Excerpt

Misha came into his office riled up. The morning run and boxing session hadn’t released any pent-up energy. For a brief moment, he’d felt that connection to Raquelle when she let him bind her wrists. He had sensed that she felt the power of the rope when her body became lax. Maybe it was his imagination playing tricks on him. He had spent years searching for the strength two people had to have to truly trust one another. He worried he had pushed her too far, causing her to bolt. Then he remembered her rule about staying professional. He was pretty sure he was about to break that rule. His pull toward her outstripped anything else he had ever felt for another woman. At thirty-six, he was experienced in the field of love and sex and wouldn’t accept an imitation.

As the morning dragged on, the numbers on his screen blurred. He couldn’t focus. His mind wandered between his father’s demands, a company in crisis, and everything Raquelle. With every minute that ticked by, he waited for her to make an entrance.

He pressed the button for Audrey’s desk. “I’m in the middle of something. Can you please make me a cappuccino? It’s that time. Thank you.” He began to lose steam in the early afternoons.

The door opened and Raquelle walked in with Titus on his leash. His amped-up energy turned to relaxation—until he saw Titus.

“Are you ready for him?”

He nodded and stared.

She walked over saying, “Baby,” close to Titus’s ear.

“You can stop saying that. You’re starting to give me a complex.” His heart pounded in his chest.

“Remember to breathe,” she said. “Titus, sit.”

Misha consciously breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth.

“I would like you to try and pet him today. First, you’re going to put the top of your hand out to him. He needs to sniff it. Ready.” Her voice was calm.

“Yes.” He stretched out his hand as Titus sniffed it and then gave him a gentle lick. He pulled his hand back as Titus continued to wag his tail.

“That wasn’t so bad. Now, put your hand out and touch his head.”

His heart rate started to come down from its peak position. His hand lightly brushed Titus’ head. The dog never moved, as if he sensed his tension.

“That’s enough for today. You must be feeling brave.” She winked, taking Titus off his leash, and ordered him to go lay down. He went over and plopped himself on the rug under her easel. She threw him his favorite bone, which kept his attention.

She dropped her bag on the floor and took off her coat. Without looking at him, she said, “I’m going to paint today,” and walked over to the easel. “Damn it, I forgot my paint shirt.”

No doubt her designer outfit wouldn’t tolerate oil paint. He went to his closet and got one of his many dress shirts. “Put this on.” He held it out for her to put her arms in. She kept her back to him, so he turned her around and began to button up the shirt. His fingers itched to touch her skin again.

After the last button was put in place, he ran his fingers along her jaw. She caught his hand.

“We need to talk, Raquelle.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to talk about.” She moved to turn back to the canvas.

He held her by the shoulders to stop her. “I think you got spooked yesterday. You probably have questions for me. So, fire away.” His hands dropped away from her. He needed to give her space.

She held the hem of the shirt. “I talked to a friend last night who’s into all this. Then I looked it up online. I don’t think we’re a match.”

“Why not?” He needed to push her to open up to him.

“Because I’m not into that pain and pleasure thing. In other words, you’re not going to tie me up and then beat the crap out of me and think I enjoy it.”

He laughed. “Have I given you any indication that I’m into dishing out pain?”

“No.” Her mouth turned down.

“It’s not about bondage and pain for everyone. I’m not into that. I’d love nothing more than for you to be in my rope, but it would be all pleasure, no pain.” He ran his thumb down her neck.

“Why?” she asked.

“Why, what?”

“Why do you do it?” There was no judgment in her face, only curiosity.

“My life has been mapped out for me since the day I was born. Every decision has been made for me. I needed to make some decisions of my own. I fell into this through a friend at college and it spoke to me. When I have a woman, who trusts me and completely surrenders to what I’m doing, there’s an energy and peace that comes over both partners. There is nothing more powerful than seeing the pleasure you can give a woman. The sex is amazing. I would never do anything that a woman doesn’t want to happen. There’s a lot of communication that goes on before you ever get to that point. Yesterday, when you held the rope, you felt something. I felt it too. Tell me I’m wrong.” His thumb registered the uptick in her pulse.

Her lips tightened for a moment. “Yes. But I can’t describe it. I liked having my wrists tied together. At the same time, it felt wrong, dark.”

“That’s a normal initial reaction. Some things that are dark are very right.” He nodded his head in the direction of the stuffed elephant hanging on her easel. “I made you something.”

He took the black rope bracelet off BB’s neck. The bracelet had been made from the strands of one of his silk ropes and tied in intricate knots. Gold clasps were attached at both ends.

“This is beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like it. Are you sure you’re in the right business? Maybe you should design jewelry.” She held out her wrist for him.

“You add to the beauty of this bracelet. Not the other way around. Nothing could add to your beauty. You’re wonderful just the way you are, inside and out.”

“Thank you.”

He leaned down to kiss her but was interrupted by Marco barged in his office.

“We’ve got a lead on yesterday’s breach.” He looked at Raquelle, questioning whether he should say any more. “Who are you?” Marco demanded.

“She’s my portrait artist and that’s all you need to know. Go on.” He cleared his throat.

“Ah, well, I don’t know how to tell you this, but the last trace on the breach before it went dead came from your office.” Marco swallowed. “I need to check all your equipment.”

“Go ahead. I doubt you’ll find anything. I have nothing to hide.” He remembered leaving Raquelle in his office alone the day before. He watched her reaction to the news.

“Were you here yesterday?” Marco glared at Raquelle.

“Yes.” She looked at Misha for help.

“Then I need to see your phone,” he ordered.

She nodded and got it out of her bag. He took it from her and turned it on.

“Did you have it on or off yesterday?” Marco asked, looking down at his tablet.

“Off.”

“Why?” His face turned hard. Misha was curious on how she would handle Marco’s Spanish Inquisition.

“I don’t like to be bothered when I’m working. Why does it matter to you?” She put her hands on her hips.

“Because I need to find where the breach came from.” Marco’s voice hardened.

She turned to Misha. “What was breached?”

He waved a dismissive hand.

Marco pressed a couple of buttons on her phone. “Well, it’s not your phone. I’m going to check all phones in-house and keep searching.” His face stared down at his device as he left the office.

“I’m sorry about that. It’s pins and needles around here lately.” His father’s obsession with security was at an all-time high.

She turned off her phone and dropped it in her bag. “Should I even ask why?”

“When you have someone leave the firm with other people’s money and then turn up dead in Mexico, it raises a red flag. We had to pay out our clients and reassure them. Everyone is scrambling for answers.”

She nodded. “Tell me more about your father. You seem close to him.” She continued to work on her canvas.

“My father likes to give his advice when it comes to running the company but mostly runs his business in Rus— internationally.” He stopped himself before he gave her more information. His father had always told him to keep his business quiet as well as the fact that he was Russian. His comfort level with her allowed him to open up and want to share his life with her, or lack of it. He was so tired of being ashamed to be Russian and keeping secrets.

He stepped behind her and began twirling her curls. Her hair, with its golden strands and big loose curls, mesmerized him. His fingers worked their way up to the base of her skull. She stopped drawing and fell back into his touch. “I have an idea. I say we have dinner at my place where there are less distractions.”

She turned around as he held the back of her neck in his hands. He reached for her bracelet and slipped his finger underneath. “I made this for you, to wear on your wrist at all times as a reminder of what you’re denying us to be. Imagine what it feels like to be bound, to be mine. I want that. I want you and I'll have you, but tonight comes with nothing but dinner and conversation.” He kissed her forehead.

The sun had been playing hide and seek with the clouds all day, casting the office in shadow and light. A ray of sun peeked out from behind the opaque mist and shined on her face. Tears shimmered at the edges of her eyes. One fell as he caught it with his thumb.

“You don’t know who I am or what I’m about. I’ve slept with a lot of men for many different reasons. I’m trying so hard to keep this professional and you are making it so damn difficult.” Shame spread across her face.

“I just confessed my love for tying women up. Most women would have run for the hills. You came back and asked questions. I want to know why you didn’t run. You helped me with my fear of pit bulls without judgment.” He touched his forehead to hers. “Let me teach you about the art of Shibari. You can’t deny there’s something here. I don’t care about your past. Just let me in. Let me decide.” His heart tightened with fear. Having tasted her warmth, he wanted to be burned by the sun. He would peel away her layers and find out more about her, from the sorrow and hardship to the newly discovered dark side she hid from him.

She smiled. “You had me at pit bull. But what does *malen’kiy* mean?”

“Little one. It’s a term of endearment in Russian.” He turned over her wrist and kissed the inside.

She sighed. “You’re so gentle.”

“Sometimes.” He wiggled his brows. “I have a meeting to go to. I’ll leave you to paint.”

The afternoon dragged on, but he couldn't stay focused on anything but the thought of dinner with Raquelle. There was much to explore: her body, her mind, and the chemistry that sparked between them.

When he made it back to the office at the end of the day, she had completed a preliminary sketch of him on canvas.

He stood behind her. “Amazing.”

She spoke to him over her shoulder. “It’s a very complex piece,” she said dryly.

“I can’t wait to see you give it life.” He held her wrists with his fingers. “So, can I expect you at eight tonight?”

“Yes, for dinner and conversation. I’ll expect that you will be cooking and not ordering out.” She gave him a sly grin.

“Do you doubt that I can cook?” He acted offended.

She put her hands on his chest and looked up at him. “I don’t doubt that you can do anything you set your mind to.” She pushed away. “I have to get going. I have to put myself together for dinner with a handsome man who says he can cook. We’ll see.”

Her words rang in his ears. She believed he could do anything and yet his father second-guessed his every move. He needed her on his team.

She grabbed Titus’s leash and he followed her to the door. Lucky dog.

“I’ll call Jonas to give you a ride home. I’ll see you tonight.” His heart ballooned. He hadn’t felt like this since he was in high school going to the prom. *People move, things change, and you lose track of each other. But you never forget your first love*. Raquelle might be his first love all over again. Lucky him.

He stood by his office window and called Raquelle. The clouds had dissipated enough for him to see to the street below. “Jonas said he’ll meet you by the curb. Do you know you’re like one more piece of chocolate for me? I can’t seem to get enough.” He thought he could see her talking on her phone with Titus sitting next to her.

The boom came, first rattling the windows followed by a plume of white steam. The explosion tore a hole in the street the size of a city bus. He couldn’t see her through the smoke as debris filled the air.

“Raquelle!”