). Hair dried and brushed (by him). And a smile on her face (put there by him when he ran his fingers through her sleek fall of hair and told her he hoped there was some veracity to her theory that how you spent New Year was how you spent the rest of the year.) The smile falls off her face pretty damn quickly when she looks out of the window and turns to him with a mournful expression.

“Hey, where’s the damn snow, Wes?” Man, she sounds whiny. “A couple of little flakes wouldn’t be too much to ask for,” she adds, trying to sound a little less like a toddler about to throw a full-on hissy fit.

He looks up from where he’s rummaging through the sideboard drawers and gives her a placatory smile. “The snow really does have to come on its own schedule, Faith. Though I’m sure if it knew you were waiting so anxiously for its arrival, then it might put on in appearance.”

“You think?” She wanders toward him so she can rub her cheek against his back. “What are you doing?”

He reaches round so he can pat her hip absentmindedly and starts on the next drawer. “I have a terrible hankering for Eggs Benedict with smoked salmon so I thought we could order in from the hotel… oh, here it is!”

She peers curiously at the menu he’s clutching in his hand. “We ordering breakfast? From the hotel next door? Don’t you have to be, like, a guest?”

There is no way that he should be able to look that insufferably smug and still have her love him but he just about manages it. Even with the whole gloating thing he’s suddenly got going on. “It’s a rather wonderful perk of living here, but residents are able to order room service from the Carlyle,” he says with a trace of wonderment to his voice.

“What? And they just bring it right to your door?” she ask incredulously.
“They do indeed.”

“Well, yeah, so does Domino’s Pizza.” She grins at him, kissing the affronted look right off his face so damn well that he doesn't even arch an eyebrow when she orders both the American and the Continental breakfasts for old-time’s sake.

And her piggy little ways are definitely creeping up on Wes because he puts away the Eggs Benedict and her fried tomatoes and her wholemeal toast and when he thinks she's not looking he tries to snag a rasher of extra crispy bacon off her plate and she has to send her fork crashing down on the back of his hand so he gets the hell out of her breakfast and lets out an indignant, girly yelp into the bargain. And God knows, she never gets tired of making him do that.

“I really think we should do the contract now, Faith,” he tells her after some uniformed flunky has taken away the plates and she's prodding her belly to see if it really has just expanded a couple of inches. “In the study, both of us fully dressed and in complete agreement that we won't do anything untoward to distract the other party, yes?”

“Works for me,” she says jauntily, primly pulling down her top and trying not to swing her hips in what could be misconstrued as a provocative manner as she leads the way.

But it's not as much fun as last time. And not just because there's no blowjobs in it. They sigh heavily as he scores through the section on appropriate office behavior, appropriate office attire, and pauses with his pen poised over the section on comestibles.

“There's not much point, is there?” she asks him dully, resting her head in her hands. “Not like I'm gonna be here to moan about your smelly cheese stinking up the fridge, am I?”

He puts the pen down so he can squeeze her fingers. “Faith, darling girl, our imminent separation will just be a temporary state of affairs.”

“But you won't be there to be completely unreasonable about how frozen yogurt is a lame substitute for ice cream and my cute little corporal punishment table,” she runs a reverent finger over section five, paragraph 3 sub-a, and looks at him plaintively, “it doesn't mean jackshit if we're not together. What are we left with? Just a section about e-mails and phone calls.”

And it's completely in contravention of the new section 1, paragraph 1, sub section a about how the party of the first part won't unduly try to influence the party of the second part during contract negotiations but he pushes his chair back from the desk and pats his thigh. “Come here, sweetheart.”

She doesn't so much climb into his lap as hurl herself at him. “I don't want to go, Wes,” she wails and he's gripping her arms tightly and his voice is steely, cutting through her rising panic with no room for compromise.

“Stop it, Faith,” he says shortly and she's pressing her fingers against the stern line of his mouth.

“Don't be mad at me,” she begs, curling herself round him. “I know that I have to go home and give notice and listen to Darla cry, but I don't have to be happy about it.”

“We'll have the weekends,” he says suddenly. “Rupert is interminably persistent about work/life balance so I'll take Friday afternoons off and you can come here or I'll come to you. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Faith?”

She sniffs slightly, allowing herself to feel mollified and nods. “I guess. Or, like, hey, we could meet somewhere in the middle. What's between New York and Florida?”
Wes thinks about it for five seconds and then gives a shudder. “I believe it's Maryland.”

“Bet they got hotels in Maryland though with beds and maybe they have the ones where you feed quarters into a slow and they vibrate.” She gives him a shaky smile and gets rewarded by his lips pressing against her hot forehead “Wouldn't have to be every weekend if you were totally busy.”

“Every weekend,” he says firmly, picking up the abandoned contract and studying it intently. “How else can I make sure that you haven't fallen back into your wicked ways? So, I'm afraid Faith, that you little scheme to render section five, paragraph 3 sub section—a null and void has been unsuccessful.”

She gives him a good, hard poke in the ribs for that little funny. “I so wasn't!”

“Good, then it stays as should Orgasms, frequency of and allowances made during,” he says decisively, shifting her on his lap so he can reach forward and pick up his pen.

They're bickering amiably about who gets custody of the collar during Monday to Friday and Wes is just about to cave on her cunning suggestion of alternate weeks when the phone on his desk starts ringing and he gives her a smarmy grin.

“Saved by the bell and don't stick your tongue out at me. It's very unbecoming, Faith.”

She slides off his lap and hands him the phone. “I'll make you some tea if you let me have the collar for the first week.”

He rolls his eyes at her and shakes his head warningly. “Hello? Yes, happy new year to you too. Good Lord, are you in a bar at, what, midday, Doyle? Yes, I know it's a public holiday but even so.”

Wes with friends who phone him up so he gets this bewildered look on his face like it's still so new to him is so fucking adorable that she wants to whip out a camera and record the moment. And when she comes back with his “lawyers do it in briefs” mug with his tea the perfect shade of American tan, which is just how he likes it, he's still on the phone.

“Much as I'd like to be steaming drunk while it's still daylight, Lindsey, I really do have to say no,” he's laughing down the phone while Faith puts the mug down and wonders who the fuck Lindsey is. Texan, Wes' co-counsel, likes to do more than shake ladies' hands, she remembers and hovers by the doorway until Wes looks up and beckons her nearer. “Faith's only got two days left in town and I doubt she'd appreciate me leaving her to go bar-hopping with your two reprobates,” Wes gives her this helpless look and holds the receiver away from his ear. “I'm sorry about this. I'll just be a moment.”

“I don't mind if you wanna go out, Wes,” she hears herself say and she thinks of the mound of presents that she needs to wrap and the card that she needs to write out and how she wants to pop out and see if she can get him a birthday cake and she realizes that it's true. And that makes it easy to lean over and snatch the phone away from him. “Hey, Lindsey, right? This is Faith.”

There's an appreciative little chuckle. “How you doin', darling?”

“I'm doing fine,” she squeaks because coming onto your co-counsel's girlfriend is kinda inappropriate. “You want Wes to come out and play, huh?”

“Faith…” Wes is all growly but she pushes the mug of tea at him and turns her back on his glare of wrath.

“Sure do, Faith. New Year's drinks, birthday drinks, not being at work drinks… Hey, Doyle! I'm
talking to Wes' chick. She sounds hot."

There's a muffled thud and then there's someone else slurring down the phone. “And there we thought you were just a figment of Wes' imagination,” says an Irish guy and he sounds enough like Liam that she's clutching the phone in a hand that's gone clammy before she takes a deep breath and says calmly, “Guess you're Doyle.”

“And I guess you're the light of Wesley's life. You gonna come out drinking with us too?”

“Faith, please give me back the phone,” Wes says wearily and she ignores him because he has friends and they're missing him which is just about the cutest thing ever.

“Okay, Doyle, listen up,” she says firmly. “I can't go drinking with you because I'm like totally underage (she swears she just heard Wes mutter “fuck” under his breath but… nah!) but you can come round at three and then you and Lindsay can take Wes out for two hours and if you send him home drunk, then you're gonna have me to deal with? We clear about that?”

“Clear as the beautiful blue sky above,” Doyle says, and she can hear Lindsey in the background muttering something about how he's fucking blind as it's cloudy today. “So then, Faith, just how underage...”

“I'm glad we're agreed,” she says, cutting him off as Wes finally manages to wrap his hands around the phone and tug it from her grasp. “See you at three!”

She tries to give Wes a huffy look for ruining her fun, but now he's turned away, muttering, “No, Francis, Faith is not, as you so delicately put it, 'barely legal'."

“Yes, I am too!” she laughs, sliding up to sit on the desk and swinging her legs around his waist, pulling him close even though he tries to wriggle away. She's got him trapped, all right, and to prove it plants a row of tiny, soft kisses along his neck. “You should go—I'll be fine, I swear,” she breathes in his ear.

“Very well,” he sighs, finally capitulating to the goading on all sides. “But only if you two don't drag me to that place on 33rd again, what was it?” He's still doing a fine job of ignoring her even though she's untucking his shirt from the back of his waistband and generally being a nuisance. “Oh, you're there now? They let you back in after what happened? Oh, yes—if you reimbursed them for it, then you're perfectly within your rights.” She can hear Doyle chattering away loudly until Wes interrupts him. “And she said she preferred you with your trousers off? Well I suppose a round of congratulations is in order for that at least. Look, I've got to ring off now—no, Faith isn't... Good-bye, Francis. See you shortly. Yes, three. Good-bye!”

He hangs up the phone with another exaggerated, belabored sigh and finally breaking free of her grasp. “They really are quite a force to be reckoned with once they start drinking...”

“They sound nice, Wes. Really do.” She bites back saying something about how a pair of rowdy lawyer types are way better than a certain chilly WASP princess with man problems, but thinks the better of it. “I'm glad you agreed to go out with them. I mean, I have some things I need to do.”

He raises an eyebrow in surprise as he carefully tucks his shirt back in. Maybe it hadn't been the best idea to divulge that little bit of information. “And what might that be?”

“Secret birthday business, mister. So don't even think you're getting more details than that!” she says, as he gallantly offers her a hand down from her perch. “And wait, what was Doyle asking you there at the end?”
“It's really best that you don't know,” he mutters, scooping up his mug and taking a long sip before settling back into his chair and flipping the pages of the contract. “Now, where were we?”

“You were just agreeing that we could have joint custody of the collar and take opposite weeks for visitation rights.”

“I was?” He sounds incredulous, as if she's pulling one over on him or something.

“Yeah, remember? Before the phone rang. And then I made you the tea, and you promised.” She's really not above wheedling for this one clause, not at all.

“I did no such thing,” he says sternly, and actually has her fooled for a moment that he's genuinely pissed off until he breaks into a grin. “Very well, I'll let your appalling behavior on the phone pass for now and I'll agree to this clause—but only as I've just realized Lindsay and Doyle, both owe me a round of drinks every Thursday for a month—as you do indeed actually exist.”

“I guess showing them the pictures I sent wasn't exactly the best way to prove that, huh?”

“Not exactly, no.” He gives her a considered look, eyes narrowed, opens his mouth to speak and then thinks better of it.

“Spit it out, Wes,” she cajoles, leaning against him and touching her hand to the back of his neck where he's so warm and soft. “You were about to spill the beans on something, I know you were.”

He leans into her touch, closing his eyes for a second as she kneads her fingers against the big, old knot of tension that even several mind-blowing orgasms doesn't seem to have shifted.

“I'll tell you later,” he says imperturbably, gasping just enough to make her smile as her fingertips worry at his nape. “I'd hate to think that I may be accused of unduly influencing these rather fraught negotiations.”

And that's Wes at his most irritating and, like, oblique so she's damned if she's going to carry on giving him a neck rub. “Wouldn't be fraught if you'd just let me have the collar first,” she points out sweetly, sitting daintily on the chair opposite him and crossing her legs.

He steeps his fingers so he can give her a stern look, that she's not buying for a second, over the top of them. “Very well,” he sighs, and she gives a tiny start because she never thought he'd give in so easily. “But there will be certain conditions attached. Or not, as it were.”

Being Wes he can spin out a whole sub-section on exactly what she's allowed to do with the collar when she has custody and he expects nightly phone access to ensure that she's looking after it properly, which makes him drift off into this wistful little segue about buying her a camera phone so he can make sure that she's following his instructions to the letter.

“And so I can send you pictures of myself playing with myself,” she adds with a smirk and he raises her twenty by putting a reminder on his Blackberry to look into webcams.

By the time they're finished and she's managed to have tickling absolutely, unequivocally and positively prohibited and he's been really unwieldy and mean about the topic of suitable subjects for e-mail correspondence during work hours, the contract in front of them is a mess of margin notes, strikethroughs and appendices. Faith thinks it might be the prettiest thing she's ever seen.

“I guess this makes it real,” she says wonderingly, picking up the sheets of paper and smoothing a proprietary hand over them. “That this isn't all a dream.”
“It's certainly not a dream,” Wes informs her stoutly. “Especially as I'd like you to type it up while I'm out. I'm curious do you have dreams about performing office tasks?”

“That's not a dream, as you so charmingly phrase it,” he begins indignantly, getting up from the chair, and snagging her hand so he can tug her out of the room. “I'm going to have a couple of drinks under duress before I come home so we can…”

“Fuck like bunnies,” she purrs in his ear, wrapping her arm round his waist. “Only got me for two more nights and we have to go out with that Rupert tomorrow, so you better make the most of me, Wes.”

“You get the most peculiar look in your eyes, Faith, when you mention my employer's name,” he says with just a hint of something dark in his voice. “I hope we're not going to have a repeat of the other night.”

She's just about to burst out with an impassioned protest when he cups her cheek. “Especially as I've told Giles how charming you are.”

“I am, aren't I?” she beams, trying to pull him in for a smooch but he adroitly side-steps out of her way so he can open the bedroom door.

“You have your moments,” he concedes with a faint smile and then winces as she throws herself down on the bed. “Really, Faith, have some mercy on the springs.”

She sits cross-legged on the quilt and just relishes the warm fuzzies she gets from an unspectacular conversation about what they're going to have for dinner and whether he needs to put a T-shirt on underneath his black shirt and there's this feeling in the pit of her stomach like a Christmas Eve kind of feeling that soon they can do this stuff every day.

And it's powerful enough to bring her to her feet so she can walk over to him and wrap him up in this tight hug which says all the things she's too unwordly to say. “Don't you fucking dare go to a strip club,” she mutters instead, rumpling the hair he's just combed.

“Now why would I do that when I've got my little Olympia waiting for me at home?” he inquires throatily and he's pinching her chin at the same time as he pinches her ass, coaxing a pained little gasp from her.

“Hey, that's a twenty-four-hour exclusion zone,” she yelps, returning the favor and his eyes darken and she knows he's just about to exact retribution when she remembers the conversation they were having before. “What were you going to tell me? About me not existing and showing your lawyer buds dirty pictures of me?”

“I would never let Lindsey and Doyle get their grubby little paws on those photos,” he growls, then tilts her head up to look at his fierce blue stare. “I could hardly bear to look at them myself.” His mouth twists wryly and she knows he's thinking of that last day they spent together when everything was sun dappled and she was high on hope and he was already living a lie.

“Doesn't matter, Wes,” she whispers, fingers trying to rub out the furrows on his brow. “You got the real thing now.”

He's letting her go so he can fumble in his back pocket and pull out his wallet, which is kinda
random because this is Wes and it's not like he's going to her give her twenty bucks and tell her to order pizza. “I wanted to show you...even when we were apart,” he's muttering indistinctly and she's not really following until he pulls out a crumpled, dog-eared Polaroid picture and holds it up so she can see her scowly face, crossed eyes and hair going in a gazillion different directions. And man, she never knew it before, but she looks goddamn fugly.

“So beautiful,” he breathes, snatching the photo away from her because he can probably tell that she's seconds away from burning it. “And, my darling girl, the pout on your face is practically a perfect match.”

That just makes her pout even more but she's saved from having to speak by a buzz on the doorbell.

Wes is calmly gathering up his scarf and keys and then she's hanging back as he strides out of the room. She hovers in the hallway as he opens the front door and if she just peeks round the corner, she can make out, well, not that fucking much until Wes turns and gestures with his hand.

“Faith?” she hears him call. “Come and say hello.”

She's frantically smoothing down her hair and wishing that she wasn't wearing jeans and her What Would Joan Jett Do? T-shirt and maybe a whole Nordstrom counter of cosmetics as she sidles into the hall and vaguely waves.

“Er, hey,” she croaks and she's never been more grateful for the steadying, comforting weight of Wes' arm around her shoulders, even if it does mean she's got to, like, actually look up and shit.

“Faith, this is Lindsey MacDonald and Francis Doyle,” Wes interjects smoothly and there's a flurry of handshakes and “Well, aren't you just the most gorgeous thing I've ever clapped eyes on?” from Doyle in an Irish accent that makes her toes curl into the carpet before she stumbles back against Wes. And he's a suave bastard, he really is, with the carefully cultivated, thrift store chic and the big bouquet of roses that he thrusts at her. Lindsey's quieter and yeah, if he was six inches taller he'd be an absolute heartbreaker but he just looks at her and then at her hand clutched compulsively around Wes' arm and asks her quietly how she's liking New York.

“It's cool,” she mumbles and Wes' arm tightens round her shoulder and she manages to summon up a fair to middling smile. “Wes gave me this two-day guided tour that most people would, like, probably do in a week, didn't you?”

And then Wes starts talking about the exhibition at the Whitney and she can ignore the way Doyle's eyes scan her body before he turns to Lindsey with a smirk and pair of raised eyebrows in the direction of Wes.

“So you mind if we steal old Prycey away for the rest of the day?” Doyle asks her with another shit-eating grin as he lurches toward the door and both her and Wes snap in unison, “Two hours!”

“Aw, he'll barely have the time to make an inroad into a bottle of Jamesons,” Doyle whines, scrabbling for the handle. “We'll bring him back in one piece, darling.”

“I'll be back at five,” Wes says firmly and he's bending down to give her a dutiful peck on the cheek which she completely derails by grabbing him by his coat lapels and giving him a proper smooch with tongues so she can show Doyle that old Prycey ain't no slouch when it comes to keeping his barely legal girlfriend happy.

Wes' expression is satisfyingly dazed when he comes up for air and it's totally worth the warning glare he gives her when she catches sight of Doyle's jaw falling floorwards and the look of awe of
“Two hours,” she reminds him, shoving Wes in the direction of the door. “And don't be late or that's all you're getting from me tonight.”

Wes looks like a fluffy kitten who's just had its fur rubbed the wrong way but he saves his thinnest smile for Doyle. “Not a word of this at work, Francis, or I'll have you filing litigation reports until you're ready for early retirement,” he says pleasantly as they shuffle out and she stands at the doorway to see them make it into the elevator but not before she hears Lindsey say to Wes in the kind of hushed tone that people use in church, “You must have done something fanfuckingtastic in a past life, Pryce, to have that warming your bed every night.”

And she's still smirking about that a half hour later even after the heart-shattering discovery that lit cigarettes and mittens aren’t a good combination. Faith's figured that the contract is way down on her list of priorities because she's got, like, ninety minutes left to finish her plans to give Wes the best birthday he's had in all his almost thirty-eight years on earth. Not like she thinks that the beam has ever been raised that high in the first place.

Henri, the concierge at the Carlyle, is way obliging. In fact, she thinks he might be her new, best friend. He doesn't even bat an eyelid when she insists that the pastry chef ices the words, “Wes is da man” on the birthday cake. But she figures if she's gonna pay seventy-five dollars for a chocolate sponge with ideas above it station, then she can have what the hell she likes on it. And he doesn't get pissy when she tells him for the fifth time that breakfast has to be delivered at 8.30 sharp and that they're not to ring the bell, just text her on her cellphone.

Once that's sorted out she runs four blocks in gale force winds to the cute stationery shop to buy wrapping paper and then has to run all the way back when she suddenly remembers that she's forgotten to buy Wes a card. By the time she's trying to unthaw her hands enough that she can turn the key in the lock, she's got five minutes before Wes comes back and he better be only squiffy and not halfway to sozzled if he knows what's good for him.

She's just getting the feeling back in her fingers when she's completely startled, not by the click of his key in the lock, but by the quiet jangle of the phone in the study.

“Oh, he'd better not be,” she mutters, sprinting across the apartment in a few strides and picks up the phone before it rings again.

“Where are you?” Doesn't even bother with hello because she knows it's him when the first thing she hears is a wall of incoherent chattering and a roar of burly male voices yelling at what she imagines must be one of the New Year's college football bowl games on TV.

“Faith?” It's Wes, thank goodness. The soft-voiced, drawly, and slightly tipsy version of Wes, but at least it's not Doyle or Lindsey calling to tell her he's been squashed by a bus or something.

“Who else would it be?” she mutters, unsuccessfully trying to keep the impatient edge off her voice.

“Where are you? And you know it's almost five, right?”

“Where've you been, my sweet, naughty girl? I've been calling for thirty minutes.”

“I told you, I had some things to take care of. Why didn't you call my cell?”

“I seem to have forgotten mine at home,” he says, distantly before trailing off. And yeah, she totally sees it sitting on the kitchen table. Good one, Wes. “Stupid of me, I know, but I seem to have also forgotten a few key digits in your mobile number.”
“Right. How much have they made you drink, then?” The obvious question, as she's pretty damn sure he knows that number backward and forward.

“Yes, he stammers. “I seem to have let peer pressure get the better of me. They seemed very intent on congratulating me for scoring such a hottie.”

Okay, yeah, she's kind of thinking maybe that whole thing about how he had friends who wanted to take him out for drinks wasn't so cute after all. “I should have known something like this would happen.”

“Don't be mad, Faith.” His voice is so plaintive it totally takes the edge off her annoyance. Hell, she'd done way, way worse. Plus, there's the fact that she's kind of not gotten around to typing up the new contract. And sure, usually she'd use that to make a play for a little spanky session, but she's totally thinking of extending that whole twenty-four-hour kibosh on her ass for another day, because any swats there now would still be kind of in the realm of not the good kind of pain.

“I'm not,” she sighs. And she isn't really because there's definitely something about his voice right now that's helping warm her frozen extremities, and she wouldn't mind having a pliant, probably totally sozzled Wes to snuggle with until he sobered up a bit. Not at all. “I just want you to come home. Just tell the boys good-bye and thank you and get in a cab, okay? Or do I need to come get you?”

“No, no. I'll be fine, really Faith. I'm only a few avenue blocks away. I could walk, even. Might help clear my head.”

“Hey, hey—Wes, listen to me. Don't walk home, okay? It's pretty freakin' nasty out there.”

There's a pause and then he says softly, “Are you taking care of me by any chance, Faith?”

And she wonders how long it's been since anyone else did, since anyone cared if he ate his greens, got to bed early, took a day off. No one but her, and when she thinks of how fucking tender he gets, and yeah, how agitated when she's sick, she's just about ready to go down to that bar and rescue him.

“Damn straight, I am,” she says fiercely. “You take a cab and—”

“Faith? Is that you, sweetheart?”

She hisses with indignation because she doesn't need the sound of a scuffle to tell her that Lindsey's just totally snatched the phone off Wes.

“Yes, it is.”

“Darlin', Wes can't wait to get back to you, and there's not a one of us who'd blame him for that—” She rolls her eyes because his voice is heavy with insinuation. “But you wouldn't want him to miss the end of the game?”

“I don't give a—” She takes a steadying breath. “If Wes wants to watch it, he can watch it here.” She bites back the impulse to mention the widescreen TV: the last thing she wants is them turning up and settling in for the night.

“Faith, as soon as the game's over, we'll have him back with you, I promise.”

“You promised you'd have him back by five,” she says acidly.

“Well.” There's a chuckle. “We did, yes, but did you really expect him back on time?”
After a lifetime of watching Liam leave the house for 'one drink' and lurch back hours later? No. But
she's still blinking away angry tears because dammit, Wes wanted to come back and they were
stopping him.

“Listen up, Lindsey,” she says steadily. “You make sure he gets in a cab, okay?’

“Course. Word of honor.” She can almost see him smile. “You missing him that much already, then?
Man's got hidden depths.”

And she's so fucking tempted to say any one of the snappy, sassy retorts lining up and waiting, but
Wesley works with him and she has a feeling he's going to be getting enough teasing about her as it
is, so she settles for demure agreement, “Not going to argue with that, Lindsey,” and waits until he's
hung up before she growls.

She flicks through the channels, but there are at least three different games on and none of them look
as if they're close to finishing. With a resigned sigh, she decides to make the best of it, and get on
with what needs to be done.

It takes her half an hour to wrap his presents and the professionally gift-wrapped ones, like the tie,
stand out because she's never been all that good at making neat corners and fancy bows. She studies
the heap for a moment, wondering if he'll like them, before stashing them in the small spare bedroom.

The contract retyping still has to be done, but she discovers that she's starving, and it doesn't look as
if Wesley's going to be in any fit state to cook the steaks he chose, taking nearly ten minutes to pick
the perfect piece of meat until she’d been ready to go veggie just on principle. As he still hasn't given
her any cooking lessons, she doesn't even try to cook one herself; just whips up a jaw-breakingly
thick sandwich after shaking her head over the lack of mayo in Wes' fridge and the way-too-healthy
bread he goes in for, all nutty and grainy and needing major chewing.

With that, a Coke and the TV to herself, she's almost having fun, but not really, because every
minute flashing by is bringing her closer to leaving, and for all the talk of meeting up at weekends,
and schedules that have her back here way before spring, she's still feeling a sharp pang at the idea of
saying good-bye.

Suppose Rupert and her totally don't hit it off, she thinks moodily, switching off the TV, and he
invents all these reasons why Wes can't leave town to visit her. Suppose Anne comes calling and
Wes is too fucking nice to make it really, really clear he's not interested.

She's on her feet at that, the silence and the loneliness stifling her. God, how had Wes stood it, night
after night?

She glances over at the clock. It's 6.30 and her lips tighten. Fine. Lindsey and Doyle and Anya, and
Rupert bloody Giles all just made it onto her shitlist.

“And you can all stay there,” she mutters, heading for the study.

Typing helps. She's so wound up at first that she makes mistake after mistake, the tension of sitting
still making her fingers stutter and hesitate on the keys, but Wesley's presence is too strong in here for
it not to calm her.

His pen's lying on the desk, capped and neatly aligned with the edge of the desk, ready to scrawl
brown-ink notes and it's so very much like him; the precision combined with individuality that she
can't help smiling.

After she's typed up two copies of the contract, read them over and placed them on his desk, ready to
be signed, it's almost eight and she's back to being alternately steamed and worried.

Because she's seen Liam leave and come back bloodied and bruised too, caught up in a fight that was never his fault, oh no, and although Wes isn't the fighting sort, she can think of half-a-dozen ways he could get into trouble.

By the time she's dreamed up a scenario where someone takes exception to his accent—oh God, have they taken him to that Irish bar, Doc Watson's, over on 2nd Avenue? Wes had said they might—and maybe decided to refight a battle, she's chewed three nails down. She goes out on the balcony in the frosty-cold air to smoke her eighth cigarette, staring down at the busy city that's swallowed him up and won't give him back and waiting for the phone to ring.

But it's his key grating in the lock at nine o'clock, that brings her worrying to an end.

She's running across the room and flinging herself at him, breathing in the smoke-chill hanging around him, feeling his cool cheek against her face as he gathers her to him. “Missed you so fucking much,” she mumbles. “Not even going to get on your case about how late you are.”

He kicks the door shut behind him without releasing her and gives her a long, hard kiss. “I've been trying to get back to you for hours,” he says. “I really do have to develop a better line of threats because none of the ones I came up with seemed to work at all.”

She can't help laughing. “Hope you didn't try any of the ones that work with me, Wes,” she says, helping him out of his scarf and overcoat.

He frowns, thinking it through way too seriously, and then shakes his head. “Of course not. Really, Faith, that's a ridiculous notion.”

He slurs 'ridiculous' just the tiniest bit and she narrows her eyes, trying to work out just how drunk he is. “Are you squiffy?” she asks. “Tell me where you are on the Brit-scale of drunk.”

He sits down heavily on the coach, toeing off his shoes—which tells her plenty as he's usually meticulous about removing them at the door and putting them away inside the closet.

“Legless? No. He's an elf.” That seems to strike him as funny and he starts to giggle, but catches himself. “I'm rather too drunk to be able to do what I want to do,” he says solemnly, beckoning her over. She sits beside him and he pulls her onto his knee. “My darling Faith,” he murmurs. “They're going to regret this, I promise you.”

“Yeah?” she says, smoothing back his tumbled hair. “What're you gonna do to them, Wes?”

“For rendering me incapable of fucking you?” he says looking stern. “For a crime of that magnitude, it has to be—” His face falls. “No. It was my fault,” he says. “Totally, completely and utterly my fault.”

“No, it wasn't!” she says indignantly. “They're the ones who—”

He gives this sad little shake of his head. “I'm a grown man, Faith,” he tells her. “I could have walked out of there at any time, but—”

“But what?” she prompts, nestling in closer so she can put her hand over his heart where it's thumping away steadily.

He turns his head so the blue of his eyes—and his whiskey-breath—are right there in her face. “I want them to like me,” he says, with this puzzled, questioning look on his face, as if he's trying to
make sense of it. “They're so different—they're playing all the time, Faith, but they're good at what they do, make no mistake about it. In court they're formidable, despite their youth.”

“Not as good as you, Wes,” she tells him, with a certainty that goes beyond loyalty. “And they do like you. They kept you out to piss me off—and, yeah, you too, but they really wanted you out there with them. You do that a lot, do you?”

He shrugs. “We go for drinks after work once or twice a week,” he says. “And meet up for hockey games, although I can't say I enjoy that as much as they do.”

“Then I don't think you have to worry about them liking you, Wes,” she says gently. ‘Sounds like they already do.”

He shoots her a sly, little grimace. “They like you,” he informs her. “Francis got quite lyrical about your tits.”

“Yeah, well, he can keep his fantasies to himself,” she snaps. “And his hands.”

Wesley lifts up his hand and pats her breast. “But I don't have to,” he says, sounding smug but in such a sweet way she can't do more than smile.

“Never mind you touching me, Wes,” she tells him.


“All yours,” she agrees, shifting around so that she can lean his head on her shoulder. He sighs and relaxes, his breath slowing until she wonders if he's fallen asleep, but not caring because this—being with him, being able to hold him—is still so much part of her dreams that she can't accept it's reality now.

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Four

And he does fall asleep for a little while, mouth pressed against her neck and ewwww! There's a little bit of drool going on along with the whuffly sound of his breathing and when she tries to shift off his lap because she's getting a crick in her neck, he makes this faint sound of protest and clamps his hand over her breast.

As evenings go, she's had better ones. She's pleased he's got friends, she really is. And she's pleased that he's gone out and found himself a life, but fuck it! It's her second to last night with him and he's sleeping off his drunken stupor.

The longer that she sits there, the more she's aware of the teeth gnashing grind of resentment that she's coasting and it's giving her tummy ache and it's giving her a crick in her neck, he makes this faint sound of protest and clamps his hand over her breast.

As evenings go, she's had better ones. She's pleased he's got friends, she really is. And she's pleased that he's gone out and found himself a life, but fuck it! It's her second to last night with him and he's sleeping off his drunken stupor.

The longer that she sits there, the more she's aware of the teeth gnashing grind of resentment that she's coasting and it's giving her tummy ache and she's playing back every single minute that she sat and waited for him and every single fucking minute of last night when he wouldn't let her come and she's sitting there on his lap with hot, angry tears leaking out of her eyes.

She struggles off him, digging her nails into the hand on her tit so he lets go, opens his eyes for a second and then snaps them shut, stretching out on the Faithless sofa with a contented little sigh. For just one second, she's reliving the whole throttling him fantasy from last night but instead she has to make do with a choked little sob of pure fury before flouncing out of the room so hard that she stabs her toe on the door jamb.

There aren't many places to storm off to in Wes' apartment so after making a pit stop in the kitchen where she takes great delight in pouring herself some of his precious Scotch from his precious Rupert Giles and liberally mixing it with a good few inches of diet Coke because he's too busy drunkenly
snoring on the couch (he so fucking is!) to wince and give her a lecture about the goddamn religious experience that is single malt whiskey.

Just thinking about Wes and alcohol and how she should have insisted on a clause in the contract about him never being able to drink it ever again is enough to send her headfirst into the fridge so she can cause havoc with his stupid, anal system for chilling his condiments (and just how many jars of mustard does one man need when he hasn't even got any mayo?) before kicking the door shut and trying to decide where she's going to flounce off to next.

She ends up in the bathroom, after slamming practically every door she can find. Even that isn't enough to stir him from his slumbers. As she lights the scented candle that was in Darla's cache of bathroom goodies and chuck's half a bottle of green tea bubble bath into the hot stream of water gushing from the faucet, she tries to calm down.

It's not like her and Wes are joined at the hip. And it's not like he could carry on being the weird loner guy who never went out and just stayed at home with his stash of dirty books and the files he brought home from the office. But they've got, like, thirty-eight hours until she gets on the plane that will take her away from him and when it comes down to counting time in hours and not days anymore, then every second is precious. 'Sides, they're going to have to spend at least three hours with Rupert so-called Giles tomorrow and Wes is going to be drooling on the sofa until morning. Faith does some not so rapid mental arithmetic and by the time she's sitting in the tub, glass of whiskey and coke clutched forlornly in her hand, she's sobbing all over again for the fourteen hours that they've got left together.

“Faith…?” She looks up, out of red-rimmed eyes to see him lurching through the doorway. “My darling, sweet, little zabaglione, what on earth are you crying for?”

It's so like him to have the nerve to be all cute and call her after Italian puddings when she's so fucking angry with him. Picking up the sponge and throwing it violently across the room so it hits him, dead eye, right in the chest is this, like, total reflex. And she waits for his to kick in too; the tightening jaw, the righteous fury in his eyes and yeah, he's opening his mouth so he can spit out some icy threat and…

“Good Lord, the Knicks could have done with you on their bowling side,” he mutters, looking puzzled at the damp splodge down the front of his shirt. “Stay there, I have just the thing.”

She stays there, sliding right down under the bubbles, not because he wants her to but because she's miserable and she's a girl and miserable girls have long, soaking baths with scented candles. There's probably a law and if she wasn't so pissed with Wes, she'd ask him about it. She can hear him clattering about in the kitchen and then something falling on the floor. Probably his jaw, she thinks with an evil smirk, because he's seen just how utterly she's fucked his fridge shit up.

He's staggering back down the hall, nearer and nearer, and she's just debating whether to give him the finger or tell him to fuck right off when he starts in on her, when he appears again like some drunken genie and she's been knocking back too much of the Scotch because he's standing there with a sheepish smile and the tub of triple chocolate fudge chunk ice cream in his hand.

“What's that for?” she asks sullenly, propping her elbow up on the side of the tub and making sure she doesn't flash him her breasts because no way in hell is he getting a treat like that.

“It's for you,” he tells her, like it should be obvious. “Because you're sad and I'm sure I read somewhere that chocolate ice cream has beneficial effects on beautiful girls who sit in bath tubs crying.”
Okay, maybe after that little speech she's not quite so mad at him. Especially because his evil master plan is to be about as fucking adorable as it's humanly possible to be. “Don't try and sweet talk your way out of this, buster,” she snarls, flicking bubbles at him as he creeps closer. “I'm mad at you.”

He doesn't so much as sit down on the bathmat, as collapse in an ungainly heap with his chin resting on the rim of the bath so he can gaze at her with eyes that seem way bigger and bluer and well, bloodshot than she's ever seen them. “I wanted to come home to you, Faith,” he says softly. “I did. I really so very truly did but the game went into extra time and Doyle and Lindsey were so insistent on me having one more for the road.”

“You were four fucking blocks away!” she points out tartly and while her mouth is still hanging open, he deftly pops a spoonful of ice cream into it.

“I know, I know,” he says sorrowfully, trying to rub his head against her shoulder and the only reason she doesn't squirm away from him is because he'd probably collapse and bang his head on the side and then she'd have even less time with him because she's have to call 911 and spend the rest of the night in the ER. Well, that and it feels kinda nice.

“But they kept asking me about you and…” He frowns and squints at the same time before giving her a conspiratorial smile, which she almost returns. “I enjoyed it,” he says dreamily. “Hearing them talk about you, about how sexy and beautiful you are and I haven't been able to… I'm so proud of you, Faith. That you chose me and there's never anyone to tell and well, tonight there was,” he finishes simply and then mistaking her anguished expression for something else. “I didn't… I would never betray our secrets, Faith. No matter how drunk I was.”

“No, Wes. God, I know you wouldn't,” she yelps frantically, scrambling to her knees so she can cup her wet hands round his face. “I was just… I was sad and angry with you because we've only got a few hours left before I have to go.”

Her long garbled explanation about advanced mathematics seems to be hard for him to follow in his liquored-up state but she guesses that he got the gist of it. “My poor, neglected darling,” he coos, stroking the hair back from her face. “I could phone Rupert and cancel, would that take the sulky, little pout off your face?”

It totally would but she's got poise now, allegedly, and it's not very girlfriendly behavior to totally alienate Wes' boss even if he is a shit-stirring, match-making pillock. “You don't have to do that,” she says, feeling all kinds of magnanimous. “Just you're not going to go to sleep again, are you? Not until I do.”

He doesn't answer at first, because he's too busy spooning a dollop of ice cream into her mouth but when she's let it slide down her throat, he presses a tiny, apology of a kiss to her lips.

“I think I'm getting my second wind,” he tells her gravely. “Enough to realize that it looked like there'd been a hurricane sweeping through my refrigerator.”

“Yeah, well you totally deserved it. And see this glass? It's got your fancy Scotch in it and I mixed it with diet Coke. And I'm taking back all your birthday presents tomorrow and not giving you a single one,” she finishes with a huff that's not quite so huffy as before.

Now it's his turn to pout. “Not even a little one?”

“Nope, you don't deserve any. But if you wash my back then I might give you a birthday kiss tomorrow,” she concedes and as he burrows eagerly under the water for the flannel and manages to tickle every silken inch of her that his questing hands can find, she realizes that he's turned the tables
on her again. The only predictable thing about him is his stunning ability to always leave her guessing and (as his fingers graze the underside of her breasts) wanting. The last of her bad mood is melting away like the bubbles, as he helps her out of the tub into the fluffy embrace of the towel he's wrapping her in.

“You're so pretty,” he murmurs, kissing her eyebrows, the tip of her nose, clumsily bussing against the corner of her mouth. “Such a pretty girl and you're all mine, aren't you, Faith? Even when you're furious with me?”

“Maybe I'm not quite so mad at you,” she squeaks as he scoops her up and almost slides on the wet floor. “But if you drop me then I'm going to have to rethink that.”

“Would you be mad at me if I confessed that I'm suffering from this horrid affliction known as brewer's droop?” he tells her candidly, flushing up prettily, and she stares at him in disbelief, waiting for the subtitles to flash up. “I may have some trouble, er, performing…” he admits and the flush has upgraded to full-on crimson.

“You saying that you're too drunk to fuck me?” she demands and her voice is so high pitched, she swears to God she must only be audible on Mars. “For fuck's sake, Wes!”

And he really must have sunk a skinful because usually when she's stuck on the querulous setting, it's his cue to threaten her with a sound thrashing at the very least, not squinch up his face like he's about to burst into tears. No, that's usually her job.

“I'm so sorry,” he mumbles, putting her down on the bed and when she's ready to scramble away from him so she can roll herself up in the quilt and sulk until Easter, he's quickly unraveling her from the towel, hands greedily sliding over her skin without his usual finesse but a hell of a lot of fervor.

“Don't you be starting something that you can't finish,” she hisses, batting his hands away, but he's already sliding to his knees and yanking her legs apart.

“Please, Faith, don't be angry with me,” he practically whines, which is enough to make her eyebrows shoot up toward the ceiling, even as she's trying to clamp her thighs shut, arms crossed over her breasts. “I'll make it up to you, I swear. Just lie back, please, let me see you. See your beautiful tits and your beautiful, wet, little cunt.”

“Maybe that's something I could assist you with,” he sighs, leaning in close between her legs so she can feel the warm gust of air across her pussy lips. “Would you like me to bring you off with my mouth, fuck you with my tongue and my fingers because I'd so very much like to do that?”

She's starting to think that maybe Lindsey or Doyle dropped some LSD into Wes' beer because he's bringing new meaning to indulgence. And, hey, if he's offering then she's going to take advantage. Like, hello! She might be mad at him but she's not fucking stupid. “I want to come three times, Wesley,” she decides and what do you know? She's bringing new meaning to imperious. “At least.”

“My little bitch goddess,” he purrs fondly and then he's snaking his tongue out, fingers holding her open and if his technique is lacking his usual precision, she's not going to complain about the way he's dragging the flat of his tongue across her clit, before dipping into her suddenly dripping cunt, pressing in as far as he can go while she grinds her whole pussy into her face.
He doesn't do anything fancy. Just pulls back so he can thrust three fingers into her demanding, damp hole and flicker his tongue against her clit in this relentless rhythm that has her coming suddenly with a harsh cry of surprise.

“Did you like that, Faith?” he asks her anxiously but his hands are sure and strong as she's barely got time to nod a reply before he's flipping her over. “I'd fly to Florida every day, just to have my mouth on you, tasting you…”

“Yeah, well…” she starts to say, then dissolves into giggles because he's stroking his tongue over the soles of her feet before sucking her little toe into his mouth, which should be kind of gross but it tickles in a really good way.

“So sorry I left you,” he murmurs again and again, kissing his way up her legs and pausing to investigate the sensitive skin behind her knees. “Sorry that you have to leave. Sorry that I won't be there when you go to sleep and when you wake up.”

His tongue is causing havoc along her thighs and she's squirming under his touch. “Sorry I hurt you here,” he sighs against the bruise on her ass and she's reaching round with her hand so she can fumble for his hair.

“Don't ever have to be sorry for that, Wes,” she tells him softly. “Not ever.”

“Good,” he drawls and it's clear and distinct like she just imagined the drunken slurring. “Now get on your hands and knees so I can kiss your beautiful arse.”

For one second she's starting to wonder just how drunk he really is but then he's pulling her cheeks apart, trailing his tongue along the cleft of her ass and she's not thinking of anything but dragging his hand down to her clit so he can rub it hard while his tongue rims around her puckered flesh and this should never feel as good as it does.

She collapses on her tummy as the second orgasm pulls her under then rolls over so she can yank him up and on him, reveling in the way he's pinning her into the mattress. “Fuck me!” she orders, and he's not so pissed now because his cock is half hard under her busy hands as she unzips him and strips him off with ruthless, practical strokes. “Want you inside me fucking now, Wes!”

“Bossy little bitch, aren't you?” he grins, trying to steal a kiss but she shoves his head down toward her tits because it felt fanfuckingtastic but he's just had his tongue in her ass and that's a whole 'nother use for her safeword right there.

“You'd better fucking believe it!” she growls but her hands are gentle as she winds her fingers through his tousled hair. “Y'know, Wes, I kinda like you drunk. You turn into this big, old pussy cat.”

He glances indignantly up from where he's painting her breasts with his tongue and he's hard enough, leaking pre-cum so her hand can move faster along his shaft, that she can get him inside her with a shimmy of her hips that makes him groan around her nipple.

She can feel him swelling inside her, getting harder, getting bigger and her mouth opens in a gasp of wonder. “See, know that you wanted to fuck me,” she whispers, wriggling against him and spreading her thighs wide, feet planted firmly on the bed.

He gives an experimental thrust that has her legs clamping round his waist but he frowns even as he starts to move in her with these choppy strokes, which are so different from the way he usually moves. “I might not be able to come,” he confesses, even though he's doing a pretty good job of
hitting her G-spot every time he pushes inside her.

“Well, then you'll have keep fucking me until you do, won't you?” she tells him, narrowing her eyes and waiting for him to get bored with the whole drunk act and start fucking her godholy.

Instead she gets another frown. “I'll give it the old college try.”

It's so different from all the times that he's never let her come before and she's been the one clutching the sheet and gritting her teeth. This time she's getting all the good stuff; these steady thrusts that hit right where it matters every time, her fingers rubbing against her clit because poor, old Wes is up on his elbows and needing all his powers of concentration. She just needs a little something more…

“Wanna come, Wes?” she asks him softly. “Wanna come inside me, huh?”

He nods frantically and her hands slide down the curve of his spine, settling on his jerking hips so she can roll them over.

“You just lie there, I'm gonna do all the work,” she promises, sitting up but keeping his cock still inside her, sliding almost all the way out and then swallowing him whole with her cunt.

He gives her a dazed little smile. “Hmm, that feels lovely. You're so lovely, Faith.”

She rewards him for that little poem with the first real smile she's given him since he got home and throws in a little shake of her chest which makes her breasts bounce so his eyes follow their trajectory like he's watching a tennis match. “Gonna feel even more lovely, Wes,” she grins, tightening round him with everything she's got and then some, and hanging on tight as he arches up off the bed. “Got muscles you never even dreamed of.”

And it's starting to feel like she's moving underwater, rising up and then ebbing away so slowly, hands spread out on the sweat-sheen slopes of his chest, feeling him take deep breaths every time her cunt clasps him in a deep embrace. Eventually his hips start rising to meet the challenge and her hand's moving down to her clit to start this fast, circular motion and she only has time to hiss, “I fucking love you, you bastard,” before she's closing her eyes and falling forward as his hands hold her still so he can slam into her with one, two, three hard thrusts and cry out her name.

He's still not sober enough to put up much of a fight when she hauls him into the shower and stands next to him, hands on her hips, until he drinks half a bottle of water and cleans his teeth. It's a bit like having a Wes-shaped zombie who's happy to be tugged around the apartment and does exactly what he's told. And yeah, it's a nice place to visit but she wouldn't want to live there.

She thinks he feels the same because when she finally lets him get back into bed, because she's feeling really sleepy, and curls round him, he suddenly says clearly and distinctly, “I think I shall be very angry with you tomorrow, Faith. I do believe you've taken dreadful advantage of my inebriated state.”

“Don't think you will, Wes,” she smiles, burrowing against his side and hitching her leg over his. “You're not allowed to get mad on your birthday and 'sides it's my last day and so you have to be extra special nice to me.”

He makes this harrumphing noise and then pulls her closer so he can steal another clumsy, nose-bumpy kiss. “I'm sure we'll work something out,” he mumbles against her cheek and she smiles at the darkness.

“I'm counting on it.”
Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Five

Wesley's birthday—and fuck, thirty-eight is, like, scarily old and she wants to cry when she thinks of how much of his life has gone that she wasn't part of—begins way too early for him. The text message that breakfast is ready comes when he's still snuffling into the pillow, looking totally wiped-out.

She's feeling pretty fucking perky herself, even if it is her last full day with him. Slipping out of bed and tucking the sheets around him, because the pampering can't start too early, she heads for the door to rescue the breakfast, knotting her robe tightly so she doesn't flash an unsuspecting neighbor.

The hallway's empty but there's a small folding table supporting a tray, and beside it, a white cardboard box festooned with thin strips of silver and gold ribbon that has to be his cake.

She carries everything through to the kitchen and nibbles her lip, wondering whether to wake him. The cake can wait. Wes isn't going to want it for breakfast, not the way he's going to be feeling—

“Good morning, Faith.”

She spins around and squeaks. “Wes! Get back to bed!”

He yawns and rubs his hand across his forehead. “Not unless you join me.” He gives her a puzzled look. “It's not like you to be up this early.” His eyes widen at the sight of the covered dishes. “And is that—did we order breakfast? I don't recall.”

She rolls her eyes. “It's your birthday,” she says. “And that means you get breakfast in bed, so get back into bed or I'll toss it.”

“I really hope that you don't,” he says. “I'm famished.”

“No hangover?” she says.

“I don't get them,” he replies smugly, and she's seen enough of his morning afters to know that's true up to a point.

She moves over to him. “Happy Birthday, Wesley,” she says softly, kissing him and feeling the prickle of stubble against her chin. “Want to know what your horoscope says for today?”

His arms tighten as he drops a kiss on the top of her head. “Does it involve beautiful dark-haired girls fulfilling my every wish just by existing?”

She smiles, tilting her head back so she can see his eyes, clear now and looking more alert with every minute. “You peeked.”

“It's possible,” he allows. He glances at the tray. “Can my first wish be coffee?” he says hopefully.

“Yeah, sure it can,” she tells him, giving him a final smooch. “But only when you're tucked up again.”

“Actually, I've always considered breakfast in bed to be slightly over rated,” he begins, looking longingly at the table. “Crumbs. Spills. No room to—”

“Wes!”

“Oh, very well,” he sighs. He studies her. “Why do I have the feeling that for once it's you who has the inflexible schedule?”
“Because I do,” she says smartly. “And you just get to relax—”

“‘To the inevitable?’”

“But he insists on helping her with the tray, giving the cake box an interested look that she counters with a hissed order for him to get his ass out of the kitchen, like, now, or his birthday spanking might arrive early.

A flicker of amusement sparks in his eyes at that but he's surprisingly meek as he leads the way back into the bedroom.

“Put it all down there,” she tells him, pointing to the bedside table.

“You really do seem to be in a most demanding, bossy mood today,” he complains, discarding his robe and crawling back into bed. She waits until he's got the pillows arranged behind him before pouring him some coffee and shrugging out of her robe. That means she gets an even more intense look than the cake box did.

“‘Aren't you going to join me?’” he asks, shifting over a bit.

She shakes her head. “‘Nope. Gonna feed you your breakfast first.’”

“He sets his coffee cup down and then reaches out and rescues the raspberry from falling and pops it into her mouth. “Yes, I do.” His eyes gleam. “Very much—”

She lets him go to town on licking and nibbling at her tits until she's in danger of forgetting that they’re on a plan here and it doesn't involve Wes fucking her while his breakfast goes cold.

“Hey, hey!” she says, pushing him away. “Glad to see you're back to normal, Wes—”

“‘Oh Lord, I suppose you're going to tease me unmercifully, aren't you?’” he sighs. “‘Shall I apologize again?’”

“No I'm not!” she says indignantly. She purses her lips. “‘Though, have to say, Wes you're really fucking lucky that you're so adorable—’”

“I'm not in the least—will you stop describing me in words better suited to a kitten?’” he growls.

She smirks. “‘Not planning on stopping any time soon, Wes.’”

“Not even on my birthday?”

And his hair's sticking up and he's going to freak when he sees himself in a mirror because he's the poster boy for scruffy what with all the stubble that's left her breasts pink where his chin scraped them, but he's still so pretty she's melting like the ice cream they totally forgot to put back in the
“I promise I won't call you 'pretty' in front of Rupert,” she says generously. “Now have some bacon. Open up!”

Feeding him's kinda tiring funny enough, and she's not as good at it as he is, so she's there, fork poised while he's still chewing, way too often. Her tummy starts to make protesting noises halfway through so she grudgingly allows him to insist that she starts to eat as well.

“So, do you have any freaky traditions about not opening presents until after lunch or something?” she asks, swallowing the last of the raspberries.

“Not that I recall,” he says. “But it hardly matters, does it? I believe you said all mine were going to be returned.” He heaves a sad sigh. “I didn't get any last year either,” he says wistfully.

She gives his shoulder a solid thump. “You are such a crybaby,” she says. “And you know damn well I won't take them back.” He grins smugly and she contemplates making the next punch harder but then relents. “Time for you to have a bath,” she says, standing up and clearing the dishes away.

“I do feel as if I need one, despite the shower you forced upon me,” he admits. His hand rasps over his chin. “Not to mention a shave.”

“That you can do yourself,” she says firmly, “but once you're in the bath, I don't want you to lift a finger, got it?”

“I don't think I've ever been pampered with quite so much determination,” he mutters. “It's rather intimidating.”

She wraps her arms around him as he heads for the bathroom. “Don't want you to feel that way, Wes,” she tells him earnestly. “Just want today to be special.”

He slides his hands up her arms. “I know,” he says softly. “And please don't think I'm not very touched by the trouble you've gone to. The breakfast was lovely, and quite unexpected.”

“Not like I cooked it for you,” she says gruffly.

“That's not important,” he says and he's a breath away from telling her it's the thought that counts, or something equally lame so she wriggles free and goes to start the bath.

She doesn't join him at first; just kneels beside it, scooping up handfuls of water to wet his hair so she can wash it.

“You did this to me, remember?” she tells him. “Brought me upstairs that first time and bathed me.”

“Of course I do,” he says, closing his eyes as she empties a jug of water over his head and spluttering because this is something else that obviously takes practice and she needs it. He swipes at the soapy water running down his face and then, ignoring her glare, submerges his head in the water to rinse it clean.

“Get in, Faith,” he says when he's surfaced and dried his face off on the towel she had ready. “You'll find it easier, I assure you.”

As she's pretty much drenched anyway, she decides she might as well, but she snatches the sponge out of his hands and lathers it up with a martyred air.
“What is it now?” he says. “Why are you giving me your very best pout?”

“I wanted to take care of you!” she says. “Spoil you, the way you do me, and you’re not letting me.”

“Yes, I am,” he says, adding with a brutal frankness, “you’re just not very good at it.”

“Presents. Going back,” she hisses.

“Nonsense,” he says softly. “And stop sulking. It’s my birthday and I absolutely forbid it. Just as I forbid you to ever be quite as bossy as you were last night, although I do appreciate that it was… well, perhaps there were mitigating circumstances. But even so…”

And Wes is back, no doubt about it, and she might have known that once he sobered up he’d remember that she’d totally managed his ass into that shower and been kinda pushy about the three orgasms and fucking her, and all that.

“Perhaps we can make this a little easier?” he suggests, breaking the slightly sticky silence. “Take the sponge and start with my feet, Faith.”

And with him giving her orders, in a pleasant, conversational tone—‘scrub a little harder, Faith, I won’t break—ah, but not there, no, gentle circular motion, yes, exactly, good, very good…’ it turns into a treat for Wes, if not quite the way she’d planned it. He reclines, quite at ease, in the hot water, smiling at her through the faint wisps of scented steam, totally loving having a little bath slave to get to all the hard to reach areas.

She’s not entirely pleased that he’s kinda turned her plans on their head, but really, when she thinks about it, having him there to touch, her hands slip-sliding over chest and stomach, cock and legs, is just too much fun. She does his back by squirming into his lap, feet bumping the sides of the bath so they’re both laughing, and reaching over his shoulders, abandoning the sponge and making swooping, wide circles across the strong, flat muscles with her soaped-up hands.

“Enough,” he says finally, combing his fingers ruthlessly through his wet hair. “I think I’ve lost a layer of skin and you’re starting to look positively shriveled. Out.”

She contemplates changing his mind but really he’s right; the water’s warm now, not hot, and although it sounds good in theory, fucking in the bath doesn’t really compare to what Wes can do on dry land, so she climbs out obediently and he stands still as she dries him, not showing any signs of impatience the way she does when he gets obsessive about mopping up every clinging drop of water.

Snuggling up to him for a kiss when she’s done, with his hands warm on her still-slightly damp skin, she says, “Do you want your presents now, Wes?”

She can feel his cock hard against her, and she's waiting to be told the presents can wait, but he smiles.

“Yes, I think I would. Well, one in particular.” His hand moves down and comes to rest on her tattoo. “I’d like you to put on your watch and my collar—” She’s sure he’s going to insist she spends the day wearing nothing else, but he continues, “and get dressed.” His fingers run along the words he can't see. “I've waited long enough for one of my presents, I think.”

And it's weird, because she’d made this whole fuss about being naked when he wasn't, but wearing her collar like this, so casually, half-hidden by her shirt, is getting her more aroused than when she wore it when she was naked.

“Can I keep it on all day?” she says. “While we're in here?”
His smile gets a dark edge to it that makes her think she dreamed the wistful, adorable Wesley of the night before—but she knows she didn't, that they're both him, and more; that he's never going to be capable of being summed up, because if anyone's mercurial, it's him.

“If you only knew how much I'd like to take you to the restaurant tonight wearing it,” he murmurs.

“I would,” she says, and she means it. “If you wanted me to, I would.”

“I shall have to find something better than a scarf to act as a reminder,” he says thoughtfully. “Something you could wear that would raise no eyebrows but which would still—A torc, perhaps, in silver.”

He goes off into this little contemplative space and she rolls her eyes and goes to get his presents, because only Wes could stand there on his birthday thinking about something else to get her.

It takes a few minutes to stack all the presents so she can carry them all in one trip, and when she passes by the bedroom, she sees that he's efficiently cleared up all the detritus of their breakfast.

“Hey, you didn't need to do that,” she says, finding him waiting expectantly on the sofa. “Like, it's your birthday and you shouldn't have to lift a finger.” She arranges all the presents on the coffee table before climbing into his waiting lap.

“Not even when I take you to bed later?” he laughs, pulling her close and brushing a few stray damp tendrils of hair off her neck. “I foresee some problems with this particular indulgence.”

“What ever, Wes! I'm not gonna even acknowledge that with a response,” she says, handing him the envelope with her card. “Just open your presents, buster, and be grateful.”

“Oh, Faith.” He smiles, but his eyes are sober, and so deep she might just fall right in and never come out. “You'll never know how grateful I am. For you, for this, for everything.”

“Hey, hey. Don't get all sappy on me—you haven't even read the card yet!”

She thought of snagging the tackiest, most disgustingly romantic gold-leaf-and-script “For my darling—on his birthday!” card Hallmark had to offer, but of course, cute stationary stores on the Upper East Side didn't exactly traffic in that kind of thing. The card's from some boutique letterpress company and simply reads 'Happy Birthday' in black on crisp, thick paper.

“Very striking,” he says, flipping it open and smiling at the sentiments she'd carefully written inside, about how he's everything to her and how she hopes that today is his best birthday ever, but that she can make each one she spends with him a little better than the year before.

Watching his reaction as he reads makes her remember the other stuff she'd written in the flurry of wrapping last night, and it makes her blush a little, and yeah, okay, she's gotta swallow down the lump in her throat as he pulls her close for a kiss. “This is already the best birthday ever.”

“Wes, stop it,” she says, shoving a small box in his hands to open first. “Don't jinx it! Or I won't be around to throw you a big-ass party for your fortieth!”

“My darling girl, you really shouldn't be quite so superstitious.”

“Can't help it, Wes. I really don't want our whole star-crossed lovers thing to end up in tragedy, y'know?”

“I sincerely doubt it will come to that—if this gift is just a prelude of what's to come.” He's finished
unwrapping the box and is examining the silver and jet cuff links in the sunlight.

“I nearly forgot about those! I bought them out shopping with Spike and Dru, like ages ago, and I knew I had to get them for you.” The chintzy antique store and everyone and everything back in Florida, for better or worse, seem so very far away at that moment.

“They're exquisite, Faith. I can't believe you found them in that town. Bloody tourists always seemed to clear out all the good vintage haberdashery.” He winks at her, and she pulls a face in return. “Now, darling, your face will freeze like that if you persist in contorting it in such a fashion. Will you replace that horrid grimace with a pretty smile if I promise I'll wear them tonight?”

And, well, yeah, with a promise like that, she'll do anything. “Since you're letting me dress you, open this one next,” she says, handing him the long box that holds the tie. She's pleased as punch when he fingers the thick silk reverently, clearly touched. “Thought I'd get you something to wear around your neck,” she says. “And it matches your eyes. Not like that was the only reason I bought it or anything.”

“It's just perfect,” he says, gathering up her hands in his and dragging his lips across her knuckles. “Just perfect.”

And she's pretty sure he's gonna start running out of superlatives to heap on her and the gifts, especially when he rips the paper off 'The Death Rays of Ardilla' and lets out a little gasp of surprise. “Faith! How did you… Where did you find this?”

And his intense happiness makes her blush and forget everything except the smile on his face. “Looking Bookwards. It's in midtown somewhere, can't remember the cross street. The man said you might not have it. You don't right?”

“If I do, it's at my mother's house, probably buried in a box in the basement somewhere. Or sent off to a charity jumble sale years ago.” He squints, as if trying to see all the way across the Atlantic Ocean. “My father wasn't much for Johns' science fiction books—so I just have the firsts of the Biggles books—but this! I read this all in secret in an afternoon one summer, hiding in the thicket behind the house, with an apple and some cheese and a bottle of lemonade for provisions.”

The thought of little Wes, hiding in the lush greenery with his perfect little snacks laid out, the warm summer breeze ruffling his hair and the teeny furrow between his brows as he reads as fast as he can and still savor every word. It's just too cute to bear. Which totally reminds her...

“Oh! Open this one! And I've got provisions for us!” She hands him a cylindrical-shaped package that was really freakin' hard to wrap without totally giving away the contents and leaps to her feet, tossing him the bag from Economy Candy as she dashes past and heads for the fridge. “Bet you didn't even notice 'em in there, even with your crazy reorganizing fit.”

“Didn't notice what? In where?” he asks, popping a fizzy lemon candy in his mouth.

“There was extra stinky cheese in fridge. And some truffles! You're so uptight about your like, eighty kinds of mustard, I knew I could hide this stuff in here and you'd never even notice.”

She brings both back to the living room, and finds him staring at the can of rice pudding like he can't believe it actually exists, that it's actually quite a good birthday present under the circumstances. “Faith, you remembered.”

“Of course I did—I do listen to you sometimes, you know!”

He laughs and examines the truffles and cheese she's holding in outstretched hands. “Oh, Faith.
These are both perfect—we'll have them at lunch. That is, if these delicious things don't ruin my appetite!” He holds out the bag to her. “Fizzy sour lemon shark?”

“Don't mind if I do, thanks!” She pops it in her mouth and winces at the tanginess. “Okay, there's two presents left, and I'm not sure what order I want you to open them in.” She picks up the flat package containing the photograph first, and hangs on tightly to the little box holding the biggest surprise of all. “This is the one I made you wait for,” she says and yeah, there's a certain amount of satisfaction in her voice, which he acknowledges with a wry twist of his lips. “Was going to give it to you for Christmas so that's why it's, uh, got holly berries on the wrapping paper.”

“I wonder what it can be,” he says with a grin, taking the parcel from her and cautiously shaking it. “It's rather heavy…”

She gives him a cuff on the arm and then rubs it better before he can start with the aggrieved looks. “You know exactly what it is! Go on, open it.”

He carefully unpeels the sticky tape with his thumb and reverently folds back the paper, frowning when all he uncovers is the wooden back of the picture frame. “Well, that's no fun,” he murmurs with a tiny smile and then rips right into the paper, chuckling as her mouth opens in a little 'o' of surprise as he takes great delight in carpeting the floor with a forest of holly berries. “Oh yes,” he breathes as the monochrome curve of her ass, the arch of her spine, nine perfect words bisecting them both come into view. “This is beautiful. Show me the original, Faith, I'd like to do a compare and contrast.”

She's already wriggling onto her knees and pushing her shirt up as he feels his fingers hook into the waistband of her jeans and tug then down just enough that he can trace over the words on her skin. “You like the photo, don't you, Wes?” she asks him anxiously. “You going to put it on the wall?”

He doesn't answer because his lips are ghosting over the love letters he's uncovered. “I love the photo and yes, of course, it will take its rightful place in my bedroom,” he says and he sounds almost reverent. Then he clears his throat. “I've a good mind to sneak in to the Met under cover of darkness so I can hang it there but that would mean I'd have to share my picture with half of New York…”

“Yeah and I don't fancy all those tourists staring at my ass,” she finishes for him, turning her head so she can see the blissed-out look on his face for herself. “So do you want your last present?”

His eyes are still stuck on the strip of skin that she's got exposed but now they flicker to the small box that she's still clutching in her hand. “You've spoiled me beyond all my wildest dreams, Faith,” he says softly. “I really can't remember when I received one birthday present, let alone all these wonderful gifts.” He reaches for her hand so he can press fervent kisses to her knuckles. “My darling Faith, whatever did I do to deserve you?”

She shifts round so she can climb into his lap again and curl her arms around him, letting their noses bump together and feeling her insides turn to gloop when he closes his eyes and smiles crookedly. “You had to spend all that time alone because you were waiting for me. Because nobody else would be able to love you as much as me.”

“Don't, Faith,” he begs, arms wrapping round her so she feels completely enveloped in Wesness. “I'm one breath away from cooking up this ridiculous scheme to keep you here and not let you go back.”

“You can if you like,” she whispers in her ear. “Cept Darla would get on a plane so she could give you a slap upside your head and I'd have to phone Monty and he'd sound all hurt and unwanted.”
“Well, yes, there is all that,” he admits unwillingly, then gives her a plaintive look, which really
doesn't suit him. “So this last present? Will I be getting it any time soon?”

“Well, yeah, but it's kinda like when you got the Neruda book. It's a present for both of us and I was
going to let you unwrap it but maybe I should just show you…” She trails off because the idea's only
just come to her and it's a fucking good one.

“It sounds intriguing. I confess I'm quite curious and also incredibly suspicious of the smirk on your
face, Faith? What have you been plotting?”

“I haven't been plotting anything,” she exclaims innocently and completely ruins it by dissolving into
a fit of giggles. “Just there's one other present you need to have before you get what's in here,” she
adds, tapping the box with her index finger.

“You're being very vague, Faith,” he sighs. “But I'll play along. What's the other present.”

“You have to stand for it.” She shifts off his lap and gets to her feet, pursing her lips so he thinks he's
getting another of those big, old birthday smooches. “Come on, Wes, shake a leg. Gotta schedule
here and it says that you're slacking.”

“Very well,” he says rising in one smooth, fluid motion and leaning in, eyes drooping shut because
he thinks they're gonna get all kissy kissy. Which is even better because he can't see the sudden
movement of her arm as she reaches round him and gives him a good, hard swat on his ass.

His eyes snap open immediately as he jumps back, almost cannoning off the coffee table. “What the
hell was that for?”

“It's time for your birthday spanking!” she crows, darting away from the hand he's just shot out and
landing another good slap on one firm buttock. “Only got another thirty-six to go, Wes.”

He's suddenly frozen in position and when she catches sight of his pinched lips and his nostrils
flaring, she falters slightly. “It's, like, a birthday tradition isn't it?” she offers hesitantly, trying on a
pout to get round him as he looks sour enough to have mainlined the whole bag of fucking fizzy sour
lemon sharks. “A smack for every year.” The pout isn't doing jackshit so she aims for a winning
smile instead. “Wouldn't want you to have bad luck, Wes.” Her eyes are so wide she thinks that they
might just fall clean out of their sockets.

“Well, no we wouldn't,” he murmurs thoughtfully, eyes narrowing in a way that never leads to
anything good. Well, not the good kind of good. More like the bad kind of good and she's edging
slowly away from him. “It's very sweet of you to be so concerned about my wellbeing.”

“I'm only thinking of you… Fuck!” The sentence mutates into an anguished squeak because all off a
sudden she's been upended and the world looks really strange upside down.

Looks way better when he's practically flung her over the back of the couch and has one hand
pressing down on the small of her back so she goes from wiggly to limp and pliant in a nanosecond.
“As you're so solicitous of my needs, Faith, I'm sure you won't mind having my birthday spanking
for me.”

“It doesn't work like that,” she protests but even to her ears it sounds kinda half-assed, which is a
really lame pun when Wes' hands have snaked round to unpop the button on her jeans and drag
down her zipper.

“On the contrary,” he purrs, pushing down her jeans and panties around her knees and flicking a
finger and thumb against her cheek. “Remind me to buy you a copy of 'The Whipping Boy'. It's
really very convenient as I wanted to get you a gift to say thank you for all my lovely presents.”

“Aren’t you giving me a present right now, Wes?” she snaps, arching her back so her backside is thrust out just the way he likes it.

“I’m not going to count those two pathetic taps you gave me,” he sniffs, then gives a chuckle that would have Dr. Evil suing him for copyright. “In fact, I’ll add them to the tally and bring the number up to an even forty. I do so like it when things are orderly. Count, Faith!”

She spits out one to ten as he slaps the backs of her thighs slowly and deliberately, scoring his thumbnail down her legs whenever the fuck he feels like it. “I’m not going to spank that impertinent little arse of yours, Faith,” he says when it’s time for eleven. “It’s still a little tender.”

“Want you to,” she mumbles and she does because the first ten were only the pre-show and she’s barely warmed up.

“No,” he says firmly. “I’m going to smack you there tonight and I can’t let anything interfere with that. Stand up.”

Eleven to twenty are a precise series of blows across her breasts, the flat of his hand connecting with the heavy flesh, fingers grazing over her hard nipples and she’s arching her pelvis against thin air with every smack.

“You love it, don’t you?” he asks her and he sounds more curious than anything.

“Yes, yes, you know I do,” she moans, shaking her head and waiting expectantly for his next order.

“I think the last twenty… yes, I want you to lie on the table,” he decides, nodding his head decisively. She’s staggering slightly as she kicks off her jeans, hands cupping her tender tits, but intent on getting to her destination, as he taps her ass and tuts. “C’mon, Faith,” he purrs. “I thought you were on a schedule.”

“I am… I was.” She perches on the edge of the table and then slides backward, looking at him with a frown. “Is this right?”

He shakes his head. “No. I was perfectly clear that I wanted you on your back. Flat on your back, Faith. That’s it. Now spread your legs as wide as they’ll go.”

The tendons in her thighs protest as she drapes her legs over the edge of the table, knowing that she’s wet and so spread open like this.

“Oh yes, you do love it,” he says like there was ever any doubt. “Now count again, Faith, please.”

He does twenty-one to forty in one session, alternating between her left flank and her right, making her skin sting and sing as he rests one hand on the table for balance so he can put everything he’s got into making her cry out each number in a voice that’s veering toward a scream.

When he’s done she can hardly close her legs because everything’s smarting and all she’ll need to do is squeeze gently, get some pressure on her swollen clit and she’ll come. He takes one shaking hand and gently tugs her upright so he can brush the hair back from her face.

“Thank you for my birthday spanking,” he says with a straight face and then strokes a heavy finger along her rosy red, inner thigh, smiling when she bites her lip and whimpers. “Would you like me to fuck you, Faith?”
“Yes.” It's said simply, plainly. Stating a fact. “But you have to wait for your last present.”

He glances over at the box, which has long since been abandoned on the couch and then gives her a slightly incredulous smile. “You're passing up the opportunity for a fast and, oh Faith, a very furious fuck so you can give me my last gift?”

She closes her eyes and tries to will her mouth not to open on a frenzied plea of “yes, yes, fuck me now.” And when she opens them again, he's caressing the hard outline of his cock and giving her a knowing smile.

“And before he can haul her back for another forty slaps, she's hobbling as fast as her protesting legs will let her, scooping up the box en route and calling over her shoulder, “Don't you just love delayed anticipation?”

She's ready in three minutes but she makes him wait. Not because she's getting off on that little role reversal, well not much. Just that the delicate pressure of the clamps on her painfully aroused, just freshly spanked nipples is almost too much. She has to sit on the end of the bed, taking deep breaths until she gets used to the constant, tugging sensation before she carefully eases on the black, almost there bra from Agent Provocateur so her breasts are framed by nothing but satin-covered underwire and that frivolous bow. Then she slips on that lovely shirt with just the one button missing, parts her legs and calls out to him.

She watches him and it seems that it's taken them a long time to get here, to this point where he's got no choice but to accept that asking her if she loves this, all this, is as redundant as asking him if he does, but now that they have it's all going to change.

He's got to say something, she thinks, do something besides stare at her, and she's so ready, so close, that he could make her come with a word; her name dragged out, drawled out or one of those orders of him, where the blunt, uncompromising words—fuck yourself with your fingers, Faith—become impossibly elegant because of his accent.

His hand is resting against the door that he'd pushed open and the spread fingers contract into a fist, tightly curled, as if it holds all the impassioned words he won't say because it's not the way he does this.

Slowly, with a deliberation that has to cost him, he strips, still so far away that she can't reach out to him, and then walks over to the bed. He stands at the foot of it and his gaze travels from her flushed face and fiercely-bitten lip to her breasts, half-hidden by the shirt and down to the glistening folds of her cunt, open and waiting for him.

He places his hands on the bed and crawls toward her, staring at her face now, until his head's level with her pussy. Then, without touching her with anything but his mouth, he leans forward and—fuck!—it feels as if his tongue's everywhere, and his teeth, licking and tasting her in an avid, voracious attack that has her coming in helpless surges, ass bumping against the bed as her hips lift in
a reflex that has her grinding her soaked cunt against his hungry mouth.

As she collapses, panting, ragged moans breaking the silence, he raises his head and moves so that he's over her, his hands planted on either side of her head. He kisses her mouth then, and she tastes herself on him as his tongue thrusts forward, demanding a response she's only too willing to give.

His head lifts and there's an intensity in his eyes that's making her shiver, but she can't look away and she doesn't want to.

"Are they hurting you, Faith?" he says and she jumps a little, as if a spell's been broken.

"Yes."

He doesn't do anything but smile at that, bracing himself on one hand so he can push back the shirt, revealing her breasts, skin glowing still from his hand, her swollen nipples hidden behind the black clamps.

His finger hooks under the wide flat links of the chain connecting them and he gives it a slow, gentle tug. The sound she makes isn't one she's sure belongs in the daylight, but a flash of pleasure lights up his face and he shifts so that the head of his cock nudes her opening. She tilts her hips slightly, imploringly, and she's so wet that's enough to get him slipping inside her, just a little. He doesn't rebuke her, or move away; if anything he encourages her as if she's earned it, shifting again so that his cock slides into her in a deliciously slow thrust. Before she's had time to moan out her appreciation of just how fucking good that feels, he's pulled back out again, so that just the tip of him is inside her.

She hasn't quite got the nerve to glare at him but it's close and he's never been slow at reading her expressions.

"Patience, Faith," he says softly picking up her hand and moving it to her neck, where his collar's resting snugly. "And keep your hand there."

She's frowning, but then he tightens one of the clamps, with a sure, knowing touch, and she gives a hoarse cry as the pain, sudden and sharp splits her in half, so she's positive she wants to beg, but whether it's for him to stop or to do it to the other one, she isn't sure. Her fingers are clutching at the collar, just as he'd known they would.

"I think that's enough for now," he murmurs. "I'm going to fuck you, Faith, because you really do deserve it, my darling, but I'm going to take them off first—"

"No," she says weakly, even though the throbbing's upgrading to a hurt that's almost tangible, a warm, red cloud of pain settling over her breasts. "Want you to leave them on, Wes."

"You don't know how it's going to feel when they come off," he tells her. "It'll hurt so much more." And there's absolutely nothing in his voice to let her know how he feels about that, about her hurting, but he pushes inside her again, as if he can't help it, and for a second the taut lines of his face break up as he groans softly.

"God, Faith," he says, "Oh, you don't know how you feel right now—"

His hand's shaking slightly as he releases the clamps, holding them cupped in his hand for a second, before tossing them aside because she's started to writhe beneath him and he needs both hands to hold her down as he starts to fuck her, his long fingers tight against her wrists.

The feeling as the blood rushes back into the pinched, compressed flesh, forcing it to swell to
fullness, is overwhelming, just as he'd warned her it would be, but with Wesley there, right there, cock in her, hands on her, eyes watching her, she rides out the waves of sensation, and she's starting to feel pretty fucking proud of herself for dealing, when he moves and sucks one aching, hard nipple into his mouth.

She screams then because it feels good; the warm, soothing lap of his tongue, but it's too much, too fucking much—

His head lifts, eyes blind, glazed and then he smiles down at her and does it to her other nipple until she takes a fistful of his hair and tugs at it.

“Don't—please—don't—” she begs, and for once he listens and she gets a kiss, swift and hard and he doesn't care how much it stings her thighs as she wraps her legs around him, how much it hurts her breasts as she pulls him down on top of her, she just wants to hold him, cling to him as he fucks her with a steady, relentless series of thrusts that break down as she comes, crying out, her nails scraping at his back, giving him the same edge of pain she's feeling. As she arches under him, feeling the warmth spilling through her, racing to every part of her body, he says her name as if it's all he wants to say, all he needs to hear, coming as she does, his head thrown back, his mouth open in a final, gasping repetition of that single word.

Afterward when he's slathered her breasts and thighs in soft kisses and half a tub of the arnica cream, they have an impromptu picnic lunch on the living room floor.

Well, she has three slices of birthday cake which is really more-ish until she realizes she's gonna puke with one more bite and Wes has these tiny little portions of the stinky cheese and truffles she's got and then has to be talked out of making the creamed rice.

“It's perfect winter comfort food,” he protests when she tells him that it's gross looking and she's definitely going to barf if she even has to look at it. “I've got some Tiptree strawberry jam that will go perfectly with it.”

“You'll need comfort food tomorrow, when I'm not here because you'll be all mopey and missing me,” she insists in the face of his skepticism. “Hey! You'd better be mopey and missing me or we're gonna have a problem.”

Wes wipes a smudge of chocolate from around her mouth with his thumb and then thinks better of it and kisses her, tongue snaking out to make sure she's squeaky clean. “I'll be bereft. And I shall work your last nerve as you'd put it, by phoning you up constantly to pester you with obscure queries about popular culture references in crossword clues but really I'll just want to ensure that you're thinking about me.”

“You're being adorable again, Wes,” she warns him with a grin, wrapping her arms round his waist so she can give him a beguiling look when he glares at her.

“I thought we were going to have a moratorium on that particular adjective, Faith,” he reminds her silkily.

“Stop being adorable and then I won't say it. Mind you, you're still gonna be pretty even when you keep giving me all those doom and gloom looks,” she smirks, standing up on tip toe so she can stop his next threat with an enthusiastic kiss. “Wanna snuggle up and take a nap?”

He pushes her gently away, keeping one hand on her shoulder like he can’t bear to lose contact for less than a second. “I wanted to take you somewhere this afternoon. Though we should probably have one of your famous power snoozes when we get back.”
He gives her questioning look a leer. “I have plans for tonight which really don't feature you getting much sleep, my little nymphet.”

“But Wes, what with you being a whole year older an' all, do you think you've got the stamina to go all night?”

And he slaps her ass all the way to the hall for that little jibe, even getting some sly tickles in and he even has the audacity to stick his tongue out at her when she squeaks that he's violating the contract.

He won't tell Faith where they're going as he bundles her in a cab and then she's too busy kissing him to look out of the window, until she emerges with pink cheeks and kiss-sore lips onto a street of elegant brownstones, while Wes tells the driver to leave the meter running.

“Is this it?” she asks but she already knows and he merely nods and points in the direction of a house a couple of doors down.

“I thought you might want to see it as you were so curious,” he says, then pauses. “Are you sure it won't be too upsetting, Faith?”

She shrugs. “Sort of but I'm kinda curious too.” She looks up at the shuttered windows with little flower boxes on the sills. “Looks big.”

“It's three floors and a basement,” he replies taking her hand and leading her a few steps down the street so they're standing right outside. “It would have needed a lot of work. The bathtub was far too small for those long soaks you like and the kitchen was an absolute travesty.”

She peers in through one of the windows but gets nothing more than a sense of shadows and space. “Don't think anyone's living there though. What was the main bedroom like?”

He sighs. “Darling, let's not. Come on, let's get back in the car. This isn't our final destination.”

“Wes, I want to know!”

“I was afraid of this. In the car and I'll tell you, Faith.”

And as they head across town, he tells her that the main bedroom took up the whole of the top floor and had a dressing room and bathroom off it and that it caught the morning sun and that the ceilings sloped all the way into the eaves so he'd probably bang his head if he ventured into the far corners.

“Will you…?” she mumbles. “I mean, it doesn't hurt to ask, does it?”

He's fumbling in his pocket for his wallet as the cab pulls into the curb. “I'll call the realtor when I get back to work but you're not to get your hopes up. There are other places we can live and most of them actually have decent sized kitchens with working stoves.”

“But I want that one,” she pouts, tossing her head back so he gets the full weight of her most mournful look. “If it's still available. And… oh, hey! I read about this place in my guide book.”

“Bloody tourist,” he grins, wrapping an arm round her shoulder. “It's one of my favorite places in New York and since you've become quite the bibliophile, I thought you might enjoy spending some time here.”

Then he opens the door of The Strand bookshop and ushers her inside. She stands for a while inhaling the musty scent of old books and letting her eyes travel round the over-laden shelves and tables, all piled up with volume upon volume. “Fuck!” she breathes, turning to Wes in time to see
him wince.

“Not in front of the books, Faith,” he implores her, then gives her a pleased smile. “It's rather impressive, isn't it?”

“You got that right? Didn't know there was this many books in the world. And I need something to read on the plane anyway.” She heads for the first set of shelves and stands there, eyes darting over the spines. “Don't really know where to start.”

“Well, I expect you to read to me when we get home,” he purrs in her ear. “As one of my birthday indulgences. And I expect you to read to me alternate nights when I call you, remember?”

She nods, already reaching for the new David Sedaris. It was one of the new clauses in the contract that they'd read to each other for at least five pages every evening. And not just dirty books either. Wes was totally unrelenting about that. “Sir, yes sir!”

He gives her rump a proprietary pat because he can't seem to keep his hands off it even in public places. “How charming to have you in such an obedient mood for once, Faith. I'm going off to browse, I'll come and find you in a while.”

Half an hour goes by in no time at all and she's clutching a little pile of treasures to her chest, including a copy of 'The House Of Mirth', mainly because it's a cute little hardback from the 1940's, and two Douglas Couplands which have been marked down so much that they're practically giving them away.

She wanders down the stairs into the basement to find Wes among the eight miles of used books. He's nowhere to be seen, until she turns into a slightly deserted corridor and finds him perusing the art books with a dreamy little smile on his face. God, he just won't quit being damn adorable today. Faith takes a minute to completely check him out because she's going to have to live on memories of him for a few days. How tall, how lean he is. How elegant his hands are as he reaches for a book from the top shelf and turns it over to read the back. How the hard lines and angles of his face soften out when he glances around and sees her standing watching him.

“There you are!” he exclaims. “Show me what you've found.”

She hands over her little pile of books. “I think I'm about to have a whole contemporary literature thing going on,” she tells him, as he picks up the Douglas Couplands. “And this turn of the century erotica phase,” she adds as his eyebrows shoot up when he sees 'The Delta Of Venus' and 'Little Birds' there too. “What did you get?”

He's got a couple of things tucked under his arm. “Oh yes, shall we find a secluded corner?”

“Wes? You gonna make out with me in the stacks?” she teases, as he rolls his eyes at her. “In front of the books? I'm shocked. Actually, dude, I'm appalled!”

“Stop being a brat or I won't share my discoveries with you,” he tells her firmly, pulling her into a dusty little alcove and, yeah, moving in for a sneaky little kiss. “I must confess it's always been one of my little fantasies to fuck you in here, up against the shelves, with one hand over your mouth so you won't make those lovely little whimpers of yours and have all the staff running over.”

She's so tempted to just lean back against the wood and paper, unbuckle his belt and see how quickly they can make it to the finishing line but then she catches the eye of a sweet old lady who's perusing cookery books and turns back to him with a wistful smile. “Thinks that's going to have to be one of your fantasies that I file in the Neruda folder,” she says regretfully and he gives her a wolfish grin,
one finger under her chin, tipping her head up so she can see the gleam in his eyes.

“Never say never, Faith. It's so… defeatist. Maybe we'll come back just before closing one day.”

“Whatever, Wesley. Gonna show me your goodies? Like, your book goodies.”

He brings out the first book and she traces her fingers over the title. “Manet's Modernism: The Face Of Painting In The 1960s,” she reads and he tuts.

“Don't look at the words, Faith. Look at her, look at Olympia,” he orders her softly, flipping through the pages and her eyes are drawn to the woman that he's showing her, reclining on a bed with this secret, self-assured look on her face.

She smiles herself because one more piece of the puzzle is slotting into place and he chuckles. “A perfect match. Look…”

His fingers caress the upturned thrust of her breasts, the sloping curve of her belly, the place where her hands covers the mysterious juncture between her thighs. “See, it's you. My Olympia, my Faith.”

And she suddenly gets the deal about the whole art thing. That it's not what you see, but how it makes you feel. And this painting, this girl who lived and died before she was even thought of, was just an ideal, an idea for Wes before he met her.

“I'm prettier than her though, right?” she says before she can stop herself because she's never gonna be Sister Wendy.

“You're the most beautiful girl in the world,” Wes insists and there isn't a hint of teasing in his voice. “One day I'm going to have you painted just like this. Even Manet himself would decide that you were infinitely lovelier than the original. Would you like that, Faith?”

“Yes, I'd love to look like her, have you look at me and know that all the time it was being painted, I was thinking of you,” she covers his hand where it's splayed over her namesake and squeezes his fingers. “One day we'll have to go and see her, y'know, say hello.”

“Oh, you're clever as well as beautiful,” he murmurs, showing her the other book. “Or psychic, maybe.”

She takes 'The Virgin Guide to Paris’ from him and almost shrieks. “Say fucking what?”

“I'm taking you to Paris this Spring if you absolutely promise not to swear in public.”

“But we can't… we need to find somewhere to live and we'll have to move in and man, I haven't even got a passport,” she babbles, hands creeping over every inch of him she can reach. “And I can't speak French!”

“Je t'aime. Je t'adore, Je t'embrasse toi,” he drawls, picking her up so she can wind her arms round his neck, wrap her legs around his waist and rub against him, because if he keeps on with the French, the really fucking sexy French, the sweet old lady is just going to have to have a heart attack. “Ma petite Faith, mon amour vrai.”

“What does it mean?” she whispers, kissing the plump lobe of his ear.

“I love you,” he translates, pressing his mouth to her neck while she squirms with the overwhelming romanticism of being in Wes' arms, among the books, and the French which her brain might not understand but her heart seems to. “I adore you. I embrace you.”
“I adore you too, Wes,” she sighs happily, pulling him even closer. “What about the last bit?”

“Ma petite Faith, mon amour vrai?” he repeats, smirking as she practically swoons. “It means, my little Faith, my one true love.”

“Say something else,” she begs, but then she's kissing him, stroking him with her tongue so he's not doing much of anything but turning her around so he can press her against the shelves.

“Ma fille chérie et belle, veux-tu m'épouser?” he breathes against her lips and she's frowning at him.

“What does that mean?”

“Young man, if you don't put down your girlfriend immediately, I'm calling a member of staff,” says a fractious voice and they turn to see the sweet, old lady looking at them like a bitch on wheels. “In front of the books too. Disgusting!”

“I'm terribly sorry,” Wes says politely, carefully placing her on her two shaky feet. “I was carried away by the beauty of my girlfriend. She's lovely, isn't she?”

The old bag doesn't seem to think so because she looks at Faith like she's some two-bit floozy who turns tricks in the art book section of the Strand and turns away still muttering under her breath about how the “young today have no respect.”

“So what were you saying back there?” she asks him when they're all snug in the back of a cab, bags of books on their knees. “The last thing?”

He gives her his most maddeningly obtuse smile and pats her thigh. “I'm not telling you,” he says with this smug little smile that never fails to make her eyes flash. “You'll have to work it out for yourself. You have an excellent memory for languages as I recall. It shouldn't present a problem so stop pouting.”

And even though she wheedles and nags the whole way home, he keeps shaking his head, eyes glinting with amusement and won't tell her.

“God, you're so mean sometimes, Wes,” she complains bitterly as she follows him inside the lobby and waits for him to open his mailbox. “Give me a clue!”

He pauses from checking through a wad of envelopes and gives her the most evil smile she's ever seen. “How's your Italian?”

“Like, non-existent.”

“Such a pity,” he sighs. “So you won't understand if I say volontà lo sposate either? Shall I try it in Spanish?”

“Wes!” she growls, bumping him angrily. “Just tell me.”

“¿quieres ser mi esposa?” he laughs and she doesn't want to encourage him because he's being so fucking annoying and a smartass to boot, so she just turns her back on him and marches off to the elevator while he calls after her, “¿Adónde vas, mi florcita dulce?”

His arms snake around her waist and he kisses the side of her neck when he catches up with her. “The last thing I said was, where are you going, my sweet little flower?”

“I think you meant to say your pissed off little flower,” she grits out and then digs him in the ribs.
“Not going to be mad at you because it's your birthday but stop teasing me.”

He gives an outraged little gasp as he closes the door of the elevator and presses the button. “Me? Tease you? That's a terrible accusation, Faith!”

She rolls her eyes so hard it's wonder she doesn't dislocate something. “What-fucking-ever.” Then she spies the clutch of post in his hand and changes the subject. “Are they all birthday cards?”

“They appear to be,” he admits with a bashful smile. “Though I think one's my Visa bill.”

“Sucks to be you,” she grins, leaning over his shoulder to sneak a peek at the brightly colored envelopes and a couple of interesting little packages. “Ooh! English stamps. Guess that means birthday greetings from the mother land.”

“And from my mother,” he says, brandishing one of the packages at her. “I recognize her handwriting, though it seems to be addressed to someone called Faith.”

Who'd a thunk that birthdays would make Wes so mercurial? Or capricious? Or such a fucking, irritating pain in the ass? He won't even let her look at, like, her package until he's had a cup of tea and told her to get undressed and into bed.

Not like there's anything on the agenda but a book before bedtime. “I want you to get some sleep,” he says icily over her furious protests. “You'll be thanking me later, I quite assure you.”

“What? When you haven't let me come for a gazillion hours and it's four in the morning,” she asks sulkily but she's pulling off her jumper anyway.

“Faith, haven’t we had many a conversation about putting ideas into my head?” he asks her smoothly and she sticks her tongue out at him as she kicks off her jeans and yanks back the duvet.

“I'm in bed,” she huffs, folding her arms and giving him a mutinous pout. “Want my package now… please.”

He perches on the edge of the bed and winds a lock of her hair round his finger. “Well as you asked so charmingly.”

And she ignores the sarcasm oozing from every syllable because he's finally giving her the damn thing and watching with an amused smile as she rips into it and gives a tiny cry of glee when five Orange Kit Kats tumble out along with a perfect picture postcard of a little English village that looks like something out of one of those costume dramas on BBC America.

“Cute,” she decides, holding it up and showing Wes. “Is this where your Mom lives?”

“It's about five miles from her house. But that pub does a good ploughman's,” he grins. “That's where we ended up after the hike I told you about.”

“Five miles?” she echoes, with an incredulous shake of her head. “Don't you have cabs in England?”

“No, Faith, we're still using horses and carts to get from A to B,” he says with a poker straight face, which she ignores because she's reading what Sylvia has written.

Dear Faith

It was so nice speaking to you on Christmas Day. I hope you had a lovely holiday and that you
didn’t take any nonsense from Wesley. I’m planning a visit to New York before summer so maybe we’ll have a chance to meet in person. I hope you enjoy the enclosed chocolate. Wesley brought back some American candy when he was over—ghastly stuff!

All the best

Sylvia

“Well, it seems like you’ve charmed my mother,” Wes murmurs, not even attempting to hide the fact that he’d totally reading over her shoulder. “Would you like to help me open my cards?”

And she so would, snit forgotten as he tells her who they’re from, which is mainly his truckload of cousins, though there’s a home-made effort with something that might be a cow on it from his little brood of micro-sized relatives addressed to “Onkle Wesslee”, which makes her burst into a fit of giggles as Wes reads out all the spelling mistakes in his prissiest voice.

She’s still chuckling feebly when he places the cards on the nightstand and turns to her. “Now, Faith, what are you going to read to me?”

“Shouldn’t you read to me if you want me to go to sleep?” she argues. “And maybe stroke my hair while you’re at it.”

“No, it’s my birthday and I seem to recall that my every wish was to be granted.”

“Okay,” she says grudgingly, then snuggles down under the covers. “But we have to cuddle.”

And she starts to read ‘Girlfriend In A Coma’ to him because it seems appropriate with the whole nap thing even though she’s completely not tired but by the end of the first page, he’s started smoothing her hair with careful, deliberate strokes and she’s fighting to get through to the end of the chapter, managing to mumble, “Destiny is what we work toward. The future doesn’t exist yet. Fate is for losers” before her eyelids droop and she gives a huge yawn and rests her head on his shoulder so she can let sleep claim her.

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Six

The books are stacked precariously high in The Strand of her dreams. Okay, yeah, it's not much different than the real place, but all the hipster clerks are standing around her with foreign dictionaries and looking at her peevishly.

“What do you mean you can't remember exactly what he said?” a girl with spiky black hair and too much eyeliner snaps at her. “We can’t help you if you don’t know what you need to look up.”

She’s just about to snap something at the stupid girl, break her neck maybe, when Xander suddenly appears.

“Try and remember, Faithy.” He looks far too serious and is holding a giant French dictionary that’s not full of words but elaborate schematics of what appear to be shoes surrounded by mathematical formulas. “Rupert will be disappointed if you don’t have all the right answers.”

Anne sidles through, arm in arm with Spike, and throws her a Portuguese dictionary.

“Wes didn’t mention Portuguese. I don’t need this one,” Faith says, tossing it to the floor. Bursting into flames, the book turns into a pile of Agent Provocateur lingerie, all too small.
“You might now,” Spike says and winks as he and Anne disappear into the film section.

“Never underestimate Wesley's abilities!” Anne calls over her shoulder with a laugh, and all the peevish book clerks join in nervously.

**

She wakes with a start. The room is dark, save the glow of the bedside lamp and she rubs the crust out of her eyes. Everything wobbles into focus as her eyes adjust to the low light.

Wes is perched on the edge of the bed, his hand caressing her right breast, thumb teasing the nipple erect through layers of fabric. It isn't sore, surprisingly, despite the abuse it took earlier in the day, but his touch feels weird, like when she bumps her funny bone. Tingly and numb at the same time, and it's a little nauseating.

“I think you let me sleep too long, I feel really gross. Plus, I had this really fucked-up dream,” she mumbles and shoves his hand away. The weird churning in her gut ceases, but it's replaced by a swirling nervous energy as she realizes that they'll probably need to leave for dinner soon. And that's piled on top of the residual angst of her really obvious anxiety dream and the sticky weirdness of waking up after a too-long nap. As she struggles to prop herself up on her elbows, his hand slips into the space between her back and the mattress, coming to rest on her tattoo. Usually she'd totally be yearning for the soothing balm of his touch, but his hands aren't warm and steadying, they're cold and a little clammy to boot. Or maybe she's the cold and clammy one. “What time is it?”

“Six o'clock. An hour to get ready, darling girl. But not if you persist in lolling about,” he says, pushing her up into a sitting position, leaning in to plant a little kiss on her pouty lips.

“Please tell me that you've made some coffee then,” she says through a stifled yawn.

“But you've already had your two caramel lattes for the day, Faith. I'm afraid I'll have to cut you off. Wouldn't do to have you jittery over dinner.”

“Well, I'll be face down in the cheese plate if I don't get some caffeine stat, Wes.” She collapses melodramatically against his chest and could totally fall right back asleep right then, and yeah, so she'd miss out on all the late-night fucking Wes has planned, but God, it might be worth it to avoid the Rupert Giles appetizer special.

Instead of cradling her in his arms and letting her get back to sleep already, he jumps to his feet, sending her crashing face-down into the mattress with a muffled harumph.

“Really, Faith,” he says, a twinge of annoyance edging into his voice. “We don't have time for a melodramatic display. You'll feel better once you've had a shower. Come along!”

Somehow, he manages to pull her to her feet, and she unsteadily stumbles after him into the bathroom. And, okay, yeah, once she's moving, she's feeling a lot better, and by the time he's joined her under the hot stream of water, she's totally at like 85 percent at least and rising as he carefully shampoos her hair and then briskly scrubs every inch of her still sleep-pliant body with a loofah.

“You're not stripping paint off me,” she huffs as he attacks her backside with gusto, but he just replies with a little snort and scrubs a little harder, or maybe she's just imagining it. And even though she's secretly pleased he's clearly going taking care of the little details of the evening, it doesn't give her anything else to think about but how to greet Rupert. Shake his hand? Give him a hug? No, only if he makes a move first, she decides. Though, the point is probably moot as he's probably not all into that kind of physical intimacy. Probably a good thing, because in her mind he...
kind of looks a little uncharitably like all the jowly old English actors she knows from movies, like Ian Holm or Jim Broadbent or something. Maybe she’ll be lucky and he’ll look more like Alan Rickman.

“Faith.” Wes’ voice pulls her out of her weirdly spiraling thoughts. “Are you all right? Even for someone so sleepy you’re very quiet.” He pushes her gently against the wall of the shower stall, tangling his legs in hers and gives her a long, slow kiss that finally seems to kickstart her brain and she’s suddenly overcome with a warm rush of desire. “Are you nervous?” he asks when they part, gently pushing away the wet tendrils of hair that are plastered to her cheek.

“Are you kidding? I’m fucking mortified, Wes.”

“Everything will be just fine,” he says, turning off the taps and grabbing a towel. He briskly dries off before wrapping her in a fresh towel and wraps her hair up in another, piling it on her head like a cute little turban. “Rupert doesn't bite. At least, I don't believe he does.”

“You don’t know that! He's totally gonna want to eat me alive. He won't approve, won't like me.” She knows her voice is edging toward whiny hysteria as she follows him into the bedroom, but there’s nothing she can do to stop it. “He probably talked to Anne and she told him all about how I'm some drunken white trash skank.” She plops down on the bed dejectedly.

“I can assure you that Anne most certainly didn’t tell him that.” And oh, she really envies his strength, she does. He’s carefully and methodically laying out her outfit, all in order from underclothes and stockings, to her new black dress and matching shoes. The fact that he’s in so control should make her feel better, but it doesn’t. It makes her feel like a petulant teenager—which, of course, she kind of is. But that makes her feel even more like a big fucking baby because she’s making a big deal out of this when he’s obviously not even slightly worried.

“Well, whatever. She probably couched it in some nicer words that mean the exact same thing!” Her voice slides into a fair imitation of Anne’s perky chirping. “Oh, she’s just so young, Rupert. You must convince our Wesley that he’s making a horrible mistake.”

“Faith, you’re being completely ridiculous and getting yourself worked up for no reason. I assure you she did no such thing. Now, please, please just try and remain calm.”

Well, okay, she was wrong about him not being worried, there is a tiny bit of an annoyed edge to his voice now, underneath the concern. But she’s momentarily stunned into silence as he dresses, choosing a black wool suit that’s perfectly tailored so as to accentuate his lanky frame. And yeah, it is a little soothing to watch him in this reverse strip tease as he pulls on one sock, then another—to watch him slip into his trousers and then slowly button his shirt. He catches her eye in the mirror, pins her with one of those patented Wesley looks that could melt lead or something as he slips the cuff links on, fastening each French cuff shut and then makes a great show of slowly knotting his new tie that’s totally turning her into the pile of gushy romantic goo formerly known as Faith.

Without turning to look at her, he asks, through his reflection, “I’m going to dress you now, Faith. Would you like that?”

“Yeah,” she breathes, heart knocking against her chest as he crosses over to her and unwinds the towel from her hair. God, she hopes this feeling never fades, the exhilaration that comes the moment they’re slipping into a game. “Really would, Wes.”

His fingers trace along her neck, where the collar would rest were she wearing it. “But you’re to calm down, is that clear? I don’t want to tell you again.”
“Yes,” she croaks as all her anxiety is funneled away by his touch and turned into the heavy, wet weight of desire between her legs. His hands slide down reverently over her body, an eyebrow quirking when one hand slips over her damp pussy.

He leans in, voice rasping in her ear. “What was it that made you wet, Faith?”

“You,” she says simply. There's too much to explain, she'd be there all night.

“Nothing in particular?” He looks suspicious, but that doesn't stop him from slipping his fingers inside her cunt, dragging the moisture up to lubricate the little circles he starts to trace around her clit.

And she can't speak, only moan softly as the his fingers curl and tease over her sex, never resting in one place long enough to really get her going, just increasing her desire exponentially with each shift of his fingers.

“What was it? Tell me.”

“Just you being you, Wes,” she manages to force out of her gritted teeth, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him down into a kiss.

And she's totally not ready for the way he scoops her up into his arms and brings her down to meet the mattress, the wool of his trousers leaving a trail of friction as he pries her legs open with his knee. “You wicked girl, I'm fully dressed and all I want to do is get out of these bloody clothes and fuck you here and now.”

“Nothing's stopping you, Wes.” But he's miles ahead of her, his hand's fumbling for his belt and she arches under him, hands slipping down from cradling his head to loosen his tie—when she catches sight of the clock. The clock whose hands are starting to inch precariously toward seven. “We can be a little late, right?”

Which, in retrospect, is probably not the wisest thing to say at that moment.

His head whips around and it's like he's hit the circuit breaker when he sees the clock. “Oh fuck,” he mutters. “Fuck!”

“Hey, hey, Wes. Chill. It's okay. We still have half an hour.” And it's so horribly wrong that she's the one calming him down now as he obsessively fusses with his tie in the mirror, leaving her to yank on her clothes faster than she really should. It's amazing, really, that she doesn't bust a hole in her fine denier stockings as she shoves her feet in and gracelessly yanks each one up with a few sharp tugs.

“It's impossible to get a cab going downtown at this hour. How did that slip my mind?” he mutters to his reflection. “Idiot!”

She slithers into her dress, but can't quite get the zipper up all the way alone. “Wes, just call down to the doorman and have him start trying to snag one now,” she says, hastily slipping into her shoes while still trying to pull the zipper up. “But hey, like, can I get some help here first?” But he's out of the room and halfway down the hall at that point, muttering something about finding the phone.

Giving up on the zipper, she briskly towels her hair dry and drags a brush through it, but it's still way too wet for going outside on a cold night, and it's totally gonna get smooshed flat under her hat and look like crap by the time they reach the restaurant, she's sure of it. Fuck it, she thinks, it's just hair, it's not like she ever styles it that much anyway—but she gives it another go-round with the towel just to be on the safe side.
She can hear him in the other room barking down the phone line at the doorman on duty as she whisks on some mascara, eyeshadow, a coat of dark plum lipstick, and a couple strategic smudges of Stila all-over shimmer in a quick attempt to pull off some semblance of an acceptable evening makeup look. And amazingly, her hair doesn't look quite so bad now, and she actually looks pretty freakin' gorgeous under the circumstances. Except for the fact that she's only half zipped into her dress, but that can be fixed, easy.

Wes is markedly less freaked out when he returns to the bedroom, her coat draped over his arm, and he finishes zipping her up before she can even ask again.

“There's a cab down there for us now,” he says, slightly out of breath. “I'm sorry, Faith. I'm sorry I made us late. This is all my fault.”

“Wes, chill, really—we're not late yet.” She shoves her lipstick and cigarettes into an evening clutch and links her arm through his. “Believe me, I know. We're totally cool.”

“This is Manhattan, Faith. At the tail end of rush hour. We'll only just make it. It's not the optimal situation but...”

“It's gonna be okay, Wes, really. We're both nervous. But we're gonna get through this,” She stops him in the doorway as he fumbles for his keys, stroking down a stray bit of hair and kissing him softly. “How the hell did I end up the calm one, huh?”

Then again, she's not really so sure she is the calm one once she's in the cab, but she puts up a good front anyway. They both do, really—hands clasped tightly, spines ramrod straight, and hardly speaking a word to each other the entire way to the restaurant.

Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Seven

Some measure of assurance returns to Wesley as they arrive at '21' only seven minutes past the time he'd arranged to meet Rupert. The deferential nod of recognition from the maitre d' doesn't hurt either and she can almost see him relaxing now he's here, safe in his world, where a dropped fork will get picked up by someone else, a glass refilled as soon as it's almost empty.

“Mr. Giles is waiting for you in the lounge,” they're told as they hand over their coats. “Your table is ready when you are—you're dining in our upstairs room, I believe?—but he thought it would be pleasant to have a drink first.”

Wesley smiles a thank you and she copies him, although his drops away after a moment and she feels as if hers is stuck to her face, a grimace of panic that won't go away.

“Wes, I can't. I think I'm gonna throw up.”

Wesley doesn't take his eyes off the waiter who's been delegated to lead them through the warm, light rooms to where Rupert's waiting, like a hungry spider, to get her tangled up and fucked up, suck her dry and spit out her bones, and okay, now she's really not hungry.

“Faith, I'm here,” he says in a bare whisper of a voice. “Please stop being so ridiculous.”

The slightly exasperated tone and the arm that comes around her shoulder briefly, pulling her out of the path of a couple who're too busy talking to watch where they're going, settle her enough that when they reach their destination her desperate smile's disappeared, leaving a faint ache in her cheeks as a reminder.
Rupert’s managed to get a booth; the curving sides providing some privacy, and the open side a view of the people, though at the moment all she’s conscious of is a surge of noise from a hundred voices, a dazzle of color, and the oddly-homey smell of food in the background. The waiter vanishes and a tall man stands up and steps out to greet them.

Faith blinks at him, the confusion dropping away as she finally has one single thing to focus on, and then returning in a rush because he’s so not what she was expecting. She knows he’s a decade or so older than Wesley, knows a handful of facts about him, dry-pea-dancing around in her head—likes chess and single malts, is English—knows she’s got her other hand full of grudges over Anne and the fact he’s muscled in on her last night with Wes.

None of that helps her now.

Rupert Giles is, well, she reluctantly admits he’s not bad-looking. Older, yeah, but one of those men who just get better-looking with every birthday. He’s got kind green eyes, a charming smile, going-gray brown hair brushed back off a wide, lined forehead, and a voice that’s so like Wesley’s she feels a tiny bit of her hate chip away.

He gives her one, quick, amused glance and greets Wesley first, as if he knows she’s too freaked to be capable of anything coherent, shaking hands the way men do, murmuring the usual commonplaces.

Then Wes clears his throat, slips his hand inside her arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze, and says, without a tremor, “Rupert, I’d like you to meet Faith.”

Wesley’s hand slips away and she stares at Rupert who gives Wesley a quick smile and then takes the hand she’s automatically extended, raises it up and bends his head to kiss it. It’s a proper kiss, brief but warm, leaving a lingering sensation on the back of her hand.

“My dear, you’re every bit as beautiful as Wesley told me.”

He straightens as she snatches her hand back, face burning because getting kissed in front of Wesley, even on the hand, feels weird. “I’m delighted to meet you at last.”

She gives him a suspicious look but he’s just smiling at her and Wes is starting to stiffen up as if he thinks she’s gonna do or say something he won’t be able to smooth over.

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“Nice to meet you too, Mr. Giles,” she says politely. “And thank you for arranging this.” She glances around and suddenly she can see it all properly, high ceilings, huge flower arrangements, the glitter of lights on glasses. “This is really something.”

There’s a twang of snapped tension and before she knows it, she’s seated between them in the booth, with Wesley’s hand finding hers for an approving, supportive pat and Rupert telling her all about the famous people who’ve dined here and the secret wine cellar in the basement, dating from the Prohibition days, that’s now a private dining room, with the walls covered with racks of wine bottles.

“The senior partners,” Rupert says, with a twist of his mouth, mocking the solemnity of his words, “which would just be Quentin and myself, always have a small dinner in early March and invite the partners—and their partners of course. The cellar room seats twenty-two, so it’d do nicely. A little far ahead, I know, but would you be able to join us for that, Faith?”

All the suspicions that receded when Rupert begged her not to ever call him ‘Mr. Giles’ again—although she got the idea he was kind of pleased she had at first—flood back. Because she might not be back then and if he thinks he knows just the perfect person to take her place, he can fucking think
again.

She opens her mouth to say something along those lines but Wesley gets there first. “I'm sure she will, Rupert, as I very much hope she's living here by then, but if she isn't, I'm sure I can prevail upon Anya to accompany me.”

And she's just about to get on his case, because when she meets Anya there's going to be a really interesting conversation about secretarial solidarity and how it means you don't refuse to put people through and be, like, totally rude, when Rupert winces and flings up his hand.

“Wesley, you can be a complete bastard at times,” he says and she remembers Wes told her once that Anya had the hots for old Rupert—not so hard to believe now she's met him—and realizes that Wes just won that round with a knockout.

“I'm sure Faith would agree with you,” Wesley says with a chuckle, just as the waiter arrives with a bottle of champagne and three flutes.

Wesley raises his eyebrows at Rupert who smiles. “I took the liberty of ordering for us. Not perhaps a traditional aperitif, but it seemed appropriate as we're celebrating so much tonight.” He nods at them both. “Your birthday, Wesley; a bright new year, and Faith's first visit here.”

The waiter opens the bottle, and Faith recognizes it as that same pretty, flower-wreathed one she once drank in Wesley's bath. She gives Wesley a quick, anguished glance because she's kinda stuck; not drinking it, when it probably cost a fortune in a place like this, is going to look rude, but Wes had been pretty specific about her staying sober. Of course, he'd been pissed-off at the time, and she was certain he didn't really mean she had to stick to water, but even so…

“Just a half-glass for me,” she says.

The waiter's hand freezes in place and he shoots her a slightly incredulous look she meets without flinching.

Rupert gives the waiter a tiny nod and the bottle's placed down and she's handed a glass with about three good swallows in it, which is such a shame because she loves this drink, loves the light, dry bite of it, the sparkle and the shimmer of the golden liquid in the glass, irrepressible and sophisticated all at once.

“Let me propose a toast,” Rupert says, lifting his glass slightly. “To Wesley, on his birthday -” He turns and smiles at Faith, “To Faith about to make a fresh start—and to me who counts himself fortunate to have made a new friend—hopefully two.”

And she's not going to capitulate that easily, no matter how hard he's trying to be nice, so she settles for a noncommittal murmur and a smile before taking a ladylike sip as Wesley and Rupert exchange friendly looks and down half their glasses.

Hmm, maybe she's not the only nervous one.

They chat about nothing much for a few minutes, with Rupert apologizing for having to drag Wesley in over the holidays and Wesley shrugging it off as unavoidable, and then Giles glances over at a couple of men deep in conversation.

“Wesley? Weren't you saying you wanted to meet David Nabbit?”

“Yes,” Wesley says, staring at the short, slightly overweight man who's looking harried and, against the perfection around him, really under-dressed, although his suit and tie are expensive enough.
“Anne mentioned that he was involved in a charity project I've been doing some pro bono work for, but really, I'm not sure this is the best time; he's obviously busy.”

“I'd describe him as harassed myself,” Rupert says. “And I really don't think he'd mind being rescued. Besides, he told me only the other day that he heard good things about you. Let me just...”

Rupert catches the man's eye and Faith sees an almost comical look of relief pass over Nabbit's face as he gestures eagerly for Rupert to join him.

“Faith, would you excuse us for just a moment?” Rupert says, standing up.

“Uh, sure,” Faith mutters.

Wesley hesitates, gives her a ‘what can you do?’ look and slips out of the booth. “Would you like to come too?”

“Oh, I'll be back to keep her company, don't worry,” Rupert says. “I'll just introduce you and then...”

Somehow, and it's really fucking neat if only it wasn't going to leave her in a one-on-one with him, Rupert sweeps Wes over there, gets rid of the other man, and has Wes and this David guy chatting away like bestest buds, all without doing more than smile and say a few words. Faith watches him work with a sinking feeling, and finishes her champagne in one, defiant gulp.

When Rupert sits down beside her again she's ready for him.

He doesn't say anything at first; just picks up the bottle and refills his glass and then, before she can stop him, takes, tilts, and fills her glass too.

“I told you,” she blurts out. “I'm not allowed to drink it.”

“Allowed?” Rupert says, frowning slightly. “Odd choice of words. From my impression of him, I'd say Wesley was more inclined to spoil you than be strict with you?”

How about them both being one and the same thing? she thinks, gripped in an icy-calm now, because she's got to be so very careful -

“I mean allowed because I'm under-age,” she explains carefully. “Got nothing to do with Wes.” She smiles sweetly and plays an ace. “You're a lawyer; should know that one.”

Turns out to be a joker. Rupert says softly, “Then why did you have any at all? I'm afraid that argument doesn't hold water.” And as she scrambles for a reply he asks, “Just how old are you, Faith?”

“Nineteen,” she says. “How old are you?”

There's a surprised pause and she can feel Wes staring at her from across the room, as if he's listening to every word, although that's impossible, and then Rupert starts to laugh.

“Sauce for the goose? Quite right. It was rude of me to ask, wasn't it? I'll be fifty this year; impossibly old, I know.” He taps his finger against her glass. “I won't let you get drunk, Faith, and you don't, you really don't, have to be quite so on guard around me.” He holds her gaze and gives her a slightly mischievous look. “You're so very determined to hate me, aren't you?”

She stares at the glass without touching it, watching the bubbles rise in an endless flow. “Did you
“arrange this?” she asks bluntly. “Getting us alone?”

“Good Lord, you're so direct,” he mumbles. “You'd make a dreadful lawyer, my dear.”

“Good job I'm just a legal secretary then, isn't it?” she answers. “But I'm guessing you know that already. That I was Wes' secretary, I mean.”

He nods without showing any signs of being flustered. “Oh, yes.”

“You didn't answer my question,” she reminds him.

“Did I arrange for young Mr. Nabbit to be here? No. Hardly. Was I fairly certain that there would be someone here tonight Wesley wanted, or needed to speak to, giving me the chance to talk to you alone? Yes. That's practically a given at a place like this.”

She folds her hands in her lap and sits up straight, back not touching the cushioned wall of the booth. “Talk about what?”

He clears his throat. “Two things. First, an apology; both Wesley and, more recently Anne, have been at pains to make it clear that I'm not to play Cupid again, and I understand that my actions, well-intentioned, I assure you, caused you some dismay and led to —”

“Me being all kinds of rude to Anne at the ballet,” Faith finishes. “Yeah. But that was my fault.”

“Ah, I see why you're so insistent on sobriety tonight,” he says. “But I'm still convinced I'm mostly to blame.”

She sighs and lets her resentment go. “No. You didn't know I existed and you thought you were doing Wes a favor, right? Setting him up with someone when he was new in town and all alone, someone you thought he'd like.” Rupert clears his throat again, looking uncomfortable, and she frowns. “What?”

“I didn't know about you as an individual, but I knew something untoward had happened in the time between offering Wesley the job and his first day,” he tells her. “He'd mentioned when we met that he was involved with someone who'd be coming here with him, but not gone into details. I didn't know him well enough to ask for any, and it really didn't seem important; one expects a man his age to have someone, no matter how dedicated to his profession.”

“Yeah,” she says softly, her gaze drawn to Wesley who was writing something down in a notebook, and talking at the same time, his face animated. “That was me. I was supposed to come. We had a house picked out and everything —” She turns her attention back to Rupert who's giving her a really odd look. “Now what?” she snaps.

“Your face —”

“What about it?” she demands, because she'd been in such a rush when she got ready—oh God, has she smudged her mascara or—no, Wes would've noticed.

He picks up the champagne cork, turning it in his fingers. “When you're glaring at me, you're still very pretty, if a little fearsome, but when you look at him you're quite impossibly beautiful, you know.” He looks up and meets her startled eyes. “It's rather disconcerting.”

“I'm not…” She's stumbling over the words, blushing now, because, sure Wesley says she is—thinks she is—and she knows she's pretty, but that's it.
“Oh, you are,” he says quietly, “but I shan't tell you again if it bothers you.”

She gives him a grin, relaxing for the first time. “Bother me one more time.”

And she gets why Anya's after him, totally gets it, because when he leans forward, picks up her hand and kisses it again, murmuring, “Faith, you're quite enchantingly beautiful,” he's giving Wes a run for his money when it comes to sending tingles all over her.

Then he leans forward, still holding her hand, and says in a confidential whisper, “Wesley looks about ready to challenge me to pistols at dawn.”

“He does?” She slants her eyes over to him and yeah, he's not looking happy. She can't help it; she giggles, pulling her hand free.

“And you're amused by my imminent demise because you're still not ready to forgive me?” Rupert asks mournfully, sipping at his drink.

“No,” she says. “Just don't think you're in any danger. Wes likes you.”

The pretense drops away and she sees the edge beneath the kind eyes and charming smile. “I like Wesley too,” Rupert says evenly. “My first memory of him is as a seven-year old throwing up behind the stables because he was so bloody terrified of getting on the horse his father had chosen for him—a brute of a beast, far too strong for him. I was the only one who saw that—and ten minutes later I saw him get on the horse without hesitating.”

“Wesley said you knew his mom a bit but he didn't say much else,” Faith says, feeling the weight of her pity for Wesley and her equally strong hatred for his father. “I kind of thought you were more friends with his dad, but —”

She hesitates, doubtful because the picture in her head of Roger doesn't match the sort of man Rupert would like, not now she's met him, and he confirms it by shuddering. “And were you still harboring an urge to punish me for the Anne debacle, that insult should balance the books nicely. Dreadful man. No; I really didn't know the family well at all; after that day it was years before I saw Wesley again; thirty to be precise.”

“When you offered him the job,” Faith says slowly. “But not because you knew him from way back?”

“It didn't hurt,” Rupert said frankly. “But, no, he's a very talented lawyer and it was more than time he remembered that. I don't wish to be rude, but he can't have had much scope in your home town.”

“No,” she says, remembering how she'd wondered what he was doing there, why he stayed.

“So I offered him the position,” Rupert continues, “and looked forward to working with him.” His head turns and Faith follows his gaze. Wesley's looking restive now and as if they sense that they don't have much time to finish this, Rupert's voice quickens. “And he arrived in May, completely changed. Alone, withdrawn, a polite, cold shell and I wanted to ask what had happened, but I didn't really need to, did I?”

“No,” she says, feeling her throat close up at the thought of those first weeks after he'd gone.

“No,” he agrees. “So I gave him time, put him to work with people like Lindsey and Francis—whom I believe you've met?” She rolls her eyes and he grins. “Yes. Hard to be withdrawn and brooding around them, wouldn't you agree?” He sits back and stares at her thoughtfully. “You don't have to answer this, Faith, but I confess I'm curious: what happened on the thirteenth of
And it's so out of the blue that she's lost for a moment, frowning at him in perplexity. Then it clicks.

“I e-mailed him,” she says. “Got back in touch with him. And that's all I'm saying, because it's between us.”

“I see.”

Wesley's shaking hands with Nabbit and turning away.

Rupert pushes her glass toward her. “Thank you, Faith.”

She doesn't pick it up. “For what?” she asks bluntly.

Wesley's threading his way through the crowd now, moving with a restrained impatience.

“For being honest and admirably discreet, and, according to Sylvia, who is someone I like, despite her poor choice of husband, the indirect cause of his reconciliation with his family.”

And if he had one question, she's got a dozen after that, but there's no time. Wesley and a waiter arrive at the table simultaneously and Rupert stands up, shrugging off the intensity of their brief, loaded conversation as he does so, and giving Wesley a bland smile.

“Shall we go to our table then? Faith? Are we done here?”

She looks, not at Wesley, who's really on edge now, as if he never intended her to be alone with Rupert for that long, but at Rupert who's asking so much in four words. Holding his gaze, she reaches out for her glass and drinks from it, a long, fizz-filled swallow.

“All done.”

She moves to the edge of the booth and slips her hand inside Wesley's, standing and smoothing down the wide skirt of her dress with fingers that have stopped shaking now.

Wesley holds her hand all the way up the stairs to a much smaller room where a circular table, tucked away in a corner, is waiting for them. It's not until he releases it so that she can sit down that she realizes his thumb's been moving restlessly against the place Rupert kissed, as if to erase it.

She's been in too many restaurants with Wesley to get overwhelmed by them, even though this one is off the scale when she compares it to the ones around her home, but the menu, handed to her with a flourish, makes her blink.

“Wes?” she hisses, leaning forward. “What the fu—I mean, what's red kuri? And when they say 'oxtail', it's like your mincemeat with no minced meat in it, right? They don't mean an actual tail?”

“From an actual ox?” Rupert says, his eyes twinkling. “I'm afraid they do.”

“That's—” She's about to say 'gross' but she thinks better of it. “Different. Think I'll pass though.”

“Red kuri is a type of squash, Faith,” Wesley says in a cool voice, not lifting his eyes from the menu. “But I notice that the foie gras comes with broccoli puree if that's more to your liking.”

And he can be mad at her if he wants, though she's not exactly sure what she's done, but there are limits.
“Really isn’t, Wes.” She scans the appetizers and decides to go for the tuna. It’s raw, which means she’s not gonna be eating it, but it comes with sourdough chips, so score.

Wesley emerges from the menu only to start an earnest discussion with Rupert over the wine. They make a token effort to involve her but she shakes her head. “I’m good with whatever you guys pick. Really.”

She’s full of approval for the dessert menu (chocolate mousse cake? So saving a corner for that!) but she’s reduced to profound gratitude that with Rupert there, Wes can’t insist on ordering for her, or feeding her, because she has the feeling that in the mood he’s in she’d be tucking into the lamb, which comes with some stuff she doesn’t really want to think about, (artichoke stew? ) such as the horror of a Brussels sprout emulsion.

In fact, when he taps the menu with his finger and gives her a long, considering look, she’s certain he’s contemplating ‘suggesting’ it, in a way that doesn’t give her any choice but to obey, but before he can say a word, the waiter arrives, turning to her first with a bright smile.

It’s with deep satisfaction that she orders the sea bass with truffle potatoes and champagne sauce, meeting Wesley’s ironic look and barely resisting the temptation to stick out her tongue.

After they’ve ordered and the wine’s arrived, Rupert excuses himself, threading through the tables to the washroom and getting stopped so many times as he does, that Faith can’t help wondering if that was more the objective than a need to pee.

He’s barely out of earshot when Wesley takes a gulp of his wine, sets the glass down with a thump and says, “I’m sorry that I had to leave you alone for so long earlier, Faith.”

“I wasn’t alone,” she says. “Rupert was there.”

She gets a look that promises her she’s gonna be flying home with a stinging ass. “I’m well aware of that, Faith.”

“Look, Wes,” she says, relenting because it’s his birthday after all, “I was nice to him, okay? We had a talk about the whole Anne deal and we got stuff sorted out.”

He winces. “I hope you weren’t rude, Faith. Rupert’s very important to me, both as a friend and an employer. Tell me you didn’t—”

“Wes, it’s cool,” she insists. “He was sweet and stuff.”

“Yes,” he drawls, changing moods in the blink of an eye. “I noticed him being sweet.” And he’s just so close to pouting that she can’t bear it.

“Wesley, if you think for one moment—”

“Give me your hand,” he says, interrupting her.

“What?”

He extends his hand and raises his eyebrows. “I don’t think I was speaking in a foreign language this time, Faith, so I see no reason to repeat myself.”

She places her hand in his and he stares down at it for a moment and then turns it over and brings it to his mouth, kissing her palm and then her wrist, leaving her breathless because there’s so much heat in his eyes as he watches her react, his thumb resting against the pulse hammering in her wrist.
“You— Wesley—”

“You— Wesley—” he says with an intensity that's emphasized by his lowered voice. “I want to hear you say it.”

And she's just about to, because usually it's her asking for that reassurance, and she knows how it feels, how sometimes it just needs to be said, to be heard, but Rupert picks that moment to slide back into his chair with a genial, all-encompassing smile, and the chance is lost.

“Faith, do tell me,” he says breezily, “when you were working for him, did Wesley have some of the bad habits Anya's trying to break him of? Or has he developed them recently?”

She's so very glad she swallowed her mouthful of wine as soon as she realized she was going to have to be ready to answer a question, or she thinks Rupert would've ended up wearing it.

“Such as?” she asks cautiously. “Because the only thing I had a problem with wasn't a habit as such; it was just the way he had this total hate on when it came to printers and computers and I know he's gotten over that.”

“I simply prefer —” Wesley begins, but Rupert's throwing back his head and laughing.

“He didn't make you use a typewriter did he? With carbons and ribbons?”

Wesley's glaring at them both at this point, and she nudges his foot—least she hopes it's his foot—with hers. “Yeah, but you know, I kind of liked it myself,” she says loyally. “The straightforward typing anyway.”

“Anya's never quite recovered from the time you hauled her over the coals for correcting your spelling,” Giles purses his lips. “I do sympathize, Wesley, but when in Rome, you know —”

“I simply pointed out —”

“And he's had the poor girl running all over the place looking for the tea he wants and insisting on a —”

“Freshly-cut thin slice of lemon, resting on the saucer, not in the tea,” she finishes dreamily. “Yeah, I remember.” She takes a sip of her wine and gives them both a demure look. “Maybe I should come in one day and give her a few pointers?”

There's a moment's silence, then, thank fuck, they're both laughing, with Wesley's bad temper disappearing as fast as the wine.

And it's like all that tension has finally cracked and she can start to relax, though she's always aware of Rupert's eyes on them, taking everything in, like the way Wes brushes away a strand of her hair which is clinging to her face or how she covers his hand which is resting on the table and squeezes his fingers gently as he's telling Rupert about the time she made him drink the vodka milkshake.

“Really, Rupert, it was quite possibly the most revolting concoction I've ever tasted,” he says with a shudder and she giggles.

“Whatever, Wes,” she snorts, nudging him with her arm. “This from the guy who's like the king of stinky cheese.”

Turns out Rupert's big with the stinky cheeses too—must be a British thing—and he and Wes regale her with tales of stinky cheeses they have known while she pulls disgusted faces until the starters
Her tuna arrives and looks every bit of raw as she feared, though she's more preoccupied with Rupert's oxtail, which doesn't look quite so tail-y as she thought. But the sourdough chips are yummy and when Wes asks her if there's something wrong with her tuna, she gives him her most serene smile.

“'It's kinda raw, Wes, and I want to leave some room for my pudding,’” she explains in her most poised voice. And there's nothing he can do about it but purse his lips. Either way she doesn't have to eat it, and either way, he's going to be spanking her ass at some stage tonight so it's win/win.

As it is, she's really getting into her role as the perfect lawyer's girlfriend, asking Rupert about how he came to work in the States and listening attentively when he tells her about the big case he and Wes have been working on. She can't help but shoot Wes a proud smile as Rupert tells her about the corrupt slum landlord that he totally annihilated in court.

“'Only saw Wes in action once,’” she chimes in, seeing that dusty courtroom in her mind's eye, “'but he pretty much rocked.’”

“'Oh, Faith, I'm afraid that a career as a court reporter sadly does not beckon,’” Wes says sorrowfully, shaking his head and sharing an amused look with Rupert, which any other time would have her snarling and getting all paranoid that they were making fun of her but Wes has slipped an arm round the back of her chair, the side of his hand warm against her neck and it steadies her, keeps her calm and her smile natural as the starter plates are cleared away and she takes a good chug of her water so she doesn't get too drunk. As it is, she's maybe halfway to mildly squiffy.

Thankfully her sea bass isn't too covered with yucky garnishes and she's actually feeling kinda accomplished as she revels in the chink of glasses and the expensive tinkle of silverware on fine bone china. She hasn't sworn or had to spit her food out and Wes keeps flashing her these encouraging little smiles, which make her feel completely cherished. Man, if the folks back home could see her now.

She even manages not to stab Wes with her fork when the waiter comes to take their orders for dessert and he gives her a wicked grin and asks her if she wants the cheese plate.

“I want the chocolate mousse cake, Wes, like you didn't already know that,” she hisses and then lowers her voice so Rupert can't hear, though he's watching them like they're a new episode of The Osbournes. “Don't be mean to me on my last night.”

“How am I being mean to you?” he inquires archly, raising an eyebrow and she taps her finger meaningfully on his thigh.

“You're trying to deprive me of chocolate,” she squeaks indignantly.

“Wesley, leave the poor girl alone,” Rupert orders and then gives Faith one of those disarming smiles, which she imagines he uses to great effect when he's grilling some poor sap in the witness box. “So, Faith, what are you planning to do with your time when you move to New York?”

Thank God, he's started off with an easy one. “Gonna get a job,” she says firmly, ignoring the way that Wes has straightened up. They haven't talked about it but she's going to get a paying job, give him money toward her board and he can just fucking deal with it. “Maybe find another Monty and be his assistant.”

“Although you may go back to school,” Wes adds stiffly, refusing the wine bottle that Rupert's
offering him. “Really, Faith, you’re incredibly bright, I don’t think you should dismiss the notion of further education out of hand.”

“I’m not! But I’m so over, like, homework and tests and I want to pay my way,” she finishes angrily and then tries to find her poise again and get Rupert to stop looking at her like she’s a specimen under the microscope. “Might become a lawyer though, Wes, a few years down the line and then I can kick your ass in court.”

“We’ll see,” Wes mutters and he’s removed his arm from the back of his chair and she just wishes he’d stop being so fucking mercurial.

“I hate to contribute to your little domestic disagreement but I was talking to one of the professors at NYU the other day,” Rupert smoothly interjects and they turn to him in relief. “His assistant is leaving to have a baby in April and he’s anxious to find some cover. I could put a word in for you, Faith.”

She beams at him and then at Wes but thinks better of it when he gives her a sour look in return. “Thanks, Rupert, I’d really appreciate that,” she says sweetly. “Maybe I could e-mail you my résumé to send to him.”

“Though I’m not sure that Wesley would approve of all those lecherous law students coming into close contact with you,” he adds with a sly look at Wes and she fucking swears she can hear him grind his teeth.

“Wes doesn’t have to worry about stuff like that.” And she strokes his leg under the table, just so he’s sure on that point. “So, Rupert, where did you go to school?”

Turns out that Rupert was quite the hellraiser when he was at college. He belonged to this British version of a frat called The Scoundrels and they got up to all sorts of bad boy shit. She barely registers her chocolate mousse cake arriving but digs in without really noticing because Rupert’s telling her about these, like, completely debauched drinking games they used to play and how they’d lure impressionable freshmen girls back to their pad…

“And really, my dear, modesty forbids me from continuing this rather lurid tale,” he laughs when he’s just got to the good bit.

“Aw, c’mon, Rupes,” she begs. “Don’t hold out on me.”

“I can see what you meant when you told me how persuasive she is,” Rupert tells Wes who hasn’t said a word for, like, ten minutes. “Though you forgot to mention just how winsome that pout is.”

“If it was that winsome you’d totally be spilling the beans,” she says plaintively, wriggling away from Wes’ hand on her back because she’s really hot and it’s distracting her from getting Rupert to ‘fess up. “Tell me! I won’t tell a soul so your rep as a big, important lawyer dude stays all intact.”

Rupert has gone all red-faced and giggly, which is actually kinda cute and he puts down his napkin and throws his hands up in the air. “I’m sorry, Faith, but there are some secrets that will be buried with me.”

“Not cool,” she opines sadly as he pushes his chair back.

“There’s someone over there, Mr. Delmonico, Wesley, you remember? I must go and press the flesh.”

The second he’s out of earshot, she turns to Wes with a big grin. “It’s going really well, isn’t it?”
But from the pissy look on Wes' face like he's just been sipping hydrochloric acid, you'd think it was the worst dinner in the history of worst dinners.

“What are you looking at me like that for?” she asks him worriedly. “Did I fuck up? Thought me and Rupert were getting on like a house on fire.”

He leans in close to her, so his breath is warm on her neck and she's feeling shivery now, not hot. The good kind of shivery because his thumb is pressing down on the jut of her lower lip.

“I thought that your winsome pout was reserved only for me,” he whispers in her ear and all she can do is stare at the intent, almost savage look on his face. “You're such a provocative little tease, Faith. And the only reason I'm veering ever so slightly toward leniency is because I don't think you quite realize how desirable, how fuckable you are. I know Rupert thinks so.”

And she should maybe be ewwwing because Rupert's a nice guy but no way in hell would she ever even think about that. Not, like, in a gazillion years but she's still stuck on the small print.

“Lenient?” she asks him in a tiny voice just before he pushes his thumb slowly and deliberately into her mouth.

“Well maybe not quite so lenient,” he decides with a wry smile. “Do you want to know what I'm going to do to you when I get you home, Faith? Should I blindfold you and tie you to my bed? Use that pretty whip on you, watch you flinch and squirm as you try to guess where it’ll land next? A hundred flicks with it, just kissing your skin until it's alive and flushed and warm to my hand and you're begging me to hurt you properly, end the torment, but you'll have to beg so very nicely for that, Faith, because I do so love to make you wait.”

All she can do is stare at him mutely, not even giving in to the urge to squirm longingly on her chair because she can feel her nipples tingling, her cunt moistening and the gentle thrust of his thumb in her mouth.

But he hasn't finished and he gives her a sinister, sultry smile and his other hand is under her dress and resting on her knee now, heavy and warm through the silk of her stockings.

“And we haven't really explored the possibilities of my birthday present, have we? Where else would you like to feel them, Faith?” he purrs, hand sliding up her leg so fucking slowly that she's almost whimpering around his thumb. “Do you think you could bear one on your clit, just for a moment, applied so carefully after I've spent an hour licking and sucking at it but never letting you come? Would you come then, Faith, just from that sharp, exquisite pain? And would I be merciful and allow it, excuse it, because really, I ask so much of you, don't I, my darling girl? Oh, I think not...and you'd cry if I did, wouldn't you? Because I'll give you anything and everything my love, but never mercy, never that.”

He pulls his thumb away from her mouth, where she's been slicking it up with her tongue and she doesn't even have to think about it. “Don't want mercy, Wes. Don't ever want it.”

His hand is just ghosting the satin between her legs, where she's damp and craves him the most, because she's just soaked through another pair of fifty-dollar panties.

“I know exactly what you want, Faith,” he tells her harshly, at odds with the way his fingers are gently pressing the wet scrap of satin against her clit. “And I can promise that you're going to leave tomorrow aching, Faith, every part of you. You'll leave covered with bruises I won't get to see flower under your skin and fade, and I'll regret that so very much that I'll make them marks that will last for days, left in a dozen secret places.”
She’s arched toward him, the hum of the restaurant fading away because all there is is him. All she can hear, all she can see, all she can touch. “Want to go home now,” she pleads. “Don’t want to leave you, Wes. Just wanna stay.”

“And you’re never to come, ever, Faith without my express permission while we’re apart,” he continues, voice and fingers relentless. “If you do, if you dare—oh, I’ll ask you and I’ll know if you have, if you’ve lain there in bed, fingers pressing against skin I know better than you do, dipping into wetness, into the heat that my fingers and mouth and cock know so well.”

She shuts him up, because she’s going to dissolve into a puddle right there if he keeps talking, by kissing him. And he lets her, tongue sliding into her mouth in a promise of all the things he’s said, all the things she knows he plans to do when they’re alone. She doesn’t care that Rupert could come back at any second, that they could get kicked out by the maitre d’ for a way too hot public display of affection, all she cares about is his mouth on her and when he pulls away she makes this inarticulate sound of need, which makes his face light up, even as she feels the sting of her panties tearing, the elastic cutting into her skin before giving way.

“Huh?” she murmurs dazedly.

“Take off your knickers, Faith and give them to me,” he drawls, turning his head to where Rupert is shaking some fat guy’s hand as a prelude to coming back to the table. “Preferably before Giles gets here.”

“Wes, please…” she implores him but she’s already lifting herself carefully off the seat and trying to discreetly tug down her ruined panties. Rupert has already started walking back when she shoves the scrunch ed up pink satin into Wes’ waiting hand. “You’re such a fucking bastard,” she mutters and there’s no heat to her voice, just a furious blush staining her cheeks.

Wes has only just slipped them into the inner pocket of his jacket as Rupert arrives back with a slightly inquisitive gleam in his eyes. “I thought I’d leave you two lovebirds alone for a while,” he says and she’s sure he knows. But there’s no way he can so she lifts up her head and manages to give him a tremulous smile.

“I was just telling Faith how much I was going to miss her,” Wes says with a tiny, self-satisfied smirk. “As you can imagine.”

Rupert is nodding his head sagely as he signals to a hovering waiter and makes the universal sign language for “can I have the bill?” “Well, I was going to suggest that you came back to my apartment for a nightcap—I’ve just acquired an Augustus John lithograph that I wanted to show you, Wes—but I’m sure you’d rather be alone.”

He’s got that right and Wes is already getting to his feet and helping her up because she’s sure that standing when her clit is tapping out the Morse code for ‘fuck me now’ is going to be a problem. He strokes a hand down her hot face and then turns to Rupert with what she hopes is a regretful smile. Wouldn’t do to tell the boss that he can’t wait to get her home and make her scream.

“That sounds lovely, Rupert,” he purrs, his hands surreptitously smoothing over the curve of her ass. “Faith was just saying that she doesn’t want the evening ever to end.”

If she could totally shoot real daggers from her eyes, he’d be so dead right then. On the floor, bleeding all over the fancy marble walkway. But, since that’s not an actual possibility, Wes continues to exist, smiling at her with more than a hint of smugness.

Takes two to play that game, she’s pretty sure of that. So she’s only got one course of retaliation. And
yeah, it's probably not the best idea to play on his jealous nature, but there's no other strategy's jumping to mind.

“Well, I am having a fantastic time—with Rupert.” There's a barely perceptible pause in her phrasing as she smiles back through grinding, gritted teeth and swoops past Wes, linking her arm with Rupert's because she's still not feeling too steady on her heels. “I just need to powder my nose,” she murmurs discreetly as they reach the restrooms and even Miss fucking Manners herself couldn't fault her goddamn poise, she thinks to herself as she scrubs at her treacherous pussy with a paper towel before splashing her face with cold water and trying desperately to calm the pounding in her veins to a dull roar.

Rupert and Wes are waiting for her at the coat check and she manages to hold her head up high, find a beatific smile from somewhere and let them usher her out the door into the chilly New York night. There's high thin clouds streaking across the moon, and the wind's picked up. But that's not a concern for long as the restaurant's doorman already has a cab waiting and they all pile in, her in the middle, book-ended by British guys.

She knows leaning heavily against Rupert with a tiny sigh of relief as they settle into the backseat is probably going a bit too far—and just in case she hadn't realized that, Wes' vise-like grip on her wrist is enough to let her know that he at least thinks so. She's trying to work out if the whisper-light brush of his thumb across her palm that follows is a threat or a promise when Rupert leans forward over the front seat to give the driver directions.

Wes is never one to miss an opportunity to gain the upper hand, and he takes the opening as if he were tearing into a tiny hole in a defense witness' story. She knows he has the ability to make the way he touches her look innocently affectionate to the casual observer, not drawing any attention to the fact that he is indeed driving her mad with some other subtle action—but pulling that off in such close quarters? With Rupert's back to them, he's got the advantage, but he's still so very sneaky.

Gently pulling her hair back away from her cheek, he leans in for what would appear to be a sweet kiss. But he's barely brushing his lips across her flesh as he murmurs, “You're certainly intent on insuring that your flight will be quite an uncomfortable one—any leniency I might have considered earlier in regards to sending you back home with your every single inch of your flesh still throbbing is null and void—just you wait until I get you home.” Hidden by the deep shadows of the cab and the folds of her coat, he's able to slip his hand halfway up her skirt, letting his fingers come to rest on her inner thigh, as she squeezes her legs tightly together, which just makes her clit slowly come pulsing back to life.

With perfect timing, Rupert leans back at that moment, so she doesn't have time to bite out the tart retort that's waiting to burst from her lips. Never mind that her ministrations in the washroom and the cold tamped down the spark of her neediness, it's back in full force now. And she tries not to think about how her current state of undress is probably ruining her gorgeous designer dress, and wonders if Manhattan dry cleaners are blasé and cosmopolitan and don't even bat an eye at that kind of thing.

“So, Rupert, tell me about your apartment,” she says, turning to the older man and wondering if he knows that she's using him as a human shield, her thighs clamped viciously shut against Wes’ marauding hand. “I take it you also live on the Upper East Side?”

“Yes,” he says, taking off his glasses as they pull away from the curb, carefully polishing them with a crisp handkerchief pulled from his suit pocket. And woah, without the glasses he's definitely got some hotness going on. She's momentarily captivated by his methodical, precise motions—they're not that dissimilar to some of Wes’, actually. Which, if she'd noticed that under other circumstances,
would've kinda weirded her out, maybe—but wrapped in a warm buzz of champagne and squished up next to him in the back of a cab speeding uptown with Wes' hand up her skirt, well, these circumstances could make her see lots of things in a different light, she decides. Rupert gives her a little smile as he replaces his glasses and continues. “I admit, it isn't exactly what I had in mind when I pictured myself having a Manhattan bachelor pad, but it meets my needs adequately—even if it is a bit…”

“Pretentious?” The subtly flirtatious edge to her voice suddenly appears of its own accord now, like her body knows how to get exactly what she wants from Wes even if her head doesn't think it's a good idea to goad him any more than she has done. Right on cue, Wes' fingers flex in a silent order and inexorably she obeys like he's trained her to do, relaxing her posture so he can press just a little harder into her thigh, and she takes the bait. “Ostentatious, maybe?”

Rupert laughs. “Faith, you really do have a remarkable talent for directness—how refreshing! I admit, those are the two words that crossed my mind the first time I saw the place after the decorator had worked her wicked magic on the place. Wickedly expensive magic, I might add.”

“He hired Anne's sister for the job,” Wes adds, voice dripping with forced pleasantry. “She's already helpfully offered to find a place for us in her busy schedule should we require her services.”

Jeez, there was a sister, too? Would her punishment never end? “But Wes, remember, we'd decided that I'd handle the decorating decisions?” Well, they hadn't really, but it's more helpful to remember it that way as it forces him to play along.

“That was in the previous property, darling—who knows where we'll end up this time. I'm quite fond of this part of town.”

“I'll be happy to look at places up here, Wes. But I have some pretty exacting standards, remember?”

“How could I forget, my sweet?” The lilting bite to his question is followed by the slight glide of his fingers farther, ever farther, up her thigh. “But of course, I just want you to be happy with your new home, wherever it may be.”

“Hey, Wes, we could live in a trailer and I'd be happy, as long as you were there with me.” And really Rupert can't be buying any of this bullshit, but he hasn't even so much as given a half-quirk of an eyebrow at the conversation. “But Rupert was talking about his apartment, Wes. I'm sure that it's totally boring for you as you've been there before, but I wanna hear all about it before we arrive.” And, just to show that she's not flustered by the proximity of his hand almost at the bulls-eye of her twitchy clit and because she's got a death wish the size of Texas, she traces her fingertip coyly over the back of Rupert's hand before resting her fingers lightly across it, her wrist and forearm draped across his thigh.

Rupert glances down in surprise then with a wicked grin in Wes' direction, only half glimpsed in the darkness of the cab, he pats the back of her hand in a not completely avuncular gesture. “I'd hate to ruin the surprise,” he murmurs. “It really does have to be seen to be believed. By the way, Wes, before I forget did you make any progress on the Clarkson case?”

And after that she sits there in silence, half-lulled into this dream-like state by the rhythmic movements of Wes' thumb as it finally comes to rest on her clit and the dry legalese and cumbersome Latin phrases that fall out of their mouths. And she guesses she must have become like some kind of lawyer groupie because all the plaintiff this and in forma pauperis that is making her light-headed and infinitesimally grind her pussy into Wes' waiting hand.
No wonder that when the cab pulls over, she's clinging onto Rupert's arm for dear life as he helps her on to the sidewalk. Doesn't help that Wes gets out the other side and walks round to them, absent-mindedly prodding his thumb with the tip of his tongue like he's lost in thought.

“There's no need to hold onto Giles quite so hard, Faith,” he says amiably, the very picture of charm. “I feel quite left out.”

Rupert laughs softly, as he holds out his hand to Wes. “We can't have that, Wesley. There's more than enough of me to go round.”

And the dirty bad wrong fleeting thought of being in the middle of a Rupert and Wes sandwich pierces her dulled synapses just long enough for her to snag hold of Wes' sleeve so she can trap his hand in her spare one. “Don’t be silly, Wes,” she says, her voice shrill with nerves because there should be an NC17 rating slapped on the way he's looking at her. “Know you're the only one for me.”

“That's very sweet,” Rupert murmurs, as he holds the door open for her and now she's clutching on to Wes, hand greedy as she slides it over the rigid sweep of his spine.

When Rupert takes her coat, she's surprised to find that she's still got her dress on because she feels naked. Maybe it's the way Wes is looking at her like he can totally see through her black dress to where her nipples are hard and aching and her cunt is wet and messy, just how he likes it.

The uber-gilt and chintz of Rupert's front room only momentarily blindsides her and she blinks disconcertingly as the side lamps get snapped on and she's dazzled by the light reflecting off all the ormolu.

“Okay, like, no way are we getting sister of Anne and her swatches within fifty miles of our new place,” she snaps out decisively, voice firmer than it's been in an hour. Wes makes this tiny hissing sound and she realizes that dissing your host's décor is very not cool. She gives Rupert an apologetic smile and decides she'd better upgrade it to her most beguiling pout. “It's lovely, really it is, Rupert, but it's a little traditional for me and Wes; we kinda have this whole modernist vibe going on.”

“Well, I must admit, my own tastes are rather more Catholic,” Rupert says, wincing at a freakishly well-endowed, gold-plated cherub holding a lampshade aloft. “Maybe you could help me redecorate, Faith.”

“Maybe I could, Rupes.” She giggles, because she's guessing that Urban Outfitter rugs and vintage drapes really wouldn't go down too well and with a sideways look from under her lashes at Wes, she can see that her girlish trilling hasn't gone down too well with him either. She's gonna have to ask the flight attendant for extra cushions for her poor ass when she gets on the plane tomorrow, and just the thought of how tender it will be, like he's still touching her even when they're miles apart, makes her up the stakes. “Hmm, I'm thinking that you need to make this place a bit more sexy, Rupert,” she purrs, flinging her arm out to encompass the room. “Y'know for when you bring ladies back.”

Rupert gives a delighted chuckle and practically rubs his hands together with glee. “Have I told you how much I like you, Faith?” he smiles. “You're a girl after my own heart. Now, Wes why don't you show your utterly charming girlfriend the view and I'll sort out some drinks. Brandy?”

The minute that he's left the room, Wes is at her side in two angry strides and she's already lifting her face for the furious, devouring kiss he gives her, tongue thrusting in her mouth, hands cupping her ass and gripping tightly.

“Faith…” he growls, like some bespoke-suited caveman and she smooshes against him with a
“You jealous, Wes?” she taunts, almost burning her fingers. “Gonna do all those things you talked about in the restaurant? Gonna make me scream? Gonna make me beg?”

He doesn't say anything just reels her back in for another savage, lip-biting kiss and yanks her hand to where his cock, hidden by his jacket, is hard underneath her palm.

“How being jealous turn you on, Wes?” she asks him and she's half curious, even as she stands on tiptoe so she can whisper in his ear. “Makes me wet, y'know. I'm. So. Fucking. Wet.”

And she doesn't know where she was going with this, other than over his knee when they get home but she didn't expect him to push her away so he can bunch up the skirt of her dress with his hands, while she frantically tries to bat them away.

“Show me, Faith,” he insists, his movements implacable so she can feel a gentle draft gusting round her legs. “I want to see just how fucking wet you are.”

She glances over her shoulder at the doorway, expecting to see Rupert standing there with his mouth hanging open and his spectacles falling off. If she strains her ears, she thinks she can hear the distant chink of ice cubes. “He could come back at any time,” she says frantically and then he places his impossibly warm hand over her pussy.

“Do it, Faith, now.”

And there's no way she can deny him when he's drawling the words out, making them sound impossibly languid. So she's stepping away, pulling up her skirts so he can see what he's already felt, his head tilted to one side, the faint sheen of her arousal glowing on her mound.

“And if you look over there, my darling, that tall one with the lights on, that's the Empire State Building,” he says conversationally and she thinks her brain has just broken but when Rupert walks into the room two seconds later, she's cradled in the circle of Wes' arms, dress demurely back in place as he points out the different, neon-lit landmarks.

She doesn't let go of Wes' hand after that—she's not sure she could, even if she wanted to. They sit side by side on Rupert's couch and she sips her Calvados brandy and smiles and nods every now and again like she's totally following the conversation, when all she's really doing is being killed slowly and softly by Wes' fingers caressing her wrist. When he lifts her hand to his mouth so he can kiss her knuckles, she has to bite down on her lip hard to quell the needy whimper that's rising up in her throat.

“Rupert, I'm afraid that I'm going to have to get Faith home now,” he says finally, either taking pity on her or picking up the telepathic messages she's been sending him of 'Get me out of here. I need you to fuck me right the hell now.'

And the two kisses that Rupert gives her on each cheek as they say a hurried good-bye in the lobby is worth at least ten blows from the whip landing on her poor, defenseless skin, she decides, giving him her most blinding smile and saying throatily, “It was so lovely to meet you, Rupert. Hope I get to see you soon”, just to make doubly sure.

Which is probably why she spends most of the elevator ride with her back against the wall, Wes' thigh hard between hers, hands tangled in her hair, as he ravishes her mouth.

Which is probably why he gives the driver a hundred-dollar bill as soon as they get into the cab and she spends the entire ten minutes of the ride home straddling him, her breasts bared as he sucks and
bites at her nipples.

And it's probably why the second, the split second, that he slams the front door shut behind him, he turns to her with glittering eyes and the most fucking scary look she's ever seen on his face and says very slowly and precisely, "Hands and knees, Faith. I want you to crawl to the bedroom, you beautiful, little bitch."

**Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Eight**

He watches her crawl into the center of the bedroom, and she can feel him watching, the weight of his regard pushing down on her so her hands drag slowly over the soft carpet. He tells her to stand, on legs that feel shaky, close to collapse, and begins to undress her. He's forbidden her to move until instructed, so each piece of clothing is taken from her to the accompaniment of a fleeting touch from his fingers, a calmly-voiced command.

Exactly as bidden, she raises her arms, bends them; steps out of the pool of black her dress makes as it drops to the floor, until she's standing naked in front of him. He's still dressed, only his overcoat discarded, his dark suit severe against the white shirt and blue tie.

She's trembling, but all it takes is a single, meaningful look to make her stop and leave her beautifully calm, perfectly poised. She's still a quick heartbeat away from writhing against him begging to be fucked though, and they know it.

"Do you think I'm overly possessive, Faith?" he asks finally, when he's looked his fill. "Think that it's ludicrous of me to mind another man kissing your hand, making you smile, flirting with you and getting hard when you flirted back, pursing those full lips of yours so he couldn't help but imagine kissing them, feeling them on him—do you?"

She frowns because he knows she wouldn't—not ever—"Wesley, all that—it wasn't—it didn't mean anything. You know that."

He nods. "I do. And so does he, I'm sure. It changes nothing, Faith. And you didn't answer me. Should I apologize for how I feel when you're touched, desired by someone else?"

"No!" she says. "Because you know damn well I feel the same way about you, Wes. That's why when Anne, when she—" Her voice breaks and she swallows, glaring at him. "You're mine, Wesley," she says with a soft vehemence. "Just the way I'm yours."

"You're the only one who's ever wanted that," he tells her, and there's no anger in his voice now. "Ever wanted to belong to me, ever wanted me."

"I'll never stop," she tells him.

"I hope not," he murmurs. "But as I said, it changes nothing. You're still going to be punished."

He sits down on the bed and studies her for a moment, eyes narrowed in thought. "Fetch your hairbrush, Faith."

She walks past him into the bathroom, not looking at herself in the mirror because she knows what she looks like; how her face is flushed, her eyes dilated, her breathing deep and fast. When she's given him the brush he takes her hand, linking their fingers, and pulls her down across his knee.

"I don't have an exact figure in mind," he says, "so there's no need to count tonight. I'm simply going to spank you until I think your arse is red enough that when you arrive home tomorrow it will still be hurting." The cool flat side of the brush comes to rest against her skin, making her shiver.
“And, as always, Faith, you can stop me with a word.”

“Please,” she whispers and he chuckles.

“That's not it, but since you're so eager to begin—”

The brush smacks down hard and the stinging burn becomes too much to bear in silence after a very few strokes. She's panting, trying to hold back the sounds, but he sighs as if she's being impossibly recalcitrant and concentrates on one cheek, one spot, until she breaks and cries out, giving him what he wants, all the tears, the curses, the promises, the pleas.

When he's done, he turns her over and rocks her in his arms as she twists so her ass isn't touching his pants, now feeling like fucking sandpaper, not wool. His lips press kisses on her hair and her wet face until her sobs quiet down, tear marks brushed away by his handkerchief, deftly wielded as always. Then his hand slides between her legs to tease at her clit, pinching and twisting it with a remorseless gentleness, letting his fingers slip inside her, bringing them out glistening with her juices for her to lick clean again and again until she's forgotten everything but how much she wants him, and his cock, solid and aching behind too many clothes.

“Fuck me,” she begs. “Please, Wes—”

“Not yet,” he says and there's a curious expectancy about him now. “On the bed, on your back, Faith. Spread your legs for me.”

Any hope she might have felt that he's about to relent end as he lashes her wrists and ankles to the bed and, after a moment's thought, drapes a final scarf across her eyes.

“I'm going to fuck you soon, Faith, because I want to, so very much, but I haven't dealt with your disgraceful behavior to my satisfaction yet.”

“Do anything,” she says hoarsely, feeling her hips lift off the bed an inch in an involuntary invitation. “Wes, I need you, need you in me.”

His hand comes to her mouth, caressing it, and she hears him chuckle, the sound lacking its usual indulgence, as she kisses it, frantic pushes of her lips against fingers that move away too fast, brushing the tender skin at elbow and neck, cupping the weight of her full breasts and pinching her swollen nipples with a delicate cruelty.

“I'm not going to be doing anything, Faith,” he murmurs. “You are.”

“I don't understand,” she says, her head moving restlessly against the pillow so the scarf catches and tangles in her hair.

“I want you to tell me a story, Faith. A fantasy, just like the ones we shared when we were apart.”

She frowns. “Well, I'll try—” she begins doubtfully, because it's easier to write than to say, easier to say when you can't see—oh. She closes her eyes, even though the blindfold has already made him an indistinct shape above her.

“Before you begin, Faith, I'd like to give you some guidelines, if I may.”

She rolls her eyes, because she might have known it wouldn't be as easy as putting some of her starring Wesley Wyndam-Pryce as himself dreams into words. “Go ahead, Wes.”

“I want you to describe, in detail, an hour or two with you and me...and Rupert, with him—I'm still
speaking, Faith, you will be silent, please—with him in a position of authority over you, as much as I am."

“That’s—no! I won’t,” she spits out furiously. “Wes, that’s just fucking sick! He’s your friend! You can’t make me—and I’d never be able to look at him without remembering—”

“I imagine not,” he says imperturbably. “Good. It sounds as if it will be an excellent way of ensuring that you don’t repeat this particular transgression. And I wouldn’t be too concerned over Rupert’s finer feelings. I’m certain he’s going to be thinking of you tonight as he jerks off—and yes, Faith, he will, and that doesn’t please me, although I can’t blame him. You really are so tempting and so very beautiful.”

She clenches her bound hands into fists, eyes wide open now, staring into dim, shifting darkness because he’s turned off the main light, leaving the room illuminated by a lamp in the corner. She hears him start to undress and she still can’t think, can’t decide—

“This is difficult for you, isn’t it?” he asks kindly.

“Really is, Wes,” she says, trying not to whine. “I just—I can’t—”

“Perhaps you need a little help,” he says. The familiar weight of her collar is slipped around her neck, comforting her at the same time as it heightens her arousal. “You’re wearing my collar, Faith, and I’ve given you an order. It’s very simple.” There’s a pause and he adds softly, “Isn’t it?”

And when he puts it like that, yes, it is.

“He’s—you’re both watching me,” she begins and his fingers drag slowly down her stomach as a reward for her obedience.

“Watching me strip for you.”

She builds up the picture for him; the two of them, sipping at drinks, sharing a couch, their eyes on her, only her, as she spins out the movements that leave her bare.

“And then I go to him—to Rupert,” she says because she knows just how she’s going to play this and if Wesley thinks he can win every battle, she’s going to just have to remind him that she’s a pushy fucking bottom, not a pushover.

“Go to him and he’s smiling at me, telling me how well I did, and he pulls me down on his knee and kisses me while you watch—and it’s different. He tastes different and he’s gentle enough but I can feel how hard he is and when his hand comes up to my breast his tongue slides in past mine and I feel him moan—”

“And what am I doing, Faith?” he says in a toneless voice.

“You take my legs, pull me so I’m lying across both of you and while he kisses me, touching my tits and telling me how they’re the perfect size and how much he wants to suck on my nipples, feel them harden and yeah, use his teeth and he’s asking if I’d mind and I’m telling him no—”

Wesley sighs and brings the flat of his hand sweeping in an arc that ends between her legs, the sharp sound of the slap diffused by the soft, wet skin it meets. “Do I need to tell you how you earned that?” he asked, with a thread of annoyance that makes her smirk inside, where even he can’t see it.

“No, Wes. You’re holding my ankles and pulling them apart, telling me how wet I am, how much you want to taste me, touch me, and you’re both telling me that, but you don’t do it and I’m starting
to struggle, starting to beg. You look at each other, and it’s like you’ve planned all this, and you’re both smiling. Then Rupert reaches down, unzips himself, gets out his cock, and he’s hard, so very fucking hard, just like you are now, Wes, isn’t that right?”

“You know it is,” he says indifferently. “Carry on, Faith. I’m sure this is going to get interesting soon.”

“Oh, you bet it fucking is, Wes. Because you roll me over onto my front, still lying across your laps, so I can be the one doing the tasting, and I want to, I really do. I’ve got my hands free so I can hold him in place—and his cock jumps when I touch it and he’s already wet on top, so I start with that, cleaning him up and swirling the tip of my tongue around and around until he’s making these little gasping sounds—“ She can hear his swift intake of breath and that last slap’s left her cunt throbbing and she’s not sure she can think and talk if he does it again, so she hurries on—

“You push me, lift my hips, so my ass is sticking up in the air and I wish you were going to fuck me, push your fingers in my cunt, up my ass, but I know you won’t, not yet, and I have to pull away from Rupert—did I mention how he tasted so good I just couldn’t help it, and I had to take him in as deep as he’d go?—but I know you’re gonna spank me, Wes and I can’t risk biting him, so I go back to licking him, and when your hand lands on me and I whimper I hear him say, ‘Good Lord,’ in this quiet voice and I swear I can see his cock get harder still, because he likes it, likes watching you spank me—

“And then he stops you, reaches out his hand and touches you, says your name, and I’m crying and he’s made it stop, and I don’t know if I’m mad at him or grateful, but he wants me to suck him, suck his cock again, so you have to stop, Wesley. Have to watch me, and you do, shifting closer to him so you can see my face, tucking my hair behind my ear so you don’t miss a thing—”

She’s squirming now and she can’t stop. “Touch me, Wes,” she begs. “I need it—”

His hand comes down hard across her breast and he grazes her nipple with the back of his hand while she’s still absorbing the jolt of welcome pain.

“Well?” he says harshly.

She turns blind eyes toward him. “Thank you, Wesley,”

He reaches out, a rough caress she’s sure he didn’t plan, curling his fingers around the curve of her jutting hipbone. “You haven’t finished.”

And it’s so close to a question that she wonders if he wants her to end this, but she’s not going to use her word, not for this—

“And his hand’s stroking my hair and he’s saying my name, telling me he—”

“And I’m lifting you off him, Faith,” he says, “because I’m not pleased with your eagerness, not pleased at all by how wanton you must appear. I’m sure Rupert agrees with me that your lack of decorum needs addressing.” There’s a dark satisfaction in his voice as he takes control of the story. “And we decide that you should sit across from us in a wide, low chair, with your legs hooked over the arms, so you’re open to us, utterly and completely. On display, my sweet, shocking Olympia.”

His fingernails scratch lightly over her inner thigh, moving upwards, a maddening tickle she knows isn’t going to go anywhere near where she wants it to. “Just as you are now for me.”

And she is. She can feel the slow trickle of wet heat between her legs, her body readying itself to be fucked, and the fact that like this she can’t hide that, can’t pretend, just makes her arousal deepen.
“We might watch you for a while, Faith, telling you to touch yourself, lift those rounded, perfect tits, pluck at your nipples until they’re so tender you’re making the most delightfully plaintive sounds of pain, but we keep telling you to do it and you’re trying so hard to be good for me—”

“For both of you,” she says with all the clarity she can muster. “Isn’t that right, Wes?”

And he’s so pissed at that, she can tell by the annoyed grunt and the way his hand leaves her, but he can’t really argue, now can he?

“You can’t resist me for long, though, Wes,” she continues, snatching back the reins. “Not enough to just watch me, not when you could be touching me, feeling how hot I am, how much I want you. So you come to me, both of you, and you’re kneeling between my legs, and he’s crouched beside me, and you’re both doing all the things you said you would.”

She’s talking rapidly now, the pictures in her head cascading in an endless loop, her fingers clutching at empty air. “So fucking good, Wes—got him kissing me, hard kisses, all tongue and teeth, and I push his head down to my tits and he’s holding them, cupped in his hands, totally going to town on them with his mouth, and he knows they’re kinda tender, but he’s like you, that just makes him hotter so—”

The bed creaks as he moves between her legs, running his spread fingers up her inner thighs until his thumbs are digging into the skin on either side of her cunt, his fingers caressing her smooth mound. “I’m starting to feel neglected again, Faith,” he purrs. “Perhaps I can give you some incentive to include me in this? Tell me what I’m doing as I kneel in front of you. I can’t think I’m happy to just look at your wet, hot, little cunt, not when I could be -?”

“You’re—oh you’re touching my clit,” she says, gasping as he does just that and a white-hot flicker races over her skin. “Light little touches, because you know I’m gonna want more and you like it when I beg—”

“I love it when you beg,” he corrects her absently. “The triumph of hope over expectation.”

Whatever.

“But you can see me, how I need more than that—”

“Yes, I can,” he murmurs. “I can see perfectly well—all these intricate folds of flesh, flushed and swollen. You look ripe, Faith. So ready.”

“And you want to know the next moan, the next whimper’s because of you, not what Rupert’s doing, so you shove your fingers in me, two, no, three—”

“Keep talking or I’ll stop,” he says, driving three fingers into her with a ruthless twist of his wrist that turns her careful instructions into babbling.

“Wes—oh God—harder, you—you don’t stop and you’re staring up at me and I’m looking over his head at you and then you lean forward and I feel your mouth—on me—it’s—you’re—”

“Oh, that really won’t do at all,” he says, tugging his fingers out of her, although she does get one brief fervent press of his lips against her clit—which doesn’t help calm her down at all. “Perhaps I should continue?” She peers through the layer of silk and watches him kneel back, his hands resting on his knees. She can see the jut of his cock and her tongue comes out to touch nervously at her dry lips.

“You’re so perilously close to coming that it counts as a slip, I’m afraid. The fine tremors racing
through your body, the noises you're making all give you away, and—well, we simply can't allow something that flagrant to go unpunished. So we move away from you again and although Rupert's cock is still out, and the poor man's so very hard, his hand passing over it in restless, eager strokes, we ignore you for a while, finish our drinks, while you pout and your eyes fill with tears I've forbidden you to spill.

And her eyes are prickling now but she blinks them clear, listening, catching every word.

“Then I beckon you over, make you kneel, hands behind your back, in front of Rupert, who's waited so long, and he wants your mouth on him again, so I allow that, but only for a moment. Then you feel my hand in your hair, pulling you off him and you turn to look at me, questioningly, so I slip my hand around the back of your neck—do you know how you go still when I do that, how utterly compliant you feel in that moment?—and hold you, so no matter how much he wants it on him, your mouth's an inch away from his cock.

“Then I nod at him and watch as he works himself, that strong hand of his so tight around his cock, and he's panting now, hoarse gasps because his eyes are on you and your lips are parted, tongue sweeping over them, and I take his hand in mine so we're linked that much at least, all of us, as he comes, feel his fingers clench around mine, feel you shudder as his come paints your lips, your face—"

The scarf across her eyes is torn away and she stares up into his furious face, blue eyes blazing, lips thin. “But he doesn't get to come in you, Faith, not when I haven't, not when you haven't touched me once—he doesn't ever—” He kisses her then and it's a clumsy, ferocious kiss and she can feel his heart hammering against her.

But when he lifts his head and moves so that his cock's rubbing against her mound, in the slick cleft where her clit's throbbing insistently, his voice is like ice. “And perhaps the next time you're tempted to flirt, you'll remember that you're mine, Faith and I don't fucking share—”

“Not something I'm gonna forget anytime soon, Wes. Now, are you gonna fuck me or talk my fucking ear off?” she hisses, because if he wants a pushy bottom he's going to get one and then some. She’s trying in vain to angle her hips to take advantage of the slow drag of the tip of his cock against her clit, but he answers her impertinence by going completely still. “Rewards need to be earned, Faith, and you've done nothing but push the limits of my good will all evening.”

“Yeah, but it's not like you didn't get off on that. You can't deny how hard it got you. God, I love it when you almost lose it, Wes, you know I do,” she adds, breathlessly and more than a little frustrated.

She's left with a sinking feeling of emptiness as he slips out of her with deliberate, agonizing slowness. He rocks back on his heels—roundly ignoring her tiny, furious gasp—and tuts coldly under his breath. “Oh, Faith,” he sighs wearily, as though his infinite patience has been tested for the last time. “You seem to think that my displeasure with you isn’t real, but it is.”

Her mouth twists into one of those cruel little smiles he seems to have perfected and she manages to grit out, “Yeah, I think I got how real it was when you pinned me up against the wall in the elevator. And, oh yeah, practically fucked me in the cab. We’re running out of time, and I really need you to—"

He looks a little startled. “And are you in a position to issue ultimatums, Faith? It certainly doesn’t look that way from here. Although I can’t say I’m not enjoying the view.”

She doesn’t even try to buck against the silk holding her down, keeping her open. Just says, calmly,
coolly, “No. You’re right. I’m not. But I’m leaving in the morning and I’m tired of waiting. Just this once, Wes, please, don’t make me wait. Please, don’t.”

She stops mid-sentence not because she’s gone too far—although she has—but because of the look on his face—as though she’s struck him, or like he’s snapped out of whatever trance he’s been in. He looks diminished, and not a little sad. His fingers brush lightly alongside her cheek.

“Tell me that I give you what you need, Faith. Tell me—”

“Is that what this is about, Wes? Because, really, how could you even think—? You do, always. You know that, don’t you?” She makes an executive decision to change tacks, going from plaintive to flippant on a dime. “And right now I just want one thing from you, you charmingly single-minded bastard…”

“Ah, we’re at the name-calling portion of the evening.” The veneer of control is back, and she practically sighs with relief. She can’t be the one keeping things together—it’s altogether too much of a burden.

She gives him what he wants, plays up to him. “Might be a wicked epic two-parter if you keep me tied up and un-fucked for much longer.”

“Oh really?” he asks. Is that an eyebrow arch she sees? She’s going to get back at him, she really is.

“Yeah. Gonna give you everything in the book, Wes. Real loud, too, so your proper, upper-fucking-crusty neighbors can hear what a cold-hearted sadist they’ve got living next door. ‘It’s always the quiet ones,’ they’ll whisper, and…”

“Faith.” God, that steely voice of his will cut through just about anything she can dish out. “Once you’re through being so charmingly immature, I daresay I might fuck you. But your very impertinence deserves some sort of response. What should that be, Faith? You’ve already enjoyed the hairbrush—I’m not going to spank you again with it so soon. Would you like the flat of my palm instead? Something subtle like that?”

He sounds so casual, like he’s asking her what she’d like in her coffee, but she knows damn well he’s just toying with her. She’s absolutely determined that she’s not going to beg for his cock, no matter how much he pushes her.

“Want your hands on me, Wes. Now.” The last word comes out as a feral-sounding growl, and Wes smiles.

“Very well.” He starts to move slowly toward her with such controlled, feline grace that she lifts her head to watch him appreciatively.

“You have a kind of …elegance, you know? Anyone ever tell you that?”

“Shh, Faith. Don’t make me gag you. Or add yet another forbidden word to the contract.” He sounds annoyed but she can tell from the gleam in his eyes that he’s amused.

“We’re so not even going there, Wes. Not tonight.”

“No,” he whispers as he kneels down, so close she can feel the gentle exhalation of his breath against her neck. “Not tonight.” He leans across her, kissing her forehead with such chaste sincerity that she’s taken aback. Then he kisses each cheek, reverently, in quick succession, like he’s paying her a tribute. And, finally, her lips, but the chasteness is gone now, replaced by the hunger she
knows he’s been holding back, by everything he doesn’t need to say to her. All his love, all the neediness he hides under that carefully composed exterior, all of it is there as he tips her chin up so he can kiss her properly. One hand strays between her legs, fingers ghosting around her clit with maddening restraint. All she wants is to hold onto him fiercely and not let go, but she can’t. So she kisses him back with everything she has.

“Untie me, Wes, please,” she murmurs.

“You’re impossible, Faith. Is that why I love you so very, very much?” He sounds breathless, awed.

“Is that a no?” She tries to be flip, but she can’t keep the shakiness from her voice, because his fingers are doing marvelous things to her. The room around her is starting to grow indistinct; that remorseless, throbbing heat between her legs is all that matters.

He doesn’t answer, just continues trailing kisses down her body, his fingers slipping deeper into her cunt all the while. “Shh,” he whispers again, kissing the flat of her belly, moving closer to her pussy.

“Yes,” she hisses, so ready to come she can’t stand it anymore. Every muscle she has is strained with the effort. Wes just ignores her discomfiture, taking his sweet time to lower his head down between her legs. He presses another lingering, wet kiss to her poor clit, which sends a shudder through her. “God,” she practically growls, sounding slightly desperate. But she knows that’s hardly going to gain his sympathy. He grips her thigh with one hand to still her as his tongue thrusts inside her.

She’ll never quite get used to the intense attentiveness he shows her cunt, the voraciousness with which he goes down on her. It’s overwhelming, and it certainly is now, when she’s so very close.

Which is why she's nearly crying and screaming again when he starts to slow down, until he's just lapping at her with long, slow strokes. And then just grazing his fingers up and down her thighs.

“Why...why are you stopping? Don’t stop,” she gasps.

“I need to think, Faith. Do be quiet for a moment,” he snaps, and she flinches at the vehemence of his words. He must have realized his tone, though, because he returns to tracing his fingers along her flesh before he dips his tongue into her again, not fucking her with it as before, but just being a damn tease, and she can feel the first burgeoning waves of her climax stretch out long and thin and then dissipate in her groan of frustration.

“Do you think I'm being cruel, Faith, making you wait like this?”

“Yes,” she hisses. “You fucking bastard.”

“Yes, yes, Faith—I know all about that charming side of my personality. But I believe you'll be thanking me shortly—you'll scream just as you promised—loud enough to disturb the neighbors.”

He slides down the bed between her legs, untying her ankles. “As much as I like keeping you restrained this way, I require a different view now.”

As soon as he's freed her legs, he makes quick work of the knots holding her arms splayed out and before she can shake the blood back into her fingers, he's pushing her over roughly.

“Hands and knees, Faith,” he barks at her, and it's a struggle to pull herself up into the position after being left weak-limbed and light-headed and on the verge of coming.

“That's better,” he sighs, settling in on his knees between her legs, rubbing the warm center of his palm in long, lazy circles around each ass cheek. “I just can’t bear the thought of not seeing as much
of your lovely arse as possible before you leave me tomorrow.”

And when she feels that old, familiar displacement of cool air before he smacks her still-tender ass—one, twice, five, ten times—she's transported—back to when all she lived for was this. The simple act of his hand striking her ass over and over as they teased out their darkest demons and but then foolishly, naively shoved them aside. That was before they really and truly understood it all, understood that this was what they were, this was what they could continue to be and still end up with love—even after plumbing the depths of two lifetimes of heartache and then dragging all that pain to the surface. This is what has saved them both, and she knows he's just as grateful for that discovery as she is.

And in the tingling aftermath of those strokes of his hand against her ass, he pets her tattoo, his usually soft, warm fingertips blistering hot against that tender patch of skin. “We really don't know any other way, do we, Faith?” And before she can squeak out an answer, he pushes down on the center of the tattoo that covers the small of her back—sending her crashing to the mattress on her elbows. Her back arches, her ass springs up and she's pulled wide open—and he holds her there even though she wouldn't dream of moving so much as a centimeter at that moment.

There's a fleeting moment that cool air flows across her wet and aching cunt before the head of his cock is bumping against her, the odd angle making entry harder than usual, and she screams—yeah, really honestly lets out a wall-shaking wail when he shoves himself inside her roughly. And she's so tight, so very tight, that he can hardly thrust against her—which is probably for the best because even the slightest movement makes her feel as if she might pass out, come instantly, or both at any moment.

Bracing his hands against her ass for leverage, he pushes her down harder into the mattress to open her up a little farther, but to no avail, they're trapped this way, in a sort of extended state of concurrent pre-orgasmic bliss until she tilts her hips back just the tiniest bit and he lets out a long, low groan that's somehow escaping from somewhere deep and dark inside him and sneaking out between his clenched teeth, his tightly-locked jaw.

And in the split second after the sound dissipates, his hands are smacking against each ass cheek over and over and over until he manages to jolt her just the tiny bit more open and his frustrated thrusts recoil from an excess of inertia as he hammers into her cunt, cock pistoning harder and deeper with each thrust, leaving her groaning into the mattress.

“Touch yourself now, Faith. You can reach that insistent clit of yours.” And it's so easy to obey because it's not a question but an order, and without even having to think about it, her hand snakes awkwardly under her belly until she reaches her clit, throbbing and raw and tender to the touch. But she's so wet, she only has to flick her finger up the tiniest bit to soothe it with a smear of the commingled juices that are flowing out of her cunt, and she can't help but give a little whimper as her fingers circle around her clit—because she's thrown right back to that spot—right when she was about to come a handful of minutes before. Only it's as if there's a small neutron bomb going off now that she's rubbing her clit furiously in time with his thrusts, with each slap on her ass. And yeah, there's a little part of her brain that's wishing that she could lock eyes with him, that he were pinning her down and holding her thighs open. But there is something to be said for being held face down to the mattress by strong one hand as he alternately slaps and fucks the living daylights out of her.

And he certainly was right, it's not long before she's screaming his name and her voice echoes out of the highest corners of the ceiling, his hands now both hanging on tightly to her hipbones as the momentum of his orgasm sends him slamming into her as she comes once, then again, all in a blur with him as he presses his way deep inside, jerking against her thighs for a few long moments before he's finally still. Letting out a long ragged sigh, he leans heavily on to the backs of her legs as her
quivering cunt holds tight to his cock. It's not the most comfortable position in the world, but God, she wishes she could just stay that way for as long as possible.

And it seems like hours have passed when she finally lets out a tiny whimper of discomfort as her back is starting to ache. When he finally slides out, he wraps his arms around her, pulling her down off her hands and knees and cradling her so she's nestled against him—and it's as comforting as always. Still breathing hard, she gives him this slow, exhausted smile. “You’re a sick fuck, Wes.”

He regards her coolly. “I believe you’ve said as much before.”

“Yeah, well, you always surprise me, that’s all.”

His head drops to her breast, his tongue darting out to circle her nipple. “And I would say that feeling is entirely mutual, my beautiful girl.”

He lets her sleep for a little while with his spunk still inside her, wet cock twitching between her legs, hands clutched possessively round her breasts, but she's barely closed her eyes before he's snatching her away from dreams, rolling her into her back so he can gaze down at her with a tender gleam in his eyes.

“I wasn't asleep,” she mumbles and then ruins that little lie with a bigass yawn.

“Yes you were,” he grins, and like he can't stop himself his hands are back on her breasts, cupping their weight, thumbs grazing over her nipples and although she's had two monster orgasms she's already arching up into his touch. “You like that, don't you? Love me touching your beautiful tits?”

“Love you touching me anywhere,” she says and of course he's trailing his hands away because it's what he does.

“And I love it too,” he says, tucking his hands behind his back as he stares down at her. “But I love to look at you too, Faith. Show me.”

She's already parting her legs for him, the last vestiges of tiredness disappearing as she feels the sharp throb of desire start to settle in her tummy and what the hell, now it's her turn to play the indulgent card. “Want me to make myself come, Wes?”

“Forgotten how to bring yourself off?” he snorts, settling on his stomach between her spread thighs. “I don't imagine that day will ever arrive. Maybe you'd like to try again, Faith?”

She reaches down so she can ruffle his hair because he's exasperating sometimes. He really fucking is. “Okay,” she agrees equably, wriggling a little as he blows gently on her come-soaked folds. “Want me to make myself come, Wes?”

“Always so imperious,” he sighs, another gust of air hitting her pussy and she can see the change in him, how his face goes from dreamy to resolute in the blink of an eye. “What I'd really like you to do, Faith is to stop prevaricating and get your fingers on that tender clit. Just your index finger for now. I want you to rub it softly, like that. That's very good.”
She's so wet that her finger keeps slipping off the mark and she knows that she's going to have to build up to coming, a long, slow burn. “I want you to thrust two of your fingers inside your tight, little cunt. Hard,” he suddenly barks, snapping her out of her reverie and they make a pleased noise as her hips lift off the bed.

“Talk to me,” she moans, nudging his shoulder with her knee and she can feel him smiling against her skin as he presses a kiss against her thigh.

“Three fingers, Faith,” he purrs. “Maybe we'll work up to four in a minute. You're so hungry for it tonight, aren't you? And in answer to your little request, I have so many games for us to play. I want to see another woman use her mouth on you, fuck you with her tongue while I tell her exactly what to do. I want to have you in cuffs, bent over my office desk while I fuck you in the arse. I want to use those delightful clamps on your clit and you know that I will, Faith and that you'll love it. You'll coast the space between pleasure and pain and you'll beg me to hurt you, won't you?”

“Yes! Yes.” She groans, head thrashing from side to side, heels digging into the mattress.

“You're not to come, Faith, not for a long time,” he hisses, pulling her hand away and staring at the juices clinging to her fingers. “Suck on them.”

“Meant to be fucking myself so I should get to say when I come.” And she knows that he's not going to let her and she's going to let him not let her. It's how they play this, so she's not surprised when he slaps her flank hard enough to sting and glares at her.

“I said suck on them,” he repeats icily and she's just snaking out her tongue, making her fingers more messy as she tastes herself and him before she obeys the challenging quirk of his eyebrow and sucks them into her mouth, just like they're his cock. “Of course, no recounting of our past triumphs would be complete without a guest appearance from our mutual friend,” he adds with a sly little smile. “I am going to miss the little chap while you're away.”

She flops back on the pillows, fingers now squeaky clean, and folds her arms. “Mr. Bunny is sleeping, Wes,” she says primly. “He's got a long day ahead of him tomorrow with the flight and all.”

“Amusing as it is to give it a personality, Faith, I should remind you that Mr. Bunny is a vibrator and I'm going to take great delight in watching you fuck yourself with it and if you perform… adequately, I might even let you come.”

He's already uncoiling from the bed and she grabs onto his arm. “Rather you fuck me, Wes,” she begs, hauling herself up she can press against him, hand skittering down the clenched muscles of his stomach so she can curl around his cock, which is starting to perk up no end. His fingers enclose hers and she looks up at him, suspicion flaring as she sees that devious little smile flicker across his face for a second before he schools his features into this shaky approximation of stern as he firmly removes her hand.

“What now, Wes?” she asks him warily. “You're totally plotting something.”

“I don't plot, Faith, I devise,” he says grandly. “I devise these dark tableaux with you in the starring role and you were adamant before that you wanted to know my favorite of all the depraved acts I've visited on your willing flesh. Would you still like to know?”

She nods frantically because there's been so many and she can't even slow down the slideshow of images; his wet-tipped cock twitching against her lip, her hands clenched into the sheets, his hands stroking the rosy red blush of her ass after he's spanked her. And the soundtrack of “fuck” and
“cunt” and “bastard” and “let me come, please let me come, I'll do anything if you let me come.”

“I thought you might.” He holds out his hand so he can help her off the bed. “Go and stand facing the wall, eyes shut, and you're not to turn around until I tell you.”

As commands go it's as specific as it's vague, but good things come to girls who obey. She knows that by now. Sure as hell don't come to those who wait. And she's already trotting in the direction that he's pointing to, swinging her ass as she goes and not giving into the temptation to see if he's left her with a leaving present of his fingermarks pressed into her cheeks, ready to blossom into bruises.

“Good, that's very good, Faith,” he says and he sounds pleased enough that she reckons he'll let her come in, say, half an hour if he's feeling generous.

She doesn't know what he's up to but she hears the bedside drawer get opened, then one of the drawers of the bureau and finally the sound of something heavy being dragged across the carpet. She's getting the tingles now. Or, like, more of them: this curious combination of excitement and anticipation and this dark desire which is a close cousin to fear.

“You can turn around now, Faith,” he says from the opposite corner of the room and she whirls round so fast that she almost falls over. He's sitting in the over-stuffed easy chair, the big cheval glass pushed to one side and on the end table next to him is a bottle of lube and in all his purple, plastic glory, Mr. Bunny. “My two favorite scenarios, Faith,” he reminds her with a look that's purely amoral. “Can you guess what they are?”

She smiles triumphantly and brushes the hair back from her face so he can see the “don't fuck with me, unless you're gonna fuck me” look in her eyes. “So, Wes, if I guess right, do I get a reward... I haven't finished! And is that reward going to involve fucking me until I come?”

“Oh, I'm sure we can come to some mutually beneficial arrangement,” he drawls and he beckons her closer with a crook of one long finger and she already knows where it's going to go, how it's going to make her scream.

She settles herself down on his lap, relishing the feel of his rigid cock settling into her slick folds and winds her arms round his neck, breasts bobbing against his chest. “You fucked my ass at the same time as you fucked me with Mr.... my vibrator,” she amends and he chuckles and bends down to gift one nipple with a slow suck of his mouth. “And you fucked me in your bathroom, in front of the mirror, so I could see.”

“Perfect recall,” he compliments and then his hand is sliding down her back, fingers spanned against the words etched there and his thumb just pressing into the cleft of her ass. “But you can't have your reward until you tell me exactly what I'm going to do to you to achieve it.”

It's hard to talk because she's suddenly paralyzed with toe-curling, skin-shivering, nipple-hardening waves of lust. “You're going to fuck my ass,” she chokes out, squirming against the dark promise of his cock. “And you're going to fuck me with Mr. Bunny and you're going to let me watch.”

“Such a clever girl.” His hands tangle in her hair, not gentle as he pulls her down for this demanding, insistent kiss and when she's free of his hungry mouth, gulping air in, he gives her another of those disconcerting smiles. “Pick up the lube, Faith and get me ready.”

By the time she's standing in front of him, bent over, hands clutched tight on her knees, his fingers are dripping with a mixture of the lube and her juices because he can't seem to resist sending them knuckle deep into her cunt.
And then the waiting's over because he's pressing the tip of one finger against her puckered hole, pushing it in slowly while she encourages him with this long whimper that seems to last an eternity, thrusting her hips against the pressure because she wants his cock as fast as she can get it and she can't help the growl of satisfaction because now there's two fingers and he's so very pleased with her.

“That's my beautiful girl,” he sighs. “So relaxed, so ready to be fucked in the arse.”

She's not even waiting to be told, but shifting backward, straddling his legs and clamping her sticky hand around his cock, which she's already got lubed up and good to go. Then she's lowering herself down in a faster than the speed of light gulp and turning round to give him a grin. “Sorry, Wes, forgot it wasn't meant to go there,” she chirps, tightening those well-exercised Kegel muscles of hers around him before he can spit out dire warnings about her appalling behavior. Then she's lifting herself up, letting just the tip of him stay and staring at their reflection in the glass.

He leans forward so he can see too and then shockingly capitulates. “Oh, very well,” he agrees. “But only for a little while and you're absolutely not to come.”

She hasn't even got time to rest her feet on the floor so she can rise up and sink back down before his hands are tight round her waist and he's lifting her up and impaling her on his cock so blurringly fast, nudging that maddening little bump inside her every time so she's saying his name over and over again, getting louder, getting...

“You fucking bastard!” she howls, when she's belly down over his lap so quickly that the room is spinning wildly. “I want to come now.”

“And I want to give your arse a good, hard spanking for such flagrant disobedience so we find ourselves at an impasse,” he says pleasantly, just before he lifts his hand and there's no waiting, just a volley of slaps that make her shriek and kick her legs and want so desperately to be fucked.

“I love you. I want to come. I want you to fuck my ass,” she moans when he hauls her up upright, almost incoherent with the mess of emotion between her legs. “Please, Wes. I won't mess around anymore.”

“Good,” he states quietly, finger tracing the edges of her cunt. “Good, because one more trick like that and you can forget about coming at all. Is that clear, Faith?”

“Yes.” She slides down onto his cock slower than honey dripping out of a jar. Pausing every inch to grit her teeth and get used to the heavy velvet feel of him, letting the smooth, unhurried cadence of his voice (“that's good, Faith, you're all right, take your time, my darling little girl”) guide her. He feels huge and relentless and it's almost too much but when she thinks about stopping, about saying her word, she realizes that she'll die without this.

Her eyes droop shut and she's drugged with the heat even though little shivers are rippling over her and his hands stroke her arms as she gives a tiny, experimental shimmy and cries out at the wonder of it.

“I don't... Wes, I can't... help me,” she whispers and he's smoothing back the tangled fall of her hair so he can kiss the pounding pulse in her neck.
“Look in the mirror, Faith,” he orders her calmly. She's pursed tight around him and his beautiful fingers rest for a minute on her thigh before he circles her clit. “Look at my beautiful girl,” he murmurs. “Do you see how pretty she is?”

She wants to move now, grind against his knowing hand, watch his cock slip out of her just a fraction of an inch then press deep into her again. It's getting easier because the Faith in the mirror wants it so badly, enough that she lifts her head and shoots her an imploring look and Wes is lifting her up again so she can drape her legs over his and now her hand is feeling what her eyes could see, reaching to where they're joined and touching the over-sensitized flesh.

“Please…” the girl in the mirror mouths at her and she's reaching over, moaning quietly because his cock bumps inside her and it shouldn't ever feel so good and her hand fumbles for and finds the thick silicone of the vibrator.

“Good girl.” Wes' eyes meet hers in the glass and then they're both looking as she moves the blunt head of the vibrator to her entrance and teases just the tip of it inside her.

“Not gonna last much longer, Wes,” she warns and there's a frantic edge to her voice now which he tries to soothe away with tiny kisses and his fingers rubbing faster against her clit.

“I know, Faith. But I don't want you to come until it's inside your cunt. You can do that.”

It seems like they're both holding their collective breaths as she pushes the thick shaft into her cunt, fighting against the constriction of her channel because of the way his cock is twitching in her ass. “Last time… could you… when you switched it on, could you feel it against your dick?” she stammers, wriggling up so he's not so deep inside her and she can slide Mr. Bunny home.

He lets out this really weird hissing noise and then bites down hard on her neck, the tiny sting distracting her, making her squeak as she sinks back down on his cock. “Yes, I could feel it,” he tells her in a strained voice and she pauses to look at herself, both holes filled and it should be obscene, like a picture in one of the really gross porn mags that her Dad used to keep stashed away in the garage. But it doesn't.

“Looks hot,” she mutters to herself and then she takes a deep breath and flicks both switches on.

She goes from painfully aroused to coming in two seconds tops. Between Wes thrusting gently in her ass and the corkscrewing motion in her cunt and those fucking bunny ears pressing against her clit, she gives this ungodly wail and jerks like a kite in a stiff breeze, flailing wildly but managing to keep a relentless grip on the base of the vibrator, aiming it for the strip of skin that separates it from Wes' cock.

“Fuck,” he growls and his arms wrap tight round her and he manages a couple of half-hearted lunges before she feels the white-hot burst of him spilling inside her as she wrenches the vibrator out of her cunt and throws it as hard as she can across the room.

She can't do anything after that. Not anything that doesn't involve curling up on his lap and having him rock her tenderly from side to side, while he kisses the faint tracks of her tears away.

“We need to have a bath,” he says gravely when she's stopped shuddering from the aftershocks and she gives a tiny moan of protest.

“Can't move, Wes. Really, really can’t.”

“Nonsense. You don’t have to move if I do this,” he says and he's standing, scooping her up with him and walking toward the bathroom.
She still grumbles when she has to stand, propped against the sink, as he runs the bath but finally she's leaning back against his chest, in water so hot it's a couple of degrees short of ouchy and sipping the hot chocolate he's made her.

"Are you all right, Faith?" he asks her, one hand splayed out on her belly, the other rubbing concentric circles at the nape of her neck.

"Oh yeah. But this plan of yours to stay up all night? Don't think I can rise to the challenge, even if you can."

"I'll let you sleep for a couple of hours," he promises with this tiny, wry chuckle. "I'm feeling magnanimous and I'd hate for you to be too tired for another round with Mr. Bunny."

It takes a huge effort but she manages to turn her head enough that she can glare at him. "I think I just killed Mr. Bunny," she confesses with grim satisfaction. "And I don't think I can come again, like, ever."

"We'll see," he says, kissing the damp slope of her shoulder. "Did you have a good vacation?"

"Yeah, don't want it to ever end." And just like that, she's reminded that they're on a clock and this time tomorrow night she'll be alone and unable to sleep in her narrow, single bed.

"Don't think about it," he says softly. "Please, Faith... And we have weekends in Maryland to look forward to. I've heard that Chestertown is absolutely charming and there's Washington College..."

"Whatever," she says but she's too tired to really hit the beat on the last two syllables. "You're not gonna have time to be a history geek."

"But plenty of time to be a cold sadist?" he quotes back at her and she pats his hand.

"Counting on it, Wes." She shifts so she's tucked against him, water threatening to slosh over the sides, but this way she snuggle into the crook of his neck. "Gonna miss having baths with you and gonna miss you cooking me dinner, not gonna miss you trying to force me to eat gross vegetables," she mumbles in a sing-song voice and he laughs.

"Is that your only regret?"

"Well, it didn't snow and..." She sits bolt upright, elbow digging into his rib so he makes a pained little "oof" and narrows his eyes at her. "Hey! Hey, you never told me what you were saying before when you were being all sexy and foreign," she hisses, wagging her finger at him. "What were you saying?"

"I'm not telling you," he says loftily and throws in this really infuriating smile. "Maybe later."

"Won't be able to sleep until you do," she says and pouts.

"I don't think you're going to have any trouble on that score," he says, leaning back and shutting his eyes so he can't see the mournful expression that she's trying to work.

But after he's dried her and carried her to bed, letting her sprawl on top of him like his very own Faith patterned quilt, he falls asleep before she does.

He doesn't stay asleep though. She wakes fitfully every now and again to find his mouth softly sucking at her nipples or his fingers tracing the dampening flesh between her legs or his tongue lazily flickering over her clit and when she makes an inarticulate sound of dazed pleasure to let him
know she's awake, he stops and soothingly strokes whatever bit of skin he's nearest to.

“Ssssh,” he whispers. “Ssssh, go back to sleep, darling.”

The room’s still dark when she comes to with a start to find his fingers gently curving over her ass, tracing the pattern of bruises fading and those that have yet to appear, his cock hard against the small of her back and she rolls over so she can touch the sharp planes of his cheekbones.

“Love you, Wes. Love you so fucking much,” she rasps.

“I love you too,” he whispers, taking her hands in his. “I love you because I know no other way, but this, in which there is no I or you. So close that your hand on my chest, is my hand. So close that when you close your eyes, I fall asleep.”

In the dim light of the room and even though her eyes are starting to tear up she can still see him looking at her expectantly. “Not going back to sleep, Wes,” she says gruffly, because she doesn't want to ruin all the moment left by crying. “Don't want to waste the time.”

“My sweet girl.” He clears his throat. “Thank you, Faith.”

His fingers are already smoothing out the frown on her forehead. “What are you thanking me for?”

“For loving me,” he punctuates the words with a clinging kiss to her cheek. “For forgiving me.” And another. “For accepting me.” And another. “For wanting me.” And another. “For needing me.”

She stops the solemn vows with her mouth, kissing him as fiercely as she can, wondering if her kisses say as much to him as his words do to her and she decides that they can't even come close so she’s slithering over him, caressing the wet, hot length of him as she slowly guides him into her cunt.

“Don't want to come, Wes, just wanna be close to you,” she says, starting a slow, soft grind of her hips which kinda belies her good intentions.

He raises himself up on his elbows, the movement settling him deeper inside him and gives her one of those morning-bright, sweet like sugar smiles, which turns crooked when her tears start splashing down on to his chest.

“I can’t leave,” she cries, hair hanging over her wet cheeks. “Can’t leave you, Wes. Please, don’t make me go.”

“Faith,” he says helplessly, sitting up so he can take her in his arms and kiss the sobs out of her mouth, brushing his fingers over her sticky, wet face and she risks a choked little laugh because there’s gonna be snot soon and he’s not packing a hankie. “You’ll go and you’ll come back and I’ll be waiting for you. I love you.”

“You promise that you'll never stop loving me?” she begs and his hand flattens out over her heart.

“I promise,” he says, hugging her so tight that she can barely breathe. “I could never stop.”

“I couldn’t either,” she assures him frantically, clinging to him as he coaxes her into lying down, mewling when his cock pulls out of her. “Don’t...!”

“It's all right,” he murmurs, rolling her onto her side, arm snug around her waist, as his fingers glide along her leg and he slides his cock slowly inside her. “I'm back where I belong. Now go to sleep.”
Chapter One Hundred and Sixty-Nine

When she wakes next, it's morning. The room's suffused in a shifting light and she doesn't need to look at the clock to know they've moved from all the time in the world to a handful of hurried hours.

She buries her face in the pillow, pretending she's still asleep, but his hand strokes the hair back from her face and she hears him sigh.

“You've stopped making those rather endearing little snuffly noises, Faith, so I know you're awake.”

“No I'm not,” she mutters into the pillow, but it just sounds, well—like someone muttering into a pillow.

“Really, Faith, the longer you insist on sleeping the less time we have for...” His voice trails off as his fingers trace along the ridge of her spine until they reach her ass. He leaves his fingers splayed there meaningfully, but she's not taking the bait.

“Just five more minutes,” she grumbles, rolling away with her back to him and shoving her head under the pillow. Maybe if she just acts like it's never time to get up, it never will be.

“Faith, if I let you have five more minutes of sleep, you'll beg five more minutes off me for the next two hours and we won't have time for a proper good-bye.”

Throwing his arm around her, he pulls her in close so she can feel that his cock's hard. She's not anywhere near fully awake, but she can't help but lean sleepily into his caresses, defenseless against the potent combination of his fingers tweaking a nipple as he nuzzles her neck.

She reaches out with a clumsy hand to stroke the bony knob of his hipbone and then gives a tiny groan of surrender, turning over with a tired, little sigh and giving him her most wide-eyed look as he looms over her with an intently lascivious glint in his eyes.

“Mr. Wyndam-Pryce, I think that's totally inappropriate behavior for the workplace,” she gasps, arching up so the underside of his cock nuzzles against her belly. “Might have to report you to the Department of Labor for trying to take advantage of your employee.”

“I'll give you time and a half,” he offers, lowering his head to drag the flat of his tongue over one nipple, that's getting perkier by the second.

“Make it double time and give me Friday off and I'll think about it,” she giggles, trying to pull him down for a proper kiss.

“I'll even bring you one of those sickeningly sweet caramel lattés you love so much,” he whispers insinuatingly, before finally kissing her.

“I daresay you're trying to bribe me as well, counselor,” she manages to choke out when she finally comes up for air.

“I daresay you might be right. Can you be bought, my charmingly obstreperous, willful girl?” The fact that his fingers are swirling gently around her clit might be holding some sway in her decision too. Yeah, maybe.

She tilts her head dramatically for effect, thinking about it for a second. “Think so, Mr. W-P. I appear to be—how might you put it?” She giggles and tries to school her features into something approaching stern. “Eminently corruptible.”
“Oh really? Shall I put that to the test, Faith?” And he looks so fucking serious she can’t help but giggle again. Then she just wraps her arms around him and whispers in his ear, “Not now, Wes. Got more important things to do, don’t we?”

He nods, sinking against her again so that as they kiss she can feel the solid, comforting weight of him against her, the light scatter of hair on his chest tickling her breasts, his thigh shifting between her legs, making her wince as a dozen memories of the night before surface.

He notices that. Of course he does.

“Well?” he murmurs, lifting up enough to be able to give her a wickedly teasing grin. “Did I fulfill my promise? Are you going to have a terribly uncomfortable flight home?”

“Yeah,” she says, meeting his gaze squarely. “Going to want to spend it all standing up, the way my ass feels, but you know I don’t mind.” She drags her nails slowly down his back, watching his lips tighten as he bites back a moan. “Wouldn’t want it any other way, Wes.”

“Such a good girl,” he says. “Always ready with the right answer.”


His hand slips between them, skittering over her belly and down between her legs. “And if I ask you if you’re ready for me to fuck you, what would you say then?”

She knows she’s wet, hell, she’s been primed and ready all night, while he kissed her and caressed her in her sleep. “You’re about to find out the answer to that one,” she hisses as he walks his fingers over her damp pussy before easily slipping two fingers inside.

“Yes,” he draws with just a hint of a smile. “I do believe you are. Unfortunately, I can’t help but want to make you wait just a little longer this one last time.”

She can’t help but roll her eyes a bit at that. Then roll her eyes a lot at his insinuating little chuckle.

“Wes, we’re on a clock here,” she reminds him meaningfully, tightening round his fingers. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t make me wait.”

“Ah, but maybe I make you wait, because I love you,” he replies implacably, kissing the sulky line of her mouth. “Because then you pout and wriggle so delightfully.”

“If you don’t fuck me right now then I’m going to lie here and be all still and I’m not going to make a sound. I won’t!” she adds at his skeptical look and then, because she realizes she’s dangerously close to having her bluff well and truly called, she cuts to the chase and snakes her hand down so she can wrap it around his cock in an uncompromising grip. “Fuck me now, please.”

He carries on lazily thrusting his fingers in and out of her, never as deep as she wants him to go, never as fast, never as hard. “I’m still waiting for a pout and a wriggle, Faith, at the very least,” he teases.

“Oh yeah? Well, two can play that game, Wes,” she growls, doing her best to ignore the languid, deft motions of his fingers. She gently circles the head of his cock with two fingers, slicking it up, then lets her hand come to rest at the base. “You gonna fuck me? Or should I just keep going here? Wanna see you come undone, you know I do.”

“You’re pushing me, Faith.” His voice is low and there’s no humor there.
“Oh, come on, you love it.” She doesn’t wait for an answer, just redoubles her efforts, speeding up along the length of him.

He smiles slowly, a little cruelly. “I do, I suppose. Now, stop being such an incorrigible brat and come here.” He peels her fingers off his cock and places her hand resolutely on the small of his back. “Suppose I give in to your demands just this once, you greedy girl? Will you let it go to your head?”

“Nah, might let it go to yours, though. Now, you were saying?” She lifts her leg so he can slide inside her. She sighs, wrapping her legs around him and pulling him as close as she can.

There’s some residual soreness inside her cunt, no matter how slicked it is but it adds a welcome edge to the arousal building up with every slow, lazy thrust of his hips.

Slow thrusts that don’t seem to be speeding up at all.

“Wesley,” she groans, clinging onto him and giving him a belated, unplanned pout and, yeah, the involuntary squirm he gets when he pauses and lifts an innocently inquiring eyebrow probably counts as a wriggle. “You feel—good, yes you do, but God, you're killing me here!”

“Backseat driver,” he murmurs with a pained sigh and she’d give anything to know why, when he should be as disconsolate as she is, he’s in such a fucking good mood today. “Is this better?”

His hand reaches up and captures one wrist, pinning it to the bed, then the other. When both her hands are held in place he gives her ten—she counts them—swift, hard strokes, leaving her starting the spiral up—or was it down?—to a climax she feels she’s waited for, for long enough.

But ten aren’t enough to get her there and when he stops and goes back to the gentle rocking of his hips, looking totally fucking smug, she glares indignantly at him.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, Wes, I haven’t actually come yet, so you know.” She pauses, wriggling her wrists experimentally under his grasp, and he responds by pushing them harder into the mattress while giving her another few solid thrusts at the same time. And one or the other was kind of expected—but both at the same time leave her breathlessly struggling to get out the rest of the sentence.

“No, Faith, I don't know,” he says with a feral smile. “Whatever are you trying to say?”

“Don't stop,” she manages to finally get out, and she's seriously contemplating shoving him off her somehow and making her own damn coffee and waking up properly before they start in on anything else. “Was trying to tell you not to stop, and I swear if you do that again I'll...”

But the words are lost again as he does stop, the bastard, and then dips his head down, snagging one of her pert nipples between his teeth and sucking on it gently until she’s flexing her cunt around his cock, trying in vain to wriggle underneath him—anything to get him to start fucking her again.

“Wes,” she whimpers. “Please stop.”

His head springs up and he pins her with a mischievous look she'd give anything to be able to knock off his face. “Oh, so now you want me to stop.”

“No, that's not it at all,” she mutters grumpily. “Keep fucking me, and stop fucking with me you big jerk!”

“That isn't really an effective way to get what you want,” he explains patiently, treating her to
another series of shallow thrusts that makes her grit her teeth and growl at him. “Contradictions.” He rams into her deep and hard, brushing up against that twitchy bundle of nerves and pulling out before she's even had time to gasp. “Insults.” Another toe-curling slam-dunk inside her. “Petulance.” And this time when he slams inside her, she wraps herself tight round up, legs up round her waist, and man, he wanted wriggling. He's fucking going to get it.

“Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me,” she chants, heels pushing against his ass, so he gets the message.

“Oh, well, if you're going to be like that about it,” he shrugs and even that ophidian little move has her squirming and hissing.

“Wes, please, don't be mean,” she pleads, trying to break free of his tight grip so she can kiss her way to a fast, furious fuck just this once.

“Americans do seem to have this unfortunate hang-up with quantity over quality. Land of plenty and all that, I suppose,” he muses casually, ignoring her neatly, as though she hasn't said a word.

God, he was infuriating. “You are a fucking tease, Wes. You really are,” she rasps out, and before he can fling back a snappy retort she bites down roughly on his nipple. She doesn't wait for his gasp, just circles the responsive flesh slowly with her tongue, feeling the tiny shudder go through him, feeling it right down to the tip of his cock which is still deep inside her. “That get your mind back on the matters at hand? Hmm?” And she finally frees one hand as his grip slackens and brings it down on his ass, prompting a grunt from him as he thrusts up inside her.

“You are wonderfully direct, Faith, and I thank you for that,” he responds, breathlessly, as he starts fucking her in earnest now, releasing her pinioned wrists. No games, just want and need and nothing else to complicate it. She's still wrapped around him, and he around her, and it's something precious.

“Long as you don't ever take me for granted, Wes,” she whispers against the hollow of his throat. He stills against her momentarily, raising himself up so he can kiss her. “Never,” and when he looks at her with that intense, blue-eyed stare she thinks her heart might stop beating in her chest. He must see her starting to tear up again, because he cuts her off with a whispered, “Shh, shh,” and starts to thrust languidly against her again.

She barely manages to hold back the anguished wail that rises to her lips but she does. He'll just get off on that—not enough to reward her with what she wants, oh, no, but he'll love her despair that tells him so clearly how much she wants him, and even though she gets a not-so-secret kick out of gratifying all his little whims—mostly—right now her body's clamoring for something a little more selfish.

Like getting to come really, really soon and the hell with delayed gratification.

She draws on all her experience in being sneaky to get what she wants and relaxes completely, giving him a tremulous, pouting smile before allowing her eyes to flutter shut.

“I'm sorry, Wesley,” she murmurs dulcetly. “Shouldn't be trying to boss you around. You take your time.”

Her inner smile widens as she produces an artfully-stifled yawn that's perilously close to being real—fuck it, it is real given the scant hours of broken sleep she's had—and she peeks up at him through her lashes to see how he's dealing with the idea of her falling asleep mid-fuck.

“Oh, Faith,” he says sadly. “And I was, given the state of your arse, planning not to administer a
final, doubtlessly condign punishment. But you give me no choice.”

Her eyes snap open at that. “I am kinda tender, Wes,” she pleads, although she’s already jumping four steps ahead to Wes getting so turned on by spanking her that she finally gets that fast, furious fuck she’s been waiting for.

“I know,” he says with a glint in his eye. “I made sure of that last night, remember? But I think perhaps I should just see for myself.” He pulls out of her completely and fuck, his cock's so hard she doesn't know how he's been managing to play this endless waiting game with her. “Roll over, Faith.”

With an infuriated hiss she flounces onto her stomach, bringing her hands up under her chin and making her body a long, stiff exclamation point of sheer frustration.

“Oh, that won't do at all,” he chides her. “Relax, please—”

And if his words didn't have her automatically obeying him, the slow stroke of his warm, spread hand along the curve of her spine, to the back of her neck, would have done the trick.

She melts, pliant and compliant, and sighs out a surrender to the inevitable that is Wesley.

“I mean it this time,” she says. “Not like you ever listen when I beg—”

“I assure you I listen with close attention.”

“Never give me what I ask for,” she amends, trying not to let herself start to stiffen up again. “So go ahead; make me wait, make me suffer.”

“My poor, sweet darling,” he purrs. “I'm not going to make you wait any longer at all.”

“You're not?” she asks, lifting her head and trying to catch a glimpse of him.

“No. From what I can see of it, although it's certainly a little bruised here—and here—” His fingers press down lightly on the spot that took the brunt of his assault with the hairbrush and she gives an unfeigned ouch that has him chuckling softly. “I severely miscalculated and even if you hadn't been so very bossy, I would have had to administer a few more spanks to send you home in a proper state.”

Her hips are lifted and she feels a familiar tingle in her clit as he wedges a pillow under them, raising her ass in the air.

“Yes, she's going to come, but will he notice if it's twice?

Well, he’s nothing if not observant, she thinks ruefully. But then, she doesn’t much care if he notices
or not. Not like he's going to spank her some more. Well, eventually, yeah, but that was a given.

She's determined to come soon, whether she's got Wes' express permission or not. In that respect, the addition of the pillow is wonderfully helpful, in that it gives her clit something to rub against surreptitiously while he rains blows down on her already-tenderized ass. At least he's alternating flat, open-palmed swats with gentle, massaging strokes that take some of the sting away.

Her skin is so tender that each lingering brush of his fingers over her skin ignites this spark, these little conflagrations, and she can't help letting out this needy little moan. He's so absorbed in what he's doing that he doesn't even notice that, nor does he see how she's bucking her hips ever-so-slightly against the welcome resistance of the pillow. God, she's practically humping the fucking thing—well, she's doing it delicately, but still. She's been on the edge of coming for so long that she's feverish, a little desperate, and she almost yelps out an agonized “finally!” when he raises his hand for one more blow and it comes to rest not on her poor, beleaguered ass, but between her legs. Instead she just arches against his hand and moans again.

“Are you ready, Faith?”

She smiles coyly at him, answering him only with the impertinent, upturned thrust of her ass and the heavy wetness between her legs.

“Was that an answer?”

“You leading the witness?” she asks, flippantly and possibly rhetorically. “You know what I want, Wes! God!” She hates how desperate she sounds.

He takes hold of her shoulders and carefully rolls her onto her back so she's facing him. She winces as her ass hits the sheets. He spreads her thighs wide open and guides his cock into her, ever-so-slowly, until she's almost crying out from the nervous, coiled-up tension. He's holding her there, legs parted, body exhausted, ass on fire (again), and here he is just taunting her with the hard promise of his cock.

“Fuck, Wes, please…” She's practically crying now. Through the haze of her welling tears, she can see he's smiling, just barely. But it's not one of his wicked smiles, his taunting smiles—no. It's melancholy and the sheer force of the love and adoration behind his gaze is so fucking intense she almost has to look away. Instead, she just blinks slowly, sending rivulets of tears splashing to her cheeks. She doesn't even try to stop them, because they're all she's got left. Words are gone, but she doesn't need to say anything either, not after he sweeps his thumb gently across each of her cheekbones and rubs the tears away.

“No tears now, my darling girl,” he whispers, voice cracking a little as he begins to slowly and gently thrust inside her. Those careful movements of his, which had driven her to frustration moments before begin to slowly bind up all her wild need, distilling and focusing it down to the simple contrapuntal thrust and shimmy of her hips that meets each of his languid strokes.

For all the times she's screamed his name or bucked wildly under the pressure of his hands holding her down, holding her open, holding her together—this, this moment distills each of those complex events down to the simplest denominator. It's fucking electric, the way they're joined together. A fleeting thought ripples through her mind and she realizes that practically every hair on her entire body is standing on end, quivering from the shared charge flowing between them. And it's not just where cock and cunt meet—it's everywhere they're touching, so that when his head drops to briefly lap at her nipples it's the beginning of the final spark that she knows will sends her careening over the edge.
She opens her mouth to moan, to say his name, but no sound emerges—and they're both silent. There's no babbled stream of fragmented words, of oaths, of promises of love; just the synchronized rasps of each ragged breath they share; the quiet conversation that’s passing between their eyes. And it almost seems a sacrilege to give that secret language a voice now.

But it's the final gentle upward tilt of her hips that triggers the near-nuclear energy that's built up as the hot pressure of his come finally dislodges the scream of pure pleasure that's caught in her throat. Their quiet, still moment shatters as their bodies slam together—hard, over and over, hips grinding and hands everywhere—before he slumps against her, completely spent, only able to nuzzle her neck with a soft peppering of kisses, and everything is still again.

She's having to struggle against the post-fuck urge to sleep and really? Not doing a very good job of it.

Out of her almost-shut eyes, she sees Wes frowning down at her. “We need to get up.”

“Hmmm,” she mumbles, to show willing.

“You haven't even started to pack, unless strewing most of your clothes over the bedroom floor constitutes a system that I didn't know about,” he muses, and she's grunting softly so he doesn't realize that she's sinking farther into the pillow, snuggling down but maybe he does because his hand which has been trailing slowly up and down her hair suddenly stills.

“Faith,” he says sharply. “I do hope you're not asleep when you have to be at the airport in just over two hours.”

“Not.” She opens one eye. “Think I can get a later flight?”

“I doubt it very much,” he says and she can tell he's wavering because he bites his lip for just one second before he’s gently tugging her up so she's slumped against him. “Because you're my favorite girl, I'll forgo the pleasure of washing you and let you have an extra fifteen minutes in bed while I shower.”

And she does love standing still under the hot spray while his strong hands soap her up and get her clean, get her wet but she loves the thought of those extra fifteen minutes in bed on sheets that smell like him. “You're my favorite too, Wes,” she mumbles, disentangling herself from his arms and wriggling down under the covers again.

She can hear him moving around in the bathroom and she's got his routine down so that she knows without being there, that right about now he's rinsing his toothbrush and tapping it twice on the side of the sink before squeezing out a neat blob of minty-freshness—only Wes could make toothpaste behave—and now, yeah, there's the double creak of the shower door opening and closing, followed by the hiss of the descending water because he always—makes her shiver to think of it—steps under the shower without letting it warm up first, using that first chill blast to wake him up.

By the time he comes out and starts to dress she's well on her way back to sleep and she hears him sigh as he disappears. If he comes back with coffee in, like, five minutes he might just find her still able to pry open her eyes, but six minutes and he's gonna be so out of luck, she thinks, snuggling down.

“Faith!”

No way has he had time to even fill the coffee pot so she ignores him.

“Faith, get up. Now.”
“Wes,” she says, using all her energy producing a whine that'll carry from the bedroom to the living room. “Coffee. Then I'll get up, I promise. Besides, it's cold.”

“There's a robe lying across the bottom of the bed,” he says, appearing in the doorway and giving her an espresso-strength glare that zings her awake. “Put it on and get your procrastinating, pretty arse into the shower.”

“Have to pee first,” she grumbles, sitting up and groping for the robe.

He rolls his eyes but has to give that a grudging nod of assent to that slight amendment to his down-to-the-last-detail plans for her. “Two minutes, Faith, then I want to hear the sound of you showering.”

She's just washing your hands and squinting at her puffy-eyed reflection in the mirror (note to self: Faithy, stop going to bed with your makeup on) when she looks up to see him watching her from the doorway.

“I look totally gross,” she moans, shoving her hands helplessly into her hair, then giving it up as a bad job.

“No you don't,” he contradicts her softly. “Well you look like you've been well fucked and you have, haven't you, my darling?”

She gives him a little bump and grind before stretching luxuriously. “Hmmm, got that right, Wes. Now where's my coffee and why the fuck have you got that shifty look on your face?”

It's true. There's this enigmatic smile playing around his lips but he just shakes his head. “I don't know what you're talking about,” he says with just a fraction of huff. “I want you in that shower in the next thirty seconds.”

“But coffee,” she whines and he silences her with one of his patented permafrost look which has her yanking open the door of the shower cubicle and scowling.

“Ten seconds now, Faith. And I want you out and dressed in ten minutes or well, you can forget about coffee and being able to sit down for the rest of the week.”

She breaks all world showering records and as she scrubs and soaps, she tries to work out what devious little scheme he's been working on as a fitting good-bye. As she tugs on her jeans and pokes around for a clean T-shirt, she's got it narrowed down to either going out for some carbo-riffic breakfast or, please God, not taking her to the airport but taking care of all her messy loose ends back in Florida so she never has to leave.

But when he comes back into the bedroom and finds her groping under the bed for her last pair of socks, he doesn't do anything, just stands there until he clears his throat and drawls, “You've got forty seven seconds to put your sneakers on, Faith.”

She manages it with three seconds to spare and she uses them up in glaring at him until he suddenly pulls out a black, silk scarf from the pocket of his jeans and holds it out to her. “I need to blindfold you,” he says as if it's a perfectly natural start to the day. Which, actually, when it comes to them, it pretty much is.

“Fine, Wes, just as long as you take it off before I get on that plane,” she admonishes, giggling when he swats her playfully on the ass by way of response to her question. “Hey!” she squeaks. “That's off-limits for the rest of this morning!”
“Are you questioning me, Faith?” He holds the scarf level and taut across her eyes and when he's standing so close, voice all wonderfully gruff and with that edge to it she loves so well, then no, she's sure as hell not questioning him.

“No, sir!” She swallows hard, wondering just what he's got in store for her in the next two hours before her cab shows up.

“Good,” he says satisfactorily, pulling the silk across her eyes and securing it tightly behind her head. “Now, do you trust me?”

She's really dying of curiosity now. “Of course, you know I do.”

“I've got one last surprise for you, my girl,” and his voice is low and insinuating and it certainly doesn't hurt that he leans in to place a lingering kiss to the back of her neck before taking her hand to lead her into the hallway. She tries to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other and not tripping over anything but of course he's careful and takes her on a perfect, uncorrupted path down the hall and out into the main room.

“You gonna show me the cool view, Wes? I love it and all, but I have to say, it's always kinda the same.”

“Always?”

“Well, 'cept for the whole day and night thing, yeah, mostly.”

He leads her to the window and places her hand on it. The glass is cold, ice-cold, and her instinct is to flinch away but he holds her there, linking his fingers with hers.

“I remember the first time I called you from this city,” he says. “I'd booked you into that rather dismal hotel and honestly I wasn't sure what was going to happen between us but I couldn't stop thinking about you—” He clears his throat. “It seems so long ago now.”

“Does,” she agrees, leaning back against him as the glass warms under their hands. “And, yeah, I remember you calling me. I was all snuggled down in bed and you were telling me about catching snowflakes on your tongue and a dog called Balto, and it sounded like you'd gone somewhere magical and left me behind. I wanted to be there with you so much, Wes.”

“Well, now you are, Faith. And you always will be because we belong together,” he says firmly, almost daring her to disagree.

“I know. Not going to argue with you about that but, like, why have you brought me over to the window when I can't see jackshit?” she asks him curiously. “It's kinda perverse, even for you.”

“It is, rather. Be patient,” he chides her and she even though she's blindfolded, she responds to the familiar movements of him helping her into her coat so she doesn't have to grope for the armholes like a total spaz. “That's better,” he says, doing up her buttons, then she hears the click of the lock and the heavy slide of the French doors as he takes her hand and helps her down the step onto the balcony.

“You're not going to dangle me off it by my ankles, are you, Wes?”

“One more feeble joke like that and I won't remove the blindfold,” he warns her so she has to purse her lips and he has to kiss them, lips soft against hers as she feels his fingers carefully unpicking the knot so it doesn't snag in her hair. She can't see anything but him and the blue of his eyes as the only point of color and everything's been faded out to monochrome.
“One last thing to give you,” he murmurs. “Look.” Then he turns her around so she can stare out at the city for one last time and she gasps in wonder at what’s laid out before her.

“Snow,” she breathes.

“Indeed, my darling girl,” he says, slipping behind her and folding her up in his arms, so they’re both looking out at the view. It looks as though there’s some giant hand in the sky gently dusting the entire park with a fine coating of powdered sugar, and it makes the bare branches of the trees look like sparkling lace against the gray sky.

“You really can order up anything, can’t you?” she laughs, sticking out her tongue so that a few flakes land on the tip. “Damn. Doesn’t taste like sugar at all. Totally misleading advertising.”

“It’s just frozen water, Faith—you didn’t actually think…”

She wriggles in his arms in annoyance, and he just squeezes her into an even tighter embrace. “Well, duh, no…but a girl can dream right? Considering the perfect timing, I thought this might be like, special snow or something.”

“I assure you it’s just the regular kind of snow, Faith. And yes, it’s pretty now, but you’re lucky, dearest—you won’t have to deal with slogging around the city in it tomorrow. Snow is never as pretty the second day.”

She elbows him in the ribs. “Hey, quit your bitching, Wes. This is like, supposed to be special and romantic and you’re totally sucking all the fun out!”

He widens his eyes. “I am? How dreadful of me. Let me see, how can I put the fun back in?”

He lets go of her, steps back and before she’s grasped what the hell he’s up to, he’s scooped up a handful of the snow, maybe an inch deep that’s lying on the balcony rail, and molded it into a ball that he throws at her.

It smacks into her chest and disintegrates, fine sparkles of snow flying up into her face and melting wetly as they meet her warm skin.

She’s gaping in outrage, lost for words, when the second one gets her high on the shoulder. “Wes, you’re dead!” she screeches, looking around for her own supply. “So very fucking dead.”

He’s laughing too hard to dodge her hurled snowballs but her first attempt falls apart mid-air and the second is about the size of a golf ball.

“He’s laughing too hard to dodge her hurled snowballs but her first attempt falls apart mid-air and the second is about the size of a golf ball.

“I think you need lessons, Faith,” he says, walking over to her as she pouts and gives up. “And slightly more snow. Shall I promise to take you skiing, where you can not only have a mountainsized heap to hurl, but the chance to put icy hands down the back of my neck, like this?”

She gets in one solid punch as his freezing fingers slide behind the collar of her coat, then he holds up his hands. “I’ll stop,” he says solemnly, the corners of his mouth twitching. “Well, that takes care of fun. What else was it you said it should be? Special and romantic?”

“Yeah,” she says, giving him a challenging look. “Really should be.”

His lips are quirked into a smile but there’s a serious, almost searing look in his eyes that unnerves her enough that she takes a step back.
“You okay, Wes?” she asks him uncertainly and he strokes her cheek with freezing fingers.

“I’m fine, just fine,” he assures her and now his gaze is nothing but tender. “I was just thinking of how to make this auspicious occasion romantic and special as ordered and I think I have just the thing.”

She waits expectantly and he takes her hands in his and she’s fighting back the giggles because he’s come over so damn earnest all of a sudden.

“Faith,” he says, his voice soft in the crisp, biting air. “Je t’aime. Now you say it back.”

“Je t’aime, Wesley,” she repeats obediently, and yeah his French is all sexy and stuff but she wasn’t really expecting an impromptu lesson.

“Je t’adore,” he purrs and gives her hands a little shake, when it’s her turn.

“Je t’adore.”

“Je t’embrasse toi,” he says, leaning forward and after she’s stumbled through the pronunciation, he smiles. “Thank you, Faith, I don’t mind if I do.” He kisses her right there, high up above the city, and she only has to share him with the faint sprinkle of snowflakes drifting gently down on them.

“Very sexy,” she decides and tries to pull in for another go but he’s pushing her gently away.

“Ma fille chérie et belle, veux-tu m’épouser?” he asks, cupping her face in his hands, and when she opens her mouth to parrot it back to him, he shakes his head. “I just asked you a question; I'd very much like you to give me an answer.”

She never paid any attention in French class, not ever. And she really doesn't know—word for word—that he’s said. Couldn’t break it down if he asked her. But she understands it on a different level—one that bypasses the brain and logic and makes her heart skip a beat. She must have an openmouthed look of stupefaction on her face because Wes looks at her expectantly and takes her hand gently. “I don't mean to put you on the spot, Faith, but—”

She laughs nervously, because she can't seem to form sentences just yet. She stammers out a “No, no, you're not, I just didn't expect... I didn’t—” Then she smacks him squarely in the chest. “The other day, Wes! Did you—?”

He wraps his arms around her. “I did. That was just the dry run.”

“Have I ever mentioned that you’re a sadistic bastard?”

“Practically every day, my darling girl.”

“Well, good. Wouldn’t want you to forget or anything.”

“I expect I won’t have a chance to.”

“You bet your ass.”

She gets a quirk of his eyebrow for that remark. “I’m still waiting for an answer. It's not going to be my ass that's on the line if I have to wait much longer.”

And it's at that moment it all kind of starts to sink in. Despite the teasing, this isn't just some game, this is serious. He's serious. He's fucking deadly serious. Her ability to bounce back with a snappy comeback vanishes—which is good, because—oh God, he's totally just asked her to marry him. The
enormity of it all hits her squarely in the gut and she's slamming through a whole array of emotions one after the other and it's making her a more than little woozy. But luckily he's there, holding her up, keeping her steady on her feet.

She clamps her hand around his forearm though, just to be on the safe side.

“You.” She sniffs. Her nose is starting to get cold—it's distracting her from the matter at hand, and she rubs it absentmindedly, looking past him, lost in thought. Well, not thought really. It's more like she's still internally freaking out, but none of that's made it to the surface yet. “You want to marry me,” she whispers, still not quite believing it.

“How many times must I ask you before you'll understand that I'm not kidding now, Faith?” he asks. Out of the corner of her eye she sees him going pale and he shrinks back from her grasp. She remembers the last time he put his heart out on the line like this wasn't exactly sunshine and roses and happy endings.

Her attention snaps back to him and she smiles, relieved to see that makes him look less anxious.

“You don't have to convince me of that, Wes. I know.” And she's the one that pulls him close this time, stands on tiptoe so she can whisper in his ear. Because the word, the little tiny word she wants to tell him, seems much, much too enormous to say any louder than that.

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