

Rest and Relaxation

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Prologue

So you want to hear my story? My side of things? I don't know why. I can't imagine there's anything about what happened that you don't already know. Or do you just want to record it for posterity? Why? Who's ever going to read it? And why would anyone want to? Maybe it would be good to get it off my chest, but... don't you know how hard this for me? Not just in that it's hard to remember everything that happened years ago, but it's painful, too.

Alright. I'll try. I just can't believe you want me to relive everything that happened to me. It was hard enough to just go through it all once, now you want me to do it again? You can't imagine what it was like for me. I had thought after I finally left that house that I could put all this stuff behind me. You know, just try to get on with my life... and figure out how to live with what's been done to me. Those were some awful times. The worst experience in my life. I just want to forget it and move on. I really don't want to do this.

Fine. You want me to relive everything that happened to me since day one? You want to see it through my eyes? Know my thoughts? You want me to dig through my memories and dredge up all the horrible little details? Fine. You'll get it. You're not going to like everything I have to say, but don't blame me. Remember, you asked me to do this.

Chapter 1

"You really need to relax, Katherine. You're stressing yourself out. You can't be in control of every little thing."

I rolled my eyes. *Sure I can, just give me enough time.*

The company shrink could see he wasn't getting through to me. I didn't care. I didn't want to be in this balding hippy's little office to begin with. The

cheesy motivational posters plastered all of the walls were enough to give me a headache by themselves. My leg was bouncing impatiently and I checked my watch again.

“You’re spreading yourself too thin,” he advised.

“I’m doing just fine,” I responded curtly.

“Just fine? People don’t get sent to me when they’re ‘just fine.’ Yesterday you shouted at a temp and hurled a paperweight through a wall. Does that sound just fine to you?”

I shrugged. “It was a thin wall. I can’t be held responsible for shoddy construction,” I said. He started to protest and I cut him off. “Look, this is all being blown way out of proportion. The guy did a bad job. It’s going to cost me *days* of work to make up for his mistakes. I don’t have time for that kind of thing! So I lost my temper. Sorry. Won’t happen again. Sometimes I feel like I’m carrying my whole department.”

“You’re making your co-workers uncomfortable, is what you’re doing.”

“So what? Hey, I’ve never been people’s best friend around here, but I get the job done. Okay? Honestly, I’m the only one around here who actually gets things accomplished. I didn’t get to be the head underwriter here by the age of twenty-nine by being laid-back and people-friendly.” That was sure true. I’d had to claw and scratch my way to the top, but I did it. People just don’t work unless you occasionally apply the whip. So what if I was hated? So what if there was the occasional nervous breakdown? That came with the territory. That’s what I got paid for.

“This is an office, not a battleground. I’ll be frank and say that you’re not very popular among those who work under you since you got that position. And then there’s always the rumors about that business concerning your predecessor.”

Another eye roll. “Oh, gawd, that.”

My ‘predecessor,’ Alice Merryweather, had been a thorn in my side ever since I started to work there. For years we were silent enemies. Well, mostly the rancor was on my part. I always hated her. But she didn’t like me much, either. She stepped in the way of me getting promoted several times. She told me she didn’t like the way I did things. I figured she was just jealous. I was a young, pretty, and ambitious. She was a dumpy, frumpy, nearly middle-aged woman with bad hair and terrible fashion sense. People liked her because she didn’t make them work. I wouldn’t normally have cared whether she liked me or not, and I would simply have dismissed her, except that I needed to get her out of the way to get to the top. I wasn’t letting someone like *her* screwing up my career plans. Since I couldn’t go around her, I had to go through her. The problem was, even though she was lazy by my standards, she did her job passably well. The company

had no reason to replace her. So I had to give them a reason. Turned out, it was easy.

After a little investigating, I found out she was a dyke. She lived with her lover and everything. Not many people knew because she didn't spread it around, but she wasn't ashamed of it or anything. I was a totally closeted bisexual—having learned to keep it a deep, dark secret so that I could get ahead in the business world—and that just made me hate her more. It wasn't fair that she got to have her cake and eat it, too; not while some of us had to repress ourselves just to have a chance at success. Still, it was something I could use against her. So I started by mending the bridges between us for a few weeks, then I began to lightly flirt with her in private. At the same time, I let slip a couple of rumors around the office that she had been making suggestions to me that had made me 'uncomfortable.'

She was pretty devoted to her lover and wasn't inclined to sleep around, but I guess her self-esteem was low enough that enough flattering and flirtation from a pretty younger woman eventually got to her. I executed a carefully orchestrated encounter in front of a hallway security camera. I got her alone and, while *appearing* to be formal and business-like, I pushed her buttons until she lost all sense of priority. She came up behind me, put her arm around me, and kissed my neck. I had asked her to do just that, to embrace me. But, to the camera, it looked like something else entirely. It was almost funny to see her expression as I reacted to her kiss with disgust and confusion. I pushed her off of me and hurried away, even managing to work up some tears on my way out as I left early for the day. A few days later I trumped up a false sexual harassment accusation that brought her under suspicion. It wasn't quite enough to make her lose her job, but she was teetering on the brink.

A week later, I had to take some papers to her in her office. With a smile, I quietly but viciously teased and goaded her until she lost it. She started shouting at me, pulled my hair, and then she struck me, all in front of several witnesses. Having been driven into a corner and pushed too far, it was a natural – if stupid – reaction on her part, but it sealed her fate. It achieved making her look like she was pissed at me for reporting her sexual harassment of me. She was let go and I got her position. A well-executed plan. It wasn't the last time I manipulated people to get my way, but it was certainly the most devious.

I know, I know. I sound like a total monster. Believe me, I would rather have found a way around her, but she intentionally kept putting herself in my path. She had been a random element I couldn't control. She asked for it. Hell, she practically begged for it. I didn't take any particular pleasure out of what I did. I just did what had to be done. It was strictly business. Sometimes you just have to look out for yourself, take care of number one, or else you'll never get anywhere

in this life. And I *did* have regrets and a sleepless night or two over the whole thing, but, dammit, this was a war and she was an unfortunate casualty. Dog-eat-dog. Law of the jungle. Survival of the fittest. That's the most important lesson I had learned from my parents, before they passed away. Besides, I probably did Alice favor. A frumpy dyke like that was never going to get promoted. All I did was give her the chance to explore greener pastures. That's all.

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Alright. There's also your recent divorce. Maybe--"

"My divorce doesn't enter into this. It meant nothing."

The two-bit shrink was getting frustrated. "Your problems may not be something I'm qualified to help you with. Perhaps bi-polar disorder?"

"*What?*"

"Perhaps not. But I'm recommending you see a psychiatrist. Don't worry, it'll be comped by company insurance."

"I'll do no such thing."

"I *could* recommend that you take time off and be sent to a retreat to get more in touch with yourself," he said, looking sympathetic, but I just knew he was hiding a smug smile.

Oh, buddy, you do not want to make me your enemy. "You can't do that! I can't go anywhere, I can't take time off. This place will go to hell without me."

"There you go, trying to be in control of everything. The world will keep running fine without you there to make the sun rise, you know. Well, then, if you don't want time off I suggest you opt for the psychiatrist. I have a list you can choose from."

"Okay, alright, fine. Okay. Have it your way," I huffed, promising myself to get this guy fired as soon as I had the power.

Chapter 2

They 'let' me off work early the next week so that I could make it to my appointment. I didn't like to be off work and I just knew everyone was going to be talking about me, about how 'That Bitch Kathy' was coming unglued and needed to see a shrink. Someone was going to pay for this. But, right then, I just had to play along, smile, and be part of the team. I had picked one of the listed psychiatrists, a Dr. Evelyn Benedict, for no other reason than because her office wasn't too far from where I worked. I didn't even need to drive since it was just a short bus trip downtown. At least I wouldn't have to go too far out of my way in order to be terribly inconvenienced. I guess I also picked her because she was a woman and, I don't know, I guess I thought it would be more comfortable to open

up to another woman in that situation. Funny, I usually preferred the company of men in the professional side of my life. I felt I had more in common with them. But I didn't go around opening up to my male coworkers about personal matters, either.

Dr. Benedict had a cozy little office with a fish tank in the waiting room. The magazines were up-to-date, for once, but I always got so irritated by having to wait in anyone's office that I could never concentrate on reading. I always hated to be kept waiting. Dr. Benedict, when I finally got in to see her, cut a somewhat intimidating figure. She was a woman in her thirties, with dark hair and a professional demeanor. She had a pretty face and stylish hairdo, but she was undeniably overweight. She had to be twice my weight, at least – maybe even three of me – and she carried the majority of it below the waist. She also stood about five inches taller than me. I never did like it when other women made me feel like a pipsqueak. It was hard enough working among all those men who towered over me. At least she was a sharp dresser. She had that going for her. She did seem somewhat familiar, though, and I was sure I had seen her somewhere before. I decided that, since we worked in the same area, we might have eaten lunch at the same place and perhaps I had seen her there. Although, I usually worked through my lunch hour, so maybe not.

“So why is it that you've been sent to me?” Dr. Benedict asked, after some introductory pleasantries.

“You have my file, right? They should have sent it to you.”

“Yes,” she said, “but I'd like to hear it in your own words.”

“Look, between us, I'm not crazy. I don't have any problems at all. Okay, *maybe* I stretch myself too thin, but that's just part of my job. It's what I'm paid to do. I can handle it.”

“I never said you were crazy. Not everyone who comes to see me is crazy, after all,” she said with a warm smile. “Sometimes people just need to talk.”

“Whatever,” I said, fingering the fringe of a throw pillow. I didn't need to talk.

“Why don't we just start at the beginning. What was your home life like?”

Oh, here we go, I thought. I took a deep breath. “My mommy hated me! My daddy was never home! My uncle made me dress up like a nun and spank his wrists with a ruler!”

The doctor coughed. “Pardon?”

“Sorry. Just... trying to inject a little humor.”

“Ah. That's fine, but we're never going to get anywhere if you don't at least try to take this seriously,” she said.

“Alright, alright. Look, I had a perfectly normal childhood. Okay, I guess

my parents weren't around too much, but that wasn't their fault. They were busy. I just learned to take care of myself at a young age. There's nothing wrong with that. It taught me to be independent. More children could stand to benefit from that, I think. What else is there? I grew up, I went to school, went to college, got a job, and here I am," I said.

"It doesn't sound like you've made much time for personal relationships," she observed.

"No. I haven't," I replied bluntly. "I don't have time for that. Not now. Oh, I tried getting married last year, but it was mostly a convenience thing. It lasted a whole six months. And, no, I'm not bitter."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I wasn't, as one might say, all that emotionally invested in him. I do miss his cooking, sometimes. Honestly, the only good thing Jonathan gave me was his last name. Katherine Quinten sounds so much better than Kathy Sloan," I said, referring to my maiden name. "You know, the alliteration."

Dr. Benedict had a funny look on her face, like she had just swallowed a bug. "Sloan? You're Kathy Sloan?"

"I was. I don't go by that name anymore. And I prefer 'Katherine' if it's alright with you. Why?"

"Ah, no, nothing. Excuse me a moment, please," she said, and left the room without further explanation. I sat and impatiently strummed my fingers impatiently on the throw pillow until she returned a few minutes later. "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm not feeling well," she said. She did look a little pallid, I had to admit. "It must have been something I had for lunch. I'm very sorry, but we'll have to cut this session short."

"Uh, well, alright." I was angry at having to leave work early for nothing, but relieved to get out of there so soon. It felt like getting out of detention early.

"Same time next week, alright?"

.....

So, same time, next week, there I was, back in her office. Work that week had been hell, trying to get a bunch of reports finished that a cadre of incompetents had screwed up. I could swear that sometimes they did it on purpose. My stomach had been hurting recently, too. I hoped it wasn't an ulcer. That was all I needed. I had begun to think that maybe, just *maybe*, I was working a little too hard lately. But there was still so much to do! Maybe in a few weeks I'd take a day off and have a long weekend to do something for myself. The problem was, I just didn't know what to do with myself when I had nothing to do.

"Hey, doc?" I asked when we got into her office. "I know you're not a medical doctor or anything, but do you know what an ulcer feels like?"

“I’m not sure. Probably related heartburn, I’d guess. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. I’ve just been popping antacids like candy this week. It’s probably nothing,” I said, taking my place on the sofa.

“Sounds like you’ve had a stressful week.”

“Ugh. The worst.”

“Hmm. I have heard that if you get food on your stomach, it helps it go away for a while. I have some brownies leftover in the kitchenette. Would you like some?” she offered. “They’re quite good. I made them myself.”

“Well, I shouldn’t, but... I did skip lunch again. I suppose one wouldn’t hurt. Thanks.”

She returned with a plate with a few fudge brownies and a cold glass of water. They really were quite good, and I ate two while we chatted. She asked me about conflicts at work and again about how my life was while I was growing up. I told her the stuff I guessed she would want to hear.

“It sounds like you didn’t have much of a childhood.”

“Well, no, like I said, I had to learn to take care of myself. I mean, if you can’t take care of yourself, who will? You can’t rely on anyone to do it for you. But don’t get the idea that I was neglected, or anything.” I took a long drink of water. The brownies had made my mouth dry. “Is the heat on in here?”

“No, I don’t believe so. I think it’s safe to say that you have some control issues stemming from your childhood.”

“Why? Maybe. So?” I was feeling lightheaded. Maybe I had gone too long without eating and the sugar rush was catching up with me. I was breathing heavily.

“Well, your need to achieve and be in control can potentially harm those around you. You have been very successful in your career, so far, but has it been worth it? Has it made you happy?”

“Happiness can wait until later. Right now I... just need to be... secure. I don’t feel too good.” The room was spinning.

“Oh? Why don’t you lie down. That’s right. That’s good.”

I was clutching the fringed throw pillow to my chest. Tunnel-vision was closing in on me. *What the hell? Am I passing out?* I wondered. I saw Dr. Benedict looming over me.

“Sweet dreams, bitch.”

What?

Chapter 3

I woke up to a sudden jarring sensation. I opened my eyes only to scrunch

them shut again from the painful stab of light. I felt like I had the worst hangover ever and I was still really dizzy. Was I sitting up? I couldn't make sense of my position. I felt like I was being squished. The jarring sensation came again. I forced my eyes open and tried to move. I couldn't move... I couldn't breathe – there was tape over my mouth.

What the hell?

“Mmmmmmm?”

It took me a few moments to realize that I was tied up. More specifically, I was bound up in a tight ball, doubled over, with my knees squeezed up under my chin and my arms pinned behind my back. It felt like I'd been all wrapped up with duct tape. In addition to being all balled up, I had been securely taped to a wheeled dolly cart, and, with a frightening sense of vertigo, realized I was being pulled up a flight of stairs. I couldn't see who was in control of the cart. I was pulled up another few inches and reached the top of the next step with a jarring thud. I had a brief, horrible image of being let go and tumbling in a helpless ball down the wooden stairs.

What the HELL?

From what I could see through the stair rails, I was in a regular house. I could see a shiny, wood floor and area rug at the bottom of the stairs. There was a fluffy black cat peering around the corner down below, peering up at me. I stared back at it in confusion. I was pulled onto a second-story landing and taken down a hallway. I couldn't see much, but I saw some paintings on the walls. As I was turned to go up yet another flight of stairs, I saw a side table at the end of the hallway on which sat a vase holding a dry floral arrangement. Just a regular, normal house.

“Mmmmm!”

There was the bounce of being dragged up another step. “Almost there. For such a skinny bitch, you sure do weigh a lot.”

Dr. Benedict?

“Mmm? *Mmm!*” I struggled, but couldn't get loose. I couldn't make any sense of this. Did she just call me a bitch? Why wasn't she helping me? She wasn't answering. All I could do was keep struggling and screaming through the gag as I was pulled the rest of the way up the stairs.

At the top of the small landing, I was wheeled around and pulled into a room until I was facing a bed. It had a cream-colored, rose print dust ruffle. Some of the duct tape was being unwound from me. I hoped I was being released, but I was only being unsecured from the dolly. I was able to look up and catch a glimpse of my psychiatrist. She was still wearing the same charcoal suit and navy blouse I had seen her in at the office, so I figured not too much time had passed.

She squatted down and got her arms under me. “One, two, *threee...*”

There came another horrible dizzy spell as she hefted me up to the edge of the bed and rolled me onto it until I was lying on my side. I was on top of a cream-and-roses comforter that matched the dust ruffle. I could see her clearly now. Perspiring heavily, she stood back a minute to catch her breath. She saw me looking at her and gave me a slight smirk. She didn’t respond to my desperate noises, though. Taking the dolly cart, she wheeled it out of the room and disappeared for several minutes.

Looking around as much as I was able, I could see that I was in a small room. It must have been some kind of attic room, since the far wall – the one I was facing – was steeply sloped, as if matching the inner contours of a roof. There was a little round window near the head of the bed and the walls were covered with floral print wallpaper. There was some whitewashed wooden furniture in there: a nightstand, a dresser, and a small round table with a chair. There was a tiny closet in the far corner, and the door I had been brought through was next to the foot of the bed. It was a little warm in the room and it smelled musty, as if it hadn’t been used in a long time. Underneath the mustiness was the faint scent of old potpourri. Twisting my head around, I could see that the headboard was an old-fashioned style made white enameled metal. Attached to the edge of the headboard was a heavy leather wrist restraint. My chest tightened.

I heard her muffled voice come from below. “Aww, snookums, did mommy scare you with all that noise? I’m sorry. I’ll fill your bowl in a minute.”

What the hell? Is she talking to me? Oh. She’s talking to that cat. I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on making the dizziness go away. I had to force myself not to panic. I had to stay in control. I refused to start blubbering. Whatever happened, I had to stay in control. I had to figure out what was going on, and then figure out a way to get out of it. What did they say in that assault awareness lecture I had had to attend? Never let them take you to the second location? A little late for that, thank you very much.

Dr. Benedict, having shed her suit coat, returned with an incomprehensible armload of metal, leather, and cloth. She put these down on the floor beside the bed. “Alright, let’s get you settled away.”

“Mmmmm!” I howled, seeing her brandishing a pair of scissors. She began to cut away the tape that bound my legs to my chest and kept me balled up. I had planned to immediately start fighting, kicking, whatever I could do just as soon as I was free. I moaned in dismay when I realized that, even without the strips that were keeping me balled up, I still had tape wrapped up and down my body, from neck to toe. I did kick, but being practically mummified, I was still as helpless as a caterpillar in a cocoon. And why wasn’t she saying anything? Why wasn’t she

telling me why she was doing this? Her grim silence was almost as frightening as her actions. I was rolled onto my back with arms still bound beneath me. She climbed onto the bed, looming over me. I groaned, my breath crushed out of me, as she straddled my thighs and sat down on my stomach, facing towards my feet. I couldn't see anything beyond her very wide, pantsuit-encased rear end.

I felt her taking my shoes off. There wasn't much I could do except flutter my feet and try to buck her off me, but she was incredibly heavy and wasn't going anywhere. I squealed and growled when I felt what could only be restraints being secured tightly around my ankles. As she turned around to face me I saw the thick ankle restraints, with ropes that over the bottom edge of the mattress. *Oooh, shit. What's going on?*

She turned herself around and began snipping the tape that was wrapped around torso and arms. I thought this would be my chance. As soon as my arms were free I started hitting and scratching her, reaching for her face, screeching through the gag, trying to wrestle her off of me. She caught hold of my wrists and held them above my head. Inching her way up my bucking body until her fat thighs were pressing against my chin, she painfully pinned my upper arms beneath her knees. I screamed in rage and pain into the gag.

Using her leverage, she easily fastened the restraints around my wrists. Then she pulled a some kind of tight, spandex tube, like a halter top, down over my arms, over my head, until it was bunched up below my armpits. I felt my wrists being tugged up to the top of the bed. I pulled at the restraints with all my strength as she tied the ropes off, but all I did was make the headboard squeak and shake a little. I was tethered. Trapped.

Dr. Benedict got off the bed and pulled the spandex tube thing down until it was encircling my waist. She stood back to catch her breath, looking pleased with herself. "That was easier than I thought it'd be."

"Mmm!" I glared at her with fury, tears trickling from my eyes.

"Feel like you have something to say? Alright. But, do try to keep your voice down, or I'll just gag you again," she said, then peeled the tape off my lips.

"*What the fuck! What the fuck are you doing, you crazy sow cunt!*" I screeched as soon as I was ungagged. In response, she backhanded me hard across the face. "Ow!"

"Shut up!" she ordered, returning my gaze with equal fury. "You just shut up, you evil bitch. You tried to kill my sister! You want to know what I'm doing? I'll tell you. What I'm doing is just old-fashioned revenge."

"W-what? Kill? Sister?" I stared in confusion. My head was spinning. This had to be case of mistaken identity. "I-I never tried to ki—"

"Does the name Alice ring a bell?"

“Alice? I don’t know any Alice,” I started, then remembered. “Alice *Merryweather*? From work? But... but that was years ago!”

“She’s my sister,” Dr. Benedict said grimly.

“She put you up to this?”

“Oh, goodness, no. This is all my idea. I’ve been planning it all week, ever since your first visit. I didn’t even know who you were, not until I heard your old name. She’d be horrified if she knew what I was doing. She’s far too sensitive for this sort of thing. I, however, am not.”

“B-but I didn’t try to kill her! I wouldn’t hurt anybody!”

“But you do. You hurt people all the time, but *especially* her. Alice was fired in disgrace because of your heartless lies. It sent her back into an old depression that I had hoped she had recovered from. She attempted suicide and almost succeeded. She jumped...” The woman shook her head. “She recovered, but had broken her back and lost the use of her legs. Thanks to you, she’s confined to a wheelchair for life. She was a sweet, caring soul who never hurt a fly, and you left her a cripple. Her partner takes care of her now.”

“I-I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I am, but that’s not my fault!” I protested, tugging at my restraints. “I admit it, I lied, I got her fired. I admit that. Okay? But I can’t be held responsible for what she did after. I didn’t make her attempt suicide. It’s not my fault!”

She gave me a chilling smile. “No. If you had been *directly* responsible, pushed her out the window with your own hands, you would already be dead. But you’re still the cause. If you had been more of a human being, you never would have done what you did to her, and she would still be fine. But you were inhumane. So now, I’m going to be inhumane to you.” She picked up the scissors again.

Oh god, oh god, oh god. “What are you going to do? Please, we can talk about this! D-doctor?”

“Oh, no, call me Evelyn. After all, we’re going to be spending a lot of time together,” she said. She started cutting away the tape that held my legs together, and my pant legs along with it. My legs were free of tape, but I could still barely move thanks to the restraints. She worked her way up, cutting away my underwear and blouse. She was stripping me naked. What was she going to do? *Rape* me or something? If she were a man then at least all this would make some kind of sense. But she was a woman nearing middle-age, and a *psychiatrist*, at that. This was nuts!

“Stop, stop, *please* stop! What do you want? I’ll do anything. D-do you want money? Do you want me to pay for her h-health care? I’ll do it, I will, just please stop!”

“I don’t want anything from you. In fact, you don’t have to do anything. Anything at all. That’s the whole point.” She yanked my shredded pants and blouse from under my body and tore away my pantyhose. I was left naked on the bedspread. “See,” she explained, “I’ve always had this interest, er, a paraphilia, if you please. I’ve always suppressed it, seeing how it is rather... antisocial? When I realized that I had the woman who tried to destroy my sister in my grasp, I thought long and hard on what I should do. I came up with an idea that would satisfy my fantasies, as well as provide appropriate and lasting punishment for you.”

“*What* lasting punishment? I don’t need punishment,” I cried desperately. “I’m not a bad person, I’m *not a bad person!*”

Evelyn bore a frighteningly sinister expression. “Don’t like the word punishment? Fine, call it vengeance. Poetic justice. Just desserts? How about *comeuppance*? That’s a good one.” She chuckled to herself.

My god, she’s completely crazy! I tried desperately to reason with her. “But you’re a psychiatrist. A doctor! You’re supposed to *help* people!”

“Am I not helping? I’m helping myself by providing closure and allowing myself to indulge in my fantasies. I’m helping my sister, though she’ll never know it, by taking revenge on her malefactor. I’m helping everyone you work with – everyone who will cross your path and be perceived by you as in your way, everyone you’ll hurt, backstab, and otherwise terrorize in what would surely be a long and successful career. And as bad as you are now, I’m sure you would only continue to get worse. In fact, I can’t think of anyone who *wouldn’t* be helped by me taking you out of circulation.”

Out of circulation? I wondered. “No. No, don’t kill me! *Help, somebody help me PLEEEASE!*” I howled in the direction of the little window.

Evelyn winced at my screams and hastily ripped off a fresh piece of duct tape. I was still shouting as she sealed it down over my mouth. She added several more strips, smoothing them down firmly over my lips and cheeks. I was still screaming, but surely not loud enough to be heard from the street.

“No, none of that. Stop it. I’m not going to kill you. I’m going to help you. Your behavior is destructive to those around you and even to your own health. In addition, your need to be so in control of everything is preventing you from taking any pleasure out of life. You yourself said that you’re not happy, and I believe it. And while what I’m going to do may not make you *happy*, it’s a lot better than letting you run loose. You’re going to learn what it means to be helpless and depend on others. Me, specifically,” she said, with a sniff of self-satisfaction. “It is my professional diagnosis, as your doctor, that you work too hard. I recommend lots of rest and relaxation. You’re going to take a very, very long vacation, my

dear.”

I squirmed in the restraints as she smoothed the spandex tube, the only thing remaining on my body, over my torso. “This is a corset liner. It will help keep your corset clean and prevent damage to your skin by reducing friction,” she explained.

I was wondering what the hell I would need something like that for when she picked up a big, heavily-boned corset from beside the bed. She worked it under my body so that she could wrap it around my waist. I watched in helpless confusion, breathing heavily through my nose, as she hooked the ends together in front. It was an intimidating garment, made more for function than for beauty. It went from just below my breasts, down over my hips, ending above my crotch. The thing looked to me like some kind of old torture device. After she got it hooked together, she rolled me over, none too gently, and started tightening the laces. It wasn’t bad at first, but before long I could feel it squeezing my chest and waist tighter and tighter. It was like being slowly crushed by an anaconda. She would give the strings a hard jerk that would pull me up off the bed and squeeze more air out of me. She only decided it was tight enough when I felt like I was about to be pinched in two. She tied off the strings and rolled be back over.

Okay. A woman has kidnapped, stripped me, threatened me, and now is dressing me in a corset. What the hell am I supposed to do in this situation? I struggled to breathe, gasping tiny breaths through my nose. The compression on my stomach didn’t hurt, yet, but it felt like the thing was trying to crush my bottom ribs. The muscles in my waist had been effectively paralyzed. Evelyn patted me on my constricted belly, then climbed back on top of me. *Not again! What now?*

I felt that she was unfastening my left ankle. Same as before, her weight prevented me doing anything but twitching my unbound leg. She pulled a little, nylon footie over my foot, then started working my foot into a boot. “This may be a little snug,” she said. “I ordered these ballet boots last week for you and had to guess at the size. It’s amazing what you can buy on the internet these days.”

I had the disturbing image of Dr. Benedict, sitting at a computer, ordering horrible things to torture me with. All week while I had slaved away at work, just trying to do my job, she had been plotting against me, getting weird shit delivered to her by UPS, and fantasizing about this moment. I moaned and beat my head against the pillows, which was about all I could do.

I felt my foot being crammed unmercifully into the tight boot. It wasn’t like a regular boot; it didn’t bend, it only went straight down. My foot was forced into a ballet-like, en pointe position. The toe box was small and my toes were scrunched and jammed together, as if I was trying to wear heels a size or two too small. It got worse when she started lacing it up. As the boot tightened, the pointe

position became more extreme and my ankle was completely immobilized. The boot was so tight and stiff that I couldn't even wiggle my foot, not front to back or side to side. It was like having my leg frozen in cement from the calf down. When she got off me, I saw my foot, encased in the fetishistic black boot, pointing straight down in line with my leg. The ridiculously long heel of the thing curved in to merge with the toe of the boot, forming a solid ring. It definitely wasn't designed for walking in. Walking was moot, anyway, since she had tied the ring part to the footboard.

"Aw, that's pretty," she said, sounding so perversely happy about it that I was incensed to struggle violently. Amazingly, the hastily-tied knot worked loose and my leg came free. I lashed out at her with the boot. She jumped back and I didn't have a chance of striking her. I cocked my leg up, like snake poised to strike, hoping that she would come close enough so that I could kick her. Just one good kick. In response, she picked up a vicious-looking baton from her pile of Things To Torture Kathy With on the floor. She smacked the heavy, composite club against her palm. I stared at it with utter disbelief.

"Understand, I have no compunction against hurting you. None whatsoever," she told me. "You're going to learn that you have no control here. I'm sure that I could accidentally break a bone with this thing. That wouldn't be very pleasant, would it? Now put your leg down and don't move it."

I sobbed, trying to plead with her through the tape gag. I didn't want lie still and let her do whatever she wanted to me. Being told to just obediently put it down was akin to someone telling you to drop your only weapon, and you knowing that, without it, you'd be completely at their mercy. One leg might be useless, but it was all the freedom I had.

She saw my hesitation and swung the baton. For a second, I thought she was going to hit me, and I screamed and cringed away. I felt the heavy thud of it as it struck the mattress beside me. "I *will* do it," she said. Reluctantly, fearing for my life, I lowered my booted leg to the bed. The immediate threat of the baton outweighed the fear of being tied up and what could result. Making sure to stay outside of striking range, she passed the rope through the boot heel and retied it, this time much more securely. I groaned and my head dropped back into the pillows. She repeated the whole process so that my other foot was squished, booted, and immobilized just like the first. She didn't allow a chance for me to get loose again.

Next she picked up a large and frightening jumble of metal and leather. As she straightened it out, I could see that it was an old-fashioned kind of leg brace – it looked like a pair of metal splints held together with many leather cuffs down its length. It had round ratcheted joints half-way down to allow for bending at the

knee. I made questioning whimpers, but she just ignored me as she wrapped it around my left leg and boot. It didn't take her long to tightly fasten all the cuffs. Into each of the cuffs she placed a small lock. There was one at the top of my thighs, two above and below my knees, one at my ankles, and another that went down like a stirrup through the boot's arch in front of the heel. The bar on the outside of my leg extended up past the upper thigh cuff to a second joint at my hip. That bar kept going up to my waist. The knee joints were locked in position and, though I tried, I simply couldn't bend my leg at all. I was starting to regret letting her tie my leg back up. She might have just been bluffing about beating me with that baton thing. But maybe not.

Once the second leg brace was put on, I looked like I was in heavy traction or something below the waist. It was a mosaic of metal and leather with patches of bare skin. As if that wasn't enough, she added two horizontal spreader bars, one between my ankles and a shorter one at my knees, which forced my legs to spread in a wide V. She wrapped a wide leather belt around my compressed waist and locked it in place. Then she locked the brace's side bars that went up past my hips to the sides of the belt.

"Let's see how well this works," she said, grinning, and then detached my wrist cuff and stood back.

Surprised by the release of my arms, I immediately tried to sit up. It took only a second to realize that it was impossible. The corset might as well have been solid steel for all of its flexibility. Even if I could make the corset bend, the waist belt that was locked to the braces kept me from bending at the hip. I tried lifting myself up by digging my elbows into the bed, but it was useless. My arms were free and I was still stuck on my back like a turtle in the sun. I ripped the tape off my mouth. "What are you *doing*? Why are you doing this to me? Please let me goooo!"

"That is *so* cute," she said.

With disgust and horror I realized that my helpless struggles were actually turning her on. What kind of pervert freak was she? Frantically, I clawed at the corset, at the belt and cuffs and locks. I pulled and strained at the braces, trying desperately to find some way loose. There wasn't a way. I strained with all my strength to fight the braces, but all that did was making them dig in and hurt. Crying and screaming, I pounded on the braces, threw the bed's pillows across the room, and clawed at the flower-print comforter until I was exhausted and gasping for air. The corset's constriction made it hard to breathe; I was getting light-headed. "Oh, god. Somebody help. Please let me go. I'm sorry for everything. Please."

"Oh, no, you're not sorry yet. Now you know what it's like to loose control

of your legs. But I'm not through with you, yet. Give me your hand."

"No. No!"

"Do we have to do this again? Your legs provide very easy targets," she said, with menacing ease.

"Alright, alright, just don't hurt me!" I cried, letting her take my left wrist.

"Thank you. See how much less stressful this is when you cooperate?" she asked. I was expecting her to cuff me again, but instead she pulled a sock over my hand. Then, starting at the wrist and working her way to the tips of my fingers, she tightly wrapped a long strip of duct tape around the sock.

"Please, can't we talk about this?" I pleaded. "Y-you're a smart woman, a very smart woman, I can see that. You're mad at me, I know, but this isn't the answer. It's the wrong thing to do. Right? We can work this out. Okay? I-I just know we can come to some sort of arrangement. I don't care what, just something that doesn't involve whatever the hell you're doing to me!"

"We've talked enough," she said. She kept wrapping my hand, squeezing my fingers together until my hand was nothing but a shiny gray flipper. I couldn't even wiggle my fingers. "There will be no bargaining. I'm going to see this through to the end. Alright, other hand."

"Nooo!" I thrust my hand as far from her as I could. I was crying. One hand was all I had left. She got on the bed and reached for it, kneeling down with one knee on my bound arm to keep me from using it. "Ow! Ow! You're hurting me!"

"See? That's what you get," she said, snagging my wrist and pulling a sock over it, too. "Fighting will only cause you pain."

I begged, cursed, and snapped at her with my teeth as she wrapped my hand up. When she was done, my hands were reduced to useless stumps. She was taking everything away from me.

The next addition was a plastic, orthopedic breastplate that laid across my upper chest, went down between and below my breasts, leaving them bare, and was held in place with straps that went over my shoulders, under my arms, and across my sides to a similar plate on my back. I beat at her with my taped hands, but that just made her laugh. She had difficulty getting fitting it on me right, since she couldn't easily roll me over. "Perhaps I should have done this part before the legs," she mused. It took a while, but once she finally arranged it the way she wanted it, she produced a pair of smaller braces, similar in appearance to the ones on my legs.

"No, not my arms! Please! Goddammit, you can't do this to me. I'll kill you for this! No, wait, I didn't mean that!"

Evelyn gave me a grim smirk and forced my arm into the waiting brace.

Pinning my arm down with one hand, she deliberately tightened the cuffs to hold it securely in place. There were four of them, just like on my legs, and each one was held on with a tiny lock. It had heavily-padded boards extended from the wrist part that closed over my hands, sandwiching and flattening them, as if wrapping them in duct tape wasn't enough. At my shoulder was a post that slid into a slot on the chest plate thing and was secured with screws, preventing me from moving my arm in any way. She adjusted the joints so that my arm was held away from my sides and was slightly bent at the elbow. I cannot describe the feeling of helpless terror as she finished up with my other arm. I still didn't know what she planned on doing with me, but with my last free limb locked and bolted into immobility, I knew that I was utterly defenseless. She could *anything* to me.

"Okay. That works. This is wearing me out. But it's a good tired," she joked. "One last thing." She fixed some kind of choker, or collar, around my neck. It had wires running out of it to something on the bedside table, but I could no longer bend to see what it was.

"Oh, god, what now?" I asked, crying freely. I felt like a weakling, crying like that, but I couldn't help it. I just wanted this to be over. I wanted to wake up in my own bed. I wondered, if she indeed planned on killing me or something, if I would ever see home again. That made me cry even harder.

Heedless of my tears, she placed a large, contoured posture collar around my neck. It went all the way from my chest to just under my jaw line. It was long enough to make almost feel as if it was stretching my neck. At the bottom of it, there were tabs that slid into slots in the chest plate thing and helped keep it in place. In the back, it kept going up beyond my neck to hug the back of my skull. From the sides of the rear part were two padded posts that curved around the sides of my head, just above my ears, and were locked in place at my forehead. Once it was all together, my chin was held slightly elevated and my head was fixed immovably in place. I was staring at the top of the headboard and couldn't budge my head an inch. I must have looked like a train wreck survivor on a hospital bed.

"No more. Please, no more," I begged as I felt her doing something around my feet. I heard the chain hoist ratcheting away and my legs, the whole lower half of my body, began to slowly rise off the bed. She had attached the hoist to the lower spreader bar and was using it to lift me up. The corset gave at the waist and gouged into my stomach, painfully forcing my air out. "Ow. Stop," I grunted. "Can't breathe."

"I know. It's only for a minute," she said. "I just need to find a good spot." With disgust and dread, I felt her parting my ass cheeks. She stuck adhesive pads deep in the cleft. They had wires that dangled down and tickled me. Then I felt a soft, warm, thickness being wrapped around my butt and over my crotch.

Diapers? The crazy bitch is diapering me now? I wondered. “What are you... get away...” I grunted.

“I know, it’s not very dignified, is it? It’s the best I could come up with on short notice. I’ll arrange for something better soon.” With the diaper and wired pads in place, she lowered me back down. I gasped for air as the corset ceased to dig in. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her connect the wires that were coming from rear end to a little electronic device that was also wired to the choker around my throat, under the neck brace. Glancing at a sheet of instructions, she turned a few knobs. “Okay. Let’s try this. Yell at me.”

“You want me to yell? You’re damn right I’ll yell at you, you fucked up—”

“No, no, that’s not it. Just a second.” She looked at the instructions again.

I stared at her in bewilderment, caught off stride. “Huh?”

“Okay, try again.”

“Try *what* ag— ow!” I yelped as I felt a searing bolt of pain stab through my ass. My muscles clenched of the own accord. “What the hell? Oow! What’s— *ooow!*” It just kept getting worse and worse until my screams dissolved into sobs and tears. Then the pain stopped.

Evelyn was practically giggling with delight. “It works, it works! See? Whenever you make a sound, you get shocked. That should teach you to keep quiet. Do it again.”

No! I mouthed, still recovering.

“You’re a quick study. Don’t worry, it has levels of sensitivity. I’m setting it so that you should be able to talk in a loud whisper. Try it out.”

“H-hello?” I whispered, cautiously. There was no shock, so I went on. “What is that thing? Why, why, *why* are you doing all this? This is fucking crazyyyeeow!” Apparently, my volume had risen a little too high. Cursing, I had to force myself to stop screaming to make the pain cease. I glared at her through a haze of tears. “You bitch,” I hissed.

“I told you why I’m doing this. Can you move at all?” she asked.

“You know I can’t.” I didn’t want to give her the pleasure of seeing my struggle helplessly in front of her.

“I think the question you want answered is *what* I’m doing. I told you that you ought to take a long vacation, just relaxing. Well, here’s your vacation. This is what I want from you; lying here and doing absolutely nothing. Taking your nature into consideration, I couldn’t imagine a worse torture for you.”

I closed my eyes as her words sank in. “How long are you going to keep me like this?”

“Why, until you’re completely and totally dependent on me. Who knows? It could take years.”

“*Years?*” I shouted, and was answered with another bolt of pain in my ass. “Goddd, stooopp,” I groaned.

“You should be careful with that,” she advised. “It doesn’t do permanent damage, used occasionally, but if you keep on shocking yourself like that, it may cause an electrical burn.”

“Fuck you,” I said in a fierce whisper. I didn’t feel very defiant, though. It dawned on me that all she had to do was place her hand over my nose and mouth, and no matter how much I tried to fight it, I’d be dead in minutes. I couldn’t even imagine living with that kind of helplessness even for days, much less years. “No one could stand this for years.”

“Tons of people do. Any crippled person does... to a degree.”

“I’ll go crazy.”

“I concede that’s a possibility. But if you go crazy, don’t worry, I’m licensed to deal with that, too!” She laughed.

“Oh, screw you,” I said with as much malice as I could convey in a whisper. “You won’t get away with this. They’ll catch you. You’ll get caught, and I’ll be freed, and I’ll make sure you rot in prison for this.”

“That, too, is a possibility, but not very likely. Think,” she said, “I’m just a thirty-something, well-educated female professional. That doesn’t rate too highly on a list of suspects. You didn’t drive to my office, so I had no need to dispose of a car – thank you for that, by the way. All they’ll know is that, somewhere between my office and your trip home, you disappeared. And thanks to your winning personality, you have tons of people at work who have been far more vocal about doing dreadful things to you than I.”

Everything she said was true, but I still couldn’t give up hope. “You *will* be caught,” I promised.

She smiled and shrugged. “It’s getting late and I’m starving. I hope you don’t mind if I go make supper? I didn’t think so.” She picked up the electric box and adjusted a dial. “There. Those previous shocks were at level five. I bumped it up to level ten. I’d stay quiet, if I were you.”

She moved out of my extremely limited range of sight. I heard her gathering up the leftovers of my kidnapping: the tape, my shredded clothes, loose bits of rope. Then she turned the overhead light off, leaving a small table lamp on, and left the room. I listened to her footsteps clunking down the stairs, followed by a cat’s plaintive meow from somewhere below.

Chapter 4

I spent hours enduring the faint sounds and smells of cooking and listening

to the chatter from a television somewhere below, all the while trying to grasp the creeping horror of my own situation. In the past, I've had nightmares during which I suddenly realized I was dreaming and then could force myself to wake up out of a deep sleep. It usually happened when things got too crazy in the dream for me to keep believing in it. It was such a relief to wake up and realize that all that bad stuff never happened and that real life was going on just as before. I wanted so badly to wake up in a cold sweat in my own bed, free from Evelyn Benedict, but it wasn't happening no matter how hard I willed it.

Perhaps, I wondered as I laid there, I might have been hit by the bus this afternoon instead of boarding it. Perhaps right now I was really lying in a coma in the ICU, and my mind was transforming the medical procedures into some guilt-spawned hallucination of self-torment. Not impossible, I supposed, but that would mean my real body was trashed and in mortal danger. That wasn't a comforting thought. At least, if this was really happening, my life didn't appear to be under any immediate threat, and my body was still in one piece.

Still, I couldn't fully believe that this was truly happening. This sort of thing just didn't *happen*, not in real life. Beating me up, I could understand. Kidnapping, rape, torture, or even murder, as dreadful as those thoughts were, at least fit into my world view. Putting someone in braces so that she was so helpless she couldn't even feed herself, just so she would need you to take care of her? It made no sense whatsoever. I convinced myself that Evelyn was bluffing. She had to be. She was doing this to make me feel repentant about Alice, sure, but I couldn't imagine anyone keeping this up for... years? Certainly not. She would make me suffer until she got bored or satisfied whatever twisted sense of justice she had, then maybe she'd let me go. Maybe she planned on blackmailing me once I was desperate enough to give her anything. Right then I was staking my bets on the police catching her soon. *God, I hope there aren't any photographers around when they come to rescue me and find me like this.* I could see the headline in nice, bold typeface: **Missing Local Woman Found Imprisoned, Wearing Diapers.**

I squirmed in the braces. Vigorous struggle didn't help, so I began to search for weak points – perhaps a cuff that was loose enough to patiently wriggle out of. The problem was, as I soon discovered, there really weren't any weak spots. It really was like being in a full body cast. All I could do was stare at the headboard and the ceiling above it. I could see the small window up high on the wall and tiny crescent of sky. It had turned the indigo blue of a late summer evening.

I started to ache here and there, especially beneath the corset. I wondered if it was bending my ribs. I was certain to be getting a bruise. The leather cuffs of the braces had started itching, and of course I couldn't scratch. Worst of all, I felt

the growing urge to pee. I couldn't even cross my legs or wiggle around to abate the urgency. With deep humiliation, I let go and felt the wet warmth gush into the crotch of the diaper and puddle up below my butt.

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Sometime later I heard Evelyn coming back up the stairs. My insides twisted with fear of what she might do to me next. She entered the room but I couldn't see her until she was right up beside the bed. "Comfy?" she asked. "You must be. You haven't budged an inch since I last saw you."

I glared at her with pure hate.

"Have you been crying? Oh, I see you had an accident. I hope that wasn't what brought you to tears. That's just something you'll have to get used to. Not to worry. I'll change you right away," she said, cheerfully. Having 'neutralized' me certainly put her in a better mood. I wasn't sure which was worse: mean and threatening Evelyn, or happy and cheerful Evelyn. At least the mean part I could cope with. Happy just freaked me right out. My breath was crushed from me again as she used the hoist to raise my butt off the bed. I shamefully endured her cleaning, powdering, and re-diapering me. "That should hold you for the night. Here, would you like me to move you into a better position?"

"Screw you," I said, quietly, but venomously. "Do whatever you want. I can't stop you. That's what you want, right?"

"That *is* what I want, yes," she replied. She loosened the ratchet joints at my hips so that I could bend and she raised me into a sort of reclined sitting position. She piled pillows up behind my back and head for support, then relocked the joints. I was able to see the rest of the room again. It was a blessing compared to staring at the ceiling, but there was no way I was about to thank her. "I know you're probably not very hungry right now, but I brought you something to eat, anyway"

I saw that she had brought what appeared to be a large plastic syringe used for giving enemas. It was filled with a cloudy, yellow fluid. "What are you gonna do? Feed me through my ass, now?" I was acting cavalier, but I was worried she might actually do just that.

"Don't be crass. I'm tired and I don't have the time to spoon feed it to you. It was either this or a funnel. Open up," she said.

"What is it?"

"It's just broth. Quit being so paranoid. Open," she said, again, and thrust the stubby nozzle of the thing between my teeth.

Lukewarm chicken broth filled my mouth and I realized how hungry I was. My stomach might be squished by the corset, but I still hadn't eaten anything all day except poison brownies. *Damn* those brownies. Slowly swallowing, I

managed to down most of the syringe's contents.

"I don't expect thanks for my service, for mine is a thankless task," she said dramatically.

"Good, you aren't getting any." I closed my eyes and tried to pretend she wasn't there.

She sat for a while in silence, just looking at me. "You are so sexy," she finally said.

"*What?*" I gasped in the loudest voice I dared use.

Evelyn was smiling as she looked at my body. She ran her fingers over the belts and braces. "So pretty. Braces are my secret fetish. One of them, anyway. I just love the way they look on a body, especially a strong, healthy body like yours. Unyielding metal embracing yielding flesh, binding it, molding it. You can't fight them; you can only submit to them. Rigid, merciless, mechanical discipline imposing its will upon you, and you're helpless to prevent it. It's so beautiful. I'm so happy to have the opportunity to help you experience them to the fullest. You're a slave to them, now, as much as you are a slave to me."

Whoa. When did we start talking 'slavery'? The longer I was there, the more disturbing my captor became. "Uh, you know? You need to see a shrink. I'm serious."

She laughed. "Physician, heal thyself? But didn't you know? Many psychiatrists are more messed up than their patients." She stretched and yawned. "I would love to stay and chat, but it's getting late, and I am tired and sore. I'm sure you could use some rest, too. So, I'll say goodnight. Oh, by the way, I got a baby monitor. I'm putting it here on the table. If there's an emergency, I'm sure I'll be able to hear you. Night." With that, she switched off all the lights and shut the door behind her.

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That had to be one of the most miserable nights of my life. Amazingly, I actually did manage to fall asleep pretty quickly, but that was due to my utter exhaustion. I didn't sleep for very long. I jerked awake in my form-fitting prison, realized that it wasn't a dream, and tried not to burst into tears. I would have tossed and turned, if I could only have moved. The corset was really starting to hurt bad and I was becoming aware of other aches and pains. I was bruising and my muscles were so sore from fighting against the restraints. The attic room was cooling off and I was starting to get chilly. All I could do was lie there in that one position, in the darkness, smelling unfamiliar smells, and pray for sleep to come and make this all go away.

Eventually, the discomfort became too much to bear. I developed incredibly painful cramps along the soles of my feet, I guess due to the extreme en pointe

position they were forced into. It just kept getting worse and worse until I was on the verge of tears. Something had to be done.

“E-Evelyn? Shit. I need... I need help. Evelyn?” I asked, in a whisper that I hoped would carry over the baby monitor. After two more tries and several minutes with no response, I steeled myself to speak aloud. “Evelyn! Oww! Help me! *Ooooww!*” The pain of the shocks seemed ten times worse than the ones before. It was like having a hot curling iron driven into my bowels. I growled and convulsed in the locked braces.

Finally, I heard the sound of Evelyn rapidly ascending the stairs. She flung the door open and I could see her silhouette. “What? What is it?” she asked, a note of alarm in her voice.

“My feet. You have to do something about my feet,” I whispered, still recovering from the shock.

“What about your feet?”

“They’re so cramped. You have to take these boots off. It hurts so bad.”

There was a moment of silence. “No.”

“But—”

“It’ll pass,” she said. “I thought it was an emergency. Never wake me up for something so foolish again.” Then she was going back down the stairs, leaving me alone with the pain.

At some time during the night, while I was in between brief, fitful periods of sleep, I heard the door creak open. I couldn’t hear or see anything until I felt the mattress bounce a little. I bit my lip, fearing that Evelyn had come back to do something awful to me in the night. I almost screamed when I felt something furry touch my leg, then I had to laugh. It was that damn black cat of Evelyn’s.

“You’re here to torture me, too?” I asked. “Go on, sharpen your claws on my leg. That’d be a fine trick.”

I felt it padding around my body, exploring me. To it, I must have been like a strange, new bit of furniture. I never had any pets, not since my dad accidentally hit and killed our dog in the driveway when I was nine. I never really saw the need for them after I had grown up. Then I felt its soft, warm body pressing against my skin as it curled up next to my thigh. It was purring. I couldn’t help but start crying. I hated Evelyn, and by proxy I hated her cat a little, too. But, just at that moment, the cat was like a little miracle of comfort. And I couldn’t even move to pet it.

Chapter 5

I started awake at the feel of being shaken. The morning light was pouring

into the little window and I groaned. All of my aches and pains immediately sat up and started clamoring for attention all over my body. My crotch and butt were wet from when I had to pee in the middle of the night. I had tried to hold it in as long as I could, but finally had to give in.

“Good morning,” said Evelyn. “You looked so peaceful sleeping, I hated to wake you. It’s time for breakfast.”

Oh, god, why can’t I wake up from this? “Go away. Leave me alone.”

“I don’t think you’d like it very much if I did that. One of these days, I just might. Then where would you be?” Evelyn asked. There was a tray sitting over my lap with a small cup of mixed fruit, a couple of biscuits, and a bowl of cereal. “Come on, open up. Do you like jam on your biscuits? All I have at the moment is raspberry, I’m afraid. Hurry up, now, or I’ll be late for work.”

I let her feed me the fruit in spite of myself. I didn’t like being hand-fed by her, but I was starving and I couldn’t see how a hunger strike would do anything but make me even more miserable. “You’re going to work? Leaving me here like this?” I asked between bites of biscuit.

“Well, I’d like to stay while you settled in, but I don’t want to look suspicious. I need to keep my regular routine. Don’t worry, I think you’ll be fine by yourself.”

I felt heartened upon hearing that. If she wasn’t in the house perhaps I’d have a chance to get loose. Maybe not loose, but at least I would have a chance to try without Evelyn nearby ready to pounce on me. Evelyn held up the bowl of cereal for me to drink some milk from by tipping it to my lips. Once I got a mouthful, and took aim, I tried to spit it on her. I got a few drops on her, but mostly all I managed to do was spew it messily down my front.

“Oh, for the love of Christ,” Evelyn muttered, mopping the milk from my chest and chin. “Are you *trying* to make me late for work? Just for that, I’m not going to change your diaper until I get back.”

“See if I care.”

Ignoring me, she cleared away the tray. “I’ve debated whether or not I should gag you when I leave. I could tell you that I’m situated far enough back on the lot that you wouldn’t alert the neighbors if you screamed, but I don’t think that would stop you. It’s disturbing, the thought someone howling her head off in my house all day long. So. Should I gag you?”

I looked at her, torn between defiance and fear. “I’ll be quiet.”

“Liar. But, I think I have a compromise. This shocking thing has more plug-ins for electrodes,” Evelyn said, plugging more a couple more sticky pads into the device on the bedside table.

“What? Don’t!”

“It’s the only way. I’ll turn the power up to maximum, too.”

“*Please*, don’t.”

“Hush up, Miss Milk-spitter.” She adhered the new pads at the back of my jaw, partly underneath the top of the neck brace. “That should keep you quiet. Give it a try.”

“No!”

“Have it your way. Oh, almost forgot...” she trailed off, picking up the tray and leaving the room. A minute later she returned carrying a large water bottle with a narrow hose. Although I dreaded what nefarious purpose she would put it to, it turned out to nothing more than a container of water for me to drink from. She put an elastic band around my head, under my chin, that held the end of the tube in place near my lips. “If you keep sucking, you’ll pull water up. See? Not completely helpless. Now I *really* have to get going, or else I’ll be late for my first session. Have a nice day, Kathy. I’m sure it will be productive,” she said with a smirk, and left.

I spent the first ten minutes after she left calling her every foul name I could think of. After regaining control of myself, I tried once again to force or wriggle my way out of the braces. All the struggling did was reawaken dormant cramps and my calves and the soles of my feet started aching again. It was unbelievably frustrating. If I had been locked in a cellar, or chained to a pipe or something, I could have at least been able to *try* to get myself free. I could have tried to pry a chain loose, or figure a way out of a locked room, or maybe set up a booby trap... *something*. But there’s not much one can do when one is helpless as a baby and effectively paralyzed.

I wondered how long it would be before someone filed a missing persons report on me, and I suddenly wished I had more friends. Probably no one would notice I was gone until work started, and most of them might just assume I was late. They might try to reach me at home, but most likely nobody would be seriously alarmed until I didn’t show up again tomorrow. And then maybe another few days before the police got off their asses and tracked me down and rescued me. “This *sucks*,” I moaned.

I couldn’t hear anything up there except the distant sounds of a lawnmower and a dog barking somewhere. It didn’t sound like anyone was nearby. I was going to have to try shouting for help. I was scared of the pain, but my nature wouldn’t allow me to simply acquiesce to Evelyn’s wishes so easily. I took a series of deep breaths, as deep as I could take with the corset on me, then screamed at the top of my lungs.

“HEEEL-*uuurrggkk*...” My teeth snapped painfully shut as the electricity flowed through my jaw, dancing across my nerves. It stabbed into the two fillings

I had in my back teeth, feeling like icepicks digging into my molars. My throat constricted and I couldn't make any sound other than a wet gurgle. It felt like an entire hive of wasps was stinging my ass and tongue at the same time. I convulsed as much as the braces would allow. The agonizing pulses kept going for at least ten seconds.

No, I can't give up! I have to ignore the pain. Have to! Someone has to hear me! "Somebody he-aaoooww!" Another wave of shocks. It hurt too much. I couldn't stand any more. Defeated, I slumped into the embrace of the braces, tears flowing down my cheeks. I could still hear the lawnmower mowing, the dog still barking. Nobody had a chance of hearing the short outbursts I could manage. "Oh, god, somebody save me."

I cried on and off for the next hour or so.

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An emotional numbness settled over me. I figured out how to pull the water tube to my lips using my tongue. I had to suck on it a while before water would come through the long tube, but at least it was something to do. I could barely look around the room. All I could see without straining was the half the small room and the ceiling. It didn't take long for me to start getting bored out of my skull. Was this all I had to look forward to? How long did she say she wanted to keep me like this? Years? I was afraid I'd go crazy from boredom within a week. I desperately wanted to be doing something, *anything*. God, I wished I was back home, or even at work. Anywhere that wasn't that room.

I started wondering what was going on at work. All of my projects would be ruined if I wasn't able to get back soon. What if I was here for weeks? How long before they replaced me? Were people already talking in my absence, perhaps someone who had an eye on my position? No, surely, they would let me come back. No one could replace me; I was far too valuable an asset. Damn it all! Evelyn was screwing with my whole life *and* career. The pain and indignities she had forced upon me were bad enough, but if she caused me to lose my job on top of everything else, I swore I would eviscerate her.

Twice more I desperately attempted a call for help, both times I was rewarded with nothing but searing pain. Each time it seemed to hurt worse. It was like I was getting more sensitive instead of inured to it. Around noon, I realized – judging by the growing itching and burning sensation around my crotch and butt – that I was getting a diaper rash from sitting in the soaked, dirty thing all night and morning. *Wonderful. Just wonderful.* I tried to wiggle my butt a little to scratch the itch, but that just made the burning worse. Not long after came the dreadful realization that the cramps in bowels were not related to the cramps everywhere else, and I was soon forced to mess myself. And then I just had to lie in it. *Oh,*

you're going to pay for this. I swear to god.

I measured time by slowly marking the shadows as they crept along the walls. I became intimately familiar with the seven different flower types repeating on the wallpaper – no, eight, I missed the little buds. Those counted as flowers, right? Oh, *two* different kinds of buds! That makes nine flowers. I heard a creak and was startled at seeing the door opening on its own. Then I saw it was just the cat again. “Oh, it’s you.”

The cat just sat in the middle of the oval rug and stared at me.

“Kitty, just between you and me, your owner is a freaky, psycho bitch. Hey, why not pull a Lassie for me? Go get help, kitty, go for help! Go bring that stupid lawnmower guy. Meow until he follows you back here. Help, help, Kathy’s stuck in the well!” I said. The cat had started grooming itself. “Some help you are. Here, kitty. Heeere, puss puss puss.”

Ignoring my calls, the cat curled up in the chair and went to sleep. The room was heating up in the midday sun and it was making me drowsy. With nothing else to do, I napped. Then I would wake up, fight the braces, curse or cry, plot revenge, and then, after going out of my skull from boredom, nap again. Repeat, *ad nauseam*.

Chapter 6

In spite of the fear, hatred, loathing, disgust, and general ill-will I felt towards Evelyn, I was almost relieved when I heard her coming in downstairs. Interacting with someone, even if that someone was a lunatic, had to be better than this interminable boredom. Well, as long as she didn’t hurt me anymore. The cat darted out of the room.

Meow, meow. “Hewwo, Jinxy, mommy’s home!” came Evelyn’s muffled voice. I could hear the sounds of groceries being put away. Then she did other things, I could hear her footsteps going back and forth. I knew she was making me wait on purpose. Finally, I heard her coming up the stairs.

“Ah, there you are,” she said as she entered the room, “exactly where I left you. Are we having fun, yet? Did you enjoy your first day of vacation?”

“You’re going to pay for this,” I growled.

“Something stinks. Oh my, is it you?” she asked.

“I hate you.”

“I’m sure you do,” she replied smugly. “Oh well, better get you changed before supper. I promised I would.” She went about attaching the hoist so she could lift my lower half off the bed to easily access the diapers. Unlike the first time, I was already bent into a half-sitting position, so the corset didn’t crush the

wind out of me when the hoist pulled my feet up – I just kind of tottered backwards, like a see-saw with my butt as the fulcrum. Undoing the dirty diaper, she commented, “My, what a mess! Looks like you got a rash, too. See? That’s what happens.”

I could do nothing but endure her cleaning me up. At least I would be clean again, but for how long? “Do you get off on this?” I grunted. “Perverved sow freak.”

“You know, I could refasten this diaper right over that filthy mouth of yours. Fitting, wouldn’t you say?”

“You wouldn’t dare. You wouldn’t!”

“You don’t think so? You really don’t know me very well, do you?” She finished cleaning and powdering my irritated, burning skin and put a dry diaper on me. It actually felt good, compared to the soggy mess I had been sitting in for about twelve hours. Once I was returned to a normal position, she calmly took the used diaper and made as if to wrap it around my head.

I contorted in the braces seeing the foul mess come close to my face. “No! Don’t! God, no, please, I’m sorry!”

“Do you mean it?”

“Yes,” I whispered vehemently. “I’m sorry.”

“One of these days, you’ll learn that only one person is in control here, and it’s not you.” She took the diaper away and examined the bedside table. “Ah, I see you drank a lot of water today. That’s good. And, according to this, you got four shocks today. Did anyone come to your rescue? I didn’t think so. I told you – you’re too far away for anyone to hear you. All you’re doing is hurting yourself. So, were you shouting for help, or was it an accident?”

“I’m not talking to you.”

Evelyn smirked. “You can talk to me. I’m your therapist. That’s what I’m here for.” Seeing that I wasn’t going to respond to her jabs, she shrugged and went towards the door. “Maybe you’ll feel better after supper.”

“Fat fucking chance, you bloated, twisted–” I started.

She turned around, and she was grinning viciously. “I warned you.”

“No, wait!” I squealed in horror and revulsion as she placed the filthy diaper over my face and wrapped it around my head. I couldn’t believe that she was really doing it. I gagged and screamed loud enough for the shocks to kick in, and then I was convulsing motionlessly in the braces with a dirty diaper over my face. It was sticking to my skin. I couldn’t see anything. I gasped for mouthfuls of air, but all I got was more foulness. I regained control of myself enough to speak. “Can’t breathe! I can’t breathe! Get it off me, get it *off!*” I howled.

Whether she had left, or was just standing aside watching the show, I couldn’t tell.

I sat there for I don't know how long, possibly an hour, quaking with unbelievable disgust and humiliation. I couldn't even shake my head to dislodge it. I was actually furious with *myself* for being so pathetically helpless. Finally, I felt her presence in the room. The diaper was taken away and I could breathe fresh air again. She wiped my face clean with wet naps. "My dinner's ready. I'm going to go eat. If you can behave yourself, I'll feed you later," she said. I was too demoralized to say anything snide when she left that time. Not audibly, anyway.

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Later came, and I submitted to being fed some kind of pasta and chicken dish. I was too hungry to hold a hunger strike by way of protest. I managed to hold my tongue, but I glared at her the whole time. Evelyn was mercifully quiet – for once. After I finished eating, she asked me if I felt a little stiff.

"What do you think?"

"I think it's time for a little calisthenics," she announced.

"Cali-what? Are you serious?" I asked, thinking she was teasing me again.

"Just part of your daily routine," she said. She removed the spreader bars between my legs and unlocked the knee and hip joints of one of the braces. My leg was free! It hurt a little when I tried to move it, though. "Do I need to tell you what I'll do if you start kicking or resisting me?" she asked. I gave her a spiteful glance and looked away. "If I even feel you tense up, I'll beat you. Just try to relax."

She took my leg and made it bend, making my cramped, stiff muscles ache and my joints pop. It hurt, but felt so good at the same time, having been laying straight for over twenty-four hours. I groaned from the combination of pain and pleasure of feeling the cramped muscles stretch. She did that for a while, loosening it up, but not for as long as I would have wished. I saw that she was fixing to re-lock the joints. "No, don't!" I cried and reflexively pushed her away with my foot, causing her to stumble backwards.

Without a word, and before I could even register what she was doing, she picked up that baton thing and struck me hard with it. She aimed for the meaty part of my thigh, between the two brace cuffs. My leg spasmed in pain and I screamed, earning myself a shock at the same time. She smacked me again, and again, in the same spot, as if my quivering leg was a stubborn cockroach she was trying to kill. In seconds I was reduced to a crying, blubbering mess. I stared at her in terror. She was really hitting me! She may have degraded and humiliated me before, but this was the first time she intentionally caused me serious pain, aside from using that shocker device. Suddenly, this all seemed to get a lot more

serious.

“Are you done?” she asked.

“No more, no more!”

“I’m not a – Kathy, pay attention to me – I’m not a sexual sadist. I don’t take pleasure in hurting you. Well, perhaps a little, but that’s just because of who you are. I’d rather not have to do that again. Are you going to make me have to hurt you again?” she asked.

“No, please, no,” I begged.

“Say that you’ll be good,” she ordered.

“I’ll be good, I’ll be good.”

“I don’t want you pushing or resisting me again when I undo your braces. Is that clear?”

“Yes.” God my leg hurt so bad. I would have agreed to anything to keep her from hitting me again.

“I need to do this to keep you limber. Otherwise, in a short time, your tendons would tighten and your joints will freeze like that, and it would be extremely painful for you to try to move them,” she said. “Is that what you want?”

Could that really happen? I was horrified at the thought of my limbs being frozen in position so I could no longer move, even without the braces on. “No.”

“Good.”

Evelyn finished locking the joints, and then went on to my other leg to stretch things out. I was too upset to enjoy it. She did both my arms, one at a time. She spent about thirty minutes, altogether. When she was done, with that, she rolled me onto my side and tightened the corset. She only tightened it a little, but I could feel it. Then she put me in a slightly different position for the night. She had me laying flat on my back, with my knees bent and the toes of my boots poking into the mattress, looking like some blow up doll with her legs spread and ready for sex. I was too cowed to complain about that. I did, however, manage to ask if she would take off the boots and let me flex my feet, too. “Please, they hurt so bad.”

“No, the boots aren’t coming off. Sorry.”

“Please! How...” I was about to ask her how she could be so cruel, then I realized what a stupid question that was. Of *course* she was cruel, or she wouldn’t be doing any of this.

“You’ll get used to it,” she said. “Just like my sister had to get used to living in a wheelchair.”

“That wasn’t my *fault!*” I shouted in a hoarse whisper.

She smirked at me. “Be that as it may,” she said, simply, and left me alone for the rest of the night, except to return briefly to check on me and turn off the

lights before bed.

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That night was a repeat of the first, as was the following day. Fitful, uncomfortable sleep, then having to cope with mind-numbing boredom and more disturbing episodes with Evelyn. It made me think of how they describe being a soldier at war – long periods of boredom punctuated by brief moments of terror. It was driving me crazy. If only I could *do* something, just to keep myself occupied. I wanted to work! Type something, lick envelopes... anything! I wanted something familiar and comforting and distracting. All I could do to pass the time was stare at the wallpaper again all day and listen to the very distant sounds of suburban life. That, and categorize all the aches and pains of my agonizingly cramped muscles, which only seemed to get worse.

The cramps in my feet and calves seemed to be the worst. Sometimes they went mercifully numb, other times it felt like a hot, metal spike piercing through the soles of my feet and continuing straight up to my knees. And there was a constant pain in my waist and ribs from the damn corset. And the pain in my upper belly that surely had to be an ulcer, which sure as hell wasn't being helped by all the stress and fear I was undergoing. And the burning in my crotch and butt from the lingering diaper rash. Even my hands ached from being wrapped up. I could see that I had formed an ugly purple and bruise where she had hit me. A fine addition to all the other bruises I could feel where I had fought the restraints. In desperation, I screamed for help twice that day. I didn't really expect an answer, and I didn't get one.

Chapter 7

Evelyn came back that evening and went about her usual business of preparing supper. I hated how she just went on with her daily life as if she didn't have me imprisoned in her attic. She could at least take off work, or something! I definitely didn't like the fact that after just a few days she already seemed so used to having me around that it wasn't a big deal to her. She just seemed so... *dedicated* to this insanity. I had been forced to give up hope that this was just some hoax, some twisted revenge prank to make me feel sorry about Alice and then I'd be released. No, not if she was so willing to beat me with a big fucking stick. You couldn't do that to someone and then just let bygones be bygones. The protective shell of desperate disbelief had been shattered. What replaced it was dread and a quiet, seething anger at the injustice of it all.

Evelyn came up to check on me. She didn't say much, but she was grinning the whole time as if she had some secret that she was bursting to tell. Eventually I

couldn't stand it any longer and had to ask. "What's got you looking so damn chipper?"

"Do I look happy? Oh, it's nothing," she said. "It's just that the police came to visit me at work today."

I tensed up. "They did?" *They're looking for me already?* I wondered. *That's great! Soon I'll be free!*

"Yes. We had a little chat, since I was one of the last people to see you. Seems you've turned up missing." She laughed.

"Oh, really," I said dryly. *Yeah, you keep teasing me, you cow. Soon you'll be singing a different-*

"Well, I told them we had a full session and you left, just like any other day. But the really good news is that, *apparently*, a couple women have been raped in that area, one even abducted and missing. I mean, that's awful news, and I hope they catch the son of a bitch and fry his balls, if you'll pardon my language. But my point is it *is* good for you and me. They're positive you've been abducted by this guy! Isn't that great?"

My heart sank as I realized the implications. Not only did they have no reason to suspect Evelyn, they had a far more likely suspect in this rapist guy. What if they caught him? Surely he wouldn't admit to abducting me, and he would be telling the truth. But would they buy it? Would they just write me off as a missing victim, or keep investigating and searching? "No, no, noooo..."

"Don't be so glum. It's perfect! Now you don't need to worry about having your vacation disturbed." She hummed cheerfully to herself as she plumped up my pillows.

"I swear... I swear." Rage was pounding in my temples.

"Hmm? What is it you swear, honey?" she asked in a mocking mother-daughter tone.

"You better pray," I growled, barely able to keep my volume under the 'danger' level, "you better pray I don't get loose. I swear I'll make you suffer for this. I'll make what you've done to me seem like... like... I'll make you *wish* you got off as easy as Alice."

Evelyn was smiling. "I'm sure you would. Because you're a nasty little cunt, aren't you?" she asked, in that same, sweetly condescending tone.

"You bet I am! You have no idea," I hissed, spittle flying from my lips. "You're gonna be soo fucking *sorry* when I get my hands on you!"

"Oh, I'm sure I will," she said, kicking off her pumps and hiking up her skirt. "I'm positively terrified."

"They're gonna catch you. They're onto you, you know they are!" I shouted in a hoarse whisper. "Any minute, any day now. Then you better watch your

back!”

Evelyn had been peeling off her pantyhose during my tirade and rolled them up into a squishy, taupe ball. Still smiling, she forced her balled up pantyhose into my mouth. “Open wide.”

“You’ll be sorry!” I shouted one last time before being gagged. I tried to stop her, but even my strong jaw muscles, toned by years of nocturnal teeth-grinding, couldn’t keep out a determined Evelyn. “*Nngaaah!*”

She pushed a large portion of the lightly-scented nylon between my teeth and into my cheeks. She wrapped one of the legs around my head to hold the pantyhose in and tied it off. “Well, while we’re waiting for me to be sorry, I’m going to go ahead and make dinner,” she said, patting me on the head. “You know what your problem is? You still think you’re the protagonist in this little dramatic tableau of ours.”

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I refused to eat anything that night. Evelyn teased me, asking me if her hose tasted so good that it had ruined me for regular food. When she took the soggy wad of nylon out of my mouth, I tried to spit at her. It mostly got on myself. Evelyn found this terribly amusing and gagged me again. I glared at her, breathing furiously through my nose while she changed the diaper, unlocked the brace joints, and went through the routine of stretching my muscles. Moving my leg made the bruise on my left thigh hurt, but that didn’t stop me from doing what I did next.

Once my right arm was free, I waited as she started to bend it. I lunged out, my arm slipping from her grasp, and clipped her hard on the chin with the metal part of the brace that was on my wrist. With a shout of pain, she recoiled and clasped her chin. “That hurt, you little... !”

I felt a mixture of vicious glee at having been able to hurt her a little, mixed with dread in knowing that she was sure to punish me. *Oh shit, I’m in for it now*, I thought as she retrieved that damned baton. I flailed my free arm as much as I was able in the brace, trying to make it difficult for her to hit me. I managed to yank the wad of pantyhose from my mouth. “No, wait, don’t!”

“Are you sorry you hit me?” she asked me, brandishing the bludgeon.

Crap, what was I supposed to say? I swallowed my pride, moved by self-preservation. “Y-yes, I’m sorry. You don’t have to hit me with that,” I said, trying to sound calm and reasonable.

“Are you? Then lay your arm still and take your punishment.”

“Whaaat?”

“Either do that, or I’ll beat you twice as long, and twice as hard,” she said, twisting the blunt end of the baton against the palm of her free hand.

“I... I won’t do that. Please, I can’t,” I begged, not wanting to allow her to hit me. It wasn’t as if I could do even anything with an arm free. Even with both arms’ braces unlocked, I wouldn’t be able to free myself from bondage at all. It was all locked on. I was starting to truly understand how limited my options were in the situation I was in, and I didn’t want to get hurt even worse. As I thought about my lack of options, I was slowly lowering my arm. She was watching me do it, and I saw a tiny confident smirk affect the corner of her lips. That made the anger come flooding back and I yanked my arm away. “No!”

With hardly any difficulty at all, Evelyn snagged my arm and held it down so that I wouldn’t jerk, and rapidly hit me half a dozen times around my upper arm. She had beat my leg a lot harder, but the individual blows on my arm hurt more since I didn’t have as much padding there. I cried and made noises, but at least I was able to keep myself from getting shocked for being too loud. She locked the braces in place.

“I can keep doing this for as long as you want. It takes me very little effort to cause you a great deal of pain. Take that into consideration when you’re thinking of acting up again. You know, I should think you’d be more appreciative. I don’t have to move you at all. I could just let your joints freeze in position the way they are. Keep this up and I will.”

Appreciative, my ass. I want to be free! I sobbed quietly to myself. I couldn’t bear being so helpless to someone I loathed so much. “Just leave me alooone.”

“You want me to leave you alone? Fine.” She retrieved some things from one of the dresser drawers. They turned out to be a some soft earplugs and a blindfold. The snug blindfold was fuzzy inside and blocked all light. It was strangely violating to feel her poke the squishy plugs into my ears. To my surprise, she took a second pair of earplugs and inserted them deep into my nose, forcing me to breathe through my mouth.

“There,” she said, speaking loudly so I could hear her, “I’ve set the control to zero tolerance. I wouldn’t make a peep, if I were you. I’ll leave you alone and we’ll see how you like it.” She left, or I assumed she left, leaving me in darkness.

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The next experience surpassed any of the hell I had experienced so far. It was horrible. Prisoners in solitary confinement can pace their cells. Even lunatics in a straightjacket and padded room could flop around. Not me. I couldn’t see, I couldn’t hear, I couldn’t even smell. I couldn’t move or make a sound. I couldn’t do *anything* except exist. The only thing I could do for myself was suck on the water tube when I got thirsty. I only tested the shocker once by making the lightest sound (she might have been bluffing, after all), and I suffered for it. If

anything, the loss of my other senses made the pain worse. *All* the pain was worse. The cramps were magnified tenfold, the hunger pangs became agony, the bruises throbbed constantly, and even the diaper rash I was recovering from burned with a fresh vigor.

I was able to keep track of time for a little while, but before long it got all screwed up. I wet and messed myself again and had to lie in it, knowing that it would make the rash even worse. I was desperate for that cat to come in and sit next to me, just for some company and a little sensory input. It didn't come. Had an hour just passed, or was it just a minute? When I got cold and shivery, I assumed it had to be late at night, but that might have just been in my head. Or was it morning already? Had Evelyn gone to work? *Please come back, please come back*, was the mantra going through my head.

I started thinking crazy things, like maybe she was just going to let me starve to death in darkness and silence. Maybe she would just sit there and watch as my futile struggles grew more desperate, then weaker, then stop altogether. I cried hysterically from imagining it. No, surely she wouldn't do that after all the trouble she had gone through to get me there. But *what if?* Or what if she got in a car wreck while going to work and got hospitalized or killed? How long would it be until someone came into her house? What if she was going to leave me there until I went completely out of my mind? I feared that that wouldn't take long. I was already having hallucinations of the corset and braces getting tighter, crushing the life out of me.

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Torn by pain, hunger, and the tortures of my own mind, I had grown so desperate that I kept having to consciously stifle my screams before I voiced them and hurt myself. Without warning, I felt a touch at my forehead. It startled me so much I almost shouted just from surprise. Evelyn peeled away the blindfold and I was momentarily blinded by the lights in the room, even though they were dim. Evelyn stood beside the bed, studying me sternly, but all I could think was *Thank god I'm alive! I can see again! She didn't leave me here to die!* I was euphoric.

She plucked the plugs out of ears and nose. Air flowed into my ears and my senses were flooded with the odors of the room and my body, and the smell of food somewhere downstairs. "Well?" she asked. "Are you sorry, yet? Still want to be left alone? I turned down the controller, so you can speak quietly again."

"Ah... ah," I croaked, my own voice sounding loud to my ears. "P-please. Please don't do that to me again."

"I will if I you make me. And I can make it a lot worse for you, believe me. It's only been about twenty-four hours. I could make this last a lot longer and be much more unpleasant."

“No, please, no.”

“I don’t want you to move or fight me when I stretch your limbs out for you anymore. I want you to be nice and still.”

“I can’t do this,” I whimpered. “I can’t handle this. Please.”

“I didn’t say any of this was going to be easy, but it *is* going to happen. Now,” she said softly, “tell me that you need me.”

I bit my lip, unwilling to look her in the eye.

“*Say it.*”

“I need you,” I whispered, my voice trembling with humiliation. I would probably have agreed to anything just then, just to keep her from returning me to that isolation.

It seemed to satisfy her. “Alright then, open up. It’s broth again, I’m afraid.”

It may have been just broth, but I was so hungry it could have been ambrosia. I couldn’t believe how grateful I was just to be able to stare at that damn wallpaper again. But as wonderful as it was just then, I knew that it wouldn’t take long for the boredom to settle in on me again.

Chapter 8

Evelyn was happy the next morning because it was Friday, and that would mean she would be able to spend the whole weekend at home with me. Great. I got spend another tedious day staring at the ceiling (she had left my lying almost flat on my back), contemplating if boredom alone could actually cause someone to go insane. I tried to think about work, to think about what everyone would be doing at a certain time in the day and planning projects I’d never get a chance to finish just to keep my mind occupied. It was hard, though. My thoughts kept wandering away on meaningless, frustrating tangents, going in circles. How could it be so difficult just to concentrate on something when there were no distractions?

Evelyn was more excited than usual when she got back home. Apparently, some package she had been waiting for had arrived. She sat a big cardboard box on the floor of the room and started digging into it. I couldn’t see what she was pulling out, but I could hear the light tinkling of styrofoam peanuts landing on the floor. I knew it had to be bad news for me, but I was consumed by curiosity, nonetheless. “What is it? What did you get?”

“Oh, Kathy, you’ll like this,” said Evelyn from the floor. I could just see the top of her head out of the corner of my eyes as she unwrapped something that sounded heavy. “I’ve been waiting for it to arrive all week. You don’t care for diapers much, do you?”

“You know I don’t,” I said sourly. I was still sitting in soaked ones right then, and the rash was driving me crazy.

“Well, this will take care of that little issue. It will also help in relieving you of some more control. Now be quiet, I need to read the instructions.”

Instructions? For not being stuck in diapers? Just let me the hell up and I wouldn’t need diapers, you psycho! I silently berated her with a snarl on my lips. *And what’s this about relieving me of control? Exactly how much control is it you think I have at the moment?* I wasn’t about to say anything out loud, though, not after the previous day’s experience. I sighed and waited with fear-tinged impatience to learn what the next indignant phase of my torture would be.

After a while, Evelyn was ready and hoisted my lower half up off the bed. The corset dug into me, since I was braced lying flat, until she unlocked the hip joints and my torso flopped back onto the mattress. My booted feet were high in the air and my butt was exposed. She took away the diaper and dried me. As distasteful as the thought was, I was actually getting used to her doing that. I felt her peeling off the electrode things that shocked my ass when I got too loud. That seemed promising. What came next, however, was the worst physical violation so far. “This may hurt a little,” she warned.

I felt something hard, cold, and slippery nosing between my cheeks and press against my anus. Then she started pushing it inside. It was narrow at first, but quickly widened until it felt like it was tearing the tender orifice in half. I tensed up all over and found myself by crying freely at this invasion. *She’s raping me, she’s raping me in my ass, oh my god I can’t believe this, make this stop, this isn’t right!*

“Stoop! Please! It hurts!” I shouted in the loud whisper I was being forced to come accustomed to.

“I know,” she said, actually managing to sound a little sympathetic. “It won’t for long. Just for a minute. Bear down, it might help.”

I whimpered through clenched teeth. The pain got worse as the intruder got even wider. I was positive I had to be bleeding by then. Then suddenly it narrowed, and the insulted muscles clamped down like a vice around the narrow stem. She stopped pushing. I could still feel some part of the thing pressing against my cheeks on the outside, and I tried to form a mental image. I wasn’t very well versed on the anatomy of sex toys, but based on what it felt like, she had just stuck a butt plug in me. *A big one.* That was her solution to wearing diapers? Just plug me so nothing would come out? I’d explode! I heard the sound of an air-pumping bulb being squeezed and felt a strange fullness in my bowels.

“I’m inflating it so you won’t accidentally pass it,” she explained.

“What *is* it? What are you *doing*?” I cried.

She didn't answer me. I felt her parting my pussy lips and probing around inside. *Oh, god, what now?* I wondered. She located my urethra and gently, but without hesitation, thrust a flexible, narrow tube inside. I knew it was useless, but I begged her stop anyway. The tube kept sliding deeply into me. It stung, but that was nothing compared to the humiliation I was suffering. I guessed she got it where she wanted it when I felt my bladder emptying. A catheter.

She messed around with the plug and catheter a little more, then announced, "Alright, I think that should do it." She lowered my butt back to the bed and arranged me so that I was in the semi-sitting position with pillows at my back. I could see the narrow catheter tube winding from my crotch to the edge of the bed. Accompanying it was a much thicker tube that could only be attached to the nightmarish butt plug. Sitting against the wall, partially hidden from my limited field of vision, was some kind of machine into which the tubes ran. It looked like it had a water tank on top of it. "Nice and tidy. Alright, let's test it!" she said excitedly.

"Test *what?*"

She went to the machine and turned it on. "It's a device to assist bed-ridden individuals with their ablutions. This should make things so much easier. On a schedule, it pumps water from the reservoir, here, through the tube and into you. Then it pumps it back out into this sealed container for easy disposal. Oh, and it also collects your urine, so no more rashes. Good news, right?"

An automatic enema machine? Oh, god! I couldn't get my head around the absurdity of the situation. Evelyn pushed a button and the machine began to hum quietly. A few moments later, I felt warmth filling my insides. It kept going until I could hardly stand the pressure in my bowels. The corset compressing my guts probably didn't help. Then it stopped.

"Does that feel about right? The volume, I mean. I can adjust it, but this looks good. Naturally, the stainless steel butt plug isn't standard issue attachment for medical equipment. I found a place online that makes them. It's amazing what you can find online," she said. "It should keep everything inside for ten minutes. You know, to loosen everything up." Evelyn went about cleaning the up the packaging and taking it downstairs. All I could do was squirm in the braces, feeling powerful cramps in my belly and an insane urge to go the bathroom, but I couldn't. Nothing leaked around the edges of the plug. Ten minutes later, Evelyn watched with interest as the thing turned back on and drained me empty, while I panted with discomfort. Then it started filling me up *again*.

"It's broken. It's doing it again," I said, fighting the urge to panic. I had an image of the machine not stopping, but continuing to pump water into me until something inside me burst.

“That’s just the rinse cycle,” Evelyn said with clinical detachment.

“I’m not a goddamn... washing machine,” I groaned as my bowels were refilled. This time, however, there was no holding period, and I was emptied as soon as I was full.

Evelyn pushed a few buttons on the thing. She looked extremely satisfied with herself. “It works great! This machine wasn’t cheap, but it’s worth it. See how well I take care of you? Do you see? I’ll set it for twice a day. I think that should be enough, don’t you?”

“Hooray,” I said weakly. For some reason, the experience had exhausted me.

“Oh and just a word of warning – I attached electrodes to the plug, instead of your butt. That way, should you get too loud, the punishment should be a much more intimate experience.”

Alarmed, I strained to see the electrode wires that lead to that horrible shocking device were back in place, disappearing under my butt. *Oh, I did not want to know that*, I thought.

“I think this is all very fitting. This machine complements your braces nicely. Hard, cruel braces controlling your body; a cold, cruel machine controlling when you go to the bathroom. Doing what they’re made to do, to you, whether you like it or not. Yes, I like that very much.” Evelyn’s expression took on a malicious, teasing aspect. “You know – or did you not? – that a person can become dependent on enemas. The body gets so used to them after a while that it just cannot go without them. Isn’t that an interesting thought? I wonder how long that will take with you. I want you to think of that happening, how even if you were rescued, you would still need to stick a nozzle in your ass to irrigate yourself out, every day, for the rest of your life.”

“That won’t happen.” I glared at her through tear-filled eyes. “Not ever.”

“Of course not,” she agreed, “because I’ll be there to do it for you.”

“Please no more. Please shut up. I can’t... I can’t deal... with this.”

Evelyn shrugged, good-naturedly. “Alright. Want me to leave you alone?”

“Yes. No, wait, not like that!” I exclaimed, remembering the words she used before she left me in isolation the other day.

She laughed at my fear. She got pleasure from it. “I’m going to make supper,” she said, and went back downstairs.

I heard Evelyn switch on the tv downstairs – still too quiet for me to hear it clearly to entertain myself – and start cooking. I could hear the cat playing with the empty box and batting the styrofoam peanuts around. *What a nice, normal home life I have*, I thought, then found myself trying to resist the urge to laugh.

And why not laugh? Less than a week ago I had been a successful

businesswoman with a promising future. Now I was trapped in a bed and covered from head to foot in braces. From upwardly-mobile to *immobile*. The police thought some guy had kidnapped me, and god knew how long it would be until I was rescued. I had been humiliated, threatened, violated, beaten, gagged, deprived of my senses, nearly suffocated with a messy diaper, silenced by pain, and now I had an automatic enema sucking away at my guts. Not to mention that I was going crazy with boredom. All in under a week. What wasn't there to laugh about?

Chapter 9

Saturday morning I was allowed to sleep in. Amazingly enough, in spite of the constant cramps and fear, I was beginning to sleep a little more soundly. It was probably just exhaustion. I woke to the bizarre sensation of my belly being filled with water. I made a yelp of alarm and got to experience the new butt plug shooting electricity through my ass while my jaw was stabbed through with agony. Wonderful. Awake for twenty seconds and already in tears. I wept through the duration of the enema.

"I *hate* you," I snarled at Evelyn when she came to bring me breakfast.

"My, my. Get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning? Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot. You can't get up at all."

"I despise you, I *loathe* you, I—"

"But you can't do anything about it, can you?" she asked as she sat the bed tray across my lap. "And don't think that doesn't thrill me. Now open up."

She continued to chatter idly while she fed me, as companionably as if I was an old friend rather than a kidnap victim who wanted to throttle her. I was getting used to being ignored like that; she always dismissed my anger as if it was of no more consequence than a spoiled child's predictable tantrum.

"Weekends are my gardening days," she was saying, popping a bit of fruit into my mouth. "It's my little hobby. Having to deal with other people's problems all week, it's such a relief to just get my hands dirty. Nice, organic work, instead of abstracts and emotional problems. The flower beds definitely need weeding. I've had to neglect them a little since I brought you here. Do you like gardening?"

I looked away. I didn't want to share anything more about myself than she already knew.

"You didn't give yourself time for many hobbies, did you? Well, now the chance has passed. You really should have tried harder to spend more time enjoying the simple pleasures in life. It might have made you a better person. But that's neither here nor there. I'm going to run to the nursery and pick up some

mums. Oh, and a flat of alyssum. Mustn't forget the alyssum. If you ask me nicely, I might get a pretty flower while I'm there to brighten up your room. Hmm? How about a cactus? That might compliment your personality."

In response, I spat a half-chewed peach slice at her. It hit her in the chest. My aim was improving. Evelyn plucked the peach of her lap and dropped it onto the plate, then picked up the tray. "You keep that up. See where it gets you. Well, I know what *I'm* going to do today. What are *your* plans for today?"

"Besides hating your guts?"

She smiled. "Yes, besides that. Oooh, I think I know what you'll do. You're going to just lie here and relax. Sound fun to you? Good."

She kept coming up to check on me throughout the day, occasionally streaked with dirt and sweat. Once, she entered with a conspiratorial look on her face that made me instantly uneasy. "Look what I found," she said, and showed me a large brown snail that she was holding by its shell. The snail had to be over an inch long and its eyestalks were sticking out and moving around. I shuddered. I hated bugs and anything without legs, and snails had the ickiest of all those features all at once. "It must have avoided the snail poison," she said. "I have nothing against them personally, but they do tend to munch up a garden in no time at all. I have to sprinkle snail poison pellets to keep them under control. Did you know they're hermaphroditic? They can even fertilize their own eggs."

"Great. Thanks for the biology lesson."

"I saw it and it reminded me of you. Lives inside a shell, defends itself by being slimy... that sort of thing."

I glared at the ceiling. "Nice."

"I just brought it up because I thought you might be getting lonely. Everybody needs a friend. So here you go."

"Huh? What are you-? No!" I watched in helpless horror as she reached over and placed it on my face. Oh, *god*, I could feel its cold, wet foot spread out and glue itself to my skin, right near the corner of my mouth. I let out a strangled moan of pure revulsion.

"Aw, that's sweet. It *likes* you."

"Get it off! *Unnnh*. You're such a... *freak!*" I hissed through gritted teeth. Snail torture? Who *does* that sort of thing to someone? I could feel it moving. My hair stood on end.

Evelyn looked quite delighted with herself. "I'll leave you two to get acquainted. Ta."

For the next half-hour or so I had to keep myself from hyperventilating as the slimy thing made its agonizingly slow way over my lips, nose, and even over my *eyelid*. Were these things toxic to touch or something? I didn't know! All I

knew was it was gross, gross, gross! Finally, and mercifully, it moved off my face and into some plastic part of the head brace. Evelyn came and plucked it off some time later. She told me it had gone to sleep. After she left, I conjured up some very elaborate fantasies of her somehow managing to choke on her own snail poison.

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Other than that disgusting and traumatic episode, the day was uneventful. In the past, that snail thing would have been enough for me to retaliate physically, but I didn't dare fight when she worked my stiff, aching muscles and did the daily tightening of the corset that evening. One painful beating might not have been enough to keep me quiescent, but two was more than enough. Her taunting attitude softened somewhat throughout the day, to the point where she barely said a word during supper. Her silence was a welcome change.

Falling asleep in the darkness was becoming an automatic response. Once the lights were out, the only thing there was to do was sleep. Except for pain and soreness, there was nothing particularly physically tiring during the days, and certainly nothing mentally challenging. As a result of that and the boredom naps I took throughout the day, I wasn't particularly tired enough for a full night's sleep. However, lying there in the darkness without even the wallpaper to look at, my mind was starting to just shut itself down once the lights were off.

I was just starting to doze off, some time after Evelyn had shut off the lights. I was startled to hear her coming back up the stairs. I assumed she had forgotten something, though I couldn't think of what that could be. I'd had my evening enema, the shocker thing was on, as always, and my braces were all locked in position – I was set for the night. I saw her silhouette in what little moonlight could come through the small window. I felt her touch my arm.

“Wha? What's going on?” I asked.

“Hush, I don't want to hear you,” she said. I saw the LED lights of the control device move in the darkness as she picked it up. “Setting it to max sensitivity. You need to be very, very quiet.”

I gulped. I hated it when set it to that. I couldn't whisper, couldn't even groan. I almost made a noise, though, when I felt her gripping the braces and jostling me, tugging me closer to the edge of the bed. I was afraid she was going to drag me right off and let me fall onto the floor. She stopped, and rearranged the pillows. The braces had me lying almost flat on my back, so not too many pillows were necessary. She went around the foot of the bed and I heard her curse softly to herself as she tripped on the enema tube that stretched across the floor. The mattress creaked, and I realized she was climbing into bed with me. *Oh, no, what now?* I wondered.

“Shhh, be quiet,” she told me, though shushing me was completely unnecessary. She laid down in bed next to me. I was bounced on the mattress as she scooted her way over to me. Her nightgown brushed against my legs as she settled herself in. She was lying onto her side, facing me in the dark. I could feel her fingers tracing the bars and leather straps of the braces, slowly caressing the claustrophobic prison. I inwardly cringed as I felt her touching my bare skin.

What are you doing? Don't touch me like that! How dare you! I cried with impotent rage.

“I couldn't sleep,” she finally said, her face close enough that I could feel her breath on my ear. “All day long I've been thinking about you. Couldn't get my mind off you, really. Thinking of you up here, in your beautiful braces. So lovely.” Her voice was soft and drowsy. I might have assumed she was a little drunk, but I knew she wasn't. She was aroused, is what she was. My skin crawled. Her hand explored the braces and my body. She didn't do anything overtly sexual, thank god, but she was touching me with such intimate familiarity. Worse, she did it *possessively*, as if I was a pet like that black cat of hers. She edged closer to me, hugging me, and I could feel her soft belly resting on my arm. I didn't imagine that could be very comfortable for her, what with me being covered with metal bars and joints. She spoke into my ear. “It makes me so happy when I think of you being up here, needing me. Makes me feel warm.”

In the quietest voice I can manage, little more than an exhalation, I breathed, “I hate you. I hate you so much.”

I wasn't even sure if she heard me. Then she replied, “That's okay. I'm starting to not hate you.”

Chapter 10

Over two weeks passed before anything eventful happened. The only thing happening was boredom. Stagnation. Ennui. Monotony. Dullsville. I had a lot of time to think of words to describe my experience. A whole fucking thesaurus worth. I never would have guessed that being kidnapped could be so maddeningly boring. Wake up, get an enema, get fed breakfast, stare at the walls, fight the braces, nap, get fed supper, stare at the walls again, nap, get another enema, then sleep. Day after day. I saw that damn wallpaper on the back of my eyelids. Sometimes the cat, Jinx, would come into the room and sleep on my bed. That was a huge event for me.

As much as I detested admitting it, I was starting to look forward to Evelyn coming up to sit and talk to me. Except for when she behaved cruelly towards me, anyway. I hated her as much as ever, but at least her presence broke up the

tedium. I didn't have much to say to her. Heck, nothing happened to me that I could talk about, even if I wanted to. What could I say? 'Oh, hey, I heard a blue jay outside the window today. Twice! Isn't that exciting?'

I was developing a strange new talent, though. Driven by the weight of unending boredom, I found myself becoming able to just shut my mind off. Sort of. I don't know what exactly to call it. Maybe a trancelike state, or even meditation, I don't know. It just seemed like when the lack of stimuli became too much to bear, I'd just kind of go blank. I'd still be awake, I guess, but my thoughts would just kind of drift apart, and then I didn't think of anything at all. Hours would pass and I'd be only vaguely aware of what was going on around me. The problem was, it didn't always work consistently or very often, and beyond that, I got so freaked out about the image of me lying there, staring blank-eyed at nothing for hours, like some kind of braindead person, that it discouraged me from trying to do it on purpose.

A couple times a week Evelyn would come and sleep in my bed. She would whisper things in my ear, like about how beautiful I was and junk like that. She would rub the braces as if they were a part of my body that I could feel. She would touch me, not exactly sexually, but she would touch me all the same. It still made my skin crawl, but I couldn't help but start to feel... I don't know. I was just so isolated and *alone*. It was just a relief to have another human being there after all that quiet nothingness, even if it was *her*. Sometimes I even caught myself feeling grateful for the attention. Can you believe that? Grateful! I would be disgusted with myself afterwards.

A few times I tried to call for help again and got shocked for it. The horrible, invasive pain of those shocks, especially now that they went straight into me through the plug, was starting to really have an effect on me. I hated it. I feared it. It made me ill just to think about it, and I would have to steel myself for hours just to get the courage to make a simple loud noise. Then it would be even longer before I had the courage to try again. Two days would pass before I dared cry out, then three. It was getting harder and harder to justify causing myself that pain. I knew no one would come, but it just felt like not trying was the same as giving up and resigning myself to stay there for as long as Evelyn wanted. I just couldn't do that.

The awful truth that I might never get rescued was starting to sink in. I had been laying in that bed for over three weeks. If the police had any leads, surely they would have found me by then? All I could do was pray for a real opportunity to get free myself. I dreamed of escaping, bursting through the front door and running naked through the streets screaming for help. Or maybe if I got free, before I went for help, I'd tie Evelyn in bed in for a few weeks. Let her see how

she liked it. Thoughts like that kept me entertained through many long, dull hours.

Mercifully, and disturbingly, I was kind of getting used to being in the braces and corset. Not that I found them comfortable at all, but the cramps were going away. It used to feel like I had hot wires digging into my muscles, but that eventually passed. My ballet-pointed feet and calves, which had had some of the worst of the cramps, seemed to have gone numb. I hadn't been able to so much as wiggle my toes for almost a month, but now I couldn't even feel them, aside from the occasional pins and needles. There was no longer as much pain in my body, which was good, but the physical numbness also caused me to feel even more disconnected from everything.

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"You wouldn't believe work today," Evelyn told me one evening as she was starting to bending my limbs. "Three obsessive compulsives in a row. One of them couldn't sit still until I let him arrange all the books in my office according to size. Some days I just want to smack 'em in the face and tell them to get over it. But that seldom works. According to literature."

"Evelyn..."

"Yes?" She was working the kinks out of my right leg.

"Listen. Just let me go. I won't tell anyone."

She sighed and shook her head, like a mother refusing to get her pleading child something ridiculously impractical, such as a pet pony for her birthday.

"We've been through this before."

"No but listen. I-I understand what Alice went through. What she's still going through. I understand now how mean I was. I've had a lot of time to think about it. I'm really, truly sorry for what I did. Okay? I'll send money to her every month, whatever you want. Anonymously, if you want. I'll get on my knees and beg her for her forgiveness. Just let me go."

"Kathy, you've told me all this before. It's not going to work."

"But listen! I won't tell anyone I was here. I *swear*. I'll never tell a soul for as long as I live. I swear to god. I swear on my *life*," I said, desperation creeping into my voice. "I'll tell the police that I had a nervous breakdown. I just ran off to... to Seattle. Anywhere! They'll probably be pissed at me, but people'll be too glad that I'm alive and safe to investigate it much. Right? I... I've probably lost my job, but I can get another. I'll do any job you say. Something non-stressful, like you want for me. I could do something with plants, like you like to do. Wouldn't that be good? Good for me? Low stress, right?"

"My, my. You have been thinking a lot about this."

"Please! I'm begging you. It'll work. I know it will. I've changed. Just give me a chance. Let me go, please, let me go." My loud whisper voice was

cracking from doing so much talking. I had tried all of this before, but I couldn't keep it from coming out of mouth. Barely a day went by lately without me trying to bargain with her. I knew I sounded pathetic. I knew my pleading did nothing but entertain her. It probably even turned her on, for all I knew. I just couldn't help it. "You're getting tired of me, right? Taking care of me is just a burden, right? If not already, it will be soon. Come on, just think about it, okay? I won't tell anyone, just let me have my life back!"

Evelyn locked my leg back in its usual straightened position and smiled patiently at me. "You can keep this up if it helps you. I don't mind. But it's not going to do you any good. And it's no good to delude yourself about things that aren't going to happen. I'm becoming quite used to taking care of you. I enjoy it."

"No! No you don't enjoy this. You don't. You *can't*. Please. Let me go. I'll be good," I cried. My lower lip was trembling. If I had foreseen myself simpering like this a few weeks ago, I would have been disgusted. Trying to maintain dignity didn't mean much anymore. "I'll be so good. I-I'll even come back! Yes, I'll come back. Maybe once a month? And you can do whatever you want to me for I-like a weekend or something. You can put me in braces and everything. Or every weekend! I'll even visit you on my vacations! Just let me have my life back the rest of the time!"

Evelyn laughed with genuine delight. "Good heavens! That's a new one. Offering to come back part-time, are you? You really must be getting desperate."

"Just tell me you'll think about it, okay?"

"No, I won't. You're staying right here, my bit-of-soft-and-metal. You're going to have to get used to it. I know it's hard to accept. You're mourning your old life. It's perfectly natural."

I closed my eyes and stayed quiet while she finished with my arms. Tears trickled down the sides of my face and into the cups of my ears. I knew it was useless to keep trying. Maybe some day she would listen to me and I could convince her to let me go, but not right then. She was still having too much fun. A few minutes later I felt her pressing the skin on my forearm, making it taut to expose the skin that was normally covered by the snug wrist cuff of the brace.

"Oh, my goodness!" she exclaimed. "You have a pretty bad rash." She went on to examine the skin under other cuffs. "You have them all over. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would it have mattered?" I asked sullenly. Truth was, I didn't even know I had rashes. The cuffs had always been hot and itchy. Lately, it had been getting worse, but I had just lumped that in with all the other discomforts in my body.

"Of course it does. This is my fault. You're my responsibility. I don't want

you getting sick on me.” She sighed. “Alright. I’ll just have to take everything off so I can bathe you.”

“You’ll... what?” I couldn’t believe it. My mind suddenly raced with possibilities that might come from being unbraced. Chances for escape.

“Maybe tomorrow evening. It’s going to be a chore.”

Chapter 11

All the following day, while Evelyn was at work, I stared at the walls and daydreamed (plotted, to be more accurate) about what I could do once the braces were taken off. I tried to plan for different scenarios. I also thought deep and long on delicious ideas for the revenge that I would do to her if I got the upper hand. Assuming she tied me up first, it might be difficult to have an opportunity to free myself, but if one came I had to take it. I had to take *control*. I was the only one who could help me now. I thought perhaps if I could lure her into complacency, acting much more weak or willing than I actually was, then she might get careless. I was so excited I almost couldn’t nap.

Once Evelyn got home I tried to act casual. Well, sort of casual. I didn’t want to think I was *too* eager, but she was still well aware of how much I was looking forward to being free of that damnable immobilizing cage. As the evening wore on, when I could no longer stand the suspense, I asked her, “You *are* going to take the braces off tonight, right? Like you said?”

“Yes, of course. I have to deal with those rashes before they turn into something worse. I do want things to go smoothly, however, so I’ve just been making sure everything is ready,” she replied distractedly, during one of her trips upstairs. “I’ll do it after supper.”

“Why not now? I just... you could let me feed myself, just for once. Please? I won’t try anything, I’ll be good. I mean it. I just want to be out of these things, just for a little while,” I said. “I’ve been really good lately, you know I have.” I winced inwardly at my ingratiating whine. What was worse, I was so desperate that it really wasn’t an act.

“Don’t be silly,” replied Evelyn. My words, or their tone, must have aroused that side of her that got damp at my helplessness. “You know that feeding yourself is against the rules. What kind of vacation would this be if you had to lift a finger to feed yourself? All these months of treatment and letting you be free of the burden of responsibility would be for naught. I would have to start all over. You don’t want that, do you?”

“Come on, just—”

“I will decide when the braces come off, not you. And why is that?” she

asked me. I mumbled something and she leaned forward. “What? I didn’t catch that.”

“Because you’re the one in control.”

“That’s exactly right.”

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After feeding me dinner, which consisted of soup and banana pudding (which I hate, but ate anyway), Evelyn sat next to the bed and watched me. I was getting impatient and nervous. I worried she might know that I was planning something and was maybe waiting for me to show my hand, as it were. She had brought a bucket full of steaming water and some sponges and soap. *Great, a psycho sponge bath*, I thought. I’d been hoping for a real bath, in a bathtub. Still, the sight of hot water was almost enough to make me salivate. I hadn’t had a bath in a month, after all. Boy, would a long hot shower have ever felt so good? A sponge would have to do.

“You look excited,” Evelyn observed.

“I can’t it help it,” I admitted. “I can’t wait to be out of these things. And the boots, oh my god. That’s worth getting a rash just to be out of the boots.”

“You know you’re going right back in them,” she said. “Boots, braces, and all.”

“Uh, yeah,” I said uncomfortably. I felt flushed. “Well, it’ll be nice to be out of them for a little while, anyway. So... so when are we gonna do this?”

“In a minute.”

“Good. I’ve been looking forward to this all day.” I felt an unpleasant sense of vertigo hit me from out of nowhere.

“I can see that. It certainly has made you chatty.”

“Well, it’s... I just... oh god,” I moaned. I was so dizzy. Drowsy, too. The one other time I had felt like this was in Evelyn’s office, after she had fed me poison brownies. *Oh, no!* “No... no you didn’t just... you drugged me again! You bitch!”

“Just relax, Kathy. Don’t fight it.”

I gritted my teeth, quelling the urge to vomit. I was going to pass out and there was nothing I could do about it. I wouldn’t get a chance to escape. I wouldn’t even get a chance to experience being out of the braces. I wouldn’t even get to feel the bath! “It’s not *fair!*” I cried, before slipping into unconsciousness.

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Splitting headache. Light stabbing into my eyes. Drugged.

The bitch. Oh, that evil bitch.

I groaned. In my disorientation I instinctively tried to press my hands to my eyes, but they were fixed in position at me sides, as always. I waited for the pain

drilling into my eyes to fade before daring to open them. I felt warm and snug all over. That was kind of pleasant. I was startled to feel something pressed to my lips. Evelyn was speaking to me. “Take these. It’s some ibuprofen. It should help.”

“Eat me,” I mumbled, completely out of it. I rambled on a little, completely incoherent, and trailed off into silence.

“Come on, it’ll make you feel better,” she insisted.

I allowed her put them on my tongue and swallowed them with a sip of water from a cup held to my lips. I felt so wiped out. I might have fallen asleep again for a little bit. When I finally did come to enough to form coherent thoughts, I said, “You drugged me.”

“I didn’t want to,” she replied, “but it was necessary. I didn’t want to worry about fighting with you the entire time. You were planning something. I know how your wicked little mind works. This way was easier on both of us.”

I bit back a pointless, bitter retort. My body felt tingly and raw all over. My hair was still a little damp from being washed. I felt weirdly sore as if it was the morning after a hard workout. I opened my eyes and was momentarily bewildered at the sight of the color purple. It took a second for me to realize that I was now wearing a purple bodysuit beneath the braces and corset. There wasn’t an inch of my flesh visible. So that’s why I felt snug and warm all over. From beneath the neck brace, down into the boots, and underneath the fresh tape that covered my hands, I was shiny purple. The spandex contrasted with the metal of the braces and the black boots and corset. I felt fetishier than ever. There was a zipper at the crotch that allowed the catheters and wires to pass through. It was almost strange to be wearing clothes again; I had been naked since I was kidnapped. It was a relief to not feel so exposed, but it would take some getting used to. “What did you do?”

“Oh, I gave you a good scrubbing, treated the rashes, trimmed your nails. That sort of thing. Nothing drastic. I picked out this unitard today after work. Do you like purple? It was either purple or black, and I thought you might like having some color to brighten up your days. It should really help prevent rashes in the future. And I’m sure you appreciate the chance for some modesty, yes?”

I was suddenly disturbed by the image of Evelyn bathing me, *touching* me, however she pleased while I was passed out. Not that she wasn’t free to do that at any time given my extreme helplessness, but the idea of her doing it while I was limp and unconscious was just... icky. I thought again of how I missed any chance for escape, as well as a chance to be out of bondage for even just a little while. I growled and threw a mini-tantrum in the braces. “Not fair!”

“Yes, I heard you the first time,” Evelyn said as she tidied up.

I glared at her out of the corner of my eye. “I can’t believe you drugged me again. What else have you been slipping into my food without my knowing it?”

Evelyn looked at the ceiling, as if in thought. “Hmm. Vitamins. Supplements. Valium, sometimes, when I think you need it. Oh, and myotoxic agents.”

Toxic? That didn’t sound good. “My-oh-whats?”

“Proteins that attack skeletal muscle tissue. It’s a synthetic derivative of notexin, a component of certain snake venoms. It’s used for laboratory work,” she said evenly.

“You’re feeding me *snake venom*?”

“Well, a derivative of—”

“You’re killing my *muscles*?” I gaped at her in abject horror. *Please, let her be kidding, please, please...*

“Not exactly. Not all at once. It weakens them a little more each day. Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt your heart or internal organs, they’re a different kind of muscle, and your diaphragm should be fine. It mainly accumulates in the extremities and torso. Being braced is good for simulating being crippled, but before long, you really will be an invalid.”

“You... can’t... *do this to me!*” I had to struggle to keep my voice quiet.

“Whatever not, dear?” She smiled sweetly.

“No, no, no-no-no. *Please* tell me you’re joking,” I sobbed, torn between fury and fear.

“Alright, I’m joking,” she said.

“You are?” I asked, desperate to believe her. “You are?”

“Of course. Why would I do such a thing to you?”

I studied her face through a veil of tears. “You’re lying to me.”

“Don’t get all hysterical on me. I said I wasn’t doing it,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“But you’re *lying!*” I accused.

“Do you *want* it to be true?” she asked.

“No, but—”

“Then leave it be. I’m too tired for drama, and I’m pretty sure you are, too. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go get ready for bed.” She picked up the water bucket and went downstairs.

I was so freaked out and confused, which wasn’t helped by my post-drugged state. Of course I wanted her to be kidding, just teasing to torment me. That would be just like her. But if it was a cruel joke, how come she sounded so knowledgeable about the stuff? I didn’t want to be full of myo-whatsit snake venom. Had my muscles been damaged? How would I know? Wriggling in the

braces didn't tell me a thing about how strong or weak I was.

I refused to eat the following day, in spite of her assurances that there was nothing in the food. I couldn't trust her. I spat my oatmeal at her instead. The day after that, however, I was just too hungry to maintain my hunger strike. I had to eat whether the food had muscle-killing seasoning or not. What else could I do?

Chapter 12

Another week passed. It was a pretty tense, combative week. I was so upset by being knocked out and by the possibility of being slowly and literally crippled. I shouted, quietly, at her every chance I got. She remained unruffled, as always. She must have known my anger would burn itself out again. She was right. By the end of the week, I was back to trying to bargain with her.

"I had an idea!" I told her as soon as she came in from work. "If you let me go, I could work as a receptionist at your office. That would be okay, right? I don't know much about being a psychiatrist's receptionist, but you know I could learn it really fast. I'm good at learning new things. I would turn that place around, it'll never have run more smoothly, I promise. And you'd be able to keep an eye on me during the day, see? Making sure I wasn't working too hard? Okay?"

"You're not holding down any job ever again, Kathy," she said.

"But why not? Even your sister can work if she wants to!"

"That's different. Alice isn't being punished, other than paying the price for letting you get to her. But she almost paid for that with her life. Remember?"

I got mad at myself for bringing up Alice. Talking about Alice always made her get vindictive towards me. "But... wait, I got another idea! What if," I began again, "what if I wore braces to work?"

"Wearing braces? At my office?"

"Yeah! Like, on my legs. You know, acted like I needed them. Used crutches. Everyone would think I needed them, and you'd enjoy seeing me in public like that, right?"

"I... just don't think that would work, hon," she said. She was trying hard not to laugh at me and my attempts at bargaining, I had to give her that.

"Okay. Okay, what about this," I said, sounding as if I was making a huge concession. "What if I wore them all the time, not just at work, but loose enough that I could, you know, move around. Like a normal person."

"Oh, you're anything but normal."

"What if--"

Evelyn waved a hand, dismissing everything I had said. “Enough. I actually came up here to give you a surprise.”

“A surprise?” I asked, cautious. Her surprises often came in weird forms, like that automatic enema machine. Which, by the way, I was getting so used to I had actually started to look forward to when it would turn itself on. How sad is it when an enema is the highlight of your day?

“Yes, since you’ve been so good lately. Well, not that your behavior’s been good. You stained my cream jacket the other day from spitting juice on me. However, since you haven’t been trying to fight me recently when I’ve been doing your physical therapy, I decided to reward you.”

“With what?”

“With this,” she replied, and fetched a large cardboard box from the little landing outside the door. She set it on the floor of my room.

“I can’t see it.”

“Yes, just a minute.” She pulled the dresser noisily across the floor so that it stood across from the foot of my bed, next to the door. She opened the box and, after removing some blocks of styrofoam packing, lifted out a small television. She set it on top of the dresser across from me.

“Oh my god! A tv! You got me a tv!” I practically burst into tears at the sight of the shiny blank screen.

She messed about with the cords. “I thought you’d appreciate it. It’s only for when I’m away at work. It goes off in the evenings. That means you don’t get to watch it until tomorrow. Understand?”

“Awww,” I whined.

“None of that,” she told me, taking a seat on the edge of my bed. “This is a gift just to help you pass the time, since you endlessly grouse about being bored. You only get this privilege so long as you’re good. It’s a responsibility. Do you think you can handle it?”

I grimaced at her condescending tone of voice. I was in upper-middle management at my job at the time she had kidnapped me, and now she was talking to me about responsibilities like I was some three-year-old. “Yeah. I think I can handle it,” I answered dryly.

She pinched my cheek in that grandmotherly way I hated. “That’s good to hear. Also, if you want to watch it, you need to tell me something I want to hear.”

“What?”

“Tell me that you’re my slave and I take very good care of you,” she said, smirking a little at my shock but otherwise completely serious.

“I... I... fine. I’m your slave,” I said flatly, as if it was a dull schoolroom recitation, “and you take good care of me.”

“Good. Now tell me you love me,” she said. “Say it like you mean it, even if you don’t.”

Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me. There were so many nasty things I wanted to respond to her with, but I knew she wasn’t bluffing about not letting me have the tv. If I let my dignity win the battle, I would suffer for it with interminable boredom. I closed my eyes and said it, although saying it was about as easy as trying to swallow a spiny sea urchin whole. “I love you, Evelyn.”

“Now tell me that you love being in braces and you never want to walk again.”

“No! I won’t say that!”

She shrugged. “Then I’ll take the television back,” she said, starting to get up.

“No, don’t!” I wanted that tv so bad I could taste it. I growled and rocked in the braces. I wanted to pound the bed with my fists, if only I was able. Evelyn excelled at twisting knives in my guts. She sat, patiently watching me, waiting for me to speak. *You’re just eating this up, aren’t you, bitch?* I thought at her hatefully. She knew I was going to give in, so why should I bother postponing the inevitable? I swallowed my pride with an audible gulp. “I love braces. Never-wanna-walk-again,” I blurted, trying to get through it as fast as possible.

“Wish granted,” she said cheerily, and kissed me full on the lips.

“Eeuurgh!”

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O, bliss, bliss, bliss. Evelyn switched on the tv before she left the next morning. The reception was a little fuzzy, and I only got to watch one affiliate channel since I couldn’t work a remote. Still, it was... heavenly. I had never been much of a tv-watcher; I was too busy to waste my time on that sort of thing. Whenever I had been watching tv in the past, even if the show was something I was interested in, I always had that nagging voice in the back of my head telling me I shouldn’t just be sitting around, that I should be working, or preparing for tomorrow’s work. Now, however, it was like a long, lost friend come back to me. Funny how much the little things matter when you have nothing at all. For the first time since my kidnapping, now that I had something other than my situation to focus on, I was able to zone out and *almost* relax. I let mind-numbing waves of morning news shows, court tv, talk shows, soap operas, and sitcoms wash over me.

Normally, I could not abide soap operas, but within just a few days, I was sucked into the stories. I could hardly wait to see what happened next. In a matter of weeks, I could have recited all the characters (living, dead, and amnesia-ridden), as well as all the insipid plot lines. Part of me was offended by the lazy

banality of it all, but I was not about to complain. And the talk shows; I could practically feel my IQ leaking out of my ears as I watched it, but it was a thousand, a billion times better than staring at nothing. I had to take what I could get.

Meanwhile, things got, well, *weirder* with Evelyn. She wasn't being particularly cruel – no more than usual, anyway. She was, however, getting more affectionate. I didn't even know why. Maybe at heart she was shy (yeah, right) and it took her a long time to get comfortable around me. Whatever the reason, it really creeped me out. She started calling me 'slave' a lot, and sometimes even called me her 'puppet.' That was freaky.

She also started to kiss me a lot more often. I hated it. You can imagine how uncomfortable that could be. I was torn between wanting to spit in her face when she kissed me on the cheek, or to try to act like it was nothing. Obviously, I preferred the spitting option, but I didn't want to piss her off, either. I did that once, and she crammed her dirty panties in my mouth for at least six hours, saying that I might prefer their taste if I didn't like the taste of her lips. I mean, for god sakes, what did she expect from me? To respond to her advances like some lovesick paramour? I usually ended up just silently enduring it with a wince.

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It was amazing how having something like the tv to distract me made the time fly. Sort of. Evenings and weekends were still incredibly boring, and it did get tiring just laying there watching tv for seven or eight hours a day. Another month passed, one day flowing into another. I had pretty much given up trying to talk my way out of my situation. Evelyn showed no signs of getting tired of having me around. Hell, some marriages didn't last for as long as she had already had me in that stuffy, little attic room. It's difficult to describe how small my world had gotten. I deeply missed everyday things like, well, walking, for one, or taking a shower, or having a job to do. I also missed simply being able to be outside, with trees and things. It was almost like the outside world had slowly disappeared, ceased to exist. It was just me, and Evelyn, and the constant discipline of the braces – the braces that were becoming more and more a part of me. Evelyn, as crazy and cruel as she was, was my only human contact. I was starving to need that contact.

Evelyn had just spent a Saturday morning planting bulbs in her gardens. It made her grubby and happy. The weather was starting to turn and autumn was well on its way, though I couldn't see it or feel it. She told me she had planted a whole bag of black tulips and a set of blue irises. I imagined it would be pretty next spring. Imagining was all I could do.

She was downstairs fixing lunch (I still had no lunches during the week, but I got a light lunch on the weekends – she told me she didn't want me getting fat on

her, the hypocrite), when I heard the doorbell. At least I assumed it was the doorbell. I had never heard it before, since Evelyn never had any visitors that I was aware of. A moment later I heard Evelyn open the front door.

I was frozen with shock. Was somebody there? The police, perhaps? A neighbor? Hell, even her sister Alice? Moments slipped by. *Call for help, you idiot, what are you waiting for?* Heedless of the consequences, I started screaming.

“Help! Get help! *Aaaahhhh!* Oh, god help me, *I’ve been kidnapped!* HEEEEEEELP!” I shrieked, my voice cracking.

My cries dissolved into loud screams as the agonizing shocks coursed through me, locking my jaw shut and paralyzing my tongue. It hurt terribly, but the pain only made me louder. Finally, it became too much to bear and I fell silent. I gasped for air, half-blinded by the tears that were flowing down my cheeks, as the last of the electricity zapped me. It still hurt and tingled, long after the shocks stopped. I wondered if the person had heard me. I wondered if they had gone for help. Footsteps were coming up the stairs.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Evelyn bellowed, bursting into the room. “What’s gotten into you?”

I couldn’t answer her. Evelyn was as angry as I had ever seen her. *Oh shit, oh shit, I’ve done it now, this is it, I’m dead. She’s gonna kill me.*

“I asked you a question,” she said, approaching the bed. She squeezed my cheeks painfully with one hand. I opened my mouth and sunk my teeth in in to the web of skin between her thumb and index finger. I hadn’t planned on it, and I didn’t do it out of anger, really. I’d been certain she was coming to smother me to death. It was just an instinctive reaction, like the snapping of a frightened, injured dog. She ripped her hand out of mouth, slapped me, and seemed about to do something worse. Stopping herself, she leaned against the wall with her eyes shut and nursed her hand. “It was just the delivery man. He had already left, you know,” she said, after a minute, “by the time you started hollering. He just rang the doorbell and left the package. He didn’t hear you. He didn’t even look back.”

My heart sank. No help was on its way, and now I was stuck alone with an angry Evelyn. Just my luck. I tried not to let her see how frightened I really was. She could do anything to me. The other times I had made her mad, she had punished the offending part of me by beating it with that baton. I had a terrible vision of her smashing my mouth with that thing.

“You still have too much control,” she said decisively, “but don’t worry. I can fix that.”

“W-wha...?”

“No food for you today. And you’ve lost your tv privilege.” Evelyn went to

the tv and unplugged it.

“No! Nooo!” I cried hoarsely, finding my voice. Her removal of the tv was even worse than the ominous threat of what she might do to me. “I’m sorry. Please. I won’t ever do it again. Don’t take my tv.”

Evelyn sneered at me with utter contempt. “Look at you. When you were a power-hungry bitch, you at least commanded some respect. Now you’re just pathetic.”

“Please...”

Her sneer curled into a cruel smile. “It’s okay. That’s just the way I want you.”

Chapter 13

Evelyn didn’t talk to me the rest of the weekend. That didn’t help me to be any less nervous. It turned out I had given myself a mild electrical burn on the side of my jaw from all the shocks, so she had to move the electrode pads. I kept trying to apologize for what I did, not that it did any good. I wasn’t as sycophantic as I sounded, but I was scared and I was trying to do some damage control. My gambit had failed and now I had to face the consequences. I hoped that if she at least *believed* I was sorry enough, she might not punish me as bad as she would otherwise. Monday morning, before leaving for work, she told me that it would happen that evening. I got to look forward to it all day, and I didn’t even have a tv to help pass the time.

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“This is drugged,” Evelyn said, holding out a cup of apple juice for me. “I want you to drink it.”

“No way! I’m not doing that!”

“I would really prefer it if you did. I would have slipped it in some food, but I want your stomach empty for this. It’ll have to be voluntary. You don’t *need* to be out for this,” she told me, “but it would be a lot more pleasant for both of us. Especially for you. Trust me.”

The cup of apple juice looked like hemlock to me. “Why? What are you going to do me?”

“I’m not going to tell you.”

“Is it going to hurt?” I asked, full of dread.

“It’s not going to be easy, I’m sure of that,” she replied. “But it won’t all be bad. As part of it, I just finished devising a little something that you may find quite pleasurable. So this isn’t entirely all punishment. A mixed blessing, as it were.”

I eventually drank the damned, drugged juice. I was loathe to voluntarily knock myself out to let her have her way with me, but the fear of real pain and discomfort outweighed the fear of the unknown. Either way, she would end up getting her way. I cried while waiting for the stuff to take effect. Evelyn sat and patted the top of my head, speaking softly to me until I faded away.

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My head hurt. My throat was sore. And I couldn't breathe. That realization was like being splashed with a bucket of ice water. My eyes shot open and I struggled and gasped for air, my mouth gaping like a fish's. My mouth was empty and unobstructed, but there was something blocking and filling up the back of my throat, back deep behind my tongue. I realized that I was still breathing, after all; my chest was rising and falling, I just couldn't breathe through my mouth. Or swallow.

There were things in my nose, too. Plugs? No, not plugs – they were tubes. I could hear the sound of air passing through them as I inhaled. I couldn't feel the passage of air or smell anything, though, which is what made me think I couldn't breathe. It was disorienting. I could still exhale through the thing in my throat, though, if I tried. The thing in there must have been stifling my vocal cords or something, because I couldn't make any sound at all. All that came out was a thin whistle of air that bubbled up through the pool of saliva that had collected in the back of my mouth. Evelyn was there, so I fixed her with wide eyes. “Whug? Guckgg.”

“There, there, don't panic,” she said. “You're okay. Everything's fine. Probably feels pretty weird, but you're fine.”

“Wha...?”

“I put a glottal stent in your throat,” she explained. “It's normally used for certain medical procedures. This one is slightly modified. It has a one-way valve in it that will allow you to exhale through it, but not inhale or swallow. Don't worry, it's in there quite securely. It's inflated. You won't swallow it by accident, and you certainly won't be spitting it out. The tube in your left nostril bypasses the block and goes to your lungs. It's plenty wide, so you should have no trouble breathing, even if you get a runny nose.” She smiled.

What was the point of that? I couldn't swallow? Why? It would certainly keep me quiet, that was for sure. There'd be no more shouting for help for me. I made gross, wet sounds as I tried to wrestle with the thing in my throat. I found I could still speak, in a gurgling, nearly inaudible sort of way. It was only as loud as the quietest whisper. If I concentrated, I could form words around what little air could pass through the valve. I finally asked, “How will I eat?” Or, I tried to. What actually came out was, “Hagh whill hi heatgh?”

“Aha!” she said, apparently having little trouble understanding me. “That’s what your right nostril is for. The naso-gastric tube goes to your stomach. I’ll show you how that works later.”

“Buh...” I could get my mind around the sheer bizarreness of what she’d done to me. The aftereffects of the drug weren’t helping any. I took stock of the rest of my body, finding nothing else seemed changed. Although, I could feel something on my head. There was something snug all around my head and neck. A hood? I could feel the oval-shaped seam that framed my face. “Whas...?”

“Oh that. It’s just a simple open-faced hood. Purple spandex to match your bodysuit, so you’re looking quite fashionable, puppet.” She laughed.

Yeah, whatever, psycho bitch. I was still trying to get used to the sensation that was I constantly choking. It was disquieting, to say the least. Worse, I had a lot of saliva building up in the back of my mouth. It felt like a lot, anyway. I couldn’t swallow, so where the hell was it supposed to go? I watched her plugging wires into a device that looked similar to the one she had set up to shock me. *Oh, crap! More wires! What now?*

“Would you believe I’ve become something of an amateur expert with electronics? Got this setup online. The toys people make. The world is full of perverts.” She shook her head. “Don’t look at me like that. No need to fret. This should be a good a thing. This is the reward part. Here, let me get it set up.”

As if I could do anything to prevent her. She unzipped the crotch of my bodysuit, exposing my pussy. It was both worrying and unsettling having her focus her attention there. Since I had been kidnapped, it had pretty much become a numb, not-there part of my body, except for the occasional rashes early on. I had never been much for masturbation, even when I was able to. Probably some innate, childhood guilt kept me from enjoying it. Now she was rubbing me a little as if I should be enjoying it, but I wasn’t. I gurgled at her in protest.

She showed me a ‘toy’ that had several wires hanging from it. It was shaped like a curved panty shield and was made of clear plastic. It had two metal strips lengthwise on the interior surface. Near the top, between the strips, was a shiny, textured metal nub. Near the bottom was a small, banana-shaped dildo, also made of metal. I watched in trepidation as she smeared clear lube on the whole device.

“No, no, don’t,” I breathed as she parted my lips and slid it into my body. It was cold, slimy, and unpleasant. She settled the panty shield part firmly against my pussy so that the metal strips covered the length of my lips. The little nubbin part pressed into the hood of my clit. Some latex straps around my thighs held the whole thing in place. Finally, she adjusted the braces so that I was in the reclined, sitting position instead of flat on my back. *What the hell is the point?* I wondered.

I already had something that felt as big as a shoe crammed in my throat and tubes in my nose. Why couldn't she just leave me alone?

Evelyn kept smiling mysteriously to herself while hooking the wires up. It looked complicated. "Don't be scared," she said again, "this won't hurt."

Sure it won't, I thought, *it's only electricity in my puss!* Sitting up made it harder to deal with the saliva in my mouth. I couldn't open my mouth to talk, not without getting spit everywhere. I tried to make sounds of distress, but all I managed to do was make some it bubble out of my mouth and spatter on my chin. *Gross!*

Evelyn looked up at me and grinned. "Having problems? I expected you would. See, since you seem to love spitting at me *so much*, I decided I might as well encourage it. After all, we all need our little pleasures – even you. So *your* little pleasure will be drooling. Doesn't that sound fun?"

"Gup?" I stared at her like she was crazy. Well, she *was*, but she didn't always sound it like she did just then.

"The seam of this hood," she said, tracing a finger along the edge of the hood that framed my face, "is lined with sensors. When they get wet enough, you get a reward. Now how do you suppose we can get them wet? Venture a guess? That's right! You need to drool. You can give yourself pleasure whenever you want, but to do so, you have to drool on yourself. So *do* it, slave. Drool for me."

I was shocked and mortified. I shook my chest a little, which was my way of shaking my head, which I hadn't been able to do for months. The mouthful of saliva had suddenly taken on very unpleasant ramifications. I wanted to swallow it so bad, but I couldn't.

"Go on. You have to do it sometime, so get it over with. Drool!"

I sobbed, full of hate, fear, and shame. The slimy mouthful slipped over my quivering, bottom lip. It was watery and flowed down over my chin and spattered onto my braced upper chest in sticky streams. It was probably the most humiliating thing I had ever had to do in my life. I didn't have long to dwell on the shame, though, because Evelyn turned on the little machine, activating the sensors.

"Huh? Ggk!" I bumbled stupidly, as my crotch was stimulated into life. Instead of high intensity, painful shocks like I was used to, these shocks tingled, tickled, and pulsed across my pussy lips. It almost felt like someone was licking me down there, only with far more intensity than any tongue could ever achieve. It was like nothing I'd ever felt, and my dormant sexual urges immediately came roaring back to life.

The dildo part vibrated and hummed with its own current, triggering me to bear down on it, convulsing. My poor clit was excited into wakefulness by the

vibrating, electrified nub. It prickled teasingly at my g-spot, nudging against it, making me bear down. Even the plug in my ass joined in; instead of cruelly blasting me, it seemed to pulse inside me, forcing my muscles to rhythmically contract around it. It was like an electric symphony down there, playing my pussy like an instrument. I didn't want to enjoy it, especially not under Evelyn's eager eyes, but I wasn't given a choice. My pleasure-deprived body and sensation-starved mind conspired to make me want it. Soon I was straining within the braces and hissing through clenched teeth. "Thiss s-suucks!"

"Liar. Don't be ashamed. You deserve a little happiness, right? After all I've done to you? It's okay. Be greedy for it. I'll let you."

"Nooo. Zzzsst! Gogck. Oh, *gooooodd!*" I had a small orgasm. And soon after that, I had another. My body wanted it so much, and apparently was responding crazily well to the tingling electric stimulation. Then, after about ten minutes of building pressure, I had a huge one. Not a little, 'oh, that was nice, dear' orgasm, but a full-body, drencher type orgasm. And then it just kept going. The dumb machine didn't care if I already had enough, didn't care that I didn't want one in the first place. It just kept stimulating me. Saliva dribbled off my chin, but I couldn't care. After several more orgasms and god knows how long, it went dead. My pussy continued to spasm under the plastic shield, my thighs twitched inside the leather cuffs. I was still aroused. I gasped for air I couldn't feel through the nose tube. I was all limp and tingly all over.

After letting me rest a little in silence, Evelyn finally spoke. "See? See how nice things can be when you do as you're told?"

"I didn't... I didn't want that."

"Oh I think you did," she said, then gave a little shrug, "but even if you didn't, it doesn't matter. You feel what I want you to feel. If I want you to come... you come. You're all mine, puppet."

I cried. I couldn't help it. It wasn't my choice, but I felt ashamed for having done that in front of Evelyn. Powerless. The feel of sticky wetness on my chin and neck made me want to gag, which made me salivate even more. It was building up in my mouth again. I looked helplessly to Evelyn.

"Here, I'll turn this thing off so you can get some rest. I won't leave it on all the time, you would just get numb to it after a while, I think. That drug has probably upset your stomach a little, so I'll wait a while before I bring your supper up. Until then, feel free to drool to your heart's content."

I did. I had to. I hated it, but I couldn't stop it. I never realized how much saliva a mouth produces, unnoticed and swallowed, until there was nowhere for it to go. I held it in for as long as I could, then I would have to let it out. It was so revolting and I felt like an idiot doing it. A literal drooling idiot.

Why did she want me to do this? This went way, *way* beyond anything I deserved, even *if* all the bad stuff she said about me was true. This was not *me*, I was not supposed to *be* like this! I was an attractive young woman on the fast track to great things! *I am not a drooling invalid! I am not a cripple!* I shouted to myself. I wasn't. Yet looks can be deceiving, and if anyone had taken a look at me right then, aside from the corset and the fetishy ballet boots, all they would have seen was some poor paraplegic woman whose body was completely beyond her control. They would assume it was the result of some disease or accident, not that it had been done to me on purpose. I probably would have felt the same way even if it *was* caused by a car wreck or something; even then, I would still have felt like my old self trapped in a ruined body. I cried and cried.

Evelyn allowed me a couple of hours alone to get used to it. After I got over the initial shock and despair, I had to start teaching myself how to talk a little better. The words formed okay, but I couldn't get any louder than breathy whispers. I could barely even hear what I said with my own ears. Worse, the words were always distorted by the amount of saliva in my mouth or on my lips. Half the time it sounded like I was gargling. If exhaled hard through the valve in the stent, it made an inhuman hissing sound come from the back of my throat: *hssss!* It was the kind of sound that came out of a big snake or a really ticked-off cat. I could see where this would get old, and fast.

I cursed myself. Why had I gone and shouted for help? Now because of that stupid attempt I was practically mute and drooling on myself. She had probably been planning on doing this to me for a long time, but who knows how long she might have waited before she went and actually did it if I hadn't goaded her into it. I might have been rescued before she had decided to go and do it.

No, you aren't going to be rescued, a part of me said. As long as you keep hoping for rescue, you're going to be disappointed.

No, no, I couldn't believe that. I could *not* accept that this was my life. I cried some more.

When Evelyn returned, she was already dressed for bed. It was pretty late. "You look awful. Have you been crying this whole time?"

I glared at her miserably. My chin was glistening with spit.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"*Hsss!*"

Her brows arched in surprise. "My. Well, that's interesting. You need eat, regardless. Need to keep your strength up." She wheeled in a shiny metal IV stand which looked frightening. From the bag hooks hung a pair of bags full of a whitish liquid. The bags had tubes dangling from the bottom. "Don't be scared by this," she said. "You worry too much. It's just dinner."

“Huh?”

“Here.” She maneuvered it to the head of the bed. I wriggled and hissed as she connected the dangling tube to my right nostril with a click. “Are you hissing at me? What an odd sound. Wasn’t expecting that side effect. Kind of endearing, really. Anyway, this is how you’ll have to eat from now, or at least as long as the stent is in place. I turn this valve, here, and your dinner drips down all the way into your tummy. Pretty convenient, hmm? It’s a standard liquid diet. It has all you’ll need to stay healthy.”

“I don’t get to eat anymore?” I asked. There was a strange sensation of one side of my nose getting cooler deep inside as the fluid passed through the tube.

“You don’t get to drink, either. That will work the same as this. I’ll hook some water bags up for you to... absorb.” She chuckled. “Kind of makes you sound like a plant. That’s okay, I like plants.”

I sobbed, unintentionally making a little spray of spit fly. “You are so cruel.”

“I do what I have to, Kathy,” she said, removing the support pillows and clicking my hip braces so that I fell flat on my back. She had a hand towel that she used to wipe my lips and chin dry, then tucked it around my neck and head. She went and turned off the light. I expected her to leave, but instead she came back to the bed. “Scoot over. You’re such a bed hog.”

“No, please, not tonight. Leave me alone, just for tonight,” I begged.

She arranged herself in bed beside me. “You’re upset, frightened, and uncomfortable. Think about it. Do you really want to be by yourself, alone in the dark, all night long? I’ll be right here, in case something comes up.”

When I thought about it that way, part of me did think that having her there would be preferable to being alone, but I would never have admitted it to her. As long as she didn’t touch me. But there she went, snuggling herself up close.

“More and more each day, you’re becoming more the way I want you,” she said. “I put some sleeping pills in your dinner. I thought you might have a hard time getting to sleep. Night-night.”

I might be becoming more what she wanted, but each day was taking me farther away from myself. She may have given me sleeping pills, but I was still awake by the time she was sound asleep and snoring softly next to me. I heard that people whose consciences were bothering them didn’t sleep well. That didn’t apply to her it seemed. That, or she had no conscience. Lying on my back made the saliva pool up in the back of my mouth. Exhaling through the valve made mouth fill with bubbles. Gross. I was forced to let spit trickle out of the corners of my lips, letting it run down my cheeks and puddle on the towel just below my ears. *Gross, gross, gross.* The pills finally started to kick in and I thankfully

succumbed to sleep.

Chapter 14

It took a long while for me to get used to having that junk in my throat and nose. I continued to feel sore and irritated, as if I had a bad cold, for at least a week. My lips quickly became painfully chapped until they adjusted to being wet all the time. At least Evelyn rubbed ointment on them so they wouldn't get all cracked and blistery. The drooling itself, as disgusting and humiliating as it was, took a distressingly short time to get used to, physically speaking. Within days I was automatically spitting down my chin whenever I had too much in my mouth (which was better than letting it pool up until I had to let it go in a veritable flood). That's not to suggest that I wasn't constantly aware that I was drooling like a vegetable, just that my body was getting used to it long before *I* was. I couldn't even spit at Evelyn anymore – only on myself. My drooling, by the way, didn't deter Evelyn one bit from kissing me.

Then there were the damn orgasms. I was really torn about them. Sure, it was great to have some kind of physical pleasure after all the discomfort I had been through, but at the same time I didn't *want* to be enjoying myself while I was a captive. I wanted to be a suffering martyr and stubbornly resist Evelyn's machinations. That was hard to do when part of it felt so hellaciously good. She had tinkered with the settings until she got it the way she wanted. It didn't come on constantly, just randomly, and usually only when I had been dribbling spit like crazy and really soaked the hood's receptor thing. As a result, sometimes it happened spontaneously and kept going as long as 'fueled' it with saliva, and other times I had to really work at it to get it going.

The sad thing was that they were some of the most intense orgasms I had ever had. They worked on me so *deep*. Far better than when I had been with any partner, or myself, and sure as hell better than any during my brief marriage. I had never been much of a masturbator, and I had very little experience with sex toys. I had always had trouble reaching orgasm. That wasn't the case with this thing. It worked on me in all the right ways. The buzzing and pulsing and tingly zapping made me feel things completely new, and it was really, really good. When I was feeling depressed or pissed off, I had the means, disgusting as they were, to make all of that go away for a little while. A person could become addicted to that sort of thing, which was a whole new problem. I took Psychology 101 in college and I knew about positive reinforcement, so Evelyn surely did, too. She was a shrink, after all.

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A few boring, wet-chinned, orgasm-filled weeks passed. It was back to the way it was before I got the tv; days full of staring at the walls, only now I did it while blowing spit bubbles. That was my new pass-time. See how big a bubble you can blow. Bubble, bubble, pop, pop, pop. Come, and come again. Sigh. I sure did miss eating. I would have done anything for a juicy, well-prepared steak and some cheesecake for dessert. Hell, I would even have been happy to be handfed by Evelyn by that point. I dreamed of all the different foods I couldn't eat anymore. However, I hadn't been hungry in a month. Not really. I had a constant nutrient drip-feed which didn't make me feel full, but kept me from feeling empty. It kept me from getting thirsty, too, which was really weird considering how much fluid I lost by drooling. I wondered if she put that toxin stuff in the bags to weaken me, but she still denied it. That was always in the back of my mind, but I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't even stage a hunger strike anymore. Anyway, Halloween came, which put Evelyn into an excited tizzy.

She had come up to show me some of the Halloween decorations she got at the craft store. She even got a bunch of pumpkins, hay bales, and actual bundles of cornstalks at the nursery. Apparently, she loved holidays on which she could decorate her yard. Learn something new every day. I had no idea she was one *those* people. I groaned at the idea of being held captive by a craft-happy person. It was like being Martha Stewart's sex slave, or something. She was going to make me insane.

"I think it's going to be precious," she said, referring to her plans for a pumpkin-and-gourd arrangement. She bent to wipe my chin with a hand towel.

I squinted at her. I started to gurgle out a question, then had to dribble down my chin to clear my mouth, which she wiped again. I had gotten so used to doing that it hardly even bugged me anymore unless I thought about it. "Have you lost weight?" I asked. I didn't ask to flatter her. It was just out of curiosity. I had noticed she had been wearing a lot of new outfits lately.

I winced as she practically squealed like a schoolgirl. "You noticed!" she exclaimed. "I was wondering if you would. I've been going to the gym after work. That's why I've been coming home a little later."

"You've been coming home later?" I had no idea. I didn't have a clock, and I no longer had stomach pangs by which I could measure time.

"Yes, I thought I should get in better shape. Not that I was upset with how I looked, mind you. I've always been big and I don't mind it. I thought, however, that since I have you to take care of, being in better condition couldn't hurt."

"I guess." Inside I was braiding against the thought of her working out her body while I laid in bed, debilitating.

"I've been focusing on weight training. It's kind of exhilarating, really.

Plus, I have a lot more energy now,” she said.

“I don’t,” I said sullenly.

“Aww, but you’re not supposed to! You’re just supposed to relax, puppet,” she said with a giggle and tickled me below the armpits.

I *hated* it when she did that. I squirmed, scowled, and hissed loudly at her. “*Hsssss!*” That inhuman valve-hiss had become a universal form of expression for me, whether I was pissed, upset, or even aroused. It was simply the loudest noise I could make. It always got her attention.

“Oh, I love it when you do that!” she said, but at least she stopped tickling me. She gathered her decorating supplies. “Well, I had better get started on these. Halloween falls on a Monday so I need to get finished this weekend. I usually keep the autumn decorations up until Thanksgiving. Uncarved pumpkins last a long time.”

“May I have the tv back?” I asked her while she was still close enough to hear my tiny whisper. I asked purely out of habit. I had been asking her that every day for weeks.

“Oh,” she said distractedly, “I guess so. It is a holiday coming up and all.”

“Really? You mean it? You’re not teasing?” I asked hopefully. Saliva trickled out of the corners of my mouth. She was not beyond the occasional cruel tease.

“Yes. I’ll set it back up when I take a break from outside.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you! *Hsssss!*” I was so excited and drooled so much that it triggered the pussy zapper. “Ungck!”

“Don’t mention it, slave.” Evelyn smirked.

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It was wonderful having a tv to zombify myself in front of again. Indescribably wonderful. Only now I wasn’t just a standard couch potato, but a drooling couch potato. Yuck. She let me have it on all weekend, since she was busy downstairs or outside most of the time. Fine by me.

Halloween arrived, but it was just another uneventful day for me. I was surprised and disturbed, come evening, that Evelyn allowed trick-or-treaters to come up to the door. She normally hadn’t allowed anyone beyond the front gate; the delivery man I had shouted to had been an anomaly. There I was, just a couple floors away from other people coming and going, and I couldn’t do anything about it. My hissing wasn’t loud enough to be heard on the other side of the attic room door, much less by the trick-or-treaters and their parents. I had to laugh. Here these kids were, dressing up and spooking each other out about monsters, not knowing that there was a real monster in their midst in the form of Evelyn. Giving them candy. She was a doctor, though. Maybe she was the mad scientist and *I*

was the monster. I certainly would have terrified any one of those kids if they had seen me.

Evelyn topped off the evening by adding some brandy to my water bag until I was pleasantly drunk. I asked her why she had not been worried that I might do something with strangers coming to the door.

“Why should I be worried? What could *you* do?”

That depressed me so much. I had been dismissed. Written off. A non-entity.

Chapter 15

November came, and along with it, the worst Thanksgiving *ever*. Most of the month passed uneventfully. Evelyn read *Watership Down* to me in the evenings. I would have been bored through a lot of it if my imagination had not been getting such a vigorous workout over the past months. At least it had a happy ending for the bunnies. She hooked a dvd player to the tv so that she could rent some movies for us to watch together. It was almost funny watching her hook the thing up; she could wire me with electric devices, but she couldn't figure out how to get a simple dvd player to work. I sagely restrained the urge to laugh at her confusion. At least the movies provided a pleasant distraction, even if Evelyn *did* cuddle up next to me to view them.

I would have been in pure agony by the time Thanksgiving arrived if I had still had a sense of smell. The mere thought of all the food Evelyn was cooking was torture enough. She came up late on Thanksgiving morning to change my nutrient bag and switch out the enema machine's waste containers. “I'll be really busy in the kitchen today, so I won't have much time to spend with you.”

I was pouting. “Bet it'll taste good.”

“Aw, I truly do wish I could let you have some Thanksgiving dinner. No, really, I do. I'm sentimental that way. But it would just be too much of a chore to take out that stent just for one dinner,” she said.

“Then... take it out for good?”

She chuckled. “No. Even if I wanted to, I'll be far too busy with cooking and cleaning, especially with guests here.”

“*Guests?*”

“Yes.” She smiled. “I'm cooking for Alice and Sarah.”

“*Hss!* They're coming *here?*”

“Well, it would be easier for Alice to stay at their apartment, what with her wheelchair, and all. But it's tradition. I always was the best cook among us.”

“*Here?*”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

I figured she knew perfectly well what was wrong. I had a disturbing thought. “Are you... going to show her... me?”

Evelyn laughed. “Good heavens, no. I already told you, Alice would never condone what I’ve done. I doubt she would turn me in, knowing what an evil person you were and, of course, blood *is* thicker than water. Still, it would just upset her. I don’t want to do that.”

“I was not evil,” I mumbled.

“You were, and you deserve everything that’s happening to you. Don’t look at me like that. You do. This is the only way you can make things right.” She cut me off before I could say anything else. “I don’t want to hear it. Seeing as it’s what the holiday is about, perhaps you should give some thought as to what you’re thankful for.”

Thankful? “F-fuck you, Evelyn.” Months ago those words would have come out easily. Now they were hesitant, tinged with fear, and almost didn’t come out in the first place.

“Hmm. Nope, that’s not what I want to hear. I want you to say you deserve this.”

“Nooo.”

“Say it!”

I winced and bared my teeth at her. I hated it, but I said it, god help me. “I deserve this.” I had been so beaten down, intimidated, and terrorized that I couldn’t even resist her anymore.

“All of it?”

“All of it.” I felt like I wanted to puke. Not that it could have gone anywhere but all over my chest if I did.

“Kathy, I don’t want us to fight today. It’s a holiday and I’m already stressed as it is. Here, I’ll let you watch tv until my sister comes over.” She reached for the button, then hesitated. “Hmm? What do we say?”

“Thank you,” I said grudgingly.

“See? You *do* have things to be thankful for.”

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It was a special kind of hell hearing everybody downstairs enjoying themselves. Eating good food. Talking. Laughing. I wondered when the last time I laughed was? I mean a real laugh, not a bitter, acerbic laugh. Quite a while. I could hear them talking, but I couldn’t make out anything that was said. I could make out Alice’s voice, even though I hadn’t heard it in years. I couldn’t stand her when I worked with her, and I couldn’t stand her now. I may have been the cause of her broken back, and I might have to feel sorry for it, but that didn’t mean

I had to like her. If Alice only knew what kind of twisted person her sister was. I glared at the ceiling, spit hanging off the bottom of my chin, wishing they'd all choke on a fucking turkey bone.

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Evelyn bore a strange expression when she came up later after everyone had gone. She looked happy – almost triumphant – but at the same time, she looked a little worried. She studied me with concern. “You doing okay, honey?”

What was with the sudden sympathy? That was almost as alarming as if she had burst in yelling at me for no reason. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Well, you see, I had the television on downstairs while I was clearing some of the dishes,” she came and sat on the edge of the bed. Taking the towel, she wiped an evening’s worth of saliva off my face and turned off the pussy machine. The machine had gone on ‘simmer’ mode and I had spent at least an hour getting stimulated lightly, but not enough to push me over into orgasm.

“Yeah, so?”

“So I saw something interesting on the news. It’s good, but... I’m not sure how you’ll take it.”

Why did she keep looking at me like that? “What?”

“There was a report on the news that the police found the man who had been abducting those women. You know, the one who was suspected in your disappearance.”

Instant butterflies in my belly. “And?”

“And he died in a shootout. They’ll never know if he was the one responsible for your kidnapping and supposed murder. They’ll assume the location of your body died with him.”

It was too awful to accept. “Why are you saying this to me? *Hsss!* You’re lying! Why are you being so mean? What’d I do?” My voice had taken on the aspect of a distraught little girl.

Evelyn shook her head. She considered the tv and then turned it on with the remote. The late evening news would be starting in a minute. I kept glancing back and forth between Evelyn and the tv during the commercials. Finally the news came on. One of the top stories featured aerial footage of police cars surrounding a house. Leads on the local rapist/murderer had brought them there and he had barricaded himself inside with a gun. Ultimately, he had been ‘incapacitated’ (here they showed a shrouded body on a stretcher). An interview with an officer at the scene claimed, while it was still too early in the investigation to be sure, certain evidence in the house linked him to some of the missing women. A graphic came up showing the faces of five missing local women, all assumed to be have been the man’s victims. My picture was on the top right.

I watched all of it in total silence. Everybody thought I was dead. There I was, on tv, in a photo taken of me for the office newsletter sometime last year. My fifteen seconds of fame, and it was as a missing murder victim. Everybody thought I was dead. Everybody. My last, slim hope of rescue that I had been kindling all this time had been squashed in the space of one news report.

Evelyn turned off the tv, but I still stared at the blank screen. She stroked my forearm, between the braces. "It'll be okay. Poor thing."

I don't want your sympathy I don't want your fucking sympathy! I howled in my head, but I couldn't say a thing. I started to cry.

"I know it's a lot to absorb. You'll be alright, you'll see," she said.

"I won't—" Just then the electric stimulator activated on its own. It enraged me. "God fucking shit!"

Evelyn hastily reached over and turned the thing off. At least she had *some* sense of decency.

I breathed heavily, getting control of my anger. "I won't be alright. Nothing'll be alright. Not ever."

"Yes it will. You'll see. You're strong."

I glared at her, radiating spite.

"But don't you see, Kathy? This just proves it. You were meant to be here with me. This is where you're supposed to be. You can't fight it. It's fate."

"No." *Fuck fate!*

"You said it yourself: you deserve this," she said, squeezing my shoulder. "But enough of that. I'll put some sleeping pills in your water tonight. Alright?"

"Whatever." *Dump the whole bottle in, while you're at it.*

"I don't want to sound smug or anything, but—"

"Then don't."

"But I know what *I'm* thankful for this holiday," she said.

See? Worst Thanksgiving *ever*.

Chapter 16

I withdrew deep into myself for a couple of weeks. I was struggling with denial and depression. Mostly, I didn't feel anything. All the pussy thing did was piss me off, so Evelyn shut it off for the time being. I wasn't sure if Evelyn was medicating me to shield me from the worst of it, or not. Probably. I couldn't believe that I was doomed to spend the rest of my life as Evelyn's plaything. That was just too horrible to think about. I sure as hell didn't believe in fate. But... what if? I don't want to talk about anymore about those weeks. I don't want to remember that.

After a lot of self-pitying crying jags and brooding silences, I kind of went back to normal around mid-December. I had somehow managed to rekindle the fires of hope. I would not, *could* not, spend the rest of my life with Evelyn; the universe and any kind of benevolent god wouldn't allow such a thing, therefore, I would be rescued. Unless, of course, this *was* where I was supposed to be. No, I couldn't think thoughts like that. Same as giving up. I just had to keep strong, be patient, and wait for a chance. I worried, however... if I spent too long under Evelyn's thumb, would I even be able to grab the chance if it came along?

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December, of course, meant Christmas, and that meant more excuses for Evelyn to decorate. Wreaths, a tree, ornaments, red velvet bows – the works. Her holiday cheer was almost sickening. I couldn't believe she did this every year, went and set up a whole Christmas tree for just herself and a cat. It was kind of sad. I can't imagine how lonely her life must have been before I came along. Of course, I always spent Christmas alone, too, but the extent of my celebration was limited, maybe, to a little wreath outside my apartment door and getting tipsy on eggnog at the office party. God, had my life really been so dull?

Evelyn came in a few days before Christmas with a cat-that-ate-the-canary look. "I have a surprise for youuu," she said in a sing-song voice and disconnected my water tube.

"Let me guess. You made a gingerbread house." It wouldn't have surprised me.

"Better! I've decided to let you have your present a little early. Isn't that great?"

"What is it?" I asked, completely disinterested. I concentrated on blowing a big spit bubble that popped and speckled my cheeks and chin.

She arched an eyebrow. "Quite a talent you have there. Well, my dear, I tried to think of what you would like most for Christmas, and it occurred to me you might like a bath."

"A bath?" That got my attention. I would have sat up, but... you know.

"Yes, a real bath, in a real bathtub. And without braces."

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

"And I won't be drugged for it?"

"No."

"Oh, *wow!* *Hsss!* Oh, wow, when?" Had I ever been so excited over getting to take a stupid bath? I was so worked up about that, I almost forgot the second part. '*Without braces.*' I'd be free *and* conscious? Maybe this was it. Maybe the chance had finally come. My chance for escape.

“Right now, if you like. Or as soon as I get you unhooked from all this stuff.”

“Yes please! *Hsss!* Oh, please, yes!”

Evelyn went about disconnecting me from the machines. She removed the wires and electrodes. She then took out the enema tube and the catheter (she changed the catheter on a regular basis, to avoid giving me urinary infections), but not the butt plug. I was practically vibrating with excitement. “Alright, let’s see. My tub is on the second floor, so I think I’ll undo the braces there. Besides, they’ll provide you some protection, in case I drop you.”

Evelyn worked me over to the edge of the bed and then, getting her arms under my armpits, lifted me up. I had a strange sense of vertigo, since I hadn’t moved *up* in months. I was also startled by Evelyn’s strength. When she first kidnapped me, she had to struggle to get me up the stairs and into bed. Now she picked me up, braces and all, with very little effort. She might not have been sticking to any kind of diet, and her body might still be well-padded, but she sure hadn’t been skipping her trips to the gym.

Securing her grip around my waist, she half-dragged me out of the little room. I had a feeling of agoraphobia as I left the attic. I had been within those all-too-familiar walls for so long that it was almost scary to leave it. I was pulled backwards down the stairs, the toes of my boots thumped on each step, jarring my legs and waking up sore and dormant muscles. I started giggling. I was just so excited! I might get a chance for escape, and even if it didn’t come *this* time, I would at least be out of the braces. Freedom! I would be able to move, to walk, to dance, to run through the sprinklers! Free!

My boots were dragged over hardwood floor and onto carpet as I was taken into Evelyn’s bedroom. Her evil lair, if a room with a plush, mauve carpet could be called an evil lair. She had a big, oaken bed with a padded headboard and a puffy, taupe duvet cover. There were lots of throw pillows. On the walls was, naturally, floral print wallpaper. In a corner was one of those old-fashioned, oval shaped standing mirrors. Cheval mirror, I think. Against one of the walls was a display cabinet covered with porcelain dolls of all kinds. A *lot* of dolls, with a lot of blank, white, porcelain faces. Okay, that was kind of freaky. Evelyn laid me on the carpet, just on front of the open door to the master bath. There was a Jacuzzi tub in there. It looked wonderful.

“Now,” Evelyn advised as she knelt to undo the braces’ locks, “most of you is going to be very stiff and it may hurt to move at first.”

“Okay.”

“Try not to make any exaggerated movements too soon, or you might hurt yourself.”

“*Hss!* Okay, okay! Just get these things off me.” I was so eager that saliva

was running down my cheeks to her mauve carpet.

Evelyn looked at me and shrugged. “Alright,” she said with an ‘I warned you’ tone of voice. She took off the head and neck braces first, and, oh my god, did it feel weird to get those things off. I had been wearing them so long I hardly even noticed their pressure anymore. She lifted my head to pull the spit-stained spandex hood off.

“Ow!”

It hurt! I hadn’t expected it to feel like that. All the muscles and tendons in my neck protested the movement by becoming one unified cramp. In spite of that, I tried to lift my head under my own power, but... it wasn’t moving. Although I was concentrating with all my strength to lift my head, all I managed to do was thrust my chin up a little towards the ceiling. I could feel the tension in my neck, the same way it felt when I strained against the braces, but the muscles were no longer strong enough to raise my head off the ground. I could just barely turn it to the side, but only by a couple of inches. The muscles weren’t even strong enough to overcome their own stiffness. “E-Evelyn? I can’t... I can’t move!”

Evelyn was stroking my throat. “Ooh, your neck looks so pretty and slender!”

“Hsss! I can’t move!”

“Hush. I said this would happen. Let me work some of the kinks out of your neck.” She did so, and it hurt, too. She worked my head back and forth for while – up and down, side to side – and I was in tears. When she bent it forward, I got to see my chest and belly for the first time. My chest was unchanged, but my belly was *tiny*. It seemed impossible for it to be that narrow. If I wrapped my hands around my corseted waist, my fingertips would have nearly touched. It was insane. I mean, where the hell did all my insides go? Down? I hadn’t seen a waist like that outside of drawings made of corseted women in the Victorian period. And this one belonged to me.

“Alright,” she finally said, “I think that’s enough for now. You need a lot more physical therapy, but it’s not going to happen in one night. A hot bath should probably help some.”

“Yes,” I gasped, “bath.”

She started unscrewing the complicated torso assembly to free up my chest and arms. The soreness was in my shoulders and upper back, but not really in my arms. The discomfort and the fear of being barely able to move was overshadowed by the sheer thrill of having the braces taken off my arms and hands. But not for long. First of all, they looked strange to me. Not only because I hadn’t seen my arms for so long, but because they were oddly slender. Not bone thin, like a some starving fashion model, nor fat, just soft looking. I’d describe them as flabby, but I didn’t think I had gained much weight on what Evelyn fed

me, and they certainly hadn't gained any girth. They were just... soft. As if someone had gone in and removed the muscles and replaced them with the filling they put in plush animal toys. My muscles were so wasted that they weren't even visible when I flexed them. My arms were okay for flexibility, since she worked on them every day, but they were so *weak*. I could lift them, very slowly, off the floor, but only about a foot, and the effort made them tremble and shake. They were really uncoordinated, too. I had trouble making any precise movements; I either overcompensated or under compensated. But at least they could move. My wrists and hands were another story. I could hardly bend my wrists, and my slender, bunched up fingers barely twitched in response to commands to make a fist. The joints in my hands popped and ached as Evelyn massaged my hands one at time. "Try not worry," she told me. Easy for her to say.

I brought my hands together for the first time in ages while she rubbed my shoulders. I hadn't been able to touch anything in so long, I could hardly stand the sensation of touching my own skin. My nails were about an inch long. I guess they would have been longer, if not for Evelyn trimming them from time to time. I was suddenly hungry for sensation, and I rubbed my hands over my body, the spandex, the corset, my own breasts (which hadn't been touched by anything except Evelyn's hands), the carpet beneath me. I couldn't quite get the mechanics right to reach up and touch my own face.

I continued rubbing my hands together to get them to work while Evelyn started unbinding my waist and legs. More weird sensations as the cuffs and spreader bars were removed. With the unbuckling of left ankle, the last of the braces were removed. I was finally free. I tried to sit up. No good. I tried to lift my legs and they made it about a foot off the ground at the knee, but that was all. Raising an entire leg at the hip was hopeless. My thighs were just as strangely soft as my arms. I writhed in slow motion on the mauve carpet, crying from cramps and frustration. I could still move, painfully, but I wasn't strong enough to *do* anything. I started to hyperventilated through my nose tube.

"Alright, calm down. It's okay."

"*Hss!* I can't... I can't...!" Spit was frothing at my lips, which was actually pretty normal for me.

Evelyn took my wrists and pinned them at my chest to keep me from thrashing. "You'll get your flexibility back and it won't hurt to move. I promise. It will just take some time."

"You swear?"

"Yes," she affirmed.

"W-what about my strength?"

"No, not that. It's gone," she said.

“No! No, no, no—”

“Kathy! Would you try to relax? I told you this was going to happen,” she said, somewhat tersely.

“But I can get it back, right? Like, like, when a person is normally in braces? Or a cast? I can work out and get it back, right?” I asked desperately. I saw her shake her head. “No, no, don’t tell me that! I can get it back!”

“No, you can’t. If it was just a matter of being immobilized for a long time, then yes, you could get your strength back eventually. Your muscles, however, have been damaged by the myotoxin, and you’re about as strong now as you will ever be,” she said.

“You said you were joking. You said you weren’t using that stuff on me! *Hssss!*” I cried, furious, spraying spittle. In truth, it was just what I suspected all along and it honestly didn’t surprise me, but I was still enraged upon hearing her finally admit it.

“Yes, I lied about not poisoning you. You had to keep eating to stay healthy, and I was afraid you wouldn’t if I said what I was doing. I know I shouldn’t have mentioned it in the first place, but I did, and that’s that.” She spoke calmly, reasonably, and utterly without remorse. Was I even *human* in her eyes? “Now listen to me. You may get *some* strength back. Some. If your remaining muscles get exercised, they may compensate somewhat for the damaged ones, but not by a lot. Isn’t that better than nothing?”

“*Hsssss!* You poisoned me,” I gurgled. I wanted to hit her, to strangle her, but all I could do was paw feebly at her knee. “*Why?*”

“You’re here to relax, Kathy, remember?” she asked, that damn cruel smile playing at her lips. “Now you don’t have to worry about strenuous activity. The more helpless you are, the more I get to take care of you. Not to mention it makes you easier to control. And best of all,” she said, leaning closer, “I *like* your weakness. It turns me on.”

I snarled and hissed at her, snapping at the air. She smiled and moved down to my feet to undo the boots. She took her sweet time unlacing them and working them loose. When she finally worked them off and peeled the nylons off my feet, it felt amazing. Cool air and soft carpet on my feet. I had forgotten what that felt like. The only problem was they wouldn’t move. At all. They were still in extreme arch of the ballet boots. No matter what I did, I couldn’t even wiggle a toe, much less bend at the ankle. Evelyn lifted one of my legs and pressed on the sole of a foot, trying to move it manually. I felt the tugging at the tendon at the back of my ankle, but it wouldn’t stretch. When I finally got to see them, I saw that my big toes were angled slightly inward and my little toes were all crammed together and doubled over. They had conformed to the en pointe shape of the

ballet boots. Evelyn was cradling my feet, cooing over how pretty they were. She glanced up at me, commenting, “No, you won’t walk again.”

I hissed in despair. “What have you done to me. *What have you done to me?*”

“I’m making you *better*,” said Evelyn.

“*Hsss!* You’ve ruined me! *Hssss!* You’ve made me a freak! A crippled freak!”

“Perhaps, but you’re *my* freak.” She rolled me over to undo the corset. I couldn’t even roll over on my own. I drooled and hissed and gnashed my teeth against the carpet. The removal of the corset felt wonderful and horrible at the same time. The release of the pressure felt great, but I suddenly felt like I had no support at all. It was as if my spine had been turned to jelly in an instant. I touched my waist when I was rolled back over, and found it was just about as narrow without the corset as it had been with it. She peeled off the spandex suit and corset liner and I found my skin had become fish belly white all over. Evelyn stood back to admire me, then went to get the tub ready. I heard the sound of bathwater running.

I rested on the floor. All the moving I had done had exhausted me. Ridiculous. I cried and drooled. I was ruined. *Ruined*. I could never walk again? Ever? That meant no more shoes. But I *loved* designer shoes. My sobs turned into hysterical giggles, which turned into hiccups. My head rolled to the side. I saw an oak armoire and her bedside table. There was a phone on the bedside table, one of those big, old-fashioned rotary ones, which suited the décor of the room. Its cord was dangling down to the floor.

Phone! I tried to move myself to the bed stand. I paddled my arms and dug the tips of my permanently pointed toes into the nap of the carpet and strained with all my might. I made it about three feet before I went limp from total exhaustion. I reached for the hanging cord, which I couldn’t have wrapped my fingers around even if I could touch it. The nightstand was still a yard away from my outstretched fingertips.

“Uh-uh. Caught you. I see I’ll have to take care of the phones if I’m to leave you out of braces for any length of time,” Evelyn said as she emerged from the bathroom.

I laboriously turned my head towards her. “You’re naked,” I observed stupidly.

“Yes? You don’t expect me to bathe you in my clothes, do you? What?”

After all that time, this was the first time I had seen her naked. She still had the soft belly, wide hips, and thick thighs she had when I first met her. Her heavy breasts had dusky pink nipples. I could now see that her trips to the gym had not

been without result. Beneath the layer of softness was a lot of muscle. She had stood about a head taller than me back when I could still stand, and she had easily been three times my weight then, if not considerably more. A good portion of that weight was now muscle instead of fat. She stood there looking like some kind of pagan fertility goddess. She was *beautiful*, in a scary way. *My god*, I thought, *she could snap me like a twig*.

I was suddenly filled with incredible envy. Her body was strong, curvy, soft, and feminine – the total opposite of me in my current condition. I might have been soft, but not in any good or feminine way. I hardly felt human compared to her. I felt like a drooling beast compared to her. I stared at her in complete awe, almost forgetting – for just a moment – about my body. For just an instant, I almost felt lust.

“Like I said, I’ve been working out a little,” she said, straightening up and flexing her arms. The effect was intimidating. She smiled shyly, dropping her arms, suddenly self-conscious. “It’s certainly not how I thought I’d ever end up, but I suppose that makes two of us. Come on, lets get you in the tub.”

She knelt at my side and scooped me up with hardly any apparent effort. I could feel the strength of her muscles against my bare skin. I had felt powerless against her since I had been kidnapped, but this was a completely new kind of powerlessness. It was more personal, in an unsettling way. My head rolled back and my unsupported limbs dangled. She narrowly avoided banging my head against the doorpost.

The bathroom was medium-sized, and most of the space was taken up by the large Jacuzzi tub. The faucets were still going and there was a mass of bubbles in the tub. Evelyn lowered me down into the tickling bubbles. When I felt the hot water I nearly went into shock. It felt so *good* that it was almost enough to make me weep. She set me in the bottom of the tub, in about a foot of water. I saw her lathering up a scrunchy body scrub ball and I hissed at her. “I don’t need you here,” I said. “If I can do anything, I can wash own damn self.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, reaching for me with the scrub. I opened my mouth and hissed loudly and she froze. “Alright. Alright, you want to do it yourself. You’re welcome to it.” She shrugged, all nonchalant, and left me in alone in the bathroom.

Finally. The fizzing, hot water was pure heaven. Now I had to figure out how to make my body work. I soon discovered, despite the buoyancy the water gave me, I was still too feeble to do much of anything but squirm around a little in the bottom of the tub. I slowly got my trembling hands up to the edge to pull myself into a better position, but that didn’t work either. My fingers just wouldn’t grasp anything and my arms were too weak to pull myself up. The water

continued to rise and I couldn't even push myself up to lean against the back of the tub. I splashed around like a bug in molasses as the water level rose up to my neck, then to my chin.

I was starting to get worried when Evelyn came back in and checked on me. "Oh, you're doing *fine*, I see," she commented. Instead of assisting me, she went and sat on the lid of the toilet. I could just see her over the top of the tub. She was examining some decorative hand towels on a ring. "I once had a patient who suffered from mild bipolar. That wasn't his real problem, though. His real problem was that he was simply too proud to ask anyone for help. And I mean, for anything. He insisted on doing everything for himself, even if it meant taking ten times as long or costing more money, or even if it meant throwing his back out in the process. He wouldn't have gone to see me for help with bipolar – he wanted to fix *that* himself – except that his wife threatened to divorce him if he didn't."

She continued her pedantic speech even as the water continued to rise. I was tilting my head back as best I could to keep my nose above water. Another inch and it would cover me. I was beginning to panic. *Holy shit*, I thought, *I'm about to drown in a bathtub. A fucking bathtub!*

"So anyway, to make a long story short, last I heard, the fool had broken his arm from falling off his roof and died in a crash while trying to drive himself to the hospital with one arm. The moral is: some people just don't know when to ask for help." She looked over at me. I was holding my breath, the water having reached my bottom eyelids. "How about you?" she asked me, then got up and shut off the faucet. She pulled me out of the water and leaned me in the proper position against the slope of the tub. I gasped for air through my nose tube. "Do you know when to ask for help? You can't do anything without me, Kathy. You don't need to feel ashamed about it. It is simply a fact of life. You need me. Say it."

"*Hsss!* I need you," I mouthed, glaring at her spitefully out of humiliation for needing to be rescued from a bathtub.

Sitting on the edge of the tub, she fished one of my legs out of the water and began to scrub it. "There, there, don't feel bad. It's not your fault you're helpless."

I tried hard to forget about what just happened, as well as the debilitated condition of my body, and tried instead to focus on enjoying the bath. It was something I'd been dreaming about for months, after all. The water felt wonderful (even if it now represented a fatal hazard), and my stiff limbs began to relax a little. The scrubbing was deliciously painful to my feet, since they were insanely sensitive after being booted all that time. She could barely separate my toes to wash between them. It was embarrassing being washed by Evelyn. It was almost like being a child again and being washed by my parents, though I had no

memories of that, myself. I suppose it was no less embarrassing than being fed or having my teeth brushed by her.

Once she was finished with my body, she climbed into the tub behind me so she could wash my dirty hair. I was propped forward with my head hanging limp and my chin resting against my sternum. I watched strings of my saliva stretch to the water and diffuse under its surface while she lathered my hair. That felt wonderful, too. Before long, that position began to hurt my back, since I had gotten so used to being rigidly corseted. My lower ribs were really starting to ache from the corset's absence, as well. Then she leaned back against the tub and pulled me with her, cradling me, so that I was resting with my head supported between her breasts and her soft belly pushing into my back. As much as I loathed to admit it, it was actually quite comfortable. It beat being in braces any day. I soaked like that for a while.

Eventually, the bathwater got tepid and Evelyn climbed out. She spread a big towel on the floor to lay me on, then dragged my sodden limpness out of the tub. After I was thoroughly dried, she propped me up against the outside of the tub to do my hair. I was already getting sick of being 'propped' here and there. I guess I could have been difficult and willed myself to tumble to one side or the other, but then I would have just cracked my head against the floor. Evelyn, having put on a bathrobe, was having a blast doing my hair. Giggling all the while, she brushed, dried, and curled it. That was okay, I guess. Having my hair done made me feel a little more human. It hurt, though. I had so many tangles she had to brush out that my head would get pulled back and forth with every stroke. I just couldn't hold it in one place.

To my surprise, she even brought out a bag of makeup. It was the long-lasting kind, she told me, so that I wouldn't smudge or drool it off. "I got these just for you. I think I matched your color pretty well. I know you're probably tired and just want to go to sleep, but I just can't resist seeing how it looks. I've been wanting to do this for a long time."

I could tell she was being a tad heavy-handed with the makeup application, but I supposed it didn't matter. Who would see me? I wished I could do it myself, just the way I liked it, but even if I could have gripped a tube of lipstick, I currently didn't have the coordination to draw so much as a stick figure with it. Evelyn went on to trim my toenails, shape my fingernails, and paint them an expensive, glossy, plum red. My hands still looked strange to me, as if they weren't even a part of me. And my feet. I didn't want to even look at me feet. "Alright, I'm done. Do you want to see?"

I started to nod and that made my head fall forward. *Crap*. "Yes," I said, as I drooled onto my corset-shaped tummy.

Evelyn wrapped her arms around my waist and hefted me up. She took me over to the wall mirror, my pointed toes just barely brushing the floor. There was a weird moment of mental schism as my brain struggled to process the reflection of actually being me. After all those months without seeing myself, I had almost forgotten what I looked like. What I remembered looking like didn't match what was in the mirror. It was someone else. *Something* else. My head flopped to the side. My pale body hung limp like a corpse in Evelyn's arms. No, not so much like a corpse. More like a doll. I looked like a doll. The foundation she had used was pale, even for my pale complexion. The lipstick was dark red, like my nails, and my eyeshadow was dark with exaggerated lashes. The blusher only served to emphasize my pallor and didn't look natural at all. The foundation barely concealed the rings under my eyes. Evelyn shifted her footing and my head lolled back to rest on her shoulder. A trickle of saliva came from the corner of my mouth and went down the side of my chin. *So that's what it looks like when I do that. Gross! And I do it all the time? Ick!*

"See?" Evelyn was saying. "And to think you were worried. You're adorable!"

Adorable? I don't look adorable, I look like a cross between a dead heroin addict and a fucking blow-up doll! What's adorable about that? I was raging inside while Evelyn carried me back into the bedroom. As soon as I felt the soft bed underneath me, I instantly forgot all about my appearance. All I wanted was sleep. I guess what little moving around I had done that evening had totally exhausted me. Evelyn looked at me with a funny expression, then lifted my head off covers and let it go. I couldn't hold it up. Unsupported, my head just fell limp back onto the bed. "Perfect," she murmured, and did it several more times.

It was really starting piss me off. "*Hssssss!*"

Evelyn chuckled. "I'm sorry. I'll stop. It's just too cute."

I shut my eyes, making myself calm down. "Do I go back in the braces now?" I asked, expecting to be taken back up to the attic.

"No, why? Do you want to be?"

"What? I thought it was just for the bath. I get to stay out?"

"Yes, of course. For tonight, at least," Evelyn said. She was changing into one of her nightgowns.

Thank god, thank god. I now understood that being unbraced wouldn't provide much chance to get rescued; not now that I knew how truly weak and helpless I was. But for now, simply being free of the braces for a while seemed liked a minor miracle in itself. Evelyn hadn't thought to get a nightie in my size, so one of her slips worked in a pinch. She had to pull me into an uncomfortable sitting position to dress me. My back was starting to kill me. "Wait," I said

hesitantly, “wait, I think...”

“What is it?”

“I think I need the corset. I don’t want it. It’s just my waist, it’s really starting to hurt. Pretty bad.” I had hoped it would go away, but the discomfort in my uncompressed waist was showing no signs of fading. If anything, it was getting worse. The muscles in my waist and back were even less toned than those in my arms and legs. They just couldn’t handle the strain.

“Oh! That hadn’t even occurred to me. I’m so sorry,” she said, fetching the corset and its liner from the floor. She rolled me into it and started lacing it back up. “I’ve gone ahead and ordered a new one for you. They take a long time to make. I can’t lace this one any tighter. Twenty-one inches is as small as it goes.”

Twenty-one inches? I’m twenty-one inches? Jesus! Before she had taken me, my waist had been a twenty-seven. Sometimes a twenty-eight, depending. I couldn’t believe my waist had been squished down by five or six inches. “Wha?” I mouthed, as she laced and yanked the corset tight, squeezing bursts of air out of me. “How small - *hss!* - are you trying to - *hss!* - to make me?”

“Oh, I never really had a set idea. I suppose I’ll just keep going until it won’t get smaller.” She tied off the laces and rolled me back over. “Be back in a minute. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Yeah. I’ll try to keep myself from bouncing off the walls,” I said, but Evelyn had already moved well out of earshot. I squirmed on the bed. It was even harder moving on the bed than on the floor. Too much give. I managed to turn my head a little and saw that she had removed the bedside phone and taken it somewhere. *Well, dammit! Why can’t she even give me a chance?* If this had been some movie, I would have probably had a thousand chances for escape already.

I pawed at the corset. *Wow. Twenty-one inches.* I was past the point of ‘I wish I was that size’ and well on my way to the realm of ‘Would you look at that freak’s waist?’. *Dammit.* I had to admit, it felt a whole lot better with the corset on. The pain was fading away and I no longer had the disturbing sensation of being totally spineless. Great. Corset-dependent. I hoped my spit would stain Evelyn’s duvet cover.

Evelyn returned with the IV and bags. She wheeled it around to the side of the bed and plugged the tube into my nose. “Can’t have you going thirsty, now can I? Now for a catheter.” She hiked up the slip and spread my thighs to install a fresh catheter (which I could hardly even feel go in, anymore), then exclaimed in an uncharacteristic whine, “Kathyyy! Why did you do that?”

“Huh? What?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

“You peed on my bed. Couldn’t you have held it for just one more minute?”

This is dry clean only!”

“I did?” I hadn’t even noticed it was coming out.

“Oh well, it’s not a huge spot. But that’s just bad manners,” she griped while dabbing at the spot with a wad of tissues.

Take that! I thought with gleeful malice, then sung in my head, *I peed in her bed, I peed in her bed, I peed in the evil bitch’s bed! Heehee!*

Evelyn look at me sourly, then inserted the catheter, none too gently. I was still giggling as she straightened me up in the bed and plopped my head on a pillow, which she had covered with a towel to catch my saliva. Wow, that was really soft. Almost *too* soft. I wondered if I would be able to sleep without the firm control of braces holding my head in place. That was an unpleasant thought; could I possibly get so used to braces that being out of them was more uncomfortable than being in them?

Evelyn climbed into the other side of the bed and began to read some hardbound book. I moved my legs around a little under the covers. The sheets felt almost as nice on my skin as the hot water. No risk of drowning, either. Jinx came in, hopped up on the bed, looked momentarily startled to find *two* people in his bed, then went ahead and curled up between us. I shakily moved my arm across the covers and managed to pet his black fur a little. It felt so nice and soft. Evelyn, focused on her reading, also reached to pet the cat, found my hand already there, and gave it a little squeeze. I tugged it away and she let it go. *If she leans over and sticks her tongue in my ear*, I thought, *I’m gonna scream*.

I began to squirm fitfully a few minutes later. “I want to be on my side.”

“That’s no way to ask,” she said, not looking up from her book.

I hissed in irritation. “Would you *please* put me on my side, then, please?”

“Of course, slave.”

She rolled me. It felt strange being on my side. I always used to sleep that way, but hadn’t in months. My joints settled into the unfamiliar position. Wet bubbles came out of the corner of my mouth and trickled into the towel. I was facing the wall with the doll display. “What’s with all the dolls?” I asked.

“What? Did you say something?”

“*Hsss!* I asked what’s with all the dolls.”

“Oh! Those. I just like them,” she said. “Aren’t they pretty? I’ve been collecting dolls since I was little.”

“Freaky if you ask me.” I had an unpleasant epiphany. “And I guess now I’m the best one in your collection.”

“That’s exactly right!” she said cheerfully. She sidled over to me under the covers and cuddled against my back, spooning me. I hissed loudly, but that didn’t deter her. She had her arm around my disappearing waist and I could feel her

breath on the back of my neck. Well, it was *still* better than being in braces. Barely.

“I’m not one of your dolls. I’m a human being,” I said.

“Are you so sure?” she asked.

“I won’t—”

“Oh, hush, puppet,” she said into my ear. “You know, I love when you’re braces, but this is nice too. You’re much more pleasant to snuggle when you’re not all covered in locks and metal.”

Chapter 17

Except for a couple trips upstairs to get an enema, I spent the bulk of the next day either in Evelyn’s bed or on the carpet. I was determined to get my strength back, any strength that I could. It hurt and was exhausting, but I refused to give up. By the end of the day I had figured out how to move around on the floor by kind of belly-crawling in slow motion, using my knees and forearms to pull myself along. It thought I must look like a gangly, white slug. It was exhausting and my limbs quivered for a long time after. I would take frequent naps, falling asleep wherever I lay, and then wake up really sore. I found, to my humiliation, that the most comfortable position for my legs was how they had been braced – spread wide apart. My hips would start to ache when I had my thighs together for too long, so I was forced to lie there with my knees apart like an eager whore. The worst part was that my neck was still way too weak to support my head very well, so I had to crawl with my face buried in the carpet. Christ. Evelyn watched my progress from time to time while munching a Christmas cookie, neither encouraging nor discouraging my efforts. Mostly, she left me on my own. She was still decorating downstairs. There was no tv in her bedroom and the carpet’s topography was pretty damn boring, but at least I was free.

That evening she put me in her bed and sat next to me. She had brought down that infernal pussy-stimulating machine. She stroked my cheek in a most distressingly intimate fashion. “It’s time for you to earn your keep, Kathy,” she told me and smiled mysteriously.

“Huh?”

“I’ve been taking care of you all this time. Haven’t I been taking good care of you?”

“Yes,” I replied automatically. I had practically been programmed with that response.

“Yes. I even let you have your fill of pleasure. Now I want you to do something for me in return,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked stupidly. Does boredom effect IQ?

“Silly thing, I want you to make me feel good.”

“Oh. Uh... oh,” I stammered. I should have known this was coming. But how to turn her down without making her angry? “Um, I really don’t feel up to that tonight. You know, busy day, crawling on the floor all day and all.”

She just smiled. “I’m sure I don’t mind.”

“But I can’t *do* anything! What do you expect from me? I can’t move.”

“Hmm, perhaps not, but your *mouth*,” she said deliberately, “is still in perfect working order.”

Oh, crap. “*Pleeease*,” I whined, “I really don’t wanna—”

“You like being out of your braces, don’t you?” she asked rhetorically.

“Well, if you want continue to stay down here and spend Christmas without them, you’ll have to do what I want.”

“That’s not fair!”

“I didn’t say it was fair. But those are the rules.” She settled herself down, resting on an elbow. “Come on, Kathy. It won’t be so bad. I have your favorite toy right here.”

“I don’t want it,” I said with a pout, but she started lubing it up anyway. I tried to close my thighs, but her slightest effort was enough to force them wide apart. She inserted and secured the damned, electrified pussy twitcher. She started kissing me on the mouth, which she continued to do for a long time. I was too used to this to even feel sick to my stomach. All I felt then was a helpless, indignant sense of personal invasion.

It all came down to how bad I wanted to stay out of the braces. Which was the lesser of two evils? Was prostituting myself and becoming her sex toy worth another day of freedom? It was a close vote, but, yeah, it was worth it. I didn’t have to like it, though. I don’t mean to sound like it was nothing, but it sure as hell didn’t come as a surprise. I had months to get used to the idea, after all. It was clear this night would be coming since the first time she got into bed with me. It could have been worse if it had to happen, though. At least she was being gentle.

When she finally broke the kiss, I scowled at her and asked, “Does it matter that I hate your guts?”

She feigned a moue of injury, then smiled. “Let’s see. Nope. I can’t say that it does.”

“I could bite you. Hard.”

“You could, yes, but you won’t,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll hurt you if you do,” she said, still smiling, and began to kiss

and nuzzle my neck. Well, I guess that settled that.

Evelyn spent a long time kissing and touching me all over while cooing and whispering how lovely my body was. I guess you could call it almost worshipful. I just wanted to skip the foreplay and get this over with. I tried to zone out, but it didn't work. I couldn't even fend her off. Instead, I just laid there like a corpse. The thought occurred to me that I was a pretty unresponsive lover, and I had to stifle a laugh.

After a while, though, I had to admit it actually felt kind of nice. Maybe just a little. It's just that I'd had so little physical contact for so long. I had never been a touchie-feelie kind of person, but losing my mobility to braces and staring at wallpaper for months gave me a lot of time to think of things I had missed out on and might never get to experience again. But don't think that for one second I lost sight of the fact that it was Evelyn who put me in such a predicament in the first place. But if I concentrated on just the sensations alone, it was kind of nice.

Before long I found myself face down in Evelyn's crotch. She had arranged me in a position most comfortable for herself and most humiliating for me. She got to rest on the pillows and I, with virtually no use of my neck, was planted face first in her pussy. I could barely even get air. She was clean, thank god, but... didn't she ever consider shaving? I mean, ick. It was a pretty intimidating position, actually. Her large, well-padded thighs were huge from my perspective and, well, they were really, really strong.

Eating pussy didn't bother me. After all, I was bi, even if closeted, and that was something that not even Evelyn knew about me. This act was nothing new to me, even if I hadn't done it in a long time. I just wished it was someone other than my arch-nemesis, the Evil Bitch Queen, who had been holding prisoner in the tower of her castle... yeah, well, I'd had a lot of free time for daydreaming, lately. I figured the best way to get through this was to get it over with quickly, so I went to work. I started off licking perfunctorily, with no more passion than planting a kiss on Grandma's cheek. Then she started giving me directions, which began to annoy me. I had plenty of experience in this from girl relationships I had in college, and naturally I had always striven to be the best at whatever I applied myself to. I took off the kid gloves and went to work with all the skills my tongue and lips could recall. That got her attention.

"You've done this before? Oh! Oh my, you *have* done this before! Oh *my*."

In short order, saliva and pussy juice were running freely down my chin. I realized I might have made a miscalculation in getting her even more turned on, because now she was pulling my hair to get me get me deeper and crushing my skull with those massive, earth-goddess thighs. I couldn't even get any air through

my air tube until I nipped at her just to make her ease off.

The electric monster in my own pussy came time life inside me and soon I was getting just as turned on as she was. I didn't want to, not in that situation, but I couldn't help it. It was like some programmed reaction. It did not take long for me to become a mindless, drooling *thing*, licking and sucking away with all the enthusiasm my limited mobility would allow. Inside, part of me was screaming in shame, but at that moment, I couldn't possibly have cared less. You take a little happiness wherever you can find it. Right?

.....

Afterwards, Evelyn quietly cradled me, hugging me into her bosom. She seemed pretty damned happy. As for me, I felt a little bit proud of myself, on purely technical merit. But I also felt dirty. I felt like I had lost something just then, but I didn't even know what it was. Self-esteem? Humanity? The last of my dignity? I did not like it, nor did I like the thought of what I had temporarily become. Whatever it was I had become, it was what *Evelyn* wanted me to be, not what *I* wanted me to be. She had made me become something else, and what's worse, she had made me enjoy it. For a little while.

"Aww, don't cry," she said. "That was wonderful. That was... wow. You were the best ever. You know what? I don't think I hate you anymore."

"Then let me go," I mumbled into her chest.

"In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with you."

Oh, crap. "Then let me go," I repeated.

She hugged me even tighter. "There's no way I'm letting you get away now. You're my own little invalid and nobody in the world needs me more than you. No, I'm not ever letting you go."

Chapter 18

A few days later it was Christmas Eve. Like the previous days, I spent most of the morning trying to get into shape. I was getting a little more limber so moving around didn't cause my tendons to scream in protest, but I was still pretty stiff and I certainly wasn't any stronger. I couldn't do a single pushup. I was frustrated, since I was just starting to learn how much work it would be even if my muscles *weren't* damaged. When my arms and legs got tired from belly-crawling around on the carpet (and once my face got too rug-burnt), I would focus on my hands and feet. I had acquired about twenty degrees of flexibility in my wrists as things loosened up. My fingers were still very stiff; I tried to force them to into a fist by pushing them into the carpet, but that produced an unpleasant sensation of the tendons and things going taut like cables along the backs of my fingers and

hands. And my feet... I didn't want to think about my feet. Whenever I considered them, I got depressed. My toes and ankles were still completely frozen in their ballet-boot shape. If that didn't improve, then I would never be able to wear shoes again. Hell, forget shoes; even if I got my strength back one hundred percent, I would never be able to walk. Not with feet like that. I jammed those thoughts down deep and locked them up. If I kept dwelling on what I couldn't do, I would lose the motivation to do *anything*. The frustration and fear was enough to drive me to drag myself, an inch at a time, to the dark security beneath the bed and stay there for a couple of hours.

Evelyn came up while I was still hiding under the bed. "Kathy, would you like to... Kathy? Where are you?" I heard her footsteps pause, go into the bathroom, come back into the bedroom and walk around the bed. "Where did you get to? Oh, *there* you are. Silly thing, I see your foot. Come out from under there."

"*Hsss!*"

"Stop that. Come on." She gripped my ankle and tugged me out from my hiding place, giving my nipples some serious carpet burn in the process. She *tsked* in disapproval when she saw the lint that had stuck to my wet lips and chin. She wiped them clean and re-tightened the ponytail that she had put my hair in to keep it out of my face while I was crawling around. "There we go. I guess I should thank you for collecting all the dust bunnies under there. I came up to ask if you'd like to come downstairs. You can have some cookies."

"What? I can?" *Food? Real food?*

"Sure you can. It's Christmas!" She scooped me up and carried my limp form down to the first floor.

Everything looked neat and tidy down there, like an ad for *Better Homes and Gardens*: nice furniture, polished hardwood floors, ornate rugs, and dried floral decorations. Lots of antique-looking stuff. I saw a decorated Christmas tree in the living room as I was carried past. There were also wreaths, candles, and lots of other festive brik-a-brak. I was surprised at how clean everything was. I wasn't a slob in my 'old' life, but I never got obsessive about it or anything. I saved that for my job. It looked like Evelyn spent a great deal of time keeping her house nice and presentable, even though she never had any visitors. I was struck again by the thought of how unexciting and lonely Evelyn's life must be, or must have been before I came along. I was also struck by the thought of how the tidy, ordered surroundings must be a direct contrast to the psycho chaos inside her head.

She took me into the kitchen where, on a table in the center of the room, was a batch of fresh sugar cookies. She started to set me in one of the wooden chairs, then changed her mind and propped me against a table leg. "Don't want

you tumbling off the chair and hurting yourself,” she said. My legs wanted to go in that humiliating, wide-spread-and-straight brace position, and I let them rather than endure having my hips ache. She sat in the chair and picked up a wreath-shaped cookie with green icing, which she pressed to my lips. “Here, try one.”

I automatically took a bite before I realized the logistical problems of taking a bite of something I couldn’t swallow. Well, old habits die hard. I must have looked dumbfounded, sitting there with a bit of cookie in mouth, because Evelyn wedged a bowl between my spread thighs and tucked a cloth napkin into the top edge of my corset. I made a questioning sound.

“Just spit it out when you’re done with it. Then you can have some more.”

I glared in indignation and attempted a hiss, which made me spray a few cookie crumbs.

“Go on. You know there’s no reason to be embarrassed in front of me. It’s not like you have many options.”

Grudgingly, I began to chew. For a second I thought they were the most bland, flavorless cookies ever made, then I remembered I couldn’t smell. I had learned you can hardly taste anything unless you can smell it, too. I could have had a mouth full of the finest caviar and it wouldn’t have tasted much different from a spoonful of Vaseline. I let the flavorless mouthful fall out of my lips, aiming for the bowl, but it landed wetly on my thigh, instead. I grimaced and whined, “I can’t taste anything.”

“What’s wrong? Oh! I had forgotten about that. I apologize. Let’s see if I can’t fix that with a little adjustment.” She squatted beside me and tilted my head back. I felt her tugging on my breathing tube, which caused a whole series of unsettling sensations as it shifted slightly all the way down through my nose and throat. She peeled the soft rubber flange that had formed a seal between the tube and nostril, and suddenly I could smell again. The tube was still in my nose and I was still breathing through it, but air could now get between it and my... what do you call them? Scentbuds? Anyway, it worked and I could taste the remnants of cookie in my mouth, as well as smell the delicious aromas in the room.

It was sensory ecstasy. I hadn’t tasted anything other than the mintyness of toothpaste for so long. I had forgotten just how potent a little sugar could be. It was so good and sweet, sweet, *sweet*. I anxiously opened my mouth for another bite, which she gave me. I chewed contentedly, savoring every bite, but then I had to spit it out. Not only was it disgustingly messy, it was unsatisfying. I never realized just how much the pleasure of eating depended on actually *swallowing* the food. Oh well. At least I didn’t have to worry about empty calories. The problem was, without any stomach feedback, I couldn’t get enough to satiate me.

“Want another?” Evelyn asked. She was brushing icing onto a batch of

plain cookies. She started to reach for another to feed me.

“*Hsss!* I can do it myself,” I said, impatient. I wanted to try, anyway. I had been able to get my thumbs to move a little. If I couldn’t hold something as light as a cookie, I was hopeless.

“Can you? Alright,” Evelyn said, agreeably, and held the tray within my reach.

I concentrated hard, intending to simply reach out and take one. Instead, my uncoordinated hand slapped down on the tray. I watched an ornament-shaped cookie go flipping up into the air and shatter into several pieces about six feet away. I gazed at it forlornly. Evelyn snorted, shook her head, and went back to dabbing icing on the cookies, smiling to herself. I waited a minute before asking, “I can’t have another?”

“Of course you can. You wanted to do it yourself, so go ahead. That’s your cookie over there. Go fetch,” she said. She took the bowl out of my lap, then took my arm and lowered me slowly onto my side.

“*Hssss!* Nooo.”

“It’s up to you,” she said simply, and returned her attention the icing.

I grumbled and squirmed onto my belly. I didn’t want to slither around the kitchen floor for her amusement, but I didn’t want her to win the battle and force me to admit my dependence on her yet *again*. Especially after that ‘invalid’ talk the other night. Besides, I *really* wanted that cookie. I cast her feet a spiteful glare, then, with great effort, I slowly dragged myself across the spotless and polished wood floor.

When I was almost there, Jinx came moseying into the kitchen and stopped to stare at me with curiosity. Dismissing me as a harmless aberration, he padded over to the cookie. He sniffed and licked once at the icing. I hissed loudly at him. *Stay away, pussy, that cookie belongs to me!* He glanced at me, licked his chops, then haughtily turned and walked away, in search of more cattish fare.

I finally got to the cookie and discovered my thumbs weren’t as effective as I had hoped. I could paw at the pieces, but I just couldn’t pick them up. Determined, I pulled myself closer. I was able to scoop the cookie close with the edge my hand and, with my cheek pressed to the floor, get it into my mouth with my lips and tongue. I chewed, awash with sugary bliss.

Evelyn applauded. “Very good! Not so helpless after all, I see. Let’s see you do it again.” She broke a cookie in half and tossed it to the floor. I felt it bounce off the sole of my foot.

I didn’t know what to do with what was already in my mouth. “Bupmuff. Fuff.”

“Just spit it out. It won’t hurt the floor. Lord knows I’m used to cleaning

up after you,” said Evelyn.

Disgusted at myself, but also feeling a little thrill that I was able to spit on Evelyn’s ever-so-clean floor, I let it fall out of my mouth. I hauled myself around to pursue the second cookie, which I also chewed up and spat out.

Evelyn continued the little game, tossing several more cookies on the floor, making me crawl back and forth to get them. I had intended to show her I could do it myself, but ended up just degrading myself even more by crawling around for a treat like some animal. Like some poor beast performing circus tricks. I became exhausted long before she grew bored with it. I was also a mess, having accidentally crawled over my own chewed cookie piles. My arms and breasts were slimy and there were long streaks on the floor. She rolled me over and wiped me down with a wet washcloth. “I’m going to have to mop in here now,” she sighed, but she didn’t sound upset about it. I was given a mouthful of eggnog, which tasted wonderful. I was gratified to be allowed to spit it into the bowl instead of having to dribble it down my chest.

Chapter 19

“It’s time for presents! Aren’t you excited?”

“Presents?” I had been lying on the couch in the living room for several hours, watching the blinking lights on the tree. Thank god she didn’t have Christmas music playing. That would have been too much. The feeding bag was hooked up to me from an IV stand placed beside the couch. My half-filled catheter bag was on the floor. That little rubber thing had been put back on the nose tube, so I couldn’t smell or taste anything again. I struggled to get myself into a more upright position, then gave up and settled back down. “Presents? But it’s not Christmas yet.”

“Oh, I know. My family always opened them on Christmas Eve.”

“That’s weird.”

“It is not. Lots of people do that. Either way, I have a few little gifts for you. I didn’t trouble with wrapping them, I hope you don’t mind. I thought finding yourself unable to get wrapped packages open would just make you feel bad,” she said.

“You’re so thoughtful,” I said churlishly. I was still upset about the cookie incident and I didn’t want any gifts from Evelyn. *What would she possibly think of to give me? A Jam of the Month subscription? Perhaps a respirator to hook me up to, so that I wouldn’t have to exert myself breathing? Ugh. I shouldn’t tempt fate by even thinking about that.*

“I am thoughtful, aren’t I?” She disconnected the feeding tube and sat me

on the floor with my back against the sofa. I could see a small stack of boxes she had set on the floor. “Oh, wait,” she said, and turned on the stereo in the credenza. Soft holiday music filled the air. I winced in agony. Evelyn sat down next to me and opened a box for me. She pulled out some kind of garment. “I had a seamstress at a costume shop make this to your measurements. I hope it fits okay.”

When she spread it out, I could see it was yet another full body lycra suit. *Yay. Just what I wanted.* This one was a very pale, matte color that was almost white, bordering on a peachy pink. It looked a little more thick than the one I was used to. The seams had exaggeratedly heavy stitching. “What’s that for?”

“That’s just part of a little outfit I thought up for you. It’s going to be so cute! The rest of these are some regular clothes I bought for you, but I’ll wait to show you those when the time comes. And look here, this is the best part.” She opened a box and lifted out a... hood? She set it on my lap so I could see it.

It was a lycra hood, like the other one I had worn, except it was the same color as the new suit. The difference was, in place of an open face, there was an attached face mask. It looked and felt like porcelain, but it was probably some kind of plastic. It had openings for the eyes and nostrils, and there was also a narrow slit between the slightly parted lips. It was stark white with airbrushed makeup, red painted lips, thinly drawn eyebrows, all sealed under a high gloss. It was a doll’s face. A doll mask. “It’s... it’s...”

“Isn’t it beautiful? I had to search high and low to find just the right one for you. Oh, you’re going to look precious.”

Evelyn was so carried away that she didn’t notice I was silently freaking out. I was trembling all over. *I can’t wear this, I was thinking. I won’t wear this. A doll, a doll, she wants to turn me into a doll, no, I can’t!*

She was prattling away. “It’s got a little padding on the inside so it should be comfortable. Of course, it’s not for all the time, mind you, just for special occa–” She broke off as noise came from outside the house. It sounded like a trashcan being knocked over. I had a sudden, desperate hope that it was someone coming to rescue me. A dog’s bark came from close by.

“Oh, it’s that damn dog again. I’ve told that no account Jim time and time again to fix that fence, but does he listen? But why should he care? It’s not *his* flowerbeds that cur digs up.” She stood up, grabbed her coat out of the closet, and went to the door. “I’ll be right back. I’ll have to lead the stupid thing back home before it does any damage.”

I sat there feeling my hopes deflate once more. Not a rescue. Just a nosy dog. The mask was staring blankly up at me. I swept it off my lap with a slow backhand. “I’m not somebody’s doll. I’m a human being. I won’t be reduced to a

thing. I won't wear that, I won't," I said to myself, on the verge of tears. A chilly draft on my naked skin gave me goosebumps. I made my head roll back onto the cushions and saw that Evelyn hadn't shut the front door completely. The wind had pushed it open. Just a crack, but it was open. I almost didn't understand what I was seeing, at first. Then I forced myself into motion.

I pushed myself away from the couch and hit the floor with a painful thud. A second later I was dragging myself across the area rug to the door. I was fatigued, sore, and as weak as a kitten, but adrenaline was fueling me now. *I have to get out of here, I won't live like this, I have to get out of here, get out, get out,* was the mantra running through my head. Air whistled through my nose tube as I strained desperately to reach the door. The stupid catheter bag was dragging behind me like some bizarre tail; I could feel the weight of it tugging at my bladder.

I suddenly froze in mid-crawl, realizing that Evelyn could show up at any second. The voice in my head was screaming at me to stop. *What if she catches you? She will catch you, she always does. Evelyn always wins. If she catches you she'll hurt you. You don't wanna be hurt. And then, from a deeper part of my mind, Besides, you belong here. You don't have to like it, but you have to stay. You were a bad person and this is your punishment. If you stop now and admit to her what you were going to do, she might even reward you for stopping! You know she would!*

Where the hell were those thoughts come from? Was I actually starting to believe, deep down, all the stuff Evelyn had been telling me for months? It was one thing to be afraid of punishment, that was normal, but to start agreeing with my captor? Become a willing participant? No, *never!* With a desperate hiss I started making my way to the door again.

At least my hands were good for something, as I was able to wedge my fingers into the crack nudge it open wider. Cold December air blasted me. I could see my breath as it came out of my nose tube. With strings of saliva dangling from my jaw, I slowly wiggled myself onto the porch. My bare breasts got scratched by the doormat, then frozen by the stones of the porch. I immediately began to shiver.

It was already dark out and I couldn't see much. *So, the real world still exists,* I thought. There were little ground lights that illuminated the winding walkway that lead from the porch to the front gate. I gave a single sob as I realized just how far away the street was. It would probably take me the better part of an hour to cross that distance with my slow crawl. I couldn't see any neighboring houses; the trees and bushes were all too high and thick and they concealed everything. I saw the glow of headlights in the spaces between the front

hedges as a car drove by. And... were those voices? Perhaps some people passing by on the sidewalk? I hissed loudly to attract attention, but that was no good.

I proceeded to pull myself across the freezing porch stones (dammit, why did she need such a big porch, anyway?) and over to the steps. There were only four of them. At least it was downhill. I winced and gritted my teeth as my breasts scraped over the edge of the first step. It was getting harder to move every second. My wasted muscles were becoming nearly paralyzed by the cold and my shivers had turned into convulsive body quakes. I went down another step and the extreme curve of my corseted tummy got caught on the edge of the porch. I paused to catch my breath. A few moments later, when I tried to resume my escape, I found I couldn't. *Move, dammit, move!* I howled at my limbs, but my body was giving up. What with this and the rest of the crawling I had been doing today, my sad, puny muscles had reached the end of their endurance. They had given all they had. I started to cry. Unable to even raise my head enough to look up, I couldn't see any of the yard, much less the gate beyond. I couldn't tell if there was anybody out there. *Please, somebody see me. Somebody look through the gate and see me. If there's a god in heaven, let somebody see me. Please.*

"What on earth?" My heart about stopped when I heard Evelyn's voice directly behind me. She must have come back into the house through the back door. Probably checking on what damage the dog did to her flowerbeds back there. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" She sounded more astonished than upset. She came to the steps and stood over me. I felt her arms around my waist and I hissed loudly, like a pissed off snake sounding a warning, as she started to pick me up.

"What were you trying to accomplish?" she asked as she carried me back into the house. "Were you hoping to make yourself so sick with cold that I'd have to take you to the hospital? You can forget that."

"Hsss! Hsssss! Hssssssss!"

"Be quiet! I don't want to hear it. I can't turn my back on you for a second, can I?" She kicked the door shut behind her and took me back into the living room.

"Let me go, let me go—" I cried, and she did. I tumbled into an untidy heap onto the floor, narrowly avoiding a nasty blow to the head. I spread myself out on the rug like somebody clinging to a perilous cliff face. I turned my face toward her and bared my teeth. *"Hsssss!"*

"Well? Explain yourself."

"F-fu-fff-fu..." God, I couldn't even bring myself to swear at her anymore. The voice in my head, the one that had told me to stop, was berating me. *You*

knew this was going to happen. You knew she was going to catch you. You knew it and you did it anyway! Why didn't you just stop before you got to the door? Now you're in for it. Did you really think you could escape? You're stupid, stupid, stupid! I hid my face behind my arm, telling the voice in my mind to "Shut up! Just shut up!"

"*What? You don't tell me to shut up.*" She hoisted my head up with a handful of my hair, slapped me hard in the face, then let my head drop back to the floor.

I started to cry again. I should have been pissed off and trying to fight her, but instead I was crying like a baby. Big, wet sobs. It was like I was a little child whose parent had just lashed out at her. Or, more aptly, I was like a cringing dog that had no concept of why it had just been swatted and knew only that its owner was mad about something. Defiant to defeated, all in one second. I was totally losing it. "D-don't hurt meeee," I blubbered. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, don't hurt me, pleasee."

"I thought you had learned your lesson. I'm so disappointed in you. And on Christmas! After I gave you presents."

"I'm sorryyy," I repeated, feeling an unexpected pang of guilt. What was happening to me? I shouldn't feel guilty at all for trying to escape, but I did.

Evelyn sighed. "I think it's time you went back into the braces. You're a danger to yourself out of them."

"No. No! Please! Don't do that!" After only a few days of freedom? I couldn't stand the thought of being put back into that rigid, muscle-paralyzing prison so soon.

"Yes, I think it's for the be—"

"*Hsss! Nooo!* I'll be good. Give me another chance. I'll do anything. Anything!"

Evelyn shook her and gave a sad smile. "What could you possibly offer me?"

"I-I..." I was stymied. What did I have to offer that she couldn't just take from me? "I don't know, but—"

Evelyn kicked off her shoes. They clattered across the floor. "Lick my feet."

"W-wha?"

"You heard me, *slave*. Do it. Lick my toes."

I stared up at her as best I could, then pressed my face into the rug. *Lick her toes? Lick her toes?* What she wanted was distressing enough by itself. What was even more distressing was that I was seriously considering it. "I can't. I just can't."

“You will, or I’ll take you right upstairs, put you back in your braces, and blindfold you for a week. Earplugs, too. Remember what that was like? How you begged me never to do it again?”

Being braced was bad enough, but not being able to move, see, *or* hear... it had practically become a phobia after my first experience like that. I had thought I would go out of my mind, and that had only been after one day, not a week. “No! You wouldn’t! Just for not licking your feet?”

“It’s not about my feet, foolish thing. It’s about you not accepting certain realities. You don’t see it, do you? You still don’t seem to understand who’s the boss here. *Me*. I’m the one in control. I’m the one with the power. And look at you,” she said with a sneer. She towered above me like a monolithic statue. An angry goddess. “You’re helpless and pathetic. You’re my puppet. You do what I want you to, you feel what I want you to. I take care of you. I keep you alive. I’m the sole reason for your existence now. You’re nothing without me. *Nothing*.”

I couldn’t say anything. All I could do was cringe and hiss and squirm under the force of her anger like a worm exposed to the sun. I might not have been nothing, like she said, but at that moment I sure felt like it. A weak, terrified thing slobbering on an expensive rug. Months ago I would have mocked her for giving a speech like that. Now, everything was different. Now, it started to sound like the truth. “Please stop,” I begged.

“Want me to stop? Then get your tongue over here and show me that you know what you are.”

Loathing myself, I tried to crawl to her. I wobbled my torso back and forth on the rug a few times. After all the activity that day and the recent, freezing escape attempt, my body had nothing left to give. The weight of her gaze made my body feel even heavier. “*Hsssss!* Can’t! I can’t move.”

“If you can get your ass down the front steps, you can make it over here. Now, move!”

Spurned on by her anger, I found some reservoir of strength and managed to make it across the floor. My arms and legs felt like jello clad all in lead, but I did it. Crying, I lapped sloppily at her toes and feet while making wet gurgling noises as an instrumental rendition of “Little Drummer Boy” drifted from the stereo. I hardly gave any thought at all to how insane, disgusting, and degrading it was. My only thought was that if I could debase myself enough I might be able to avoid further punishment. Pure sycophantic self-preservation.

“Better,” Evelyn said, sliding her foot out from under my lips. “I know you’re faking it, but some day you’ll learn. Alright. We’re going to go upstairs to bed soon. I have to get up early to make it to my sister’s before breakfast. I may be the best cook among us, but Sarah makes a lovely Christmas ham. It’s her

grand-dad's recipe. But first: your punishment."

"What? *Hsss!* No!" What was it I had just done? Wasn't *that* punishment enough?

"I'm afraid I have to. I have to as long as you keep misbehaving and forcing me to. When you stop, so will I. Understand?" she asked.

"Nooo," I moaned miserably. *Please don't put me back in braces, please, please...*

"Yes you do. However," she said, "I can tell you really don't want to be back in braces, and I'm just not in the mood to do something painful to you, tonight. Maybe – just this once – I'll let you off the hook."

I wasn't sure what I was hearing, so I didn't move or say anything. Was it possible Evelyn would let this evening pass without doing something awful to me for my escape attempt? That wasn't like her. I was waiting nervously for the catch, for the 'Ha ha, fooled you!' I couldn't see her because my face was still pressed to floor near her feet.

"What's wrong? Would you rather I punish you? Do you need that to ease your guilty conscience?"

"Huh? No! I just... you aren't... you really aren't gonna...?"

"Not this time. Call me sentimental. Call it a Christmas treat. I think your imagination is sufficient to torment you with all the things I could do to you. But I won't. Not tonight." She leaned closer. "A thank you might be appreciated, though."

"Th-thanks," I stammered. And I meant it to, too. I was sobbing with disbelief and gratitude. Goddamn it, I hated it when she twisted me around to feel grateful to her. She played with my head so easily. I had tried to escape her clutches and not only did I fail (again!), but in the end I was sincerely thanking her for her generous kindness.

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Evelyn hardly uttered a word as she carried me to the bedroom and got us ready for bed. Getting me ready for bed, outside of the attic, consisted of giving me an enema, giving my hair a cursory swipe, brushing my teeth (always messy), dressing me in a slip, putting me in bed, making sure my catheter line was unobstructed, and hooking up my drip-feed (water-only at night).

My body was so worn out that my muscles were quivering by the time she finally pulled the covers over me. My body was desperate for some rest, but I was still too wired after everything that had happened to get to sleep. I could hear Evelyn finish wrapping some presents for her sister. "I always put it off until last minute," she told me. Her wrapping creases were so damn perfect. After stacking them neatly against the wall when she was finished, she slid into bed and snuggled

up next to me. I was pushed onto my side so she could spoon me. “I put some pills in your water so you’ll sleep soon. Until then, we need to have a little talk.”

“We do?” I asked, suddenly afraid that she had changed her mind about the punishment and was going to do something terrible to me. In a way, she did do something terrible.

“Yes. I would like to know why you still want to escape from me.”

“Whaaat?” I was speechless. I felt my ire rising. “You don’t know? Have you completely lost it?”

“Careful with your words,” she cautioned. “You’re treading on thin ice tonight, already. So, tell me. I want to know.”

“Why do you think?” I asked crossly. “You kidnapped me! What do you expect me to do? Of *course* I want to escape!”

I felt her shake her head. “You deserved what I did, and you know it. I know why you should want to get away originally. It’s only natural for the guilty to want to escape justice. That wasn’t my question. I asked why you *still* wanted to escape.”

I just stammered and sputtered in confusion. What could she possibly want me to say?

She reached up and wiped my cheek with the towel. “What do you hope to accomplish, now, by leaving me? Hmm? Do you want to see me go to jail?”

I wondered if she was trying to trick me into an answer that would give her an excuse to do something to me. But I wasn’t so far gone I couldn’t still speak my mind. “Y-yes,” I hissed. “For what you’ve done to me. Yes.”

“And then what?” she asked.

“Then what, what?” I was having trouble keeping up with this conversation.

“After I go to jail. Then what will you do? Go back to work? Think you could get your old job back, even if they had an opening?”

I winced. Ever since I had realized how badly Evelyn had ruined my body, I had been trying not to think of everything it would mean if I really was like this for life. It was a nagging specter in the back of my mind. Of *course* I wouldn’t be able to go back to my old job now. Evelyn nudged me, indicating she wanted an answer. “No,” I mumbled.

“Then what would you do? Be a secretary? You can’t even type anymore.”

“I could still do something,” I objected. People who could barely move could still work, right?

“Perhaps you could,” she said, then changed the subject. “Do you know what I would do to if you ever successfully got help for yourself, say, perhaps got someone to call the police?”

“No.” *I don’t want to know, I don’t want to know.*

“You don’t?” She snuggled me closer, in that possessive way. “What I would do is make sure you were a lot more helpless than you are now, for the rest of your life. If I thought someone was coming to take you away from me, I bet I would have time enough to put out your eyes.” She pressed her fingertips over my eyelids and I stiffened.

“You wouldn’t,” I insisted desperately. “You’re just saying that to scare me. You wouldn’t do that.”

“No? A sharpened pencil. Your pretty eyes. It would only take a few seconds, and you’d be in darkness forever.”

“Please stop,” I sobbed. “You wouldn’t, you wouldn’t.”

I felt her chuckle into my hair. “You’re right. I’m teasing. I don’t think I’d be able to go through with that. How could I do that to my puppet? I told you I would always take care of you, and that wouldn’t be in keeping with that promise, would it? Your eyes are safe, dear.”

I shuddered with relief. Deep down I didn’t believe that, even as cruel as she could be, Evelyn was capable of that level of violent mutilation. Still, what she *had* done was to plant the seed of the idea in my mind, and that would always be there. The big *What If?*

Evelyn wasn’t finished. “However, I bet I would have enough time to inject you with enough myotoxin to completely paralyze you for life. That, I *would* do. Do you believe that?”

I couldn’t tell if she was bluffing or not. Oddly, that wasn’t anywhere near as upsetting as the thought of being blinded. After all, I was pretty close to being paralyzed already. Months of being in those braces had gotten me quite used to not moving. It was boringly familiar. But the limited movement I did have was far preferable to having none whatsoever. “Yes. I believe you.”

“Would you get much work then, do you think? No. Even if I didn’t completely paralyze you and you remained just as you are now, do you think you’ll be able to live on your own? Think you’d be able to care of yourself? Do you?”

“No.”

“That’s right. You couldn’t afford to have someone to take care of you the way I do. You left yourself with no real friends, your parents are dead, and you have no one in the world who would take care of you. Tell me I’m wrong.”

I couldn’t deny it, so I didn’t say anything. The sad thing was, she was right. I couldn’t think of any one I knew who would take me in out of the goodness of their heart. There was no one out there who really liked me. I didn’t have anyone.

“I’ll tell you what would really happen. You would end up in some state-run hospice,” she said. “Surrounded by other drooling, incontinent invalids just like you. Would you like that?”

“No!”

“You probably wouldn’t even have your own room. No privacy ever. And the nurses in places like that? Treating you like just another filled bed. Impersonal. Cold. Changing your diapers in view of everyone else.”

“Stop, stop,” I pleaded.

Ignoring me, she pressed on, her tone becoming more vehement. “And then there are the male nurses. Surely you’ve heard what some of *them* do, especially to a pretty woman like you who can’t defend herself. They’ll just use you as a hole, day after day, year after—”

“*Hssssss!* Stoop!” I cried. I couldn’t take it anymore. I didn’t know if what she said was true or if she was just trying to scare me. It *sounded* true, and that was enough to freak me out. Besides, all she was doing was echoing some of the fears I already had.

“But with me,” she said, her voice becoming gentle, “you don’t have to worry about all that. How you got here doesn’t really matter anymore. The damage has been done. Now you need someone to take care of you. Don’t I take good care of you? And if nothing else, you certainly get lots of attention. You’ve become the whole center of my life, you know. I’ll always take care of you, because I love you.” She hugged me tightly.

“No.”

“I love you even though you’re crippled. Even though you were a very bad person. I accept all of this about you. Where else can you get that? I *know* what you think of yourself. You see yourself as a ruined, drooling freak. I know. But I love you in spite of that. Who else would want you the way you are now? Only me. You need me. So, I’ll ask again: why would you want to escape now? Escape to what?”

I was a wreck. I started crying again. Everything she had said sounded true to me; I had been her captive for too long to be able to see things completely objectively anymore. Mercifully, she had finished our ‘little talk’ and turned off the light. Judging by Evelyn’s snores, she fell asleep fairly quickly. In spite of the sleeping pills, I stayed awake for a very long time.

Chapter 20

I laid in bed and stared at the ceiling. Different bed, different ceiling, same boredom. I was used to it. I was naked but for the purple hood and the electric

dildo arrangement. I wanted some time to think and sort out everything that had happened on Christmas eve, but that was impossible to do when my own drool was triggering orgasms left and right. Evelyn was at her sister's, doing the Christmas thing. She said she wasn't sure she could trust me enough to leave me completely free while she was away, so I had been bound to her bed with the leather restraints. I didn't know what she thought I could do if I was loose. Get a hold of the toilet paper in the bathroom and make a mess? I couldn't even reach the bedroom doorknob, let alone grasp it firmly enough to turn it. Hell, I probably would have injured myself somehow just trying to get off the bed on my own. Nonetheless, she had decided to keep me restrained, so there I was, staring at the ceiling again. She had chosen to act as if the previous night's escape attempt had never happened, so I decided to act the same way. No point in rocking the boat.

"Ah, good, right where I left you," Evelyn told me when she returned. "I can't begin to tell you what a relief that is."

"Hsssss! Turn this thing off, pleeaassssss!" I moaned.

"In a minute. Don't you want to know how my morning was? It was wonderful! Sarah's ham was as good as ever. Oh, and I got some lovely gifts. Look at this sweater. Isn't it nice? They also gave me some books and a gift certificate. Oh yes, and a bread maker." Her brow furrowed. "I'm not sure if that's a disparagement on my home-made bread or not. Oh, well, no matter. So how are you doing?" She reached over and turned off the machine. My pussy felt numb from over-stimulation.

"Please untie me. My arms. They hurt." The cramps in my shoulders were killing me. I just wasn't used to having them stretched out for long periods, not after having them close at my sides for so long.

"Yes, alright," she said, unhooking the restraints. "There you go. Feel better? I'm going to take a little nap, and then I'm going to have a little fun with you."

"Huh?" I hated it when she used vague, disturbing implications. "What kind of fun?"

She peeled off the spandex hood, which was half-soaked with my saliva. "Don't be so suspicious."

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After her nap, Evelyn gave me another bath, which was great. My muscles were unbelievably sore after the other day's exertions, and the hot water helped. Once I was dried off, she paid particular attention to making up my eyes heavily but didn't use any other makeup, which was weird.

"What are you doing?" I asked, worried, as she laid me out on the bedroom floor and settled down beside me. She was giggling with excitement, which could

not possibly bode well for me.

“Silly thing. I want to see you in your new presents! This is as much a gift for me as it is for you.” She pulled a box to her side and brought out the mask.

Oh, no, not the doll mask, no! I squirmed on the floor, trying unsuccessfully to back away. “*Hssss!*”

“What on earth is wrong with you?” She looked at it, trying to see what was causing my reaction. “It’s just a hood. It won’t hurt at all. A little snug, perhaps, but that’s all.”

“Don’t do this to me. Please don’t.”

“What are you talking about?” Exasperation was creeping into her voice.

“*Hss!* Don’t make me wear that. Don’t make me look like a doll. I can’t. It’s too much. Don’t make me look like a thing, I’m not a *thing*, I’m a person, I’m *me!*”

“Aah, I see. Afraid of being... objectified?”

“Y-yes. Yes, that.”

“Well, I hate to tell you this, but you already are an object. You don’t have a choice, so fucking relax, already. I don’t want to hear another complaint, or I’ll punish you. Understand?”

“*Hssss!*” I angled my face away from her. I didn’t want to submit, but I shut up all the same. I just had to keep telling myself it was no big deal. *It’s just a stupid costume. It means nothing.*

“Good. Now hold still.” She produced the pale peach-colored bodysuit and unzipped it. It took her quite a while to get me into the garment. Easier said than done. I kept getting rolled back and forth as Evelyn worked it up my body. She continued to chatter away while getting me dressed. “I hadn’t intended to do this in the beginning. It’s just that the more I got to know you, and seeing you braced all the time, this just seemed the perfect thing to do. Don’t you agree?”

Yeah, whatever. Just get this over with. The suit was matt and a lot thicker and tighter than the regular spandex I was used to. It wasn’t tight enough to start cutting off circulation, but it was still tight. It hugged every inch of me like a compression garment. It was made small around the waist so that it hugged the contour of my corseted belly. The chest had built-in padded bra cups that shaped my breasts into artificially perky, conical mounds. The gloves had fingers, but I found they were all sewed together, so that even if I could work my fingers, their movement would have been very limited. Seemed like overkill, to me. There was a zipper in the suit’s crotch, currently closed.

Crap. That was my reaction when she sat me up to zip the back and I got a good look at myself. The unnaturally flesh toned material was smooth and hid away all bodily flaws and imperfections. The exaggeratedly heavy stitching made

me look sewn together. I looked like a stuffed rag doll. *Oh... crap.*

“This looks terrific! I’m so glad it fits.” She spent some time touching and squeezing me. When she squeezed my breasts, the foam padding bounced right back into shape. I rolled my eyes and tried to disengage my mind. After getting her tactile fill, she unzipped the crotch and inserted a fresh catheter. Then she picked up the mask. “I don’t want you getting the inside of the mask all messy, so remember to try to spit through the opening between the lips when you need to. I made sure to get one with an opening, just for that purpose.”

“Great,” I said dully. At least I would get a reprieve from having a perpetually damp chin.

She tilted my head to face her and placed the mask over my face. I squirmed in distress as she pulled the tight hood over the crown of my head and down to my neck. The mask was held firmly, but not painfully, against my face. The edges of the eyeholes were smooth and didn’t dig in, but I still didn’t like the sensation of something pressing in so close to my eyes. The mask part went up high, beyond my normal hairline, and curved down beneath my chin, preventing me from opening my mouth much at all. It muffled my whisper-quiet voice even more. The face was molded well, so my nose and lips weren’t squished too much. Thank god I wasn’t claustrophobic.

Evelyn, her eyes sparkling like a kid’s on, well, Christmas, was biting one of her knuckles while studying me. “You’re perfect, oh, you’re just... perfect.” She bent over and stared at my face, then kissed me on the mask’s cold, red lips.

Are you nuts? I asked her silently. *I can’t even feel that! What’s so exciting about a stupid doll mask? God, you are such a psycho!*

“Alright,” she said, sitting up and smoothing her hair out of her face. “Plenty of time for that later. Let’s get you dressed. Can’t have you lying here naked, can we?”

“I’m not naked.”

“What? I’m sorry, I can barely hear you. You’re not naked, you say? Well, of course you are,” she said as she pulled a dress out of a garment bag. “You’re just a naked dolly.”

I winced and hissed. She ignored me and set about to putting the dress on me. More rolling me back and forth. The dress turned out to be something like a little girl’s fancy Christmas mass dress and a doll’s dress with satin and lace everywhere. It was well made and kind of pretty, really, but I still felt like an idiot. It was humiliating just to wear it. It was definitely not a dress I could imagine anyone actually wearing in public; the thing was just *too* feminine. Even as a little child, I had never worn a dress so flamboyantly girly. However, it was exactly the kind of dress a doll might wear. Evelyn put satin ballet slippers – the

only footwear that would fit me anymore – on my feet while I threw a feeble tantrum.

“Aw, there, there,” soothed Evelyn, all amused. “You look precious. You have no idea. It’s nothing to be upset about.”

“Stop treating me like a baby! I’m a grown woman!”

“Correction. You *were* a grown woman. Now you’re whatever I want you to be, puppet.” She patted my cheek, though I couldn’t feel her touch, then opened a plastic bag. “One last thing.”

“What’s that? What is it? *Hsss!* Not a wig! I don’t need a wig!”

“Of course you do. You look bald, and that won’t do.” She lifted me up and fit the curly, brown monstrosity onto my head. It was fixed in place with safety pins through the hood. She teased it and fluffed it until she was satisfied. “Oh, lord, you’re a vision. You’re a dream come true.” She kissed me again.

“*Hsss!*”

“I just want to admire you for a while,” Evelyn said. She piled some throw pillows against the wall, then lifted me and leaned me against them so that I was in a sitting position. “So cute! Do you want to see yourself?”

“No!”

“Of course you do.”

I glared at her back as she dragged the big, oval, cheval mirror out of the corner and positioned it across from me. I shut my eyes before she tilted the mirror down. “I don’t want to see. Take it away.”

I heard her sit on the edge of the bed. “Go on. Look at your pretty self.”

“*Hss!*”

“Do it or I’ll kick you.”

I made an inarticulate growl. I forced my eyes open and found myself in the mirror. Seeing my reflection was like a physical blow. There was nothing of myself in the mirror. I was staring at a life-sized doll. A soft-cloth mannequin. It wasn’t human, and sure as hell wasn’t me. On the floor sat a figure propped casually against the wall and pillows like a toy on a shelf. Its splayed, straightened legs with arched feet thrust out before it, its arms hung limp at its sides. The wig was full and curly, yet synthetic and far too shiny to be mistaken for natural hair. The pretty costume dress only served to make the thing look more doll-like. And the face... the face. Porcelain white, inhumanly feminine, and utterly void of expression. The only sign of humanity was the wide, frightened eyes gazing from behind the mask.

I reached up to try to touch my face, but the sight of the doll-thing moving in the mirror just freaked me out even more. Seeing myself like that was devastating to me in some inexplicable way.

No! That's not me! That won't be me! I won't, I won't, I WON'T!

I felt like I was having a total break with reality. I recoiled as violently as my body would allow, scream-hissing nonstop. I felt myself blacking out...

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When I came to, I found I had been moved to the bed. Evelyn was hovering over me. I spoke my first thought aloud. "You drugged me again."

"I most certainly did not," Evelyn protested. "You passed out. You had me worried for a second."

I then realized from the pressure on my face I was still wearing the mask. I tried to claw it off. All I could do was paw at its smooth surface. I could get my long, gloved nails under the edge of the mask, where it was adhered to the lycra hood, but I lacked both the strength and the coordination to budge it. Although I had never been claustrophobic before, the insistent hug of that mask on my face was pushing me over the border into a panic attack. "*Hsssss!*"

"What's gotten into you?" Evelyn took my shoulders and held me still. "Stop making that noise and talk to me."

"*Hsssss!* No! *Hsssss!* Get this off me, please, it's not me!"

Evelyn looked me up and down with a mix of incredulity and amusement. "It's just a simple costume. And I know it doesn't hurt."

"Take it off *now!*" I reached up to try to claw at her face, but she brushed away my hands with an irritated toss of her head.

"Knock it off!" she told me and smacked me on the side of the head. She then got a funny look on her face and snickered to herself. "I always wanted to do that to some of my patients."

I struggled weakly and tried to fight her, but it was pointless. With one hand planted on my chest, she very securely pinned me against the bed like a butterfly mounted on a board. "Shut up and listen. I'm not taking it off until I want to, so you're just going to have to deal with it. You have already tried to spoil my holiday once. You are not going to do it again. What you *are* going to do is relax, let me have my way, and pretend to enjoy yourself for just one day. Understand?" She eased up on my chest, then gave me a sly smile. "You can still wear that mask with the braces on, you know."

I hissed again, but weakly. Of course she would get her way. She always got her way. I breathed deeply and forced myself to smother the panic-inducing claustrophobia before it could grip me again. I knew that if I wasn't able to control myself, Evelyn would be more than willing to start imposing her own brand of control. I was marginally successful. *I really do feel however she tells me to feel, just like she said,* I mused darkly. *Crap.*

"Are we calmer now? Are we done throwing a hissy fit?"

“Yes,” I mumbled behind the mask.

“What’s that? I didn’t hear you.”

Goddammit! “Yes!”

“That’s good to know,” she said, scooping me into her arms and carrying me downstairs like the rag doll I now resembled.

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Somehow, I made it through the rest of Christmas without completely losing it again. I spent most of the day on sofa, snuggled unhappily against Evelyn as she ate her cookies and watched holiday shows on tv. My head would bonelessly flop over onto her shoulder, as if I was her affectionate lover or something. Yuck. I strove to put my appearance out of my mind. I was, for the moment, unbraced and somewhat free, and that was nothing to scoff at. Since I was wearing the mask, at least Evelyn couldn’t amuse herself by making me crawl around after floor-cookies, either. I was too sore all over to have been able to do any crawling, anyway.

For the first time in ages, with the mask pressed to my lips, I was able to feel as if I wasn’t drooling on myself. To my disconcertion, I realized I was slightly annoyed by not being able to just let the spit bubble freely out of my mouth. I was getting used to not having any control over it, so having to remember to let it flow through the shiny doll lips was something of a mental effort. God, would I ever have thought I would get so used to having no control that having to exert *any* was enough make me feel uncomfortable?

The cheerful, happy-ending normalcy of the Christmas movies was a stark contrast to my life. Even if I was ever able to get free, would there ever be a happy ending for me? I thought about the things Evelyn had told me, about me ending up in some hospice somewhere. Talk about putting a damper on one’s holiday cheer. Yeah, I was having a holly, jolly Christmas, alright. *Ha!*

Evelyn got a little tipsy from brandy later in the evening and turned maudlin. She kept telling me how pretty I was, how cute I was, how scrumptiously, deliciously adorable I was. One nice thing about the mask was that I couldn’t feel her kisses on my cheeks and lips. I just stared straight ahead while she hugged and fondled me, trying to zone out. I was getting pretty good at that. The problem was, part of me really *did* like hearing the compliments she paid me. It was nice to hear that I was pretty, despite the source. I had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn’t really me she was addressing, but the image of what I resembled: a helpless doll-thing that could neither resist her nor exist without her.

Evelyn wasn’t satisfied with her simple, one-sided necking. With a mischievous grin, she poured a generous helping of brandy into my feeding bag. Watching her do it made me feel more helpless than when she was groping me. I

didn't want to be drunk, I wasn't in the mood, but she wanted me to be and I couldn't prevent it. The alcohol inevitably began to drip down my tube and started to warm my belly. In my old life, I probably drank a little more than I should have. I wasn't a lush, certainly, but some wine in the evening was just about the only way I was able to relax after work. Since then, of course, I hadn't a drop, and it went straight to my head. After a while, as I grew increasingly inebriated, I sighed, leaned into her, and went limp. More limp than usual, anyway.

"Feeling a little more relaxed?" Evelyn asked. She took me upstairs, humming some Christmas carol or other to herself, and put me in bed. I was afraid she was going to try something, or make me do something. Mercifully, she didn't. She just kept on kissing and hugging me. I think she might have been masturbating next to me, but I wasn't sure. Either way, I was too out of it to care much. I nodded off and, thanks to the brandy, slept pretty soundly through most of the night.

Chapter 21

"You're working today?" I said, watching her get herself ready for the office as I laid in bed. She bustled about: doing makeup, getting dressed, taming her hair with a curling iron. I realized I had never actually seen her get ready for work before. She always did that downstairs and I was always in the attic. It made me envious. I remembered when *I* used to be able to do all that stuff in the mornings. I used to think of it as a time-consuming chore. But something is only a chore until you realize you won't ever be able to do it again.

"Neuroses wait for no man," she said, then swore under her breath and sucked her finger where she had just touched the hot part of the iron. I used to do that, too.

"It just doesn't seem like you to go to work the day after Christmas. Even I had a longer break around Christmas." Of course, that was just because nobody else at the office was willing to work then.

"Are you kidding? It's practically my busiest season. People stress themselves out so much this time of year. It's all worry, worry, worry: about money, relations, putting on a good facade, and 'Oh, no! The ham won't be ready on time! Life is over!', *etcetera, etcetera*. People just cannot seem to relax and enjoy a thing for what it is. Sound familiar?" She directed a pointed glance at me. "For the next couple of weeks I'll get my ear talked off about horrible in-laws, mostly. Jealous?"

"Better you than me." I was only half-listening to her. What I was thinking

about was the prospect of actually being left alone, unbraced, all day. To my surprise, the idea was a little frightening. It's just that I felt so vulnerable and helpless in my weakened state that not having somebody nearby to help me was scary. I was even more helpless while utterly immobile in the braces, but at least then I felt I had some kind of protection, in a way. The braces could be, in a way, a kind of emotional armor. Without them, I felt as exposed and vulnerable as a snail without its shell. I watched her daily preparations for another minute, then asked, "Are you going to tie me up?"

"Do you want me to? No, I have a more relaxing day planned for you. Speaking of which, I better get you ready before I make myself late. No time for dilly-dally." With that, she pulled me over to the center of the bed and sat me up against the pillows. From a hardware store shopping bag she produced a length of heavy chain and some locks. She wrapped it around my waist, locked it, then locked the other end down at the bottom of the headboard. She unzipped the bodysuit crotch and plugged wires into the butt plug.

I noticed, with dread, that it wasn't the pleasurable, electrostim unit she was using, but rather the one used for shocking me into silence. I hadn't had to feel that horrible device for a long time; not since the throat thing had stolen my ability to make any loud sounds at all. "*Hsss!* What's that for? You don't need that. I'll be quiet!"

"Oh, would you relax? Good heavens, you act as if I had tortured you with it, or something."

"*Hssss!* You have!"

She looked up at me with a disquieting smile. "I know," she said. "But not today. I'm not setting it very high at all. It's little more than a precaution, really. A reminder." She produced four satin bows attached to what looked like ruffled, elastic garters. They had wires hanging from each of them. She turned one inside out for me to see a little vial full of silver fluid that was hidden by the bow. "See here? I put these together the other week, just for this sort of occasion. It's a little mercury switch. Do you know what that is? Well, it means that once these are connected, moving too much will cause the mercury to complete the circuit and trigger a shock. The bows and garters are just window dressing." She worked them over my boots and gloves, one for each limb. They went around my upper thighs and upper arms, blending in to look like just another part of the ultra-frilly outfit, except for the electrical wires.

"Why?"

"Well, I can't have traipsing all about while I'm away, now can we?" she said. As if I could traipse. If *only* I could traipse. She reattached the glossy, synthetic wig and arranged my dress. It was a little mussed from sleeping in it.

“Are you comfy?”

“No.”

“Alright, let’s see if this works.” She took my wrist and lifted it above my head. Before my arm had barely even moved a few inches, the switch was triggered and I got shocked.

“*Hsss!* Hurts!” I writhed on the bed. A ‘*reminder*,’ she called it? No fucking way was that a little reminder! “Lemme-go-huuurts!” I tugged at my arm, but there was no escaping her grip.

She was grinning. “Hmm. I can’t tell. Do you think it’s working?”

“*Hssssss!*”

“Alright, alright,” she said, releasing my wrist. The shocks stopped once my arm was again limp at my side. “I just can’t resist teasing you sometimes. It’s so easy.”

“Evil, twisted sow,” I muttered inaudibly.

“What was that?”

“You...!” I began, but cut myself off. Discretion being the better part of valor, or something.

“Uh huh.” She set the device in the topmost dresser drawer and closed it shut on the wires. “I’m well aware that, since you’re unrestrained in any other way, you could possibly remove your pretty bows, or unhook the wires somehow. If you do, however, it’s back into the braces you go. I might even have to beat you again. The choice is yours. This should prove to be an interesting experiment of willpower, I should think. Reminds me of my lab-rat days at college.”

Great. I had to participate in my own bondage. I glared at her as she arranged the standing mirror across from the foot of the bed so that I could have a clear, unobstructed view of myself.

She glanced at her watch. “Better get you fixed up,” she said, rushing out to get a feeding/water bag. She kept them in refrigerator. She returned, connected the tube to my nose, and gave me a kiss on the mask’s pristine white forehead. “Oops. Lipstick.” She rubbed at my forehead with a tissue. “All set? I’m off. You be good.”

A minute later I heard the front door closing, accompanied by the meows of Jinx, and I was left alone with my reflection. I sat. I quickly learned the best way to avoid a shock was to simply be as still as possible. By moving carefully and slowly, I was able to adjust my position slightly. Those damn mercury switches were sensitive. I had to admit that it was a pretty clever way of making me stay put. In some ways, it was worse than being braces. With the braces on, I simply couldn’t move. Now, I was free to move, but I couldn’t allow myself to.

Naturally, I started taking stock of my situation and trying to think of ways

to take advantage of it. That shocking device was nearby, though not within reach. I supposed, if I dared to endure the pain, I could work the garters and bows off... no, probably not with the corset restricting my movement. I'd have a heck of a fun time trying to contort myself enough to get them off my legs. Even if I did, the switches didn't have to be *on* my body to trigger a shock. Just taking them off and leaving them lying there, in the wrong position, would be enough to do that.

Okay, so taking them off was probably a no-go. I might be able to wrap one of the wires around my hand and yank them out of the main device. I would have done it, too, if not for the threat that I would go straight back into the braces. I wouldn't have a way to get the wires back into the device in the dresser if I yanked them out. Evelyn *would* find out. It was a one-shot chance, and if I did something worth risking that, I'd have to make it worth the consequences. I could only bide my time until the opportunity came. I uttered a whine of frustration inside the mask. *Sure, I'll lull her into making a mistake by doing exactly what she wants... month after month after month. Who am I trying to kid?* My whole life had been reduced to sitting and waiting for the next event, and those events were all dependent on Evelyn.

So I sat and stared at my dollified self in the mirror: the perfect, cold features, the lovely, artificial hair, the hyper-feminine dress, the strange, almost-skin-toned bodysuit. Long before, if I had been dressed in a costume like the one I was wearing, I would simply have felt foolish and embarrassed to be seen by anyone. Now, after everything I had been through, it was entirely different. My appearance didn't feel foolish; it felt obscene. It was like I was losing my whole identity. My life, independence, and strength had been taken from me. What did I have left but my self-identity? Being made to look like that *thing* in the mirror just made my hold on that all the more precarious. I couldn't see any of my real self other than my eyes. I was disappearing. The Katherine Quinten I knew myself as was being replaced, more and more, with Evelyn's plaything. It was made worse by the extreme femininity of the mask and dress, both seeming to mock my self-perceived loss of womanhood as I was turned into a drooling beast. The mask *was* beautiful, if inhuman, and I knew I could now only dream of achieving that kind of beauty in reality now that my body was ruined. It was a glossy veneer over the real truth. The ugly truth.

I realized that I could all too easily lose myself in the illusion of being a thing, a doll, in place of the horrible reality of being a living, human being enduring the things I had gone through. A toy doll didn't need to worry about being held against its will. It didn't care that it was just a thing to be acted upon, never interacting. I had an irrational terror that my mind would retreat and shut

off completely, leaving only a living shell behind. Was that what Evelyn wanted me to be? God, I hoped not. I didn't want that. In the mirror, tears trickled down my porcelain, perfectly-formed cheeks.

Dolls cry, too. Who would have thought?

.....

The first thing Evelyn did when she got home was come up to check on me. I was in the exact same place she had left me. She broke into a huge grin, sat down on the bed and reached for me. I screamed in pain and surprise as the plug unexpectedly shocked me. Evelyn's jostling of the mattress had set off the mercury switches. "What?" Evelyn asked, startled. She then looked chagrined. "Oh! Oh, I'm sorry, honey, I... really didn't mean to do that. Just a sec." She opened the dresser drawer and pushed a button on the device. "There you go. You're disarmed."

I rolled my eyes and groaned. I had managed to avoid shocking myself for several hours, only to have Evelyn do it by accident. I had actually been a little happy to see her, even if only because her coming home might mean I could move again. Getting shocked spoiled all that.

"Anyway," said Evelyn, getting back on the bed, "how was your day?"

"Guess." Much of my morning had been dedicated to forcing myself to stay still. It wasn't as hard as it would have been months ago. My body was so used to being still, it was hardly even uncomfortable. I wasn't even cramped after sitting in place all day. Hooray for me. The hard part was simply resisting the urge to move around. Between bouts of existential dread as I stared in the mirror, I used my newfound talent of blanking out to make the day pass more quickly. When I did that, however, I wasn't 'there' enough to remember to carefully let my saliva drip out of the mask's mouth slit. The inside of the mask around my mouth and the front of the bodysuit's neck was damp.

"Why is your neck wet? Were you drooling inside the mask?"

Can't slip anything by you, can I? I thought with irritation. "I missed."

"Odd. Try to do better. So, did anything exciting happen today?"

"Let me see. Hmmm. No."

"Good," she said.

"Oh, wait. I thought I heard a car crash somewhere down the street."

"Really? That would explain the broken plastic in the street. Good ears. Maybe too good," she added vaguely.

"Are you done teasing me?"

"Never," she said amiably.

"Great, then can you at least get..." I began, then took a breath. "Would you please take this thing off, please?"

“Looks like I’ll have to, seeing as how you’ve soaked the inside of it. I’ll have to let the padding dry.” She sighed and peeled the spandex hood and mask from my face. It felt so good to get that thing off. Evelyn prodded the inside of the mask and looked displeased.

Don’t you say a damn thing, I thought at her. You’re the one who made me have to drool in the first place.

She didn’t, though. She simply turned the hood inside out and placed it on the bedside table to dry. “I’m going to be sore in the morning,” she said. “Today is the first time I’ve worked out in about a week. Mustn’t let myself get out of the habit, though. You’re free to do what you want for now. I need to get some paperwork done before I start supper.” She unzipped me, pulled the dress off over my head, and strapped the catheter bag to my thigh. My face was wiped dry. She sure had gotten efficient at taking care of me. I squirmed weakly and blew a spit bubble as she pulled me into a hug. She left me lying on my side.

I continued to stare at my reflection, sideways, in the mirror for a few minutes after she left. Finally, I could see my own haunted face again. It was still there. I was still human. I rolled onto my front and pulled myself to the edge of the bed. The floor looked like a long way down for someone in my condition. How pathetic. *“Hss! Hsssss!”*

“Is that you?” Evelyn called from the hallway. She looked into the bedroom. “Was that you?”

“Hss!” I said again, pointing at the floor.

“Oh, I see. Alright.” She picked me up at the waist and set me on the carpet. “There you go,” she said, and left again.

I pulled myself around on the floor for a while, getting the circulation flowing back into my wasted muscles. I was still wearing the bodysuit, which made crawling around a little different – less friction also meant less traction. The general thickness of the stretchy material resisted my efforts to move freely. The foam padding around my breasts made crawling on the floor a little less uncomfortable, though. The carpet rubbing against my face actually felt good after wearing that mask all day. I thought that it also felt pretty good to be able to salivate freely without having to worry about getting the inside of my mask wet.

I froze. *Oh my god, oh my god, did I just think that? That it’s good to salivate freely? I did not just think that! “Hsssss!”*

After several laps around the bedroom, I made my way into the hallway. I paused at the stairs and looked down. I could hear Jinx batting something around down there. I guessed, if I had to, I might be able to make it down the steps. It would be painful, but I could probably do it. My experience on the porch steps was still fresh in my mind, but carpeted stairs were a lot easier to cope with than

sharp-edged cement. I passed the stairs and headed to an open door farther down the hall. I had never seen inside that room before. I stopped at the doorway to catch my breath.

Inside was Evelyn's little home office. There were a lot of shelves on the walls, all crammed full of books, boxes, and paperwork. Evelyn was sitting at a desk, facing away from the doorway. Her wide rear end was visible on both sides of the computer chair. She was working on some spreadsheet on a laptop. There was an old REM song playing softly on the radio. I went further into the room. That's when I spotted the phone sitting on the corner of the desk. I had almost missed it, it being such a commonplace item. It was the large rotary phone that Evelyn had taken out of the bedroom. Its cord was even hanging down within reach, if I chose to make an effort. *Aha. So that's where you put it.*

Evelyn turned in her chair. "Why, hello. Did you come to visit me?"

"Uh." I didn't want her to catch me eyeballing the telephone. I pulled myself over to the chair.

"Trying to get back in my good graces?" she asked.

"Er." *Think of something.* "I was wondering... would you read to me tonight? I'm really bored."

"Would you like that? I suppose I could do that. Here." She folded up a paper towel and placed it under my head, then offered me a mint candy from the desk drawer. I strained to reach it and pluck it from her fingers. "There you go."

I sucked on the mint for a while, not really able to taste much the sweetness of it, mostly only the mintiness, letting the sugary, pink saliva soak into the paper towel under my cheek. At least now I knew where I could get to a phone. Now to figure out how get to it when Evelyn wasn't around. I finished the mint and started to turn myself around to face the door, but Evelyn placed her foot on my back, immobilizing me.

"Just a minute," she said, and continued to type away on whatever she was working on. After five minutes or so, I started to wriggle under foot. She looked down at me. "What's the matter? In a rush to get somewhere?"

"I'm busy, lady, I've got things to do. Daylight's wasting."

Evelyn chuckled. "Right. Look at me," she said. She took a wet nap from a desk drawer and wiped the sticky stuff from my face. "Go for it."

I turned around and made my way back into the bedroom, where I stopped and reflected. There I was, plotting another escape. I hadn't forgotten the events of the other day: my failed escape, my pathetic groveling, Evelyn's little talk. That damn talk. The terrible things she said.

And really, what did I hope to achieve by plotting to escape? What did I hope to accomplish? I was afraid if this kept up for much longer, maybe for as

little as another month or two, I would give up all serious thoughts of escape. I could *feel* the resolve I once had getting weaker by the day. But what the hell were my options? I didn't want to stay, but my alternatives weren't so cheery, either. It was a choice between being helpless and in a hospital bed for life, or being helpless and drooling mints by Evelyn's feet. And was the latter really so bad, by comparison? I *hated* hospitals. At least with Evelyn I would be taken care of, and even get attention...

Stop it! I scolded myself. *Stop thinking like that. If I keep thinking like that, I'll never do anything. After she's gone to jail, then I'll worry about what happens next.*

Go to jail for what? You deserve to be here. You're better off here, where no one can hurt you and where you can't hurt anyone else.

No! I can't let her beat me. If I can beat her, I'll be happy.

What do you think this is, a competition? It was your competitiveness that got you in this fix to begin with. Besides, you won't ever be happy if you somehow beat her. Who would take care of you then? Who would care about you then?

"Shut up!" Bubbles of spit ran down my chin. "Oh, my god, I'm completely losing it," I whimpered. I pressed my hands to my temples and buried my face into the dark, safe carpet.

A little while later, after I had cried myself out, or thought I had, Evelyn passed by on her way downstairs. She stopped to eye me quizzically and asked if I had been crying. I shook my head and she hesitantly left me alone. I pushed myself onto my back, just for a change of perspective. It was hard having the point-of-view of a housecat all the time. I gazed up at the ceiling and the top of the open door, then gasped. *What the hell is that?*

On the outside of the bedroom door, up near the top, was a sliding bolt. It could be used to lock the door from the outside. I blinked, comprehension coming slowly. If I had my former strength and was able to stand, I might have been able to batter the door until I tore the bolt's screws loose, but I sure as hell couldn't do that now. I rolled back over and crawled back into the hallway. Tilting myself onto my side, I could see a matching bolt on the outside of the office door, and it was currently shut, bolted, and impossibly out-of-reach. Kathy-proofed.

I started to laugh bitterly, hysterically. What a fine trick that would have been if I had tried to escape. Even if I was able to get free of the shocking device, even if I should magically escape the chain around my waist, and even if made it to the door and was somehow able to reach the knob, I would only have found that the door bolted shut from outside. I would then have had to wait there on the floor, in dread, for Evelyn to come home and catch me loose.

"It's not fair. It's not *fair!* *Hsssss!*" I cried, feeling fresh tears well up in

my eyes. Why could I never get a break?

Chapter 22

For the next week or two I continued to be passive, if not altogether agreeable. I could lie and say that I was deliberately lulling her into a false sense of security while waiting to make my move, but that was just wishful thinking in the back of my mind. The truth was that there was nothing else I could do. Perhaps I was becoming used to living the way I was; the same as I had pretty much gotten used to the braces or the corset's constant embrace, the same way I was getting used to sexually servicing Evelyn on a regular basis. I didn't want to get used to any of that; getting used to any little bit of it, accepting Evelyn's insanity as normalcy, seemed to be like surrendering more and more ground in a war of attrition that I was steadily losing. Like it or not, it was happening, all the same.

My days were just as boring as they had ever been, now compounded with the challenge of self-restraint. One of the hardest parts was when I suddenly got an itch and had to resist every impulse to scratch it. Eventually, I learned to turn out little annoyances like that until they disappeared. And then there was the doll-faced reflection in the mirror. Christ, I was even getting used to that, too. Since the only time I got a look at myself in the mirror now was when I was wearing that mask, I was starting to anticipate seeing it, as if that was how I really looked all the time. The evenings had me either being played with by Evelyn or with me being beneficently ignored by her as she went about her daily mundane domesticity.

I received both a new corset and a new dress in that time. The dress was hot pink and made me look like some Candyland Barbie nightmare. The new corset looked the same as the old, except that the waist and hips formed an even more pronounced hourglass shape and it was more heavily boned. I hissed and moaned as I was laced into it, not realizing until just then how much I had grown accustomed to the old corset's shape. The old one felt loose compared to the new one, which crushed my waist and ribs and reminded me of how the first one felt when it was put on me. It seemed as if years had passed since then.

I thought I might be getting some of my strength back. Not enough, but some. I stopped being so sore, so I ceased to feel as if I had been a punching bag in the mornings. My neck was getting better at supporting my head a little so that it wasn't always flopping around like a dashboard bobble-head. I was able to get around a little faster and without stopping for so many breathers. I still wasn't strong enough to get up and crawl around on my hands and knees, so I seemed to

be stuck on my belly for good. I was afraid that that was as strong as I would ever be. And I still couldn't budge my feet an inch out of their pointed position.

One evening, some time after New Year's, I was laying on my side in bed, facing the curio cabinet full of dolls. I had just gone down on Evelyn and had an orgasm, myself, thanks to Ol' Sparky the goddamn, fucking irresistible electrostim device. She was lying on her side of the bed, reading some shrink peer journal. I was huddled under the sheet, facing away from her. She had a CD playing on her little stereo which I found sounded rather melodic and soothing, but also forlorn. I seemed to be paying a lot more attention to music and its nuances than I ever had in the past. I guess endless boredom will teach you to appreciate just about any tiny pleasure. "The music's pretty. What is it?" I asked.

"Hmm? It's Enya."

"But I hate Enya," I said.

She was distracted by her reading and wasn't giving me her full attention. "I suppose your tastes have changed, then, haven't they?" she remarked.

That didn't make sense. How would someone's tastes change without them knowing about it? "I always hated music like this. Always thought it was too slow."

"Well, now you're slow, too, so I'd say it fits."

Oh, that's nice. Now I'm slow. Then I realized maybe she wasn't talking about my mind, just my rate of movement. That would be less insulting. She didn't say anything else, so I just listened to the music.

I got started thinking of things I was no longer able to do. Thinking about those things was physically painful, like a prickly ball twisting inside my belly. It was like some kind of masochistic self-torment, but I couldn't stop myself once I got started. Maybe it was natural. Maybe my mind decided to face up to cold truths, mourn for my losses, then put them aside. That didn't occur to me at the time, though. All I could do was pity myself.

I'd never get a promotion, or feel the satisfaction of a job done well. I couldn't go to the beach. I couldn't drink coffee. No more eating in nice restaurants. No more dating. Not even flirting. There would be no trips to the malls to hunt for the new styles. Hell, I wouldn't even be wearing anything that Evelyn didn't pick out and help me put on. Forget shoes. Shoes could no longer fit on my deformed feet, much less actually be of use to me for anything. It dawned on me that I was truly no capable of walking. I had known it, of course, but I guess I had been denying it on some level, and it struck me particularly hard.

I'm never going to walk again. Whatever happens, whether I escape or stay here, either way, I'll never be able to walk. Not ever. Not one step. For the rest of my life. Overwhelmed, I started to cry heavily, which came out as a series of

short hisses. “*Hssss-ss-ss-ss... hsss-ss-ss-ss-ss...*”

Evelyn touched my shoulder. “Are you crying? What’s the matter?”

“I won’t *hsss!* ever be able *hsss!*... I won’t ever walk again. *Hssss-ss-ss!*”

“Aww, I know, puppet. Come here.”

She took me in her arms, and squeezed me tightly as I cried against her, and, god help me, it felt good. I was frightened, weak, and helpless. She was strong, and it was sanctuary to be held like that. The feel of her strong muscles under her soft skin was nice. Comforting. She was, well, *everything*. I *did* need her. She kept holding me and stroking my back until my tears stopped.

I had a brief fantasy of pretending that she wasn’t the one who put me in this position to begin with; that I was already crippled when she found me and wanted my company in spite of it. And all the ‘slave’ stuff was just a game we played. Nothing serious. It was a seductive fantasy – one that would allow me to overlook the fact that I was in the embrace of a cruel monster who had kidnapped me. It would allow me to ignore the horrible guilt that, right then, I was actually *enjoying* the embrace.

I have to get out of here. I have to get away, I thought, with my face pressed into her bosom. If it doesn’t happen soon, I don’t know what’ll happen to me. If I don’t get away soon, I won’t want to leave.

Chapter 23

The next day started just like all the others, with me chained to the bed with nothing to do but look at my reflection for eight or nine hours. I wasn’t there most of the time, though. Most of the time my head was off in that nowhere place I went to. I found that it was kind of soothing, really. Anyway, I didn’t speak when Evelyn came home. I was still in a funk, leftover from the morbid thoughts I had last night. She went to file some papers in her office before coming in to release me. “Not talking to me?” she asked as she unlocked the chain around my waist.

“Nothing to say.”

“All right, then.” She removed the mask and hood from my head. “Wait ‘til I tell you about the man who was sent to me today. Apparently, he swallows fifty cents worth of dimes every single day – oh, and gold shavings, too – on the belief that it will help him transform into a giant mechanical bird and he’ll fly away. It’s kind of poignant when you think about it. Sad. I’ll have to recommend him to the state hospital, just to make sure his belly isn’t full of loose change.

Schizophrenics aren’t really my speciality... did you just hear something?”

“Huh?”

Evelyn went to the window and parted the curtains. “Oh, I do *not* believe it.

That damn dog again!” She opened the window and leaned out, shouting, “Shoo! Get away from there! Go home!”

“Dog?”

“It’s digging up my bulbs!” she cried. She slammed the window shut and headed for the door.

“Why don’t you just put it in braces?” I mumbled.

“What? Very funny. Jim is going to get a piece of my mind,” she muttered as she stalked out of the room. I heard her going down the stairs and slamming the front door.

I was stuck sitting there, since she hadn’t gotten around to turning off the shocking thing. Listening to her shouting at the dog beneath the bedroom window, I had to chuckle at the mental image: The Wicked Bitch and her arch-nemesis, The Dog from Down the Street. How fucking bizarre. I made my head roll back onto the pillows and looked around the room. I heard Jinx batting some paper around in another room. I had an inkling of something being not right about that, something *important*, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. A crumpled ball of paper, evidently teased out of a wastebasket, went tumbling by the bedroom door with Jinx in hot pursuit. He must have gotten it from the office.

Which meant the office door was open.

And there was a phone in there. I was unbound. Evelyn was gone.

Don’t even think about it! Remember what happened last time? You got off easy, and you know it.

It’s right there. The phone is right in there! All I have to do is get to it.

She’ll catch you! Even if you get to the phone, she will be back long before any police get here.

And of course I knew what that would mean. Her recent threats rang in my ears. She would have plenty of time to execute her plan of injecting enough of that poison in me to paralyze me for life. She might even put out my eyes. She said she wouldn’t, but who knew what she would really do if she was angry enough at me, and the cops were right outside, and she had nothing else to lose? But still, there was a chance. Wasn’t there? I also knew that if I failed, I wouldn’t get another chance, not with the phones. *But I have to make her pay.*

So she pays, and you end up in a hospital bed. Is it worth it? Just stay put. Maybe even tell her what you were planning, like you should have done last time. She might be so pleased that she’d do something really nice, right? She might take out this gag thing, or at least stop making you wear the mask so much.

The idea sounded reasonable. *I just don’t know!*

Just let her take care of you. You’re getting used to it. It’s not all bad. Not all of the time. Besides, she loves you. She said so.

It was that thought that spurred me into action. I didn't want to be loved by her. I never asked her to love me. I didn't need to be loved by anyone, but *especially* not from her! I couldn't allow myself to forget that she was the one who did all of this to me. She stole my life, crippled me, humiliated me, *tortured* me. Even if I did deserve it (and I did, didn't I?), it still wasn't right. If *I* didn't do something, no one would. If I didn't, that would mean she got away with it, and that just wouldn't be *fair*!

I rocked myself back and forth to roll myself over and off of the pillows that were supporting me. The shocks started, one every five seconds, and that was almost enough to make me want to desperately claw myself back into a sitting position to make them stop. Instead, I sed the searing flashes of pain to give me incentive enough to scramble clumsily over to the edge of the bed. I was at the far edge, opposite the dresser that held the device. I went over sideways in order to keep from landing face-first, but I still hit the floor pretty hard. My arms simply were not strong enough to cushion the fall.

I felt the strangely unpleasant tug in my ass and bowels as the wire leading from the inflatable plug to the device went taut, digging into the corner of the mattress. The end of the wire that attached to plug was screwed in (as I discovered painfully once while trying to pull it free at the start of my career as a dollified bedroom decoration), so I knew it wasn't going to just pop loose. The simple plug at the other end – the end that went into the device – would normally have been yanked free easily, except that the thickness of the plug was caught in the narrow crack of the dresser drawer. I was trapped there against the side of the bed, with my ass suspended partway off the floor by the wire, held in place by the butt plug that was shocking me the entire time. I was getting hysterical, wondering how I would explain myself if Evelyn came back and found me like that.

I could say I sneezed really hard and blew myself out of bed! Ha ha!
“Owww!”

The shocks granted me the adrenaline to move my half-dead muscles. I pulled and pulled, like a carthorse straining to move a heavy load. Finally, the wire tore free from the drawer and whizzed through the air. The pain stopped. Pausing for only a few seconds to catch my breath, I made for the hallway. The pink nightmare doll dress kept fouling me up, and it was taking me a lot longer than it should have. My mouth was bone dry. No drooling now.

Even as I crawled out of the bedroom and towards the open office door, the doubts started coming back with a vengeance. Was defeating Evelyn, at this point, really worth it? Was victory worth the consequences? ‘Did the overhead out-shadow the profit margin?’ as I would have used to think back in the old days when I had a career. Thinking about it was enough to make me stop in the middle

of the hallway. *Do you really want to do this?*

“I don’t know!” I said aloud. But I couldn’t just give up. It was too late now. I wanted to be free. Being free was the most important thing. Right? That’s what I had been taught. That’s what I wanted to believe. I ignored the turmoil in my mind, switching over to automatic. “I just can’t stop now.”

I crawled into the office, and there was the chunky old rotary phone, sitting on the desk. I rolled onto my side at the foot of the desk and reached for the cord. My fingers still didn’t work very well, not enough to grasp something firmly, but I was able to wrap the coiled cord around my wrist and pull. I felt the phone slide across the desk. I was crying and I didn’t know why. I told myself that I was seconds away from freedom. I pulled on the cord again and realized, as the corner of the phone appeared over the edge of the desk and began to fall, that I might have made a serious error in judgment.

The heavy phone came tumbling down and I had just enough time to flinch away so that it struck me on the side of the head instead of right in the face. The phone’s ringer went *ding!* as it hit and tumbled off the side. The world went dark, then bright white, then dissolved into stars. A sudden and intense sensation of nausea struck me, but quickly faded. I lay there, stunned and hissing miserably, curling halfway into a fetal position.

Once my head stopped throbbing so much and the world stopped whirling, I remembered where I was and why. How much time had passed since Evelyn left? When would she get back? Hissing, I groped for the phone and receiver. Just then it dawned on me that whoever answered my call might not be able to hear my breathy voice. I could hiss like crazy, but that just might make them hang up. I supposed they would be able to trace the call. I hoped they would, anyway.

I got the phone to my ear and pushed on the cradle once, then twice, then repeatedly. There was no dial tone. Had it broken in the fall? That didn’t seem likely. I had seen phones take worse falls than that. I had even thrown my office phone against a wall once in a fit of anger and it had still worked fine afterwards. Looking up, I took hold of the phone line, which was still trailing up over the top of the desk, and tugged at it. A bundle of cord came down and landed, painlessly this time, on my head. It wasn’t even plugged in.

Oh shit, oh shit, where’s the jack? I couldn’t see it. There were so many boxes of files and junk lining the walls that I might never find it in time.

“*Hsssss!*”

How *stupid* of me. Of *course* she wouldn’t have plugged in the bedroom phone in here. She just put it in here to get it out of the bedroom. But wait... that meant she had to have a regular office phone. I looked around and saw, from my low vantage, a gray phone line hanging down behind the desk, among the jumble

of electrical cords and things. Surely it was plugged in. I crawled further under the desk and gave it a pull. There was resistance, so it had to be attached to something on top of the desk. I pulled at it again.

“Ah. I see.”

I hissed once in alarm, and then froze in position. I didn’t even turn to look. I just closed my eyes and let my head droop until my forehead rested on the floor. There was an awful sinking feeling and a pall of dread settled over me. *The jig is up.* My hand fell away from the cord.

“Oh, *Katherine*,” Evelyn sighed as she stood in the doorway. “I thought you had learned something. I hoped you had. Clearly, I was wrong.”

I frantically tried to think of an excuse about what I was doing, but I couldn’t think of a single thing. I expected to hear her burst in shouting if she caught me. What I didn’t expect was the sound of deep disappointment in her voice. That just made it worse. I actually felt guilty, and I hated it.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” she said, advancing and grabbing my ankles. She pulled me out from under the desk and flipped me over. She hesitated. “What the hell did you do to your head?”

Confused, I reached up and felt a knot at my temple where the phone hit me. My head was still pounding. “The phone fell on me,” was all I could say.

“Fell...?” She shook her head. “Well, it serves you right. What *is* it with you and that dog? Do you two have a conspiracy or something? How long have you been waiting for the chance to get in here?”

“I didn’t mean to!” I said stupidly.

“What’s that supposed to mean? And just what did you think you were going to do? Call the police?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t give me that. You knew exactly what you were doing. Were you going for the other phone? Here, let me help.” She picked up a white portable from the desk and tossed it to me. I winced, expecting it to hit me on the head, too, but it bounced harmlessly onto the carpet beside me. “Go on.”

“Nooo.” Now the tears started.

“Do it!”

“*Hssss!*” I didn’t touch the phone. I didn’t even look at it.

“Hmph. Wouldn’t do you any good, anyway. None of the phones in the house work. I had service disconnected weeks ago.”

I blinked. “Huh?”

“It occurred to me that it might be a good idea when I saw you reaching for my phone that time in the bedroom, before your Christmas bath. So I did it. I just use my cell, now, and *that* is password-protected, so don’t even bother.”

I felt like such a total idiot. I found myself wishing she had told me about this sooner. Then I wouldn't even have attempted this escape, and wouldn't have gotten in trouble in the first place. Maybe she just wanted to leave the possibility open so she could catch me if I tried. Which is exactly what happened. If it really was a trap, then I had blithely strolled right into it. *But that's not fair! That's cheating!* I thought. I was on the verge of hysteria. "But why did you keep the door in here locked?"

"I was worried you might try for the computer and smash it while trying to get to it – even though it has a password, too, so don't try that, either. I also thought that you might, in a fit of pique, come in and start ripping up my paperwork." She stepped around me to pick the phones off of the floor. Something small rattled inside of it. "You probably broke this one. It's old. What did you think you were *doing*?" she asked again.

I started crying harder. I tried cover my face with an arm, but she nudged it roughly out of the way with the toe of her shoe.

"You did this even after I told you what would happen if someone was coming to take you from me?" she asked.

Paralyzed. "Yes."

"Then why did you do it?" she demanded.

"*Hsss!* I didn't want to. I had to!" I wailed.

"Don't talk nonsense to me. I've been *nice* to you lately. Obviously it was a mistake letting you off easy last time. You're going back in braces."

"No, please, I'll be good!"

"I don't want to hear it! You're a conniving little liar, is what you are. You haven't changed a bit. You were so sweet last night, crying and hanging on to me. I actually felt some compassion for you. Very clever. You're just lucky there wasn't any real chance for you to escape this way, otherwise I would be *really* cross with you."

"Just give me another chance, I swear I'll be good," I pleaded in desperation. "I want to stay out. I'll be a doll, okay? I'll be whatever you want, I'll lick you, I won't ever complain, just please—"

"Braces," she said with finality. "But first..." She went to the desk and picked up a set of ear-buds. She plugged them into a portable stereo that was on a shelf, then set that on the floor next to my head. She straddled me, then *laid* down right on top of me, pinning me down completely. I bit my lip as her full weight settled all over my body. Her heavy breasts engulfed my own and painfully mashed them flat. I couldn't budge an inch. I was terrified of her cruel smirk which clearly showed that Evelyn's dark side had come forward. "Now," she said, in a conversational tone, just inches away from my face, "it seems you still have

too much control. From now on, any time you try to escape from me, I'm going to take something else away. Perhaps that will give you incentive to obey. You know what I'm going to take away the next time you try?"

"N-n-*nnn*-"

"Let's give you a sample, shall we?" She put the earphones in my ears and turned on the radio. It was playing some alternative song I didn't recognize. I had missed out on so much recent pop culture. She began to turn up the volume, slowly, and the music got louder and louder. It reached the point of being painful. "That's halfway," she said, speaking loudly enough for me to hear. "Let's try full volume."

I struggled weakly beneath her as the music stopped being music and became a wall of unintelligible noise that jackhammered into my skull. I contorted in agony. It *hurt*. I hissed my screams, although I couldn't even hear myself. Grinning, Evelyn shouted something at me, but I couldn't hear her over the roar in my head. She wouldn't turn it off. I cried and begged, but she wouldn't do it. After five minutes, I could have sworn that my eardrums were bleeding. Just how loud did something have to be to rupture an eardrum, anyway? Clear bubbles of spittle were frothing from my lips and I was beating the back of my head against the floor, as if that could abate the pain in my ears.

Evelyn, apparently becoming aroused at the sight of my suffering right beneath her, started *kissing* me. I barely noticed it. I didn't even try to keep her tongue out of my wide-open, hissing mouth. I couldn't think. The noise in my ears blasted away all coherent thought. I just wanted it to end. When she finally did turn it off, after about ten minutes, the silence was a physical relief. My ears were ringing and I swore I could still hear the noise bouncing around in my head. I sobbed and went still.

Evelyn wiped the shiny film of my spit from her lips. "Well, then. How was that? Was it good for you?"

"*Gurgk*."

"Shall we have another go? Just to make sure you get the point?" she asked.

"God-no-please. Stop. Stop," I gasped, "you win. You win."

Evelyn chuckled. "This isn't a game to win or lose, slave. This is your life. But I think you get the idea. Next time you try to get away, I'll rig up this stereo to play for you all day long, every day. How long do you think it would take for you to go deaf?"

"Nooo, not *that*."

"Oh, not to worry. I would let you have a hearing aid to use. Sometimes," she said with a smile. "And keep being difficult, and I just might decide to make your braces a more permanent situation. You know, there's a kind of neck brace

that involves screwing bolts directly into your skull to keep your head in place. Then you couldn't even look up when you crawled around. Think that'd be fun?"

I could only cry. My ears were still ringing. I just wanted to disappear.

Seeing that she could wring no more fun out of me for the time being, she got off me and stood up. "Tell you what. Since it's getting late and I haven't even started dinner, I'll let you stay out for tonight only. I don't want to bother with all those cuffs and locks just now. Tomorrow's the weekend and we can start early. But one word of complaint, *one word*, and you'll be in them before you can blink, no matter how late it is. Understand?"

"Yes. Yes, ma'am." I was too defeated to put up any resistance at all. Plus, the threat of being slowly deafened, while bound and unable to even do anything about it, was horrifying. I didn't want to do a single thing that might possibly goad her into doing it now rather than 'next time'. "Thank you."

"That's not all, though. I was too easy on you last time, and look what it led to. I think you need a stronger reminder. Just to drive the point home. Don't you agree?" Not expecting an answer, she picked me up off the floor. Taking me back to the bed, she arranged me so that my head hung, face down, over the edge of bed. I heard her go into the bathroom and rummage in a cabinet. She returned and placed a small wastebasket right below my face.

Before I could even wonder what the hell she had in mind, she grabbed a handful of my hair and started cutting. I didn't comprehend what was happening until I saw my hair drift into the wastebasket below me. "Noooohsssss! Hss! Hss! Hsssss-toopp!"

"You've had this coming, anyway," she said, continuing to cut and cut. "It just gets all dirty and tangled when you're in braces and hooded. It will be much easier to keep clean this way. Your new hood will fit much better with it short, too. I should have done this sooner, but I didn't want to damage your self-image too badly, considering your reaction to your Christmas presents. That's irrelevant now. Clearly, treating you with kid gloves accomplishes nothing."

'Kid gloves?' You call what you've done to me so far *fucking 'kid gloves?'* I wondered, baffled.

Tears and droplets of spittle fell freely from my face, straight down into the wastebasket, where they landed on growing piles of my hair. Having it cut off wasn't nearly as bad as having my muscles deteriorated by poison, obviously, but it was pretty bad. It was more of my self-esteem, more of my self-image, taken from me and thrown into the trash. It was a punishment, alright. She was demonstrating how totally powerless I was to stop her from doing *anything* to me.

Yet, instead of breaking me down, or whatever it was she intended, it mostly just pissed me off to see my hair accumulating in the trash. The cringing,

whimpering beast I had been just minutes ago was thrust aside, a little bit, by my anger. *That was mine. That belonged to me. You can take it away, but you can't own it. You can ruin my body, but you won't own me!* As I continued to cry, I resolved that I wouldn't let what happened that night defeat me. If the opportunity came, I would try to get away again. Fuck her threats. Screw the voices in my head.

Even as that thought occurred to me, I also knew it wouldn't take long to lose that resolve. I was probably just deluding myself.

Evelyn snipped away until my hair was no longer than three inches anywhere. Dammit, I really liked having long hair. She brushed her fingers through it to gather up loose hairs, then did a few finishing touches. When she was finished, she pulled me into a sitting position so she could get a better look at me. "*Hmph.* Ah. Well. I never claimed I was a hairdresser. Still, it's kind of cute in a pixie cut kind of way. Makes you look a little younger, and is that ever a bad thing? It's certainly nothing to worry about, since we have that wig. So," she asked, smugly, "how does it feel?"

I refused to play her game by answering. I glared resolutely at the floor.

Evelyn's smug smile faded away. She shook her head in amazement. "I didn't do a damn thing just now but make you angrier, didn't I? I've made you stubborn all over again, haven't I?"

Crap. How was she able to read me so easily? I had wanted to make her think I was more beaten down than I was by continuing to be obsequious, which I could have hopefully used to my advantage. Well, that wasn't going to work. Not with Evelyn. *Go fuck yourself,* I mouthed into the comforter so that she couldn't hear or see me. Pissed, perhaps, but far too intimidated to curse her out loud.

"Stubborn, stubborn little bitch. You've got spirit, I'll give you that. Not that it's going to do you any good. All fighting does is cause you more suffering." Evelyn rubbed her eyes. "You wear me out. I'm going to make supper."

I guess, technically, I had gotten off pretty easy. Sure, she had cut off my hair and my ears were still ringing, but at least that wasn't a permanent thing like having lost my ability to walk or the threat of being made deaf. Hair would grow back. I would have to go back in braces, but, really, she could decide to do that any time she wanted. She didn't need the excuse of punishment to put me in braces. I spent all evening enjoying the last of my limited freedom, because god knew how long it would be before she let me back out of those damn things. Last time had been for months.

Tormenting me must have turned her on, because she made me lick her that night. She even forced me to orgasm, which was especially humiliating considering all that had occurred earlier. I know how that makes me sound like a

slut. It wasn't like that. It's just when my face was between her thighs and that thing came on, my body just reacted to it all on its own, as if it was starving for it. For a little while I was able to forget everything and just feel good. Don't judge me until you've been in that situation.

She slept soundly with her arms around me. I stayed awake for a long time, running my fingers through my raggedly shortened hair. No need for me to worry about a lack of sleep: once I was in those braces, I would have plenty of time to rest.

Chapter 24

I was on the floor of the bedroom, just about where she had put me to remove the braces the first time. I had already had a spat of crying, begging, struggling, and fussing. Now I was just staring off into space as Evelyn secured and locked the last of the braces on me. Their firm, metal grip was all too familiar. The matte 'doll' bodysuit had been replaced with the old, purple one with its matching hood, and my feet had been crushed back into those hateful, pointed boots. "There," she said, locking the bands that wrapped around my forehead. "That should do it. Very pretty. You've gotten uncharacteristically silent."

"*Hss!*" I retorted irritably.

"That's better. Well, let's get you back upstairs," she said, getting to her feet.

"Why can't you let me stay down here? I don't like the attic."

She hefted me up, supporting me around the waist. A string of drool dripped down my chin as I was straightened up and wetted her shirt. "You just answered your own question. I think the peace and quiet up there is good for you."

"But for how *long*?" I asked as she carried me down the hallway to the attic stairway.

"I already told you, I don't know. Another several months, probably."

"Months? Nooo! *Hssss!*" Not only did I have the incredible boredom and uncomfortable immobility in my immediate future, after all that time I could look forward to another painful recovery period the next time I was released.

"Oh stop your squalling. It's not that bad. You've survived it before, after all. You need to learn to be more accepting of your situation, whatever it may be. Then you wouldn't get so wound up about everything."

I scowled. "How Zen of you."

"Ha. I have to admit, having you safely installed in braces will be a load off mind," she said as we ascended the narrow attic stairs. "Won't have to worry

about what new trouble you're getting yourself into."

"It was only twice," I said defensively.

"Twice too oft—"

Just then, as she was maneuvering my stiffened form up the stairs, one of my boots and the braces caught on the edge of the corner and pulled her off balance. I could feel her trying to regain her equilibrium. For a second, I thought she might. The next second, she was falling backwards with me in her arms.

It was only a few steps, but it looked a whole lot higher as I helplessly watched the hallway floor approach over her shoulder. My body tensed in the braces and I wanted instinctively to fling my arms out, but they were locked at my sides. Through her body, I felt the jarring impact of one her feet hitting the floor as she tried to catch herself. She fell into the small side table that stood against the wall at the end of the hallway. It collapsed noisily beneath our combined weight. A vase that sat on it was catapulted almost comically through the air, spraying its bouquet of dried flowers, and shattered farther down against hallway floor.

At times like that, all you can do is close your eyes, pray for no grievous bodily harm, and wait for it to be over. My breath was knocked out of me with a loud hiss. All at once the world was still and quiet. Miraculously, I had been protected from harm by both the braces and Evelyn's soft body. After a few stunned moments, Evelyn asked me breathlessly, "Are you alright?"

"I-I think so." Other than being painfully jostled in the braces and having a renewed throbbing from the knot where I had brained myself with the phone yesterday, I seemed to be just fine.

Groaning, she pushed me off her body so that I was lying flat on my back. She gingerly scooted herself off the wreckage of the side table and leaned against the wall. "My side hurts," was all she said, and then closed her eyes for a minute. She suddenly made a fist and hit the floor. "Stupid. *Stupid!*"

For a second, I thought she was talking to me, but then I realized she was simply berating herself. She asked me again if I was sure I was alright. When I gave a cautious confirmation, she slowly got to her feet. When she put her weight on the foot, the first part of her to hit the floor, she let out a cry of pain and almost collapsed on top of me. Cursing under her breath, she rose again. She made her slow, limping way to the bedroom and disappeared inside.

Well, what the heck am I supposed to do now? I wondered. I wiggled, but the impact hadn't loosened any of the braces. I stared at the ceiling and waited.

After enough time had passed make me start to worry that Evelyn had passed out or something, she came limping back into the hall. She had removed her shirt, I assumed to examine her side and back, though she still wore her bra. I could see a pretty large area on her side that was splotchy and reddened and

already starting to bruise. Her right foot and ankle had been wrapped in an elastic bandage. She came over to me and carefully sat down, wincing several times.

“Well,” she said with a chuckle, “that was a bit of excitement in an otherwise dull day, wouldn’t you say?” She spoke lightly, but I could tell her laughter was forced. She was shaken.

“Uh... are you okay?” I asked tentatively. Why did I care? Well, because I depended on her completely. It had occurred to me long ago that if she was ever injured, it couldn’t be a good thing for me. That alone was troubling enough to even wipe thoughts of glee at her misfortune out of my mind. And, after all, she *had* kept me from getting hurt in the fall.

“Oh, I’ll be fine. Probably bruised a rib or two. Sprained an ankle, I’m sure. If I hadn’t put my hair in a bun this morning, I probably would have a concussion. Will likely have a bump to match the one you gave yourself.” She laughed nervously.

“Um. Okay. What happens now?”

She sighed and I heard the jingle of keys. “Well, I certainly can’t get you up those stairs, and I really don’t want to even attempt to carry you. Oh dear, what a mess,” she said, looking at the demolished table and smashed vase as if seeing them for the first time.

“Evelyn?”

“Oh, yes, well, it looks like you have a reprieve. It will probably be better in a day or two, but until then... I’ll have to take your braces off.”

“Thank god,” I said with undisguised joy.

She leaned forward and looked at me with an air of suspicion. “You didn’t plan this on purpose, did you?”

“Evelyn. I can’t move,” I said, annoyed yet a trifle nervous. “You don’t really think—”

“I’m joking.”

She proceeded to undo all of the locks and cuffs she had just spent an hour putting me into, setting the pieces against the wall. She left the boots on, which I hated, though it ironically turned out to be a good thing. They actually provided a little better purchase for crawling around, moreso than my poor, immovably curled toes. I rolled over and narrowly avoided putting my hand on a shard of vase. Evelyn crawled ahead of me to clear a path, brushing the center of the hallway runner clear of vase debris with her hands.

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It turned out to be more serious than Evelyn had first anticipated. That whole day was a struggle. Going up and down the stairs to get to the kitchen was a trial for her; she might have been strong, but that doesn’t help when you weigh a

lot and are trying to get up stairs on one foot. I certainly couldn't help, but whose fault was that? I fretted and kept telling her to be careful – out of self-preservation, of course. If something happened that incapacitated her, we would both be out of luck. She would have moved us downstairs so that she wouldn't have to make the trip, but told me that sleeping on the guest bed or the sofa always threw her back out, and that it was a wonder it hadn't happened from the fall. She didn't want to risk having a lame foot, aching side, and a bad back all at once.

Taking care of me was difficult. My food bags were stored in the fridge and I wasn't able to make it up the attic stairs to get to the heavy enema machine. She had to do it manually with an enema bag in the bathroom, a process that involved me lying on the floor to receive it, then laboriously getting onto the toilet with her help to expel it. It was uncomfortable, cold, and humiliating. To think, it was my first time sitting on a toilet since summer, and all I could think of was that I missed the ease and convenience of the enema machine I used to hate.

“Why can't you just take out the plug and I go normally?” I asked unhappily as she wiped the backsplash from the toilet from my bottom.

“You know you can't hold anything in anymore, so don't grouse. This is the best way, considering.”

Most of the rest of the day was spent with her in bed, and with me holding a bag of ice on her foot.

“Look at you,” she said to me, “you're so concerned. That's sweet.”

“Don't rub it in,” I replied, dribbling water as I spoke. I was sucking on a piece of ice I had managed to get out of the bag. I couldn't swallow it, but it was better than nothing.

“I know your motivations, but it's sweet nonetheless. You've been so well-behaved today. Maybe that makes up for some of your behavior yesterday. I'm not sure. Maybe I'll do something nice for you tomorrow.”

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She didn't though. By the next day, her condition hadn't improved. Her foot was still too tender to put any weight on at all and the place where she had hit the side table had become an ugly, purple bruise. It hurt her to stand, to bend, to do just about anything. As I was growing more worried, her mood was getting more black. She kept snapping at me, even when I wasn't doing anything to deserve it.

I was on the floor, since getting myself back into bed on my own was a chore. I kept getting stuck half way and sliding off sideways when I tried to climb up. Watching that usually made Evelyn chuckle, so I did it twice on purpose just to try and get her in a better mood. Playing the jester was embarrassing, but Evelyn in a foul mood could never be a good thing for me.

“Evelyn? My... I’m aching. I have to go.” It was sometime in the afternoon and my bowels felt cramped. I wasn’t used to that feeling anymore, since getting all those enemas usually kept me pretty much empty.

Evelyn rubbed her face. She had been typing something on the laptop, which she had brought into the bedroom. “It can wait.”

“No, I... it’s really uncomf–”

“It can wait!” she barked, hitting the Return key hard.

I cringed. “O-okay.”

After a minute passed, during which I laid in awkward silence, she slammed the laptop shut. “Damn it! Alright. Let’s do it.”

“No, it’s okay, I’m okay,” I insisted nervously. She made me feel like I was imposing on her, and that wasn’t fair. I wasn’t the one who made myself completely dependent on her.

Groaning, she pulled herself out of bed and limped slowly into the bathroom. I heard her filling up the enema bag from the sink. “Well? Get in here.”

Resigned, I followed her into the bathroom. She had spilled some water while filling the bag and I tried to avoid the puddles. I was pulling myself close to the toilet when Evelyn slipped on one of the wet tiles and her feet went out from under her. She made a grab for the towel bar as she went down. The bar ripped loose from the wall with a tiny explosion of sheetrock. I hissed as she landed heavily on one of my legs and I writhed to get out from under her. The enema bag hit the floor and sprayed warm water all over me.

Evelyn shakily pushed herself against the side of the tub and sat there, pressing a hand to her side. She seemed to have avoided serious injury, but was clearly in a lot of pain. Her face was red and pinprick tears seeped from her tightly shut eyelids. Her breath was uneven. I was sprawled and beginning to shiver from the rapidly cooling water and cold tiles. I watched her anxiously, and finally broke the silence with a tentative, “Evelyn?”

“Damn it. Damn it!” she shouted, hurling the towel bar against the wall. It left dent in the sheetrock and clattered noisily on the tiles. I cowered away from her, trying to make myself as small and inconspicuous as possible. Evelyn broke down and started to cry. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. I’m supposed to be able to take care of you,” she sobbed. “It’s not supposed to be like this.”

It was strangely horrible to see her cry. She had always been so strong, so confident and in control. It was as if I was suddenly six years old again and seeing my father sloppily, angrily drunk for the first time. It’s scary when the person you depend on totally and almost worship is no longer able to fulfill that role. It’s even scarier when that person is a borderline psycho whose fantasy world is

falling apart in the face of cold reality. I was frightened by what might happen if she snapped completely. I could imagine, if things got too hard, someone like her trying to make all the problems just disappear... problems like me.

She continued to cry another a minute before her sobs petered out. She wiped her eyes and sniffed. "I know what I have to do," she said, shaking her head. Looking at me, she seemed startled to see me cowering against the clothes hamper. "What's wrong? Did I hurt you? No. Oh, you're all wet." She picked up a fallen towel and scooted, wincing, across the floor to me. She spread the towel over my body. "It'll be okay. It'll be alright. Don't be afraid. Everything's going to be okay," she kept saying as she patted me down with the towel. It was freaking me out.

"You... um... are you okay?"

"Yes. Let's get this over with. It has to be done," she said. She patted her hair back in place and refilled the enema bag while kneeling in front of the sink.

After a few humiliating minutes featuring me sitting on the toilet, Evelyn helped me down. Making sounds of distress, she got to her feet and tossed the towel on the floor to soak up the rest of the spilled water. She then went downstairs without another word. Curious and upset, I went out the hallway at the top of the stairs. I heard her talking on her cell phone, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. Presently, she reappeared around the corner, carrying several of my food/water bags and began to carefully ascend the stairs. She saw me watching from the landing. "No, go back into the bedroom. I'll be right there," she said, then mumbled, "In a minute."

"What are you doing?" I asked nervously when she returned to the bedroom.

Her face was flushed and she was perspiring from the effort of getting up the stairs. "Just... a sec..." she panted and sat down with a hiss of pain on the bench. "I called my sister. They're coming to pick me up and take me to the hospital. That means, puppet, you're going to be on your own for a while. I'll probably be back by this evening, but if not, I'll be back tomorrow."

"But you can't! Hsss! Not all night! What about me?" I was torn between the desire for her to get well again so she could take decent care of me, and the fear of being left alone for so long.

"I have to. I have to admit when I need help, and I need help. I'm in no condition to take care of you right now." She was getting dressed to go out. "If this keeps up, I'm going to hurt one or both of us even worse."

"But--"

"You'll be fine. I brought several bags up and I'll set up a slow drip. That should see you through." She limped over to the IV stand and hung up the bags.

"What if something happens? What if you're gone for longer? I'll starve!"

“Don’t be silly. You’ll die of thirst long before you starve,” she said.

“*Hssss!*”

“Okay, bad joke. Don’t worry, I’ll be back. It’s only a broken foot, after all, not open-heart surgery. Now come on, they’ll be here any minute.” She picked up the chain.

I briefly entertained the thought of taking off and scrambling down the stairs. She wouldn’t be able to carry me back up and maybe she might get caught in the act when the others arrived. Then I realized that if she *didn’t* get caught, making a break for it might be counted as an escape attempt and for that I could lose my hearing. At the very least. The stakes were too damn high for me in this game. I unhappily crawled to the bed.

“Here we go,” she said, locking the heavy chain around my ankle. “I’ll leave it long enough so you can go around on the floor. Maybe you can practice your bed-climbing skills. Just be careful not to get your catheter hose tangled.”

“B-but what if something happens?”

“What’s going to happen? You’re resourceful, you’ve proven that on many occasions. You can handle it. I’d give you a kiss, but then I would have to get back up, so I’ll pass. I have to go downstairs to wait for them, so—” The doorbell rang. “And there they are. Coming!” she shouted.

As Evelyn exited the bedroom, I heard the front door opening. “*Hss!*”

Evelyn looked startled. “Forgot they had a key. *You* be quiet,” she directed at me, then quickly shut and bolted the bedroom door. I heard a concerned voice from the stairs and Evelyn replying, “No, no, I’m alright. It’s just... ouch. Okay, I could use a hand.”

I crawled across the room. “*Hssss!*” I yelled, though I knew no one would be able to hear my pathetic exhalations through the thickness of the door. Then the front door closed and I was on my own.

It’s not like I hadn’t been left in the house alone for long periods before, but this time Evelyn was at the hospital instead of work and I didn’t know when she would be coming back. I started crawling in circles – my version of pacing.

Chapter 25

By noon of the next day, I was out of my wits with boredom, I was thirsty, and I was stressed out from anxiety. At least I wasn’t in braces. I managed to reach Evelyn’s clock-radio, so I had something to listen to. I still had a hard time getting onto the bed, so I pulled the pillows off and crammed them beneath the bed to form a cozy little nest down there. Everything looked like it was going to be okay until I noticed the feedbags getting smaller and the catheter bag swelling

larger. Soon it would get too full to hold anything more. I wondered what would happen then. Would it back up into my bladder? If it came to that, I could just disconnect the hose, but then I'd have to pee on the carpet. Evelyn surely wouldn't appreciate coming home to that, but hey, it'd be better than my bladder popping like a water balloon.

The feeding bags were more of an immediate concern. I guessed the drip wasn't as slow as she had thought, because by the next morning the bags were nearly empty. After they went dry, it took me ten minutes to figure out how to disconnect the nose tube on my own. It was strange, because I hadn't felt truly thirsty or even hungry in so long. My mouth started getting dry. My saliva was getting thicker. I couldn't even drink the water in the bathroom. Couldn't swallow it, anyway. I never thought I would have reason to be upset that I wasn't able drooling freely all over myself. Damn.

It was with palpable relief that I heard the front door open. *Thank goodness! Evelyn's home*, I thought. *I'm starving!* I heard her rummaging around in the kitchen. I thought it was rude that she didn't come and check on me first thing. I figured she must be preparing new bags for me. Finally, she started coming up the stairs.

"Jinx? Where are you? I set out some food for you. Heeere kitty, kitty," came a woman's voice.

That's not Evelyn. Who's in our house? What's going on?

I was terrified at first. I hadn't seen another human being, aside from Evelyn, in so long. My first instinct was to hide. Then I realized... somebody was here. Somebody was here and Evelyn wasn't. Whoever it was could free me. *Free me! I was rescued!*

"I'm in here!" I called in a whisper. Dammit, there was no way she could hear me. "*Hss! Hssss! Hssssssss!*" I hissed as loud as I could, crawling towards the door.

"Is that you? Have you been stuck in there all this time? Why's this door locked?" I heard her say, followed by the sliding of the bolt. The door opened and a stranger entered. She was blond, petite, and slender. Probably in her mid or late thirties. She was wearing a purple sweater and thin, dark gray leggings. She had a faded suntan.

She also looked very surprised to see me.

"*Oh my god!*" she exclaimed, leaping backwards out of the room. I guess finding a limp, drooling person wearing nothing but a narrow corset and an ankle chain on the floor would be enough to startle most anyone.

She poked her head back in. "I am *so* sorry, I-I didn't realize anyone was... uh, home. I'm, er, my name's Sarah...? I'm Evelyn's sister's, uh, friend. I'm

sorry, I didn't mean to... I thought she lived alone, I didn't realize, I just came by to tidy the place up to surprise her before she came home. She said it was a mess, and, oh my..."

She kept rambling, explaining herself to me. She *must think I'm like Evelyn's lover or something! Like I'd be doing this on purpose? Yuck!* How could that be her first thought when discovering a chained, naked woman? "Hssss!"

"Wha? Um, ooh my god, why are you drooling like that? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare." She laughed nervously. "Uh, wow, well, when Evelyn mentioned she enjoyed kinky stuff, I thought she was just kidding around. Oh, wow. This is something, alright--"

"Hsss! Shut up and help me! I've been kidnapped!"

"What? I'm sorry, can you speak up?" Sarah ventured a little closer to me, but not *too* close. That confirmed for me that I looked like the beast I felt like. Even though it meant getting rescued, it was still horribly humiliating to have somebody see me like that.

"No I can't speak up, I have a thing in my throa--"

"What? I can't quite--"

"Hssss!" I shouted, throwing a fit. "Read my lips! I've been kidnapped! Kidnapped!"

Sarah finally got close enough to hear me. "Kidnapped? By who?"

"Evelyn, dammit, she kidnapped me! My name's Katherine, I've been here since summer. She's been torturing me! You have to call the police!"

Sarah's eyes went wide. She finally seemed to take in the chain locked around my leg. "Oh, no, no, Evelyn would *never* do something like that. She's so nice..."

"She did! Obviously she did, cuz I'm right *here!*"

"Oh my," Sarah said, backing away, "oh my, oh my. No, Evelyn wouldn't--"

"Listen to me! She's crazy. She drugged me and brought me here because of some twisted revenge fantasy. She's kept me in braces, in bed for months. She poisoned me! I can't walk anymore. She took away my voice. You have to help me! She said she was going to make me go deaf I tried to escape again!"

"But... I don't understand any of this." She looked frightened and lost.

"I've been here the whole time. I was in the attic when you guys came over for Thanksgiving! Remember? I watched her wrap your Christmas presents! Please, please call the police!" I begged.

"Um, okay, okay, calm down. What did you say your name was? Katherine? Everything's gonna be fine, I just..." She went over and started

pulling on the chain. “Is there a key for this?”

“I don’t know where it is. Don’t bother with it! Do you have a phone? The house ones don’t work.” I was getting pissed off, but I guess I could understand why she was flustered. How often do you come across pissed-off kidnap victims in your sister-in-law’s house?

“Yes, um... okay,” she stammered, taking a little cell phone from her pocket. “Okay. Right. Okay.” She dialed a number and gave me a placatory wave as she held the phone to her ear. She paced as it rang. “Hello, Alice? Uh, could you put Evelyn on? I want you to give her the phone and then leave the room. I don’t care, this an emergency! Put her on, *please*.”

My heart sank when I realized she wasn’t calling the cops right away. “No! *Hssss!* You don’t need to talk to her! Call the police!”

“Evelyn? Um. Did Alice leave? Okay. Listen, I came over to your house to tidy up for y—”

A tiny, metallic “*You what?*” came from the phone. I could hear Evelyn’s voice all the way from across the room. I was suddenly very glad Sarah called her first. Oh, what I wouldn’t have given to see Evelyn’s face right then. I practically giggled with malicious glee. She was stuck in the hospital, unable to harm me, and knowing that I would be free and she would be in so much trouble!

“Don’t you shout at me,” said Sarah, getting her fur up. “Would you like to explain why you have a naked woman chained to your bed? She says she’s been kidnapped! No, I haven’t called them *yet*, I wanted to hear it from you. What? No, *you* don’t understand. There is *no* good explanation for this, and I’m sorry, but... what?”

I listened to the one-sided conversation go on for a couple of minutes. Sarah kept glancing at me. She grew more quiet as the conversation went on. “Stop talking to her and call the cops, already,” I pleaded, but wasn’t listening to me.

“Alright. Okay. I will. Alright,” Sarah said slowly, as if dazed, and clicked the cell phone off. I wondered crazily if Evelyn had used her psychiatrist powers to hypnotize her over the phone, or something. She gave me a long, hard look before approaching me. “Your name’s Kathy Sloan?”

“It was, yes. Look, could you just—”

“But you’re dead! We saw it on the news. That serial killer guy.”

“*Hss!* Everybody thinks I’m dead! They thought I was one of his victims, but I wasn’t, it was just bad timing. Sarah? What are you doing? *Where are you going?*” I asked desperately as she went to the door.

“I have to go talk with Evelyn. Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon,” she said.

“No! No, you don’t have to go talk with her! Help me first! Help me!” I

demanded, straining at the end of the chain. Sarah shut the door and heard the bolt sliding into place. “What are you *doing*?”

The front door shut a minute later and Sarah was gone. I moaned in despair and crawled under the bed. What was she thinking? I was suddenly afraid Evelyn would convince Sarah to wait on getting the police just long enough for her to come home and do something horrible to me, just like she promised. Or, Jesus Christ, what if she did something crazy like kill Sarah in order to keep her secret safe? Well, that didn’t seem likely. But the first idea did.

.....

I waited in fear and confusion – and with growing hunger and thirst – for several more hours. I eventually dozed off in my nest beneath the bed. I must have been sleeping pretty soundly, because I didn’t wake to the sound of someone coming in until they were almost at the top of the stairs. I rubbed my eyes and crawled out from under the bed. Was it the police? Had Sarah come back? “Hello? *Hsss!* Sarah, is that you? *Hsssss!*”

The door opened, and there was Evelyn. She had a crutch under one arm and a thick, plastic brace around her injured leg and foot. “Did you miss me?” she asked.

I backed away in horror. I had a vision of her coming over and stabbing me with a syringe full of that muscle-killing snake venom, enough to keep me paralyzed for the rest of my life, before the police could arrive. Maybe even putting my eyes out, after all, just for good measure. “It wasn’t my fault! She just came in! I didn’t try to escape, honest! Oh, god, please don’t do anything to meeee,” I whimpered.

Evelyn just eyed me, then sat down on the bench. She stretched her braced leg out in front of her. “Aren’t you going to inquire as to how I am? God, this crutch is killing me.”

“But–” I began, then saw Sarah entering the room. She was carrying Evelyn’s purse and a plastic bag of stuff bearing the hospital’s logo, which she set down on the dresser. “Sarah! Sarah help me! Don’t let her hurt me! Sarah?” I asked. Sarah walked towards me, bent down, and slapped me hard in the face. I immediately began to cry. “W-wh-why why’d you hit me?”

“Shut up. Just shut your... your dumb drooling mouth.” Petite, sweet Sarah’s face was transformed by rage. “You’re the one who tried to ruin my Alice’s life! You ruined her reputation, got her fired, broke her back! You deserve everything Evelyn’s done to you. You should just be thankful she’s been a nice to you as she has.”

Stunned by her unexpected rage, all I could do was gape at her. “No! No, you don’t–”

“Don’t you deny it.” Without warning, she kicked me in the side. My corset protected me from the worst of it, but it still hurt. I hissed and tried to draw my knees up. “That’s for Alice!” she was saying, and was readying to kick me again.

“Sarah!” Evelyn interrupted, holding up her hand. “That’s enough. It’s alright. She’s well aware why she’s here. She’s not the same person she used to be.”

Sarah stepped away, looking like she still wanted to kick me. I couldn’t believe it, but I was actually thankful for Evelyn’s presence and her coming to my defense. Crying helplessly, I slinked away from Sarah.

“Sorry. I don’t know what came over me,” Sarah said, looking at Evelyn. “I’ve just been wanting to do that for a long time.”

“I understand. Would you be a dear and go get her water bags from the fridge? I’m sure she’s thirsty,” said Evelyn. “There should be a couple in there. I’ll have to prepare some more.”

“Okay,” replied Sarah, casting me a final spiteful glance before she left.

I moaned and pulled at my short hair. This was all so fucked up. Was the whole world against me? Had everybody gone crazy while I wasn’t looking? *I’m guessing she didn’t call the cops, after all*, I thought bitterly. *Why won’t anybody help me? I wasn’t really that bad, was I? Was I?*

Evelyn was watching me. “Just goes to show you. You never can tell about some people, can you? Come here,” she said, and snapped her fingers near the floor as if summoning a dog. And I went. Evelyn might be evil, but at least she was a familiar, comfortable evil. And she did stop Sarah from attacking me, after all. I wrapped my forearms around her unbraced ankle, pressed my forehead to her shin, and wept hysterically. She stroked my head a few times. “I’m sure you’ll be relieved to know that it’s not a break, just a bad sprain. Hyper-extended something-or-other. I did fracture a rib, but it should be fine. It’s just going to hurt a while.”

“W-why’d she hit me?”

“What? Oh. Well, she has even more reason to hate you than I do, you know. I may be Alice’s sister, but Sarah is Alice’s partner. I’m sure she cultivated a lot of ill-will towards you while Alice was trying to deal with what you put her through, not to mention when she was helping her loved one cope with being confined to a wheelchair for life.”

“I didn’t mean toooo,” I sobbed.

“But you did, and now you’re trying to make up for it. Right? So no more tears, puppet,” Evelyn said.

Sarah return and stopped short upon seeing me latched onto Evelyn’s leg

and bawling my eyes out. “Oh, wow. She really *has* changed, hasn’t she? Holy cow, Evie, what’d you do to her?”

“I’ve just been making her better while she’s been enjoying her early retirement. Could you replace the empties on that IV stand? I’ll show you how to connect them. Roll over, Kathy.” Evelyn showed Sarah how to plug the feeding hose to my nose tube. It was embarrassing and I didn’t like Sarah touching me, but as soon I felt the cool flow of liquid food going through my nose, I stopped caring for a little while.

“She really gets enough to eat that way, huh?” Sarah asked.

“Yes.”

“And she really can’t swallow?”

“Open your mouth for her, Kathy,” ordered Evelyn. “Stick your tongue out.” I reluctantly opened wide to let Sarah see the glottal stent or whatever it was. I felt like a lab rat on display, but it’s not like I could refuse.

“Wow, so that’s how she makes those noises.”

“Endearing, aren’t they?” Evelyn asked.

“Kinda eerie. Makes her sound like a snake or something.” Sarah began to reach towards my face, then jerked her hand away. “Ugh, she’s leaking.”

I turned away, feeling my face reddening. I was hardly even conscious of my drooling anymore. *It’s not my fault!* I wanted to say.

“How can you stand to have her around?” Sarah continued. “You sleep with her like that?”

“It’s how I want her,” said Evelyn. “I love her.”

“How can you love something like that? *Look* at her. I mean, she was a reprehensible human being even *before* she was like this. After everything she did to us? How can you love someone like her?” asked Sarah, sounding frustrated.

“She’s just the way I like her. She needs me. And even monsters like her need love.”

Sarah looked unconvinced. “It’s just weird. I don’t like her.”

“I need to change her catheter. There’s a box of fresh ones in the office, could you bring me one?”

“Okay,” said Sarah. She returned momentarily, suddenly skittish, “But I don’t think I can... uh, it’s just kind of...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll do it, just bring me one. I told you about the enema machine in the attic? Could you start bringing it down, please?”

“Okay,” replied Sarah.

“I should have done it sooner, but I was lazy and assumed she would be going back into the attic soon, so why bother?” Evelyn said as Sarah left. She slowly eased herself onto the floor and started unwrapping the fresh catheter.

“Was it your idea for Sarah to call me in the hospital and tell me what she had found here?”

“No,” I grumbled, “I wanted her to call the police. Oh, no wait! I mean... I didn’t try to escape! That doesn’t count!”

“Stop it. Well, I thought it might have been your idea. I bet you would have loved to have seen my face when I heard what Sarah had to say. I knew something was wrong when she wanted Alice to leave the room. Fortunately, though, Sarah has always been level-headed and let me have a chance to explain myself,” she said, sliding the catheter out of me. “While she might not agree with some of my methods, she does see the justice in what’s been done to you.”

“Why is she here, then?” I asked churlishly. Now that I knew she wasn’t going to save me, having Sarah there felt some kind of intrusion. I guess people get used to a status quo, even if that status isn’t very good. Besides, things were hard enough when it was just Evelyn. Now it looked like I was going to have *two* people tormenting me.

“She graciously agreed to help me out while I’m recovering. It’s a good thing, too, so don’t give me that look. Now you’ll be well taken care of and I won’t be responsible for neglecting you. What’s the matter,” she asked teasingly, “are you jealous?”

“*Hss!* No. I just don’t want anybody to see me like this. And I don’t wanna be kicked anymore.”

“You won’t. Admit it. You’re glad to see me home.”

“*No,*” I said with complete conviction. But if that was true, why wasn’t I worried anymore? And why was I clutching the hem of her skirt as if I was afraid she was going to leave and disappear again?

.....

I was on the floor in the corner of the bedroom, groaning with animalistic pleasure as the enema machine pumped into my guts. I couldn’t help it. It was just such a satisfying fullness. And afterwards, I’d be all squeaky clean inside again. Simple pleasures, I guess. Evelyn was sitting on the bed while Sarah cleaned up the mess left by Evelyn’s fall in the bathroom.

“We have to tell her,” Sarah was saying from inside the bathroom. “I can’t keep secrets from her, especially not something like this.”

Evelyn sighed. “I know, I know. It’s been bothering for some time now. She deserves to know. I’m just afraid she won’t be able to handle this. I’m not afraid of her having me arrested or anything...”

“No, she wouldn’t do that to you. Ew! Ew! Enema bag!”

“Just put it in the sink. No, I know. But I am afraid of her cutting off all ties to me completely. That would be the worst thing. I don’t know how I could

bear it. I love her so.”

Sarah poked her head into the bedroom. “You might be surprised. She never talks about it, not anymore, but she built up a whole lot of animosity towards that woman. She hated her. On the other hand, if she saw her the way she is now, Alice might just feel sorry for her. I mean, she *is* pretty pathetic,” said Sarah, casting me a pointed glance.

“*Hsss!* I’m not deaf, you know.” I scowled at Sarah. I didn’t like being talked about like a stray dog when I was right there in the room.

“Not yet,” Evelyn said to me with a slight smirk, then turned her attention back to Sarah. “I just don’t know how to go about telling her. I never wanted either of you to be accomplices in this.”

“She already knows something’s up. We both did. The way you’ve been exercising lately, floating around like a giddy schoolgirl.”

Evelyn giggled. Actually *giggled*. I stared.

“We both thought it was great that maybe you had found someone, but... never expected anything like this.” Sarah laughed. “I didn’t know *what* to think when I came in and found her here.”

Oh. That’s great. Laugh about the kidnapped woman chained to the bed, I thought as my belly gurgled. The machine was in its final suck mode. It was so *weird* seeing Evelyn interacting with another person. It was weird just having another person there, period. I didn’t like her paying attention to someone else. I really wished I wasn’t naked, and that made me wonder which one of us was the craziest; with everything that was going on, the foremost concern on my mind was jealousy.

Sarah went to gather up the broken table and vase bits in the hallway. Evelyn clumped over to me and unplugged the enema hose. “Before you even think of making some snide comment, I’m well aware of the irony that I, myself, am in a leg brace.”

“I would have thought it’d be turning you on,” I said before I could think better of it.

“No, I never liked them on myself. Just on others. I tried it, back in my teens. Didn’t care for it. So, how do you feel now that you’re no longer a skeleton in the closet?” she asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Oh. I don’t like her,” I grumbled, echoing her sentiment about me. “She’s mean.”

“She’s actually a sweetie. I guess you just bring out the worst in people. You just make people want to do the *worst* things to you!” she said with a grin, and started tickle me above the corset.

“*Hsss! Hsssss! Stoop!* I hate that, I hate it! *Hsss! Gggcckk,*” I gurgled

as I tried in vain to defend myself. What was worse, the limited air capacity of breathing tube in my nose would make me get woozy from lack of oxygen from things like tickling. “*Please stop! Can’t breathe!*”

“I’ll stop when I’m done. I missed you, after all, even if you didn’t miss me,” she said, moving down to tickle my thighs. “I just love watching you squirm.”

“*Hsss! Hate! Hssss!*”

By the time she was done, I was gasping for air and as limp as a noodle – which was only marginally more limp than usual. She got to her feet, muttering under her breath about the crutch. “Well, that was fun. I’m going to cook. All I’ve had is hospital food all day and that’s one day too many. I think I’ll make something for Sarah to take home to Alice. That would be nice. I think I have enough for a meatloaf,” she mused. My mouth watered at the thought. I’d have given anything just to taste and swallow a meatloaf, or even hospital food. *Any* food.

With Evelyn downstairs, I thought I would try a last ditch effort to get Sarah’s help. It didn’t seem likely from the start, but my options were kind of limited. Once I recovered from the sadistic tickling, I crawled out into the hallway. There, Sarah had stacked the broken table into a neat pile and was working on sweeping the ceramic pieces out of the corners. She stopped to watch me approach. “What do you want?”

“*Hss! Don’t kick me!*”

“What?” she asked, looking irritated. “I can’t hardly understand a word you say.”

“I said don’t kick me! I just want to talk.”

“Oh.” She resumed her sweeping. “I don’t think we have much to talk about.”

“I know you don’t like me. You don’t have any reason to like me. I admit I might have done some bad things. Okay, I know I did bad things.”

“You think?” asked Sarah, stabbing the bristles into the corner.

“I was only like that because I thought that’s what I had to do to... it’s all I knew,” I said, then decided to cease that line of thought, reasoning that trying to defend my past would only make her more angry at me. “Look, even if I was the worst person around, surely you know *this* isn’t the right thing to do. You’re not like her. You’re normal! You don’t understand what she’s *done* to me. Did she tell you everything? She’s *electrocuted* me, for god’s sake! How can you let this go on? I’m a human being!”

“Look, I’m sorry I kicked you. That’s not like me. I couldn’t help myself. Seeing you, knowing who you were, just brought everything back.” Sarah rubbed

her face and smoothed back her hair. “Alice and I had plans, you know? Everything was going great. We had even put a bid in on our dream house. Then you stepped and had to ruin it all. And for what? More money? Pure spite? I don’t know and I don’t care. Because of you, Alice lost her job and she almost killed herself. Do you understand? The woman I love almost killed herself because of you!”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled into the rug.

“The hospital bills drained us dry,” said Sarah. “We lost just about everything. And I know these sorts of things happen to people all the time, like from diseases or natural disasters and stuff. But this time it happened to *us*, and it wasn’t a natural disaster, it was *you*. After she recovered, Alice tried to go back to teaching, like she did right after she got out of college, but the reason for her getting fired from her job kept coming up – fired for sexually harassing and assaulting a female coworker – and no one would hire her. Did you know about that? Luckily, our love was strong enough to survive all that. Things have been getting better since, but it’s still a struggle. Has been for a long time.”

I lifted my head. “But surely you don’t think I deserve—”

“Deserve what? I don’t know what you deserve. All I know is that this seems pretty fair to me. It could be worse. At least you’re not dead like we all thought, or paralyzed from the waist down. Like Evelyn told me, I really don’t see anyone who doesn’t benefit from you’re having disappeared, except you. And I’m sorry but I don’t have any tears to shed over your misfortunes. That well’s dried up. I may not agree with everything Evelyn’s done – some of it is just plain bizarre – but she’s happy and that’s what’s important. She’s like my sister, and she stepped in and helped us when no one else could. She would have done a whole lot more, if we’d let her. She helps people all the time and doesn’t ask anything in return,” she said. “So if having you around is what it takes to make her happy, then I’m all for it.”

“B-but she threatened to make me deaf if I tried to escape again!”

“Then I’d suggest you don’t try escaping. Problem solved. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” she said, gathering up an armload of table to take outside, “I don’t think we have anything more to talk about.”

Chapter 26

A couple of days passed as Sarah hemmed and hawed over if and how to tell Alice, during which she and I had to get used to each other’s existence. Sarah dealt with this by touching me as little as possible and hardly saying a word to me at all, which was fine by me. Her lack of sympathy for my plight and my feelings

of guilt over the things she had told me left me frustrated and confused. She preferred just to set me up with the motion-sensitive triggers set to shock me. It kept me out from under foot and I think she liked the idea of me getting shocked if I moved. Like I even tried to move, anymore. Evelyn spent most of the time dozing in the downstairs guestroom, so she wasn't around to act as a buffer between me and Sarah when Sarah came around in the mornings and evenings. I guess Sarah could have tormented me horribly if she wanted, but she wasn't mean like Evelyn, thank god. Instead, she only tormented me mildly.

It was afternoon and Sarah had already come and gone that morning. I had been sitting on the bed, motionless, since she had left. I hadn't been able to settle my mind down, so I hadn't been able to zone out effectively. I was restless, bored, and unhappy. Jinx was a blissfully snoring black furball on the far corner of the comforter. I had hissed at him a few times to try and wake him up so that maybe he would do something to entertain me, but he had gotten so used to my noises that he didn't even bat an ear at me. Sarah had unknowingly 'frozen' me in a position where my legs were angled in a slightly different position than was most comfortable for me. As a result, my hips were aching and even the long-dormant cramps along the soles of my pointed, booted feet had come back to say hello. It hurt, but all I could do was force myself to sit still and endure it.

To make matters worse, I had the refrain of that *Kodachrome* song stuck in my head for some reason and it just wouldn't leave. I hate that song. In the middle of my fiftieth rendition about the greens of summer, I heard Evelyn coming up the stairs. *Thank god, I thought, something's happening.*

"Can't sleep on that damn guest bed." She looked tired. Maneuvering around the bed, Evelyn turned off the device keeping me in place, saying, "Wait. Don't move. Don't spoil the illusion just yet."

"What illusion?" She had told me to stay put, but I slowly tried to resettle my legs to bring myself some relief.

"Don't speak either." With a wince of discomfort, she slowly sat down on the edge of my side of the bed, where she gazed at me long enough to start making me uncomfortable. Still, I did as she said and didn't move. She reached up to touched my face and finally broke the silence. "So nice. Did I ever tell you, when I'm at work, sometimes I can hardly wait to get home just to see you sitting here? It can be quite distracting at times."

Oh wonderful, I thought, restraining myself from rolling my eyes. She's stoned on percocets and now she's all maudlin again. I can't put up with this right now.

"Knowing my puppet is here doing exactly what I want her to always brings a smile to my face. You know," she went on, gazing into space, "I never really

knew how lonely I was until I got you here. In truth, I think I'm the happiest I've ever been."

"You're happy and I'm miserable. That's just great. Isn't that the way it always—"

"Don't speak," she repeated, leaning forward to kiss my cheek.

The memory of Sarah mistakenly thinking that Evelyn and I were actually lovers, that I was somehow willingly in this situation, came to mind. Knowing it was just a matter of seconds before she moved on to kissing my lips, I tugged my head aside. I was in no mood. Thinking it amusing, Evelyn simply turned my face back towards her and kissed me again. I pulled away from her, sliding off my pile of pillows and landing on my side. She had a hand on my hip, preventing me from rolling all the way over, so one arm was pinned under my body. I batted at her with my free arm as I fitfully struggled to roll off of the other one, growing in irritation at both my helplessness and at her taking amusement in it.

"You can't stop me," she said. "Why wear yourself out trying?"

Oh, that made me so pissed off. I screamed into the comforter. "I know. I know I can't! I know, I know!"

"So why not just relax?" she asked, sliding her hand over my hip and down the curve of my belly.

There was an automatic, unwanted response between my legs which horrified me, even though I knew it was not my choice. "*Hssss! I hate you! I hate you!*"

"It doesn't matter if you hate me or not. You need me either way." That said, she got up and started to leave.

"W-where are you going?" I wrestled with the comforter, trying to get my face into the open. I was confused. She had never stopped doing something just because I didn't want her to, before. I didn't want to be left by myself with boredom and anger feeding on my mind. I was so sick of being helpless and alone. I felt so isolated. It's just that... why did she have to turn every encounter into an assault? Why couldn't she just talk to me? "You're going?"

She turned. "Why should I stay? So you can yell at me some more?"

"I just... don't leave me alone like this."

"Are you sure?" she asked, folding her arms.

"*Hss!*" I said. I didn't want to beg for her to stay. "I don't care. Do whatever."

Evelyn went around and got onto the bed, easily straightening me out with a tug on my ankle. She sidled up close to me and stroked my forearm. I didn't like her touching me. Not much. I mean, I didn't want her touching me, not like *that*, but at the same time, as long as she wasn't kissing me... god, I don't know.

“You know what you remind me of?” she asked after a while, smiling slyly. “A little boy in grade school who pulls a girl’s ponytail because he doesn’t know how else to show her that he likes her.”

“Some days, you know, you *sound* as crazy as you really are. I’m a little boy? What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“The only way you know how to interact with me is by fussing and fighting. You don’t know any other way to express affect—”

“Whoa, whoa, hang on. I know where you’re going with this, Ms. Psychoanalyst. *Hss!* Don’t think for a second that I-I get mad because I’m... what? Hiding behind... being mad? Hiding...” I was getting so worked up at her total misreading of the situation I could hardly speak straight. She couldn’t really think that I yelled because I couldn’t face that I *liked* her? God! “I fuss and fight because you kidnapped me, you, you... gah!”

“I didn’t say you were secretly in love with me, silly thing. But there are other levels of emotional attachment.”

“Just stop it!” I groaned. I didn’t want to pursue this line of thought one second longer. My eyes were burning. I breathed shakily through my nose for several minutes, trying not to burst into tears in front of her. Why that should matter so late in the game, I didn’t know.

She began to stroke my cheek. “You need to cry? I can see you do. Go on, then. Let it out,” she said.

“No,” I spat through clenched teeth.

“It’s alright. I won’t tease you. Go on and cry.”

I couldn’t hold it in anymore and finally the dam burst. “*Hsss-ss-ss!* This isn’t fair, it’s not fair!”

“I’m sure it’s not. But that’s the way it is.”

Chapter 27

The next morning Evelyn was a great deal more active than she had been since returning from the hospital. She had gotten herself fixed up nice and was now brushing my cropped, unstylable hair. I had just learned that Sarah was bringing Alice over and I was in a panic. “Here? She’s coming here?”

“Yes, in just a little while. I swear, how do you get so many tangles with such short hair? Sarah had a talk with her last night. This isn’t a secret we could keep from her, so she’s coming to meet you. I want you to look presentable.”

“What’d she say about me?” I didn’t want Alice to see the thing I had become. I didn’t want to have to face her and admit my wrongdoing. I didn’t want to see what my actions had done to her. I didn’t want to see her, period. And

I *definitely* didn't want meet her while wearing the peach spandex suit and dolly dress that Evelyn was pulling out. "*Hssss!* Oh, no way! There is *no* way!"

"Oh, yes way. I want you to look cute. Now go on and crawl down the stairs. I can't carry you," Evelyn said, gathering the outfit under her arm.

"I don't want to. I won't go."

"You'll go, or I'll put a leash around your neck and drag you down after me. And Kathy," she said, squeezing my cheeks and forcing me to look at her, "I don't want you to embarrass me. Be on your very best behavior."

Evelyn wrangled me down the stairs. I whined the whole trip. It hurt as much as feared it would, with the edges digging into my breasts and legs. It's scary to crawl down stairs headfirst; I was sure I'd take off and start sliding down until I hit the floor. I didn't. I was exhausted when I reached the bottom, but then all I had to do was lie there and let her dress me. That took a long time, what with her broken rib causing her pain.

By the time she was finished getting my clothes on, we were both out of breath. "Okay. That's done," she said. "Now be careful and don't get your clothes dirty."

"I crawl on the floor. I can't *not* get dirty," I said irascibly.

"Well, crawl *carefully*. Better yet, stay on the rug. Or better yet, get onto the couch and stay there. I have to get things ready. The place is such a mess."

I mimicked her once her back was turned, knowing it was childish but doing it anyway. Living like that, being helpless, dependent, and Evelyn's toy seemed to have regressed me so much. Maybe it was just the outfit. Hissing to myself, I crawled into the living room to await further humiliation.

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I was peeking over the back of the couch when Sarah and Alice arrived. They gathered in the little foyer to talk. I couldn't see much more than edge of a wheelchair and Sarah's back, so I slid back down among the throw pillows.

"It's true? She's really here?" came a voice I only faintly recognized.

"Yes, it's really Kathy. If I could have prepared you for this, I would," said Evelyn. "But I don't think there's a way to prepare anyone for this."

"I know," said Alice solemnly.

"Understand, I didn't want you ever to find out about this. I don't feel ashamed of what I've done, but I didn't want this to be on your conscience. You're so sensitive," said Evelyn, sounding a little nervous. "And what I've done is pretty... well, extreme."

"Sarah told me."

"Alice," said Sarah, "we don't have to do this. We can go home if you want to."

“No. No, I want to see.”

Oh, crap. My only hope was that maybe Alice, softie that she was, would take pity on me and go to the authorities. That hope was pretty scanty, considering what I had done to her in the past, also considering that it would mean turning in her sister. Still, it was the only hope I had left. They started coming into the living room. I cowered into the corner of the couch.

Sarah pushed Alice around the corner. When I saw her, I wondered crazily if there had been some mistake: *that* wasn't Alice Merriweather, and I was there for wronging the wrong person! The Alice I remembered was a frumpy, unexceptional, overweight woman with bad hair, a total lack of fashion sense, and who never seemed to care about her personal appearance. *This* Alice was a completely different person. She was practically gorgeous. She had a nice figure, stylish clothes, a clear complexion, and shiny hair pulled into a French braid. She was also sitting in a motorized wheelchair. I realized that she was the same Alice, after all. Whatever changes she had gone through since I last saw her, aside from the wheelchair, had definitely been in the direction of self-improvement. *That's not fair!* was my first thought. *It's not fair that she gets to be beautiful and I have to be like... whatever the hell I am!*

For her part, Alice was staring at me, wide-eyed, as Sarah positioned her beside the armchair across from the couch. I hissed softly in shame, trying to disappear into the floral pattern of the upholstery. Evelyn leaned her crutch against the wall and sat down beside me. “Be polite,” she told me, pulling me into a sitting position and teasing my rumpled dress so that it fell properly.

Even as I looked at her, I could feel that slim hope I had fading away. I watched as Alice's expression changed from stunned shock to one of barely-concealed hostile glee. “*It is you,*” she said to me. She looked at Evelyn. “Can she speak? Or is she, you know, brain damaged from something?”

“Oh, no, she's as sharp as ever,” replied Evelyn. “She wouldn't be a very good companion otherwise.”

“Good. I want her to know what's happened to her. Well?” she asked me, leaning forward eagerly. “Aren't you going to beg me to call the police to save you? Sarah said you might. So go on. Let's hear you beg for help.”

Both Sarah and Evelyn appeared startled by what must have been uncharacteristic malice oozing from Alice. All I could do was squirm under the force of her attention. I guessed they wanted me to say something, so I tried to think of what she wanted to hear. Taking a breath, I opened my mouth to speak, only to have a large spit bubble form and pop between my lips. Wincing, I licked my lips and tried again. “I'm sorry. What I did was wrong. There are no excuses. Forgive me.”

Far from mollified, Alice triggered the chair to move a few inches closer. “That’s it? ‘Forgive me?’ You expect me to forgive *you*?”

“I-I don’t know what else to say.” What did she want me to say? What *could* I say? Maybe she didn’t want me to say anything at all. Maybe she just wanted to see me suffer. I looked to Evelyn, but she was no help.

“I still haven’t heard you beg yet,” Alice said.

Her anger and my shame were combining to kindle a spark of defiance in me. “I liked you better before,” I mumbled.

“What did you say? *What did you just say?*” she demanded. Sarah put her hand on Alice’s shoulder.

“Nothing,” I said, though I knew I didn’t look remotely apologetic.

“How dare you make fun of me. *You*, of all people, after everything you did to me.”

Her anger was feeding me. “How dare *you*? You think you’re so much better than me. You always did. All of this has been because of *you*. *Hssss!* I hate you!” My impotent rage only made her smirk. After all, how could she take a drooling animal in a doll dress seriously? That just made me angrier. “*Hssss!* You think being pretty and getting a fancy hairdo makes you a different person?”

“I was better than you. I *am* better than you.”

I bared my teeth, and the reservoir of saliva I had been trying to keep in my mouth flowed out of the corners of my mouth and onto my dress. Alice saw this and laughed at me. *Laughed* at me. I had said I was sorry! I groped for something I could say to hurt her. “I had you wrapped around my finger. Remember? You were so easy. I had you *begging* for a little attention from me. Did you tell Sarah about that? Did you tell her I could’ve had you any time I wanted?”

I could see by Sarah’s look of disgust at my ploy that she did know. I suddenly felt like dirt for dredging that up. Alice just shook her head at me. “I was delusional. Keep those memories close. From the look of you now, your days of using your body to get ahead are long over.

“*Hssss-bitch!*”

“You were always cold and heartless,” she said. “I admit I almost felt sorry for you when I thought you were dead. But now I see how fitting all this is. Now your outsides better match what’s inside. Crippled.”

“Calling me a *hssss!* cripple? You always used to put on a show of being so nice. Now *I* can see what *you’re* like inside. You’re a *hssss!* vindictive, evil monster, just like your sister! *Hssss!* What the hell is wrong with you people? *Hssss!* How can you look at me and be happy?” I growled, literally foaming. I knew it probably wasn’t wise to go on like that, but I couldn’t stop myself. I kept

expecting Evelyn to step in and shut me up. Instead, she just watched us snipe back and forth.

“I was never vindictive, not until you messed with my life,” she said, pounding on the arms of her wheelchair, “and I ended up in this!”

“I didn’t push you off. You did that all by yourself.”

There was a stunned silence for several seconds. Then Alice’s face contorted with rage and, before I even knew what was happening, she pushed the chair’s knob and zoomed forward. The footrest of her chair slammed hard into the couch right between my feet. She lurched forward and suddenly her hand was around my neck, squeezing, and god, but her hand was strong. She was snarling and *choking* me, shaking me like a rag doll. I didn’t really have to worry about my air being cut off, not with me breathing through a tube like I did, but she was cutting off my circulation.

I gurgled and hissed and tried to pull her hand off my neck, but I was no match for her. I stared at her fearfully, never having seen the look that was in her eyes before. *She could kill me!* I was thinking. *She wants to kill me!* Sarah looked frightened and was no help at all. Evelyn just coolly watched us. “I’m sorry... please!” I begged as grayness closed in around the edges of my vision.

Alice gave my neck a final, extra-hard squeeze, then let her hand fall away. She slumped in her chair and Sarah pulled the chair away, asking her if she was okay. My head rolled back, the blood rushing back to my senses. Fear had made my rage vanish. I was shaking all over and I started to cry. Evelyn still hadn’t said a thing.

After a minute, Alice spoke up. “You’re right,” said Alice quietly, peering at her hands. “You’re right. I did it. I tried to kill myself.”

Sarah bent down. “Oh, honey, no—”

“It wasn’t her. I know I always blamed her for that, but it was me. My fault I’m in a wheelchair,” she said. She looked up at me again. “I wasn’t well. But *you* didn’t help.”

“I-If I’d known—”

Alice shook her head. “If you had known, it wouldn’t have made a difference. Would it?”

I had to admit, knowing how I used to be, I probably would have done what I did anyway, even if I had known that Alice had been prone to suicidal depression. “No. Maybe. I guess not,” I said, wiping at my eyes with the backs of my hands. There was an awkward silence that lasted a long minute. I finally spoke up. “I... all I can say is, I can’t know what you’ve been through. But I can say that if it was half as bad as what I’ve been through, then I’m so, so sorry. I really am.”

Alice just looked at me, then said, “Alright.”

I guess that was enough. The tension in the room eased up. Evelyn stroked my hair and smiled at me, finally acknowledging me. I wasn’t sure what she was smiling about (her sister had just almost killed me, after all), or why she had been so quiet the whole time. At least I didn’t feel so exposed and on my own, not as long as she was touching me. I didn’t do on my own well, anymore. She leaned over and whispered a command in my ear. My eyes went wide. “Oh... no, I can’t!”

“Sure you can,” she said. “Just pretend it’s me. Go on.”

“*Hsss!*” I pleaded, but Evelyn ignored my protests and eased me off the couch and onto the floor. I hid my face in my arms for a minute, then Evelyn nudged me with her braced foot. *Oh hell. She wasn’t joking. I better just get it over with.*

I crawled reluctantly across the floor towards Alice’s wheelchair. Alice stared at me and cast a questioning glance towards Evelyn. I got to the footrest and, after a moment’s hesitation, began to lick the toes of Alice’s leather boots. Sarah gasped and covered her mouth, stifling a giggle.

It was humiliating, but really, not that bad compared to a hundred things I could name that I had already been through. I tried not to think about what I was doing, I just did it. I realized with a twinge of shame that I hadn’t crawled over and started licking out of fear of punishment. Evelyn hadn’t threatened me, and I hadn’t thought about what she might do to me if I put up a fight. I did it simply because Evelyn told me to.

“Okay,” said Alice. “That, I like.” She had a self-satisfied smirk that was all too familiar to me, having seen it on her sister’s face often enough.

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For the next couple of hours I had to endure their teasing as Evelyn described how she kidnapped me and detailed the things she had done to me. It was all so fucking surreal. I couldn’t believe I was sitting there and listen to them casually discuss these things and talk about me as if I was a fancy new home entertainment system. I never could have guessed how humiliating it was to have someone lift your dress to show her guests the catheter bag strapped to your thigh. But I found out, alright. All I could do was squirm in embarrassment, blush, and cry... and sometimes rub my neck where Alice had choked me. It still hurt. I didn’t know if Alice had forgiven me or what, but either way, it hadn’t lessened her pleasure at seeing me degraded. What sort of twisted genes did she and Evelyn share, anyway?

“She used to spit her food at me all the time. I took care of that,” Evelyn was saying. “Oh, I wish I had some cookies. I could show you a fun game. You

toss the cookies on the floor and she chases after them to chew them.”

“But she can’t swallow,” Sarah observed.

“No, true, but she can taste them. Then she just spits them out.”

Sarah held up her hands. “Okay. I don’t need to see that.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing it,” said Alice, as she favored me with a malicious grin. “It might be kind of fun to see her eating off the floor.”

“*Hss!*”

“Aliiice,” Sarah said, “that’s disgusting!”

“Why, Alice, I never knew you had it in you,” said Evelyn. “I had no idea you had this side to you.”

Alice looked a little chagrined. “Yes, well. We’ve done *some* things. My... situation has required us to get a little creative in the bedroom, so—”

“*Aliiice!* You said you’d never tell anyone!” cried Sarah. “It’s embarrassing.”

Oh, you’re embarrassed? I wondered in amazement. *I’m the one sitting here dribbling down my chest!*

“Yes, but Sarah, it’s Evie. It’s not like she’s going to judge us, especially after this.” Alice gestured at me.

Evelyn spoke up. “Certainly not.”

“It’s still embarrassing,” said Sarah in a huff.

“Oh, speaking of embarrassing, you must see this. It’s too cute. Sarah, could you go upstairs?” Evelyn asked. “There’s a mask in the top dresser drawer. Could you bring it here?”

I immediately began to pull on Evelyn’s sleeve. “No. *Please*, no,” I pleaded quietly. She ignored me.

“Mask?” Sarah said, looking skeptical, but going anyway.

Once Sarah was out of earshot, Evelyn leaned towards her sister, looking like an adolescent sharing a secret. “What do you do?”

“I don’t know if I should say,” said Alice. “Nothing even *close* to what you do, apparently, but we play some games.”

Evelyn laughed. “I should have known. Remember the time when you—” Evelyn suddenly turned on me, looking slightly annoyed. “*What?*”

I stopped pulling her sleeve and shied away. “Not the mask. Please, not now. I’ll do whatever you want.” I was trying to sound calm and reasonable. Inside, I was screaming at thought of having to become that doll-thing in front of the others. It was bad enough when I was completely alone and simply seeing myself in the mirror.

“You’ll do whatever I want, regardless, slave,” said Evelyn. For some reason, that cracked Alice up. “What until you see this, Alice. She spends all day

like this sometimes.”

“Noooo—” I cried.

Evelyn grabbed me hard by the upper arm and yanked me close. “I told you not to embarrass me. Remember?” she hissed in my ear. She gave me a little a shake when I didn’t answer. “Remember?”

“Yes.”

“So behave, or I’ll let them watch you eat Jinx’s food off the floor instead of cookies.” She sat back, winced, and touched her side.

“Does it hurt bad, Evie?” Alice asked.

“Comes and goes. It’ll be fine.”

“It’s so funny how her head flops around like that when you move her.”

“She’s floppy all over.”

“What’s up with her hair, anyway?” asked Alice. “It looks like she was attacked with a weed-whacker.”

“Oh, that,” said Evelyn, teasing my raggedly-cropped hair. “She lost it on account of bad behavior.”

I sat with head bowed, forcing myself not to freak out. I hadn’t been grabbed and scolded like that in front of other people since I was a little girl. Of course, my parents had never threatened to make me eat cat food back then. I didn’t think she was bluffing, either.

Sarah returned, holding out the porcelain mask. “It’s not this, is it?”

“That’s it,” said Evelyn, taking it and turning to me. “Don’t fuss.”

As she pulled the hood and mask over my head, it occurred to me that this might not be such a bad thing, after all. I was someone else when I wore it. *A doll doesn’t get embarrassed. It doesn’t care if its laughed at or talked about. If it does, it doesn’t show it. I won’t have to think. I’ll just go somewhere else,* I thought. For the first time, the pressure of the mask on face was welcome. My head rolled back, my eyes unfocused, and my whole body relaxed.

“Be still,” Evelyn added unnecessarily. That, at least, was something I excelled at. After months of training, I could remain almost completely motionless for, heck, at least nine hours. No problem. Talents beg to be used, right?

“That’s... kinda spooky,” said Sarah.

“Isn’t it cute? She looks better with the wig on, but this gives you the idea,” said Evelyn. “The first time I put that mask on her, she reacted so badly she passed out.”

“No kidding?”

“Doesn’t seem to bother her now, though,” observed Alice.

“Let’s move into the kitchen. My side hurts and I need a different chair for

a while. I'll make some tea," said Evelyn, reaching for her crutch. "Don't worry about her. She won't move."

"You sure?" asked Sarah. She waved her hand in front of my face, then snapped her fingers inches from my nose. I didn't care. I didn't even blink. I was in the zone. "Spooky."

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An indeterminate (to me) period of time passed. I could hear them talking in the kitchen, but I didn't put the effort into understanding what they were saying. Cramps and discomforts came and went. They didn't matter. Evelyn finally returned, said something I didn't bother to comprehend, and started to remove the hood. I found I didn't want her to take it off. It was safe behind the mask. I wasn't expected to react to anything. I wasn't expected to do anything. Once it was taken off, I knew I would get all sensitive and start crying at every little thing again. I pulled away. "Nnn."

"What's this? You want to keep wearing it? Well, that's a new one. It won't do, though," she said, pulling the mask up. "It's time for them to go home."

"*Hssss!*" I blinked and tried to hide my face, feeling as though I had been awakened by having all the bedroom shades drawn at once.

"You can wear it later if you really want to. Sarah's going to help get you back upstairs. Come on, don't hold them up."

Yeah. Heaven forbid. Don't let my disabilities slow you down, I thought as Evelyn helped me onto the floor. My muscles and joints registered complaints all over, but that was nothing new. That always happened whenever I was still for long periods. I belly-crawled over to the foot of the stairs and waited.

Alice was sitting in her chair near the door. She gave me a little fluttery-fingered wave. "It was *so* nice to see you again, Katherine. So good to see you well. We must do this again soon."

Bitch. There was still a lot to be worked out between Alice and I. I knew she still hated me. She had accepted my existence, but that was probably the extent of it. I turned away to find Sarah's shoes were inches away from my face. *Oh no, don't make me lick yours, too.* Instead of sticking her feet in my mouth, she just stepped away. I heaved a hiss of relief.

"Alright, so how do we do this?" Sarah asked.

"Just pick her up and take her up the stairs. She's light. Not much muscle mass."

"Right." She got her arms around me and awkwardly lifted me up. "Eurgh! Her chest is damp!"

"It happens," said Evelyn.

"*Hssss!*"

“Light, huh?” Sarah grunted. “To you, maybe. I’m five-two!”

After a few false starts, Sarah eventually managed to get me up the stairs by going up backwards. I might have been able to help a little, but I didn’t. Make her work for it, I figured. She deposited me none too gently on the landing, then went to wash her hands. I crawled into the bedroom while they said their goodbyes.

At least that was over. I guess it could have gone worse. Alice could have decided to finish strangling me to death, after all. I was feeling strange and subdued. All in one morning I had to face Alice (and been faced with the fact that she had become beautiful in a way that I could never be again), endure hours of teasing, and had been confronted with the idea that I had actually *wanted* to disappear behind that mask. Plus there was the realization that with the three of them covering each other’s backs, escape from Evelyn looked like it would be harder than ever. All that was a lot to deal with.

A little while later, after they had gone, Evelyn came upstairs and disappeared into the bathroom. When she came out, she had stripped down to her underwear.

“Uh. What’s going on?” I asked. I was not in the mood for weird sex.

“What’s it look like? I’m going to take a nap. C’mon, into bed.” She helped me up onto the mattress and took my dress off.

“But you never take a nap in the middle of the day.”

“I do when I’m worn out and on painkillers. Scoot,” she said, sliding under the covers and pushing me over to the side. She squeezed me up next to her like a fleshy body pillow. “I couldn’t be happier with how this morning went. And to think I was so worried.” She chuckled. “I’m so happy for Alice. And I’m very pleased with you. You did great.”

“I didn’t *do* anything. Except get strangled,” I said sourly, rubbing my throat. “Why didn’t you stop her?”

“She needed it. The whole thing with you has really been eating her up inside all these years. She’s been needing to confront you for a long time. I don’t know why I didn’t see it sooner. Now she finally has some closure and can finally put it behind her and move on. That’s wonderful,” she said, beginning to sound emotional.

“Great for her. What about me?”

“What about you? You’re right where you belong.” She gave me an additional squeeze. “So how did it feel to finally be seen by other people?”

“I didn’t like it.”

“Good,” she said. “Maybe that will help convince you that your place is here, my disabled pet.”

Crap.

Chapter 28

Evelyn was able to go back to work the next day. A couple of weeks passed while her rib slowly healed up. For me, it was pretty much the same as before, with me chained, masked, and staring at myself all day. It's hard to describe, but, after that day with Alice, I found the mask wasn't always such a bad thing. I didn't mind wearing it so much and there was a change that came over me when I had to. Sort of like I became a different person. Or maybe, not so much of a person at all. It became so easy just to shut off of my mind and then not much of anything would bother me. It was an almost pleasant feeling. Like a security blanket.

The only change in the usual routine was with Alice and Sarah showing up now and then to help out, and I'm not even going to go into how humiliating that could be. Suffice to say that Evelyn got to show them the cookie chasing trick, after all. I had to spend most of time in the bedroom, since if I went downstairs then Sarah would have to be available to get me back up to the second floor. It didn't take long to get fed up with that, so I began to work on my stair-climbing skills. It was rough going and painful, but my poor poison-deadened muscles got a little bit stronger day after day.

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I soon learned just how cruel innocent-looking Sarah could be. She had been peevisly mean to me all one afternoon, and I had just gotten fed up with being pushed around. I don't know, maybe it was just the stress for her in having to take care of three invalids: Alice, Evelyn, and even the woman she hated. In retrospect, she was being pretty generous for doing all that for everybody. I guess it was only natural for her be short with me, but, at the time, I couldn't think of other people's feelings. I could only pity myself. I was everybody's whipping girl for whenever they had a bad day. Have any pent up frustrations? Take them out on Katherine.

Regardless, I finally pushed back with some malicious comment I don't even want to remember concerning her and Alice's activities in bed... something to do with Alice being numb below the waist. I felt justified, but maybe not to be as nasty as I was. I was lucky Evelyn hadn't overhead. I pushed Sarah, and she would push back. Just not right away. She didn't kick me or anything, she just gave me a condescending little laugh and left me alone.

The next day when she came over, everything seemed normal. Evelyn was doing the bills at the kitchen table and I was on the living room floor, pawing

through a magazine that I had snagged off the coffee table. It was something by Martha Stewart, of course. Evelyn normally didn't let me look at magazines or books because I couldn't help drooling spit on the pages, but what she didn't know couldn't hurt her. Sarah came to stand in the doorway, just leaning against the post with her arms folded, watching me. I tried to ignore her and concentrate on the magazine, but I was getting increasingly self-conscious and nervous. I slowly edged myself closer to the wall until my whole side was pressed against it. I could almost sense something bad coming.

Sarah left the doorway and came towards me. I felt an irrational moment of panic and almost started to call out for Evelyn right then. I huddled against the wall as she squatted down beside me and pulled something from her pocket. It was her cell phone. "Wanna see something?" she asked. She was trying to keep a straight face, but kept breaking into a malicious grin. She would have made a terrible poker player.

"No."

"Here, take a look. It's you." She dropped it on top of the magazine.

I didn't want see what she whatever was making her so terribly amused, but I just couldn't resist. I lifted my head and saw that it was displaying a photo of a grave marker. I snatched it and brought it close. It showed a stone plaque – one of many – set into the wall of a mausoleum. Just below my parents.

It was me. It was my name. My birth date and... the year I disappeared. *In Loving Memory*. My grave. I could feel myself begin to hyperventilate. "Hss! Hss!"

"Isn't that touching?" Sarah asked innocently.

"That's-sss... that's not real. It's--"

"Oh, but it *is* real. I took it myself. Alice and I went to check it out."

I had known everybody already thought I was dead. I had seen my face on the tv. But this... this was different. This was horrible. "But... I'm... not dead!"

"What do you suppose they put in it? Some of your old office supplies?"

"Hsssss!"

"It's kind of sad, really. Look, no one's bothered to put any flowers on your grave."

I completely snapped. I started scream-hissing uncontrollably at the top of my lungs, thrashing and pulling at my hair. I probably would have ripped some out if I had been stronger. My hissing became an awful, watery gurgle as I was struck by nausea and my stomach heaved, forcing my last liquid meal up my throat and through the stent's valve. I spewed a narrow, high-pressure stream of vomit all over the magazine in front of me.

"Uh." Sarah's self-satisfied smirk had faded. She had gotten halfway to her

feet beside me, clearly unsure of what to do. I don't think she had been expecting that sort of reaction. I don't know what she expected; maybe she thought I'd just start crying or yell at her or something like that. She had the look of a child who had just intentionally caused her younger sibling to cry and then regretted it.

"Look, just calm down..."

"Hsssssss! Hsssssssss! Hsssssssssss!"

"What on earth?" Evelyn was entering the room, clumping along on her brace and crutch. "What's going on here? Good lord, what's happened to her?"

Sarah could only stammer. I reached for Evelyn, desperately and wordlessly begging for solace. She came over and got down onto the floor, and I clawed my way onto her lap where I would be safe. She rolled me over and wiped my face and mouth with the hem of her shirt. "Kathy, what on earth's the matter with you?"

"Hsssss!"

"She's not hurt, I-I was just teasing her a little," explained Sarah nervously.

"Hsssss! I'm dead!" I cried. "They buried me!"

"What's she talking about?" Evelyn asked Sarah.

Sarah shrugged nervously. "I was just showing her a picture."

Evelyn reached for the phone, which had narrowly avoided being sprayed by vomit. She looked at it, then glared accusingly at Sarah. "This? You showed her *this*?"

"Yes. It was just a—"

"And you didn't think it might be just a little traumatic?" Evelyn shouted. I had never heard get angry at anyone else but me before. "Look what you did to her!"

"But you said she had knew! You said she knew what had happened!" Sarah protested.

"She didn't need to know about this. She wasn't ready for this," Evelyn growled and threw the photo at Sarah. She pulled me close and cradled me.

"She's different now. Can't you see how fragile she can be? It's alright, puppet. It's okay."

Sarah was at a loss. "But you're always doing mean things to her."

"She's *mine*. She belongs to *me*. She's my responsibility. You will not do anything like this without my permission again," warned Evelyn. "Do you understand?"

"Yeah, alright, okay," Sarah replied defensively. "I'm sorry."

"Don't tell me," said Evelyn. "Tell her."

Sarah looked offended. "What? I'm not apologizing to *her*. She deserved it."

“Sarah...”

“It’s not going to help. Alright, fine.” Sarah took a deep breath. She didn’t even look at me when she spoke. “I’m sorry you got so upset.”

I turned my head away.

“Kathy,” Evelyn said in a lecturing tone, “Sarah’s apologizing. I think you should be graceful and acknowledge her.”

“*Hsss!* She doesn’t mean it,” I whined.

Sarah made a sound of frustration. “See? I told you. She doesn’t wanna hear it.”

“It won’t hurt you to try harder and make her believe it,” replied Evelyn.

“No!” Sarah grabbed her phone and purse and stormed out of the house.

“*Hssss! B-b-bitch!*” I called out, after she had already left

Evelyn clucked her tongue and stroked my forehead. “No. It’ll be alright.”

She continued to rock me and gluing me back together until I got regained control of myself. “I hate her,” I sobbed. “That rotten little witch.”

“No, you don’t. You’re just upset.”

“She’s a—”

Evelyn silenced me. “I won’t let you say bad things about her, either. You should be grateful for all the work she’s being doing to help us out. She wasn’t thinking. She’ll apologize.”

“I don’t care. What do I care? I’m dead,” I said pathetically.

“Oh stop that,” she told me, continuing to cradle me and dab at my lips. “I know it’s a shock, and I know you weren’t ready, but you had to know this sort of thing would be inevitable. I’m sorry, sweetie, but the rest of the world has put you to rest as a sad chapter and moved on.”

“Y-you knew?” I asked, looking up at her.

“Yes. Yes, of course I knew. I know everything about you.”

“But I’m not *hssss!* Not dead.”

“True, without a body, your case will *technically* remain open. But unofficially, you’re considered murdered by that killer,” she explained.

“But that’s not fair!” Nothing about my life was fair. Nothing. I wished I could tell everyone I was still here. Only three people in the world even knew I was alive, and two of them hated me. Evelyn could only sigh. “Who put it there?” I finally asked.

“Some religious organization that does that sort of thing. Don’t you think it’s a nice gesture? I mean, it’s better than them having neither a body or a marker for you indefinitely. That would be as if you never even existed.”

“Oh, god,” I sobbed.

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I felt subdued and depressed all evening. Evelyn tried to keep me close to her, but I just wanted to be alone and feel sorry for myself. I actually felt a little guilty from my reaction. Not guilty that I had been upset, just that I had caused such a fuss and even threw up on the floor, making a mess that Evelyn had to clean up. I could hardly believe I had actually done that, though the bitter taste still lingered in my mouth. But it was my own *grave*. It seemed so coldly... final. I really was dead to the world.

And, damn it, I had always wanted to decide what would be on my headstone! Something significant, something that meant something to me, maybe with a pretty design. *In Loving Memory?* How trite was that? Who remembered me? Who loved me? There were a thousand other graves in the cemetery that said the same thing. I was just another anonymous marker that no one would ever go to visit. There weren't even any flowers.

Sarah returned sometime later. I slunk off into the darkness of the guest bedroom to avoid her. I could hear them talking in the kitchen for a while. Evelyn didn't sound angry at her anymore, which annoyed me. It had given me a thrill to watch Sarah squirm and to see Evelyn get mad at someone else, for once. I didn't want her off the hook so easily.

She came into the room and flicked the light on, making me hiss. She wore a hangdog expression and fidgeted uncomfortably. "Come on. Come to the stairs. I have to take you up and do your... enema thing."

I reluctantly followed her to the stairs so that she could carry me up. I would have preferred to petulantly ignore her, but if I did that, Evelyn would get angry with me and I'd just get bloated and cramped until tomorrow, and I'd have to let her do it then anyway. Once upstairs, I stayed quiet and laid on my belly as she unzipped me and attached the tube to my plug. It might have been humiliating for her to have to do that for me – I was beyond getting humiliated by such rudimentary things by that point – but I couldn't care less. There was a minute of awkward silence.

"Alice yelled at me for running off," she said, as if I should commiserate with her or something.

"Hss!"

"Look, um... I'm sorry I made you cry like that. I was... being spiteful."

"Hss!"

"Hey, I'm trying my best to apologize here. This isn't easy for me. You did do your part in provoking me to it, you know," she said with an exasperated sigh.

I tilted my head in her direction. "What does it matter, anyway. You can do whatever you want. Everybody does."

"Look. I'm sorry. Just don't say anything like that about Alice. Don't you

think you've said and done enough to her?"

I remained quiet.

"How about this: I'll stop harassing you, and you don't antagonize me. Will that work?"

I couldn't argue with the logic of that, although I still wasn't in the mood to be too gracious. "Okay," I mumbled into the carpet.

"Fine. Good," she said. "It's settled."

I suppose she did her part after that by not being so callously cold towards me. I did my part by just keeping my mouth shut and staying out of her way as much as possible. And I knew that, once Evelyn got better, Sarah wouldn't be around as much and we wouldn't have to worry about getting on each other's nerves. I guessed we were stuck together for the moment, so we would just have to learn to get along, somehow.

Chapter 29

After a visit to the doctor around March (I think, it could have been April), Evelyn came home brace free. She limped a little and complained about stiffness and weakness, but didn't get any sympathy out of me. Still, it was good that she was back to normal, because it would mean that things would get a little easier for me. That night, while Evelyn was finishing her dinner and loading the dishwasher, I tackled the stairs. I went up one step at a time, driving myself to make it to the top. I was out of breath but deliriously happy when I made it to the landing. How sad is that? Getting so excited about making it up a flight of stairs.

"*Hsss!*" I called. "*Hssss! Hsssss!*"

I heard Evelyn coming out of the kitchen. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?" she asked, wiping her hands dry with a dish towel. She saw me at the top of the stairs. "What are you doing up there?"

"I... made it," I said, still panting, "all by... myself!"

"Made it up the stairs?"

"Yes! I did it! I'm getting stronger!" I would have danced in triumph, had I been able.

"Oh." Evelyn didn't look happy for me. In fact, she looked a little disapproving. "I see."

"But I did it!"

"That's great," she said thoughtfully, then went back into the kitchen.

Well, fuck you, too, I thought. She could have at least pretended to be more enthusiastic over my accomplishments. I would have celebrated, but, well, there's not much I could do in terms of merry-making. I wondered if I could convince her

to add some of that brandy to my water later on. *I could go for that*, I thought. *Get nice and toasted.*

I was contemplating the painful trip back down the stairs when Evelyn appeared around the corner. She came up the stairs and stepped over me without a word on her way to the bedroom. Her stepping over me wasn't unusual, but her body language was. I heard metallic clanking from the bedroom, so I followed her in. She was taking the braces out of the closet and laying them on the floor. I backed out of the room as rapidly as I could. "*Hssss! Nooo!*"

"Don't make this difficult, Kathy," she said, coming up behind me and picking me up as I fled down the hall. "Oof. Did you gain weight? Maybe it's just me. Need to get back to working out." I kicked and struggled as she carried me back into the room and placed me in the middle of the floor.

"Why? I've been good! You know I've been good! I haven't fought or yelled or—"

"Stop fighting. I wish you wouldn't make such a big deal out of this," she said, lifting up my legs and butt and sliding the leg brace underneath me. It was locked around my tiny waist in seconds. I was already wearing the purple bodysuit because of the cold weather, so she didn't have to bother with that this time.

"I've done everything you wanted! I've been your doll, I've licked you every night, *hsssss!*"

"This is only partially a punishment," she said, forcing my legs into the frames. "Remember, I only said your returning to braces was postponed after I took that little tumble, not put off for good. You've had enough freedom for now. I've been considering doing this all week. And don't forget that it *does* excite me to see you in braces. This is partly for me. And when I saw you at the top of the stairs, I knew it was time." She continued to tight and lock the cuffs around my quivering legs as she spoke.

"*Hsss!* Just give me another month! Another week? Please!"

"If it's any consolation, I'm genuinely a little sorry to do this to you right now," she said. I guess she was telling the truth, since she didn't have her typical cruel grin. "You looked so happy over your accomplishment, and I hate to take it from you so abruptly. But it's best to nip it in the bud. If you can crawl up stairs, that means you've regained too much control."

"But... it's just stairs!" I cried in bewilderment.

"That's more independence than I want you to have. I want you to need me."

"I *do* need you! What if I pretend I can't do it?"

She chuckled. "Cute."

“What if I just don’t do it anymore! I promise I won’t. I’ll never climb the stairs again.” I was fighting a losing battle. Already, she was fixing the torso part in place. “Nooo! I want to *move!*”

“Well, you won’t be moving for a while, and that’s final.”

I hissed and fumed as she finished getting all the braces on me. The pitiful thing was, I was too weak to even fight hard enough to make the braces dig in painfully, like they used to the first time I had been put in them. By the time she put the purple hood on my head, the fight had gone out of me, and all I could do was stare straight ahead and moan. It wasn’t fair. The next time she let me move again, I would be just as weak as the first time and have to start all over. Even my hands would get all stiff again. Just because I managed to regain a negligible bit of independence. Not fair.

She sat back. “There. That’s so pretty. It may be a further consolation to know I’m letting you stay in here, instead of the attic.”

“R-really?” I asked, still crying.

“I’ve just gotten too used to having you near me, especially at night. I’m afraid I would get lonely if you were always up there,” she said. She picked me and placed me in the bed, putting me into the all too familiar sitting position. She excused herself briefly after connecting my feeding tube.

Being able to stay out of the attic was a relief. That was a big part of my aversion to going back into braces. It was so mind-numbingly boring up in that little room that I feared losing my mind sometimes. The only problem with being in the bedroom was that I knew Evelyn didn’t want to have a television in there. All I had was the mirror. Great. I wiggled, trying to get comfortable in the braces. Evelyn returned and the first thing I noticed was that she was carrying a small syringe. “W-what’s that for? *What’s in that?*”

“Shhh. It’ll be fine.” She uncovered the food bag’s ‘intake’ valve, preparing to inject the needle’s contents into my food supply.

“What is it? What are you putting into me?” I asked, horrified that I already knew the answer. “*Hsssssss! Hsssssss! I don’t want to be paralyzed!*” I exploded into violent struggling. Evelyn hesitated.

“Now stop that! Relax. It’s not much at all,” she said. “I’m *not* paralyzing you. Are you listening to me? I’m just giving you enough to make sure you don’t go climbing stairs anymore. I’m aiming to make it so you won’t get stronger than you were a few weeks ago. Relax.” She stroked my head.

Okay, not paralyzed was good. That didn’t change the fact she was *poisoning* me again, doing permanent damage to my body, *again*. I would have to lie there and knowingly ingest it and not be able to stop it. And all because I was able to climb some stairs! “Nooo! God, nooo! *Hssss!*”

“Kathy.”

“*Hsssss!* Please! I’ll be a doll all the time if you want! I’ll never go on the stairs again, I swear to god, I’ll never even try, just please!” Tears were flowing freely. “I’ll do anything you want just don’t do this.”

“I’m not changing my mind,” she said evenly. “I’ve said how I want you to be, and nothing is going to change that.”

“I know! I know. But if I’m in these braces a while then I’ll get weak again. You don’t have to poison me anymore. Please. Evelyn. Please, please, please, please.” I could see that she was hesitating, so I pressed on. “You don’t have to it. I’m already... I faced Alice, she said it was okay... you’ve ruined my life... I’ve paid for everything I’ve done!”

“It isn’t about that anymore,” she said.

“You take everything away. Every time I think I have something, you take it away. Why? Why do you have to do that?” I asked. She didn’t say anything. “You don’t have to do anything more to me! I need you, already, okay? I *know* that. I know I’d die without you.”

“Why, Kathy, I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” she said, sounding genuinely pleased.

“Oh, god. Please just don’t.”

She looked at the syringe, at the food bag, then at me. Bending close, she scraped the tip of the needle along the curve of my cheek. For a horrified second I was afraid she might inject the stuff right into my face. As she pressed the needle against my skin, she spoke. “If I refrain from this, I don’t want to hear you complaining about you being in your braces. Understand?”

“Y-yes.”

“A thank you would be nice.”

“Thank you! Thank you, god, thank you thank you...”

“Tell me how nice I am to you,” she added.

“Uh... you’re nice to me. Really nice.”

Without another word, she left. I could hardly believe it. Evelyn had been on the verge of making me even more helpless, but she didn’t. Not only was ecstatic that I narrowly avoided poisoning, I had to marvel that this was probably the first time she had actually not done something terrible to me just because I begged her not to. That had never stopped her in the past. I wondered if Evelyn’s growing feelings towards me, along with some semblance of sympathy somewhere deep in her evil self, might enable me to have a some tiny fragment of control over my situation. It was an exhilarating thought.

At the time, I didn’t even pause to puzzle over the fact that I was happy with simply being immobilized by braces. Or that I had thanked her for it. Or that, in

one way, I almost looked forward to getting a little weaker again, since it would mean she would have no reason to be upset and do something drastic and permanent. Funny how things work out.

Chapter 30

I was nestled against Evelyn's naked, sudsy body in her large bathtub. It was heavenly. It was my first real bath in over a month. Closer to a month and a half. That's how long I had been kept in those braces that time, although I hadn't been completely immobile the whole time. Two weeks earlier, Evelyn had unlocked the joints of the things, allowing me to move around awkwardly, so at least I had gotten some exercise. She liked the way they limited my movement, as well as clanking and clicking sounds they made when I crawled. For me, it was better than nothing.

I had finally been completely released from them a few hours before the bath. My inactivity-induced weakness was much less distressing this time. For one, I was pretty well used to being weakened and helpless by then. I wasn't happy about it, but I was *used* to it. It wasn't a shock this time. In the back of my mind, I also knew that if I wasn't able to force myself to recover and get my mobility back – *again* – then I probably never would. I would just lie there like a vegetable for the rest of my life, which probably wouldn't bother Evelyn a bit. She liked for me to be able to crawl, but would continue to care for me even if I couldn't so much as bat an eye. The thought of that was enough to keep me from giving up. If I hadn't kept wiggling restlessly and flexing my remaining muscles inside the cage of braces during my months of convalescence, I probably wouldn't have had the strength to even roll over. The first time I recovered the strength and mobility to push myself over onto my front, I was *so* elated. When Evelyn congratulated me on it, I was *grateful* to her.

Another interesting thing was that I had been able to manipulate Evelyn a little bit during my brace time. Sort of. Encouraged by successfully talking her out of poisoning me, I tried to use the same tactic on other occasions. I thought if I could play to her emotions, I might be able to get some more control over my situation, such as it was. Among other things, I had persuaded her to move the little TV from the attic into the bedroom. She didn't like having the tv in the room, so that was a pretty large victory on my part. I quickly got hooked on soaps again, although it took a while to figure out what was going on. I also got her to buy me some music, give me some alcohol, and let me taste some cake (messy, but that was her responsibility to clean up). All I had to do was not beg her to take off the braces, thank her for taking care of me, and be generally obsequious. I could

do that, if it meant getting something I wanted. Okay, so maybe I'd never be who I used to be again, but at least I might be able to exert some control over my own environment. If I didn't push it to hard, and if Evelyn's feelings got the better of her, I might be able to manipulate her for my benefit.

Sex was great... for Evelyn. All she had to do was lay me flat on my back and sit on my face. If I didn't perform up to par then I would get punished. I learned to always do my best pretty quickly. As for my own pleasure, well, there was always that electric dildo thing. Sheer boredom led me to want to use it. A lot. To my utter humiliation, and completely in spite of myself, having that moisture-sensitive hood tied into the vibrator was having a stronger and stronger effect. Evelyn had pretty much succeeded in associating my salivating with pleasure. It got so that I couldn't get or remain turned on unless I was drooling. Simply becoming aware of the moisture trickling down my chin and neck was enough to make me want to touch myself. I wish I could say I hated it. I used to, and I still did a little, but it had gotten to the point where it was just as normal as blinking. How long can you hate something that's your only source of self-pleasure? It's not like I had anything else to do.

I didn't see much of Alice or Sarah in that time. Now and then I might be taken downstairs for a social visit. They would eat or chat while I sat there immobile and virtually ignored. The only time anyone paid attention to me was to tease me in some way. Amazingly, I actually enjoyed that on some level. Not the teasing part. I hated that. I just meant being able to get out of the bedroom and see faces other than Evelyn's. As embarrassing as it was to have them see me like that, just about anything was an improvement from my usual routine. Or lack thereof. I guess it just helped me feel a little more like a real person with a real life.

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Evelyn squeezed a sponge out over my shoulder, rinsing away the bubbles. The hot water felt great on my stiff muscles, but I could tell from the growing discomfort in my midsection that I would need to be corseted back up soon. I groaned and shifted against my captor's soft body.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

I sighed. "Back's hurting. Why can't I just pretend to be normal for a little while?" I asked rhetorically. "Why I can't just enjoy some normal things like a bath without all this stuff getting in the way?"

"Lots of people can't. Your situation isn't that unique, all things considered."

"I know, I... oh, just drop it." I knew what she was going to say. All that stuff about me just dealing with the sorts of things tons of 'real' disabled people

had to go through. Alice in particular. I didn't want to hear it all again. I just wanted to try to enjoy what few pleasures I could, while I could. But it kept nagging at me, and I started up again just a minute later. "It's just I wanna feel human again! Why is that wrong?" I rotated in the water so that I was looking up at Evelyn from between her breasts. She arched her brow at me as she took a drink from the wine glass. "I can be human and still need you, right?"

"I suppose," she said, setting the glass down on the edge of the tub. "But you're not human anymore. You're my puppet. I think if you tried to go back, you'd be very disappointed."

Muttering, I rolled back over so I wouldn't have to face her. I was used to that sort of talk. "I'm not going to let you make me cry."

"If I wanted to make you cry, dearie, you'd be crying already."

She couldn't see me, so I made a face and mocked her, even though I knew what she said was true. I laid there for a few more minutes, pressing my on my midsection to put a little pressure there in an attempt to stall the cramps that came with being uncorseted. Evelyn tipped me forward and finished rinsing my hair. "I'm thinking," she said. "I haven't decided whether I should drug you tonight or not."

"Drug? Me? For what? Oh, god, what are you going to do to me now?" I cried, flopping like a fish in the water. "*Hsss!* No, no—"

"Stop that! So melodramatic. I'm not doing something. You want to feel more human? I'll give you a chance. I've just decided to take the stent out of your throat."

"Whaaat?" I couldn't believe my ears.

"Yes. For a little while. I'm curious to see what happens. I don't think I'll need to sedate you to remove it. It might be uncomfortable, but I don't *think* it will hurt."

"Wow. Wow." I was in a daze when she took me out of the bath, dried me off, and mercifully re-corseted me. I would be able to really speak again, instead of barely audible whispering! And food! I'd be able to eat and chew and *swallow!* "*Hsssss!*" I rejoiced. I hadn't even intended for this to happen. I had only been whining, not actually thinking I'd get my way.

"Don't get yourself too worked up," Evelyn advised. "It might not be as perfect as you think."

I didn't care. Evelyn blowdried her hair, then laid me on the floor and painted my nails a dusty pink. I didn't like attention paid to my feet back before all this, especially not the way they were now. Still, I wasn't even perturbed when Evelyn kissed my toes and commented on how much she loved my cute, crippled feet. All I could think of was how wonderful it would be have my voice back.

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I short while later I was feeling a little less enthusiastic. Evelyn had me arranged on my back on the bed with my head hanging over the edge of the mattress. She had a table lamp directed into my open mouth to illuminate the back of my throat. I had an unpleasant vision of her doing something like this to my unconscious self in the attic when she installed the damn thing all those months ago. She was sitting on the floor and sticking some kind of tool in my mouth. I fluttered my hands in distress.

“I’m just deflating it,” she said, distracted, as she tried to make the tool line up with whatever it supposed to in my twitching throat. “Stop flinching and keep your mouth open. We don’t have to do this, you know.”

“*Hsss!*” I said in encouragement. Then I felt the stent move, followed by a puff of air that hit the back of my tongue. My throat suddenly felt a lot less full. It must have been kept inflated in there to keep it from moving. My watering eyes widened, seeing her pick up a pair of needle-nose pliers and insert them deep into my mouth. That’s a disturbing sight, no matter how bizarre your life is. She used them to grip something on the surface of the stent and I felt this huge thing being pulled out of my throat. She had to pull at it pretty hard – my throat apparently didn’t want to let it go – and it hurt, but not so much that I couldn’t stand it. Suddenly, my mouth was full of the thing, and then it was gone. I started gagging and coughing instantly and, despite my weakness, flipped myself onto my stomach in a flash. I retched and coughed up a lot of phlegm into the towel Evelyn placed over my mouth, but at least I didn’t throw up. It took me a minute to realize that, as I coughed, I was actually inhaling through my mouth. What a wonderful thing! I started laughing even as I choked.

Once that fit passed and Evelyn made sure that I was breathing okay, she went into the bathroom to clean that stent off. I didn’t get a good look at it and I didn’t want to, but from a glance it didn’t look nearly as big as it had felt. I sprawled on the bed, shaking from the exertion, taking ragged, shallow breaths in through my mouth. I had forgotten what it felt like to inhale air. It actually felt really cold in the back of my throat. I wasn’t used to being able to breathe that easily, either, after sucking my air through that narrow nose tube for so long. I guess my throat must have gotten stretched a little after having that thing filling it from end to end, because I couldn’t swallow right. I’d get the swallow reflex started, then it would kind of freeze up when it got to the back of my throat. It was not a pleasant sensation. Evelyn came back in and I tried to say, “I can’t swallow.” All that came out was a croak.

“I warned you,” she said. “Don’t get too upset, now. You haven’t used your voice since last year, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, but... this sucks,” I rasped. I couldn’t swallow or talk right, and there was huge, sore emptiness in my throat. I kept making gross throaty noises, trying to clear a phantom obstruction that was felt but not real.

Evelyn leaned over me. “Hold still.” She detached the flange of the breathing tube, and slowly pulled the length of it out through my nose. I yelped, less from pain and more from the disturbing sensation. I pawed at my nose with the backs of my hands as my eyes teared up involuntarily. Evelyn held my head still and squirted something into my nose that stung, saying that it was for congestion, and had me blow my nose.

I coughed on saliva that I was having trouble swallowing. “O-other one,” I finally said. I didn’t relish experiencing the second tube being pulled out of my stomach, but I wanted to get it over with.

“No, I’m leaving the feed tube in for now. I’m not sure how well you can drink or eat at the moment, so I don’t want leave you without some way to do both. Don’t argue with me.”

“But I wasn’t going to.”

“Just making sure beforehand,” she said. “Now roll over. I’m going to take out the plug.”

“The... ?” Just like the stent, my body had gotten so used to that damn, steel, shocking butt plug that I had almost forgotten it was there. Or, if not forgotten, at least I adjusted to living with it. At first, I thought it would be great to have that thing out of me. Then I realized that it might have repercussions. “What happens if you take it out?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. Do you mean you’ll have no control? Yes, I suspect you’ll need diapers.”

Oh no. I remembered what it was like in those adult diapers. Hot, itchy, messy, rashes. Swallowing my pride, I asked her to leave it in.

“Are you sure? What about feeling human?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Please don’t rub it in.”

I had to accept my limitations. Better to have a big metal plug inside me than to mess myself helplessly. Far better. I was still struggling with the absence of the throat plug, and the lining deep in my nose was all swollen and I couldn’t breathe through it well. I could smell a little, though. I could smell Evelyn’s heliotrope bath salts on my skin. Under that, I detected a hint of fresh-baked bread. My mouth instantly watered. “Bread?” I asked, watery saliva dripping from my chin. “There’s bread?”

“Ah, smell that, do you? I’m using the bread-maker Alice got me for Christmas. Banana nut,” she said, stifling a yawn. She was getting ready to go to bed, which meant I would also be going to bed, even though I couldn’t have been

more awake, with everything that had been going on.

“Can... I-”

“No, you can’t. It’s not done. Even if it was, I’m not confident in your ability to swallow dense foods.”

“*Hhh.*” I tried to hiss at her, but all I produced was a quiet exhale. No stent, no hiss. I’d gotten so used to expressing myself that way. I was unsure if I was upset about that or not. I was upset by the fact that I *might* be upset about it, though.

Chapter 31

A few days later found me, tired and irritable, propped against the bed. I wanted to be enjoying my relative freedom (released from braces and the stent all at once), but my throat was sore and I hadn’t been able to sleep well. I kept waking up all during the night, with nothing to do but listen to Evelyn snore and deal with the non-existent obstacle in my throat. It was late morning and Evelyn was at work. She had left me free except for a locked chain so that I could crawl around and get some flexibility back.

All morning long I had been practicing swallowing water. I got a little better at it. At least, I didn’t cough it back up every time. Evelyn still hadn’t let me try solid foods. She certainly didn’t need to use the sound-sensitive collar, even though I could talk again; I still couldn’t manage any better than a croak. I was worried that maybe my vocal cords had been permanently damaged by having that thing in there and that my voice might be gone for good. I continued to drool freely unless I made a conscious effort not to. That was a pretty huge blow to my self-esteem. I had no idea that I had gotten so used to the feeling of a damp chest. I was disgusting and I hardly even noticed it. I even *missed* it. The association with drooling and pleasure that had been drilled into me made me *want* to keep doing it, as if the sticky wetness was a security blanket. Wonderful.

So, I was sucking on a sports bottle with a built-in straw and enjoying the feel of my bare toes digging into the carpet (instead of being crammed into tight boots), when I heard Evelyn come in. She sometimes came home for lunch when she ‘missed me too much.’ Whatever that meant. I sighed in resignation and waited for her to come up the stairs.

“Hello, puppet,” said Evelyn, entering the bedroom shortly after noon, “I’m home early. Took the rest of the day off.”

“Why?”

“I just couldn’t keep myself away from you, so here I am,” she said, beginning to change out of her office clothes. She had recently had to get a new

wardrobe for herself, since working out made her old clothes fit poorly. She placed her foot on the floor in front of my face. “Greet me.”

Without hesitation, I licked the toe of her pump, then rolled onto my back so I could look up at her.

“Actually,” she continued, “since it’s going to be such a lovely afternoon, I thought I would spend it with Alice and Sarah. They’re not working today. And I have plans for you, so let’s get going.”

“Plans? What plans?” Any plan that sprung from her twisted mind couldn’t be good for me.

“It’s a surprise.”

After quickly washing my hair over the edge of the tub, she did her best to style it. I guessed that meant she wanted me presentable for our guests. I resigned myself to getting teased all afternoon. I vowed to myself I wouldn’t forget I could swallow and start drooling in front of them. As if on cue, the doorbell rang.

They all chatted downstairs for a while before Evelyn returned to take me downstairs. It didn’t escape my notice that she always carried me up and down stairs much more carefully now. I saw a collapsed wheelchair sitting in the foyer, but I knew it wasn’t Alice’s. It was just the plain old push kind, not the motorized kind. I was taken into the living room and placed on the rug. There they all were, standing around me, and I felt very much the center of attention. I used to love being in the spotlight, no matter when or where. Now I hated that feeling. Happiness was being invisible.

“Well, hello, Kathy,” said Alice, in the cloying tones she often used in addressing me. She smirked at me with regal ease, as if her wheelchair was a throne. “You’re looking well. Did you enjoy all that time in those braces?”

I didn’t reply.

“We heard you had that thing taken out of your mouth. Are you enjoying that, at least?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Yes, I can tell by the way you’re drooling on the carpet.”

Crap! I hastily swiped my forearm over my mouth. I had forgotten my no-drooling vow in less than a minute.

“I have the clothes,” said Sarah, lifting a plastic bag. “It’s nothing fancy.”

“That’s fine,” said Evelyn. She unzipped the crotch of my bodysuit and removed the catheter, eliciting a raw yelp of surprise from me. “Can you give me a hand undressing her? Lift her up a little.”

“Whoa, hang on,” I protested. “Just hang on. Undress me why? What clothes? What are you doing?”

“Hush.”

Completely ignored and re-dressed like the doll I sometimes was, I found myself wearing some of Sarah's second-hand clothes. Normal clothes felt so strange on my skin. Even when I wore one of those froufrou dresses Evelyn would have me wear, I was always wearing one of those spandex bodysuits underneath. Now I all I had on underneath was my corset and a pair of incontinence panties that had thick, wide pad held in the crotch. That did away with the need for a catheter, but it felt unpleasantly similar to diapers. I had been dressed in a pair of black, drawstring sweatpants and a small t-shirt. Even with the drawstring pulled as tight as it would go, the pants were still loose around my corseted waist. Evelyn was pulling some socks and slippers over my ballet-pointe feet.

"Would somebody *please* tell me what's going on?" I didn't like bizarre changes in my routine. I'd grown accustomed to a dull, predictable existence.

"She looks a little worried," observed Alice.

"*I'm* a little worried," commented Sarah. She did, in truth, look a little worked-up.

"It'll be fine," Evelyn told her. Then she looked at me. "You said you wanted to feel normal again. Well, this is it."

"Uh... okay," I said uncertainly.

"Are we ready?" Evelyn asked the others.

"I am," replied Alice. Sarah just nodded.

Evelyn picked me up and took me back to the foyer. Sarah preceded us and set up that other wheelchair. I was set down on my incontinence-padded butt and was secured in with a simple nylon belt. There was a headrest attachment so that my head wouldn't flop over the back of the seat like a bobble-head toy. I squirmed, trying to get comfortable, while Evelyn made sure my toes didn't drag on the floor. A small blanket was placed over my lap. It hung down far enough to cover my poor, crippled feet. "It's almost summer," Evelyn told me, "and I know you've been cooped up all winter. I think it's time you got some fresh air. Alice kindly donated her first wheelchair to you. Isn't that nice of her?"

"I hope you enjoy it as much as I did," Alice said from behind me.

"Wait, wait, what are you talking about? Fresh air?" I glanced around at the others. They were getting their purses and things, looking as if they were about to leave. *Oh. My. God.* "Out... side? I'm going out... there?" A thousand thoughts went through my mind. Of course there was elation about finally, after all this time, getting out of the house. Sunlight, the feel of the breeze, and all the other things I used to take for granted and which I had found myself longing after once my freedom was stolen. I had wondered if I would ever be allowed to see the world outside of Evelyn's house-like prison again. So, of

course, I was somewhat elated by the idea of going outside.

But, mostly, I was terrified.

All the time I had spent in a cage of braces in Evelyn's attic and bedroom, where going downstairs was like a little vacation, had turned me agoraphobic. My heart sank into my stomach as I watched Sarah and Alice go outside to the front porch. It was too bright out there. "I-I-I can't go out there. I can't. Evelyn. I can't."

"You can, and you will," she said. "You don't have a choice. What are you afraid of?"

The world!

"What if somebody sees me? Oh my god, I don't want anyone to see me like this!" I felt sloppy, freakish, hideous. I wasn't even wearing real shoes!

"I think it might be educational for you, puppet. I don't you want you making a scene out there. Understand?" she asked. I could only respond with gurgling noises. Evelyn reached into her purse and took out a capped syringe. She waved it front of my eyes. "Do you understand?"

I nodded weakly.

"It would only take seconds for me to use it. Got it?"

"Yes!" I cried.

"Be on your best behavior, then." She pushed me toward the threshold.

My terror lessened, marginally, once we were on down the porch ramp and on the driveway. We paused there so I could get my bearings. I could feel the sun. Flowering plants were in bloom everywhere – a scent which to me was almost dizzying. I could see Evelyn's extensive flowerbeds up close for the first time, with all their flowers, manicured shrubs, and ground plants arranged so neatly. Barely a weed in sight.

Panic bubbled up in me as I was pushed down the long driveway towards the street. It was like when I was a child and went on a real roller coaster for the first time – changing my mind about the whole thing as the car climbed the steep incline, wanting it to stop, wanting to get off, but not being able to. I pressed myself into the seat, willing it to slow down. I would have clambered over the back of the chair, if I had been able. I grabbed at the handgrips attached to the wheels, but I didn't have the strength to hang onto them, much less stop myself.

It's kind of funny, really. Not so long ago I dreamed – I *ached* – for any chance to be out of house. The chance to scream for help. The chance to get free. Now that I was outside, I could barely stand it. I wanted to be back safe in Evelyn's bedroom, back where I didn't have to *deal* with anything. Nice, quiet, and predictable. I wanted to zone out and go catatonic, but I didn't have a chance of making that work. *I want my mask!* I almost begged aloud.

We turned onto the sidewalk and I was just about crawling out my skin. It was a nice residential neighborhood, with trees growing along the street. I had never been in this section of the suburbs, so I still didn't know exactly where I was. The traffic was light, but I cringed every time a car drove by. I knew it was an irrational fear, but I couldn't help it. We were like a fucked-up, dysfunctional family going for a stroll, with Evelyn and Sarah both pushing their crippled lovers in wheelchairs. What a sight. A pair of joggers, a man and woman, were coming toward us. They moved onto the street to make space for the wheelchairs as they went past. I could feel everybody's eyes on me. I was breathing so deeply that I inhaled saliva and had a coughing fit. Evelyn patted me on the shoulder.

I knew I had to get control of myself. I had to force myself to calm down. If I didn't I was liable to freak out and do something that would get me in trouble. The others started chatting about something going on in politics while I silently wrestled my fears. I focused on things like how nice the breeze felt, how pretty the grass was. I looked around at all the nice houses, full of people who had no clue as to what was going on in their midst. We passed some guy washing his car across the street, who paused to wave amiably. I still wasn't sure if Evelyn was doing this in an attempt to be genuinely nice to me or doing it to torture me. Knowing her, it was probably both. I didn't know what she expected by parading a kidnap victim around like that. I guess she expected me to be quiet and obedient, and that's exactly what I was doing.

I had a few blocks to tame my panic before we turned onto a busier street full of shops and little restaurants. So many people. So many eyes. Surreptitious glances. Subtle double-takes. Some people's gazes just passed over me as if they didn't see me. Others lingered longer, with a flash of quickly-forgotten pity.

I was ashamed. I hated it. I *hated* it. I didn't want to be seen. I didn't want to be pitied, I wanted to be normal again. Short of that, I didn't want them to know I even existed. They should be pitying me for what was done to me, not for what I was. But they would never know any of that, would they? To all of these people, the real me was interred behind a plaque in a mausoleum. To them, the real me was long dead. I didn't *belong* out here. I just wanted to go back home. I moaned and shut my eyes in resignation when I realized Evelyn was wheeling me into a street corner café – a soup and sandwich kind of place.

We had to go inside to get to the outdoor patio. I made a circuit through the tables, feeling more eyes on me. All those people in their nice clothes, taking their lunch breaks before heading back to work. Pretending not to glance at me. It was starting to make angry. *Quit looking at me! Mind your own damn business! I used to be one of you!* I wanted to shout.

What were they looking at, anyway? Why was I standing out? I knew I was

pale and thin, but Evelyn hadn't put much makeup on me this morning, so at least I didn't have that dollified corpse look. Were my deformed feet showing? Had the blanket ridden up and exposed them? Were there rings under my eyes? Was my chin wet? Oh god, it was. I ducked my head and wiped at my mouth as we went out to the patio. I was pushed up to the edge of a round table with a big shade umbrella sticking up from the center. Evelyn sat down beside me and Sarah and Alice sat across from me.

Okay, I'm sitting at a table. People aren't staring at me at the moment. Look, there's some birds, and the food smells nice. This is pretty normal. This is okay. Come on, Kathy, you can manage this. I finally started to calm down a little. Evelyn unwrapped a package of soup crackers and gave one to me. I held it carefully with both hands and nibbled at it nervously like a mouse. It was the first solid food she had allowed me. Sarah whispered something to Alice, making her chuckle.

"Don't eat that too fast. You're doing very well," Evelyn told me. "I'm pleased."

I didn't say anything. I was worried if I let myself get started, I'd get worked up and cause a scene. So I just nibbled the cracker and tried to block everything out – including Evelyn's platitudes and Alice's sniggering.

The waiter took serving a table with two wheel-chaired women in stride. He was kind of cute, even if his blond highlights were way too bright. It was humiliating to me to feel even the slightest attraction to him, knowing full well that he would react with disgust – or worse, pity – if he knew what I was thinking. Anyone would react that way towards me now, except Evelyn. He distributed menus, and I was so startled when he offered one to me that I froze up. I just stared at it, uncomprehending. I'd forgotten how to react to being treated like a human. He awkwardly placed it in front of me as Evelyn waved him away.

Wow. Food. I just started to open the menu when Evelyn took it away and placed it under her own. I stared at her with angry indignation, but she didn't even look at me. I shook it off. I knew what I wanted, anyway. *Meat.* Something hot, greasy, and filling. Maybe a hot roast beef sandwich. Or a bowl of chili. Or both!

The waiter returned to take orders. When he got to me, I croaked, "I-I'd like a—"

"She'll have the vegetable soup," said Evelyn. He departed and I scowled at Evelyn again.

"I don't want that, I wanted—"

"You want what I tell you to want. Even out here." She took a drink of her iced tea, holding my angry gaze until I blinked and looked down.

Okay. Fine. Whatever. I sat there stewing, tearing little pieces off my paper napkin. I couldn't even order what I wanted at a restaurant anymore. I watched the little birds flutter around and the people going up and down the sidewalk while the others chatted. They were talking about real estate or something, but I was pointedly not paying attention. When the food came, even though it wasn't what I wanted, it still looked delicious. My mouth began to water like crazy. I started to drool, but caught myself and wiped my mouth with the napkin.

Finally I would get to eat. If I could ever pick up the damn spoon. I kept fumbling with it, trying to get a good grip.

"I think she needs help," said Sarah.

"I'm fine," I growled, spoon clattering on the table.

"Do you want to me feed you, honey?" Evelyn offered. I knew she would, too. She'd spoon feed me right there in front of god and everybody.

"*Hhhh*," I exhaled, trying to hiss. "No! I can do it." Impatient and angry with myself, I snatched at the spoon, which was now sticking halfway over the table's edge. It went flipping through the air and hit the back of some older lady's chair and clattered to the ground. She jerked around to glare at me for a moment before returning to her conversation. I went beet red. I couldn't even trust myself to speak when Evelyn placed her extra spoon in my clenched fist.

Even though I now had a spoon, my muscles were so weak and uncoordinated all I could do was splash the spoon around in the soup and make a mess. With growing frustration, I gave up, dropped the spoon on the ground, and tried to drink straight from the bowl. I was able lean forward with the support of my corset and tip the bowl to my lips, only to burn myself with it. I sputtered and half-hissed, dribbling soup down my shirt. People were starting to look at me again.

"Perhaps you should wait for it cool," Evelyn observed.

I'm losing it. I'm losing it. Gotta keep it together, I told myself. I waited irritably for the soup to cool while the others conversed and enjoyed their lunch.

I was taking a sip of Evelyn's iced tea when I saw Sarah look towards the patio entrance, stiffen, and whisper a warning to Evelyn. I glanced over and nearly wet myself in surprise as a pair of fully-uniformed police officers came onto the patio.

My first, illogical thought was that by taking me outside, Evelyn had allowed the police had magically track me down. I could almost picture them approaching and placing a hand on Evelyn's shoulder. But they weren't here to arrest or rescue anyone; they were just on their lunch break. Hardly sparing us a glance, they went sit at an empty table and study their menus. Almost as startling

as their sudden appearance was the realization that I was relieved that they weren't here 'on business.' I could feel the tension of the others around me. I found it almost amusing. Alice found something of intense interest in her reuben sandwich, Sarah kept casting worried glances in the officers' direction, and Evelyn kind of hunched closer to the table and munched her chips, not once taking her eyes off me.

In my mind I played out what might happen if I tried to get the officers' attention. They were right *there*, as if the universe had chosen to belatedly answer my prayers. I could scream for help, as much as I *could* scream, flail, kick. The officers would be alarmed, but would probably be frozen with confusion, half out of their chairs, trying to get a grasp on what the hell was going on. They wouldn't just rush over and whisk me to safety. Evelyn would have plenty of time to get the needle out of her purse and stab it into me. That might not even be necessary. Evelyn was pretty smooth. She might be able to convince them that I wasn't well and was just throwing a fit. Maybe a seizure. I mean, how often are crippled kidnap victims in wheelchairs taken out for a bite to eat?

But if they *did* arrest her, then Evelyn would go to jail, maybe Sarah and Alice, too. I would be paralyzed and kept in a hospice for the rest of my life. I believed that completely. And one day they would get out of jail and I would still be in a hospital bed, with sores and a diaper rash, watching a wall-mounted tv all day and forever sleeping alone. Forever. That's how I imagined life would be. No one would take care of me as patiently as Evelyn did. No one would ever love me like she said she did. No one would ever hold me while I slept. No one would ever kiss me again. It was either life as Evelyn's crippled toy, or virtually no life at all.

You could get revenge on her for getting revenge on you, yeah. But where would that leave you? You can't escape what you deserve. Besides, the voice inside said, she needs you. She said so. Who else in the entire world is ever going to need you for anything now?

If I didn't do anything now with this opportunity, then I would almost surely spend the rest of my life with Evelyn. But was that so bad, all things considered? It might be a nightmare, but the alternative sounded so much, much worse. I couldn't foresee getting another chance like this one. Even if I did, I'd be so far gone that even thinking about getting help for myself probably wouldn't even occur to me. Either that, or I'd have internalized my captivity so much by then that I would chasten and restrain myself without hardly even realizing it, actively participating in my own captivity. And wouldn't that be a pathetic state of affairs?

The others kept watching me nervously as I sorted all this out. I guess they

were expecting me to try something. In the end, I knew full well that I wasn't going to do a god damn thing. Going against Evelyn's wishes always, *always* just ended up making things worse for myself. I unhappily slouched deeper into the wheelchair. *Nope. Not doing a damn thing.*

It wasn't long after my coming to this conclusion that one of the officers bent an ear to his chattering, shoulder-mounted walkie-talkie. He said something in cop-speak into it. They both got up and left before their food even arrived. Must have been an emergency.

After they left the patio, Alice let out a low, nervous laugh. "Oh. My. God. I just about had a heart attack."

"I knew this was a bad idea," said Sarah. "I couldn't have stood that much longer."

"Relax. Everything's fine." As Evelyn straightened up, I saw her hand slide out from under the tablecloth. She casually placed something back into her purse sitting beside her chair. It had to be the syringe. I hadn't even noticed her taking it out, much less how close she had been to using it on me. She must have been holding it inches away from my leg. She could have stabbed me with it before I had even finished calling for help. Hell, she probably could have used it as soon as she had seen the resolve to do so cross my face, before I had even made a peep. I felt a wave of relief wash over me. For once I had made the right decision. Thank god. For once I had done something right.

Evelyn was examining me with keen interest. "Yes, everything is just fine," she repeated. "That was very good, Kathy."

I didn't want to hear her praise. I did what I did out of self-preservation. Right? I focused on my soup, which my fingertips told me was cool enough. I greedily slurped at it. For a second, I was able to forget about everything that had happened that day. It tasted indescribably wonderful. Except, in my hunger and eagerness, I drank too much too fast for my neglected swallowing muscles to handle. My throat seized up on a half-chewed mouthful of vegetables and pasta and I gagged with a loud, wet, squawking noise. That triggered a heave and I threw up what little I had swallowed back into the bowl and dish with a splash. Sarah recoiled, scooting her chair away. I hardly understood what had just happened. I sat there with strings of slightly used soup dripping off my chin, shaking and whimpering. People were staring at me. I had never felt that humiliated in my life. "I... I..."

"There, there, it was just an accident." said Evelyn, hastily cleaning my face with her napkin. She rubbed my back and wiped up the mess around the bowl.

"Th-thank you," I whispered, deeply shaken. *Oh god, I can't even eat like a normal person anymore!* I gazed forlornly at the soup, still hungry, but I sure

wasn't going to get any of it now. Not after I'd just spit up in it.

Evelyn was still settling me down when the waiter approached the table. "Uh, um, I think I should..." he stammered, not looking any of us in the eyes. "That is, you're disturbing the other, er, patrons, and so I think you—"

"Think we should *what?*" Evelyn asked loudly. "You think we should leave?"

I hung my head. Was it possible to feel more mortified? I was being kicked out a restaurant for repelling the other diners. I couldn't even be seen in polite society. I didn't exist in this world anymore.

"Well, people are trying to enjoy their meals, and..." He trailed off, cowed by Evelyn as she rose out of her chair. I had only once seen Evelyn angry at someone other than myself, and not like that. Even Alice looked miffed on my behalf.

"How dare you. You think she doesn't have a hard enough time coping without someone like *you?*" she asked. "Let's see *you* survive a stroke and endure what she's gone through to recover. Who are you to judge her?"

People were still staring, but not at me. The waiter was blushing to the roots of his highlighted hair. Evelyn forced him into a corner of the patio, where she continued to berate him for the better part of a minute. People were now watching them instead of me. I was bewildered. *I had a stroke, now?* I guess I was a little flattered that Evelyn was coming to my defense. I would have expected her to enjoy my deepening humiliation, not to shelter me from it. Evelyn returned to the table and announced that we were leaving. She cast a few nickels on the table as a tip.

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"I'm very, very happy with you," Evelyn was telling me as we went back down the street.

I was exhausted and emotionally drained, not to mention still so hungry I could barely stand it. The incontinence pad in my panties was damp and irritating. It seemed that in the past couple of months I had been getting a little too proud of myself. I had been thinking that getting Evelyn to do certain things meant I was gaining some control of my situation, if only just a little. Being dressed up and taken outside, *exposed*, showed me just how much I had been fooling myself. I had control over *nothing*.

"I just want to go home. Are we going home?" I asked. I wanted the day to be over.

"Yes. I think that's enough for one day."

Thank god.

As we passed a coffee shop, Alice stopped Sarah. "Hold on. Hon, could

you go in and get me a mochachino? I'll just wait out here."

"Sure, okay." As Sarah opened the door to the coffee shop, I was assaulted by the fragrance of fresh coffee beans. I hadn't smelled that since Evelyn took me; she didn't drink coffee. I used to be a consummate coffee addict, and that smell made me suddenly crave a nice, dark, steaming cup like crazy.

I rolled my head back so that I could almost see her. "Evelyn, Evelyn-Evelyn. Can I have some? I want some. I've been good, right? Can I? Please?"

"Oh... I don't know. I don't like coffee breath."

"Wash my mouth out with soap later, I don't care, I just want--"

She tossed her hands up in surrender. "Alright, alright. Sarah, could you hold the door for us?"

There were about six people in the shop. They cast me a curious glance, then promptly ignored my existence. I didn't care. I was in coffee bean heaven. There was a glass display of pastries, cakes, and fresh bread under the counter and my mouth watered at the sight. I made a conscious effort not to drool. I wanted to *eat!* But coffee was better than nothing.

As we waited, I noticed the guy in front of me in line seemed familiar to me. He had kind of a graying hippy ponytail and was bald on top. The line shortened and the guy ordered a croissant. I was still trying to figure out why he seemed familiar.

Then it hit me – the company shrink! It *had* to be him! I couldn't remember his name (Franklin? Jenkins?); I had only met him that one time. Suddenly I was seeing red, consumed by disbelief and rage. He was the one who sent me to Evelyn! It was his fault that I was in this mess to begin with! I began to hiss under my breath, heedless of the saliva leaking from my lips. I was so *angry!* Nobody noticed. Nobody was looking at me. Not even Evelyn. I fumbled with the simple plastic buckle that held my seatbelt closed and it came free. The next moment, I heaved myself out of the chair and landed painfully on my knees. I fell forward onto the shop's slate tile floor and snatched at the cuff of the man's pants leg.

"*Hhhhah!* Your fault! Fucker! Kill you! I'll kill you! *Hhhhghh!*" My voice was a frightful rasp. I must have looked absolutely insane.

I heard some woman in the shop give out a brief scream of alarm. Startled, to say the least, the man jumped away, dropping his croissant on the floor in front of me. I tried grabbing from him, but he was out of my reach. Unable to get him, I turned my anger onto his fallen croissant by snatching it up and tearing it to shreds. Then I realized what I held in my hands – hot, buttered, flaky croissant – and my anger fled as quickly as it had come. I compulsively shoved torn bits of the coveted roll into my mouth as fast as I could, chewing sloppily and

swallowing, forcing it down. It tasted so delicious I could have wept, but I could already tell that it wasn't going to stay down.

I felt Evelyn picking me up by my waist. The pressure, along with my own problems with swallowing, expelled bits of croissant from my mouth in a soggy spray. She practically hurled me back into the wheelchair. She apologized frantically to the people in the shop. "I'm so sorry! She has these fits. Flashbacks. Too much excitement. Sorry to bother you all."

As my wheelchair was turned around, I saw the shocked face of the man I had tried to attack. It wasn't the shrink, after all. I could have sworn it had been him, but it wasn't. I had just traumatized some random guy with bad hair. How could I make that mistake so easily? Had I really become that psychotic and didn't even realize it? I tried to say I was sorry to him as I was wheeled out of the shop, but all that came out was more croissant.

"What happened in there?" Alice asked as we got back onto the sidewalk. Evelyn didn't answer, and I was still coughing up croissant. She swiftly wheeled me down the sidewalk, leaving Alice and Sarah to catch up. She made a sharp turn into the nearest alleyway. Thrusting my chair behind a dumpster, hiding me from view of the street, she stooped to face me. *Boy*, did she look pissed.

"Would you mind sharing," she said, starting out calmly and softly, "just what the *fuck was going through your head?*"

I cringed. Honestly, I was baffled by what I had done. None of it was sane behavior. But then again, did sanity really matter anymore? If I no longer had any responsibilities, just like Evelyn had wanted, didn't that include sanity? "I-I..."

"Things were going pretty well today, don't you think? I hope you weren't trying to escape. I really do," she said, her tone dark and ominous.

"No, I—"

"Would somebody please tell me what's going?" Alice asked, coming up behind Evelyn. Sarah was right behind her.

"She stole that man's roll!" Sarah said. "I saw her!"

I glared at Sarah. *Instigator*.

Evelyn turned back to me. "If you wanted a fucking roll, you simply had to ask for one."

"No, I didn't want the croissant, that was later!" I couldn't think right. I wasn't used to things happening so fast. Brain cells weren't muscles, but could they still get flabby and slow down? "I thought I knew that man, I thought I used to work with him." I wasn't explaining myself very well.

"You knew him?"

"I thought—"

"Did he recognize you?" Evelyn pressed vehemently, taking me by the

upper arms and giving me a shake. “*Did he?*”

“I knew this was a bad idea!” Sarah interjected.

“Sarah, shush,” said Alice.

I wriggled in Evelyn’s grip. “No! I was wrong, it wasn’t him.”

“Are you *sure?*”

“Yes! You’re hurting me! I thought it was but it wasn’t. I mistook him from behind.”

“You thought he was someone you knew, so you tried to steal his roll? Help me understand this.”

“No! I couldn’t help it, I got so mad. I thought this was all his fault!”

“Evie,” said Alice, “she’s gone bonkers. I think we should get back to your house.”

“‘Bonkers’ is not a proper diagnosis,” Evelyn muttered, but swung me around and wheeled me out of the alley.

.....

I couldn’t imagine a time when I would be relieved to see myself return to Evelyn’s house. But there I was. Once inside, Evelyn carried me upstairs and dumped me unceremoniously onto the bed. Without a word, she returned downstairs to talk with Alice and Sarah. I wondered how much trouble I was in. It was hard to worry about that just then. It was just such a huge relief to be back where it was safe and quiet, where no one could see me. I was still hungry and thirsty, but I couldn’t do anything about that. I just had to put it out of my head.

Mostly, I was thinking about what I had become... what people had seen that day. I was a freakish monster. I don’t mean because of my crippled condition. I mean my behavior. How I had acted. My mind. *That’s* what people had seen. *That’s* what had frightened and disgusted them. Snarling, drooling, clawing at that man’s leg. Cramming food into my mouth. Puking. I wasn’t human anymore. I couldn’t be. I certainly wasn’t Kathy anymore. I couldn’t reconcile what I used to be and what I had become and stay sane. Struggling with it only hurt.

Crawling over the yielding comforter, I was able to get the doll mask off the nightstand. After struggling feebly to stretch the spandex part over my head, the mask slid into place. I stroked the porcelain features with fingertips, almost lovingly. *Oh. Oh, that’s better*, I thought. *So much better*.

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When she finally came back to the bedroom, Evelyn seemed a little taken aback that I had the initiative to put the mask on myself. I didn’t want to move, so I watched her from the corner of my eye. Jinx had curled up on top of my outstretched hand and gone to sleep. He was warm and squishy. “Wake up,” she

ordered. "I want to talk to you."

"Mmp."

"Get that off, I can't hear you in that thing." I didn't move, so she removed it herself.

"Nnnnn! Nooo," I moaned, hiding my face in the pillows.

Jinx gave us both a disgusted look and relocated to the bench along the wall.

She tossed the mask on the bed and prodded me to get her to face her.

"Kathy. Kaaa-thyy. Shall I punish you for that stunt in the coffee shop? Hmm? Would you like to lose your hearing?"

I flopped onto my back and covered my ears. "N-no!"

"Yes, I thought that would get your attention," she said smugly. "Oh. You hurt yourself when you fell."

"Huh?" She must have meant my knees. I scraped them when I took a dive out of the wheelchair. Evelyn went to the bathroom to a wet washcloth. I still wasn't sure if she planned on punishing me or not, so I continued to proclaim my innocence. "I told you, I wasn't trying to get away. I wasn't!" I croaked in desperation. I had tried to explain my actions further on the way back home. I didn't know what else to say in my defense.

"Shh." She swabbed my injuries with the cold washcloth. "Poor, broken doll. I'm inclined to believe you. As a matter of fact, aside from the commotion and embarrassment you caused me, I'm not entirely displeased to have seen that happen."

"Huh?" I said again, then mentally smacked myself for sounding so stupid.

She eased herself onto the bed and propped herself up on an elbow beside me. "Yes. Do you know why I took you outside today? It wasn't just to give you a little fresh air."

"I know why," I mumbled.

"Do tell."

I growled and tried to pull the comforter over my face. I knew she would just tease me until I answered her truthfully. "You wanted me to see that... that I don't belong out there anymore," I said morosely.

"That's correct. Very astute of you. I think you've known you can't go back for a while now, but now you've experienced it first hand." She patted my corseted tummy. "And even if you were free of me, what happened today is the absolute best you can hope to achieve. And likely, without me it would be far, far worse. You're far better off here than you would be out there."

I had already figured that out for myself. I would never be rescued. And even if I was, all the threats of me ending up like she said I would months ago

would come true. A nightmare from which I could never wake up. I quietly started to cry. I had forgotten how it felt to have my nose stuffed up from crying. I didn't like it. It was so... *organic*.

"No one in the world would take as good care of you as I do."

"You take very good care of me," I said automatically. I had been forced to repeat that so many times I probably said it in my sleep.

After a minute, she added, "I'm going to put the stent back in."

"Why? No! I want to eat! I can get better at it. Just give me a chance!" It was just *wrong* to tease me with a few mouthfuls of food and then take it away. And I was already in tears. How could you say something like that to someone was crying? That was so mean! "I want to eat!"

"So you can throw it back up? Your voice is jarring after having gotten used to your little whisper-quiet speech for so long," she said. "Besides, you're better off eating through a tube. You certainly won't risk choking on anything. And giving you real food just gives you delusions of being something you're not. That's wrong of me."

Delusions? From eating? "What am I, then? You tell me!"

"Silly. You're *mine*, that's what you are. That's all you need to be. You're my puppet." Evelyn slide her fingertips into the waistband of the sweatpants, reaching into the itchy, urine-damp crotch of my panties. "So hot down there."

"Stop."

She smiled.

"*Stop*." Her hand in my crotch was the last thing I wanted. But what I wanted or didn't want didn't matter to her.

"Make me," she said.

"*Nnhhah*." I pulled at her arm, trying to get her out of my pants. All that did was make her laugh. I realized that this was probably the first time she had actually tried to get me off with her fingers. She had touched me there before, but not quite like that, and not with the intention of forcing me to come. She had always relied on that electric plug for all that. Her insistent fingers forced me to feel things I didn't want to be feeling. I mean, I wanted to feel them, I wanted to feel good, but not like that and not after the day I'd had. Despite my wishes, my body was starting to respond. It always did. I was her puppet, after all. "Ssssstop. Please stop, please. I can't."

Evelyn finally took her hand away. "Oh, I think you can." She held up her hand and spread her fingers. Glistening strands of juice stretched between her fingers. I couldn't bear to be confronted with evidence of my own arousal. I turned away and groped for the mask. Evelyn blocked my way. "You know," she said, "I don't think you appreciate me. I don't think you appreciate everything I

am to you. Maybe we can work on that.”

I scowled. “Fine. Take us to a marriage counselor. Now *please* let me sleep.”

She thrust her wet fingers into my mouth, forcing me to taste myself. “This’ll be the last thing you taste for a while,” she observed, as if it was just dawning on her. “Isn’t that interesting?”

It was too much. Wild-eyed, I gagged and struggled but it wasn’t any use. *What am I supposed to do! Somebody help me, tell me what to do!*

There was, of course, no answer.

Evelyn wiped her fingers dry on my cheeks and rolled onto her back. She coaxed Jinx onto her belly and scratched him behind the ears. I dragged a pillow over my face to hide myself from the world.

I knew I was the bad guy. I knew I deserved all this, just like she said. But, even if Evelyn was in the right, why did she have to be so mean about it sometimes?

Chapter 32

“There. How does that feel?”

“*Hss!*”

“Ah, yes. There’s the Kathy I know and love,” said Evelyn merrily.

I had been plugged, catheterized, booted, and gagged all over again. I fussed and whined, but, sadly, I wasn’t all that uncomfortable. I was just too used to it. Mostly, I was just depressed. I had hardly had the opportunity to eat anything, and now I was stuck with that thing back in my throat for who knew how long. It was the day after our little ‘excursion’ and Evelyn had given me one more chance to eat again, after I begged her long enough. She let me have some sugared apple slices. I used to love sugared apples. Although I chewed them very thoroughly, I coughed them back up messily, anyway. She decided that was enough of that. I wondered how long it would be before I physically ate anything again, if ever.

“I have another surprise for you. Since these past few days have been so very stressful for you, I thought you might need a little break. I don’t want you to be overstressed,” she said, “so I’m putting you back in braces.”

At first, I was sure she was joking with me. I gave her a weak laugh. “Funny.” But she didn’t look like she was kidding around. “You... can’t. I just came out of them. Just last week! You’re not serious!”

“I am.”

“*Hssss! No! Hssssss!*”

“There, there. Let’s not make a dramatic production out of this. I’ve made up my mind.”

“But... it’s against the rules! It’s too soon! *Hssss!*” Only a few days of freedom? That wasn’t fair.

“The only rules that exist are my rules, and I say you go back in braces.”

“W-wait!” I cried, my tears flowing freely, trying to come up with a logical argument. “It’s not... healthy?”

“You’ll be fine,” she said, and began to get the braces out of the bedroom closet. Terrified, I scuttled past the closet and out the bedroom door. I made it to the stairway banister before she came to fetch me. I hugged the post and bawled. She told me that being cute wouldn’t save me, took me by the ankles, and *dragged* me back into the bedroom where my form-fitting cage awaited.

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“Oh, the look in your eyes. Careful, dear. If looks could kill, you’d be on your own.”

I glowered at her as she wiped my chin dry with a cloth. It hadn’t taken her long to get me secured in the braces. She had been getting lots of experience.

“This isn’t fair.”

“Don’t like it? Then you’re sure to love what’s next. Remember this?” She held up the fleece-lined blindfold.

She hadn’t used that on me since that time she punished me by depriving me of my senses for a day. The memories of that experience came flooding back.

“No. No.”

“Yes, yes.”

I stared at her in fearful disbelief. “W-what’d I do? What did I *do*? I’ve been good! I’ve done everything you wanted! Is it because of the coffee shop? Is it because I ran when you were getting the braces? I’m sorry!”

“It’s not because you’ve been bad. I’m doing this because I can. You need me, that’s true, but only physically. I want you to *need* me. This is a little experiment, my guinea pig. I’m not sure if it will work, but it’s worth a try.” She tightened the blindfold over my eyes, blocking out the light, ignoring my hissing and pleading.

“Guinea...? For how long? *How long?*”

“As long as it takes.”

“You don’t understand! I-I... it’s too much. It’ll drive me nuts.”

“I think you’re already nuts, puppet,” she said as she fitted the earplugs into my ears. “A little more couldn’t hurt.”

“Please, please, please, *pleassssss!* *Hss!* *Hsss!* *Hsssss!*” I continued to scream even after all sight and sound was blocked. I kept screaming until Evelyn

pried my jaw open and stuck something in my mouth. It was those needle-nose pliers she had used to pull out the stent before; I could taste the bitterness of the metal on my tongue. For a moment I thought she might be about to remove the gag, but that wasn't the plan. After a little poking and prodding, she turned off the little exhale valve and removed the pliers. I couldn't make any sounds then. I couldn't even hiss! All I could hear was my heart pounding in my ears and what few quiet noises I could make forcing air and spit around my mouth with my tongue. *Oh this sucks so bad, I thought. Please don't let it be for long. Please just let her be making a point and not leave me like this for long.*

Whatever hopes I might have had that it was only for a little while were soon dashed. The only contact she gave me was to connect the feeding tube. I was bounced a little during that night as she moved around in bed next to me, but she didn't touch me. The only way I could measure time was from the automatic enemas, but after two of those, which meant it was the next day, I knew I was probably going to be like that for a while.

At first, it wasn't as hard as the other time she had left me like that. I had gotten used to being bored, motionless, and quiet. I could do that zoning out thing, but that was only good for so long. After five or six hours of that, my brain would get restless and start aching for stimuli. Since I couldn't move or feel any portion of my skin touching itself, I had no anchor. I didn't even get hungry or thirsty. It didn't take long for me to start feeling disconnected with my body, as if it wasn't even there. As if I didn't even exist except inside my head. If done for maybe an hour or two, the isolation might have been relaxing. Stuck like that for days was living hell. I would fight against the braces, screaming silently, just to feel anything at all, just to make sure I was still there.

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I think it must have been a couple of days before anything new happened. I don't want to remember the frightening hallucinatory dreams I had during that time. It was terrible. It got so bad that every waking moment I prayed that she would let me out. It was constant, desperate anticipation without release. I started to wonder if this little experiment of Evelyn's would involve keeping me like this until I went irredeemably insane.

I was completely, totally, and utterly helpless. Unmoored. Adrift. Just awful blackness, the sound of my heartbeat, the feel of my saliva on my neck, and the occasional enema or jostling of the bed. The silence became an almost physical presence; it was a crushing weight inside and around me. Then, out of nowhere, Evelyn's voice echoed loudly in my ears, "Can you hear me?"

I would have leapt off the bed in surprise if I hadn't been locked in place. "Yes!" I mouthed. "I can hear you! Please let me—"

“I’m not sure if you can hear me or not, but I’ll go on the assumption that you can. I’m driving to work at the moment.”

Huh? For a crazy, disorientating second, I thought I was having an audio hallucination. It wouldn’t have been the first. It was either that, or that I had somehow been placed in Evelyn’s car while I was unconscious or something. But I was positive I hadn’t been moved an inch. Even with my isolation-muddled mind, I was able to figure out that my earplugs were actually headphones, and Evelyn was speaking to me through, I guess, some sort of cell phone arrangement. But the why’s and wherefores didn’t concern me at the moment. I couldn’t care less how she was speaking to me – only that she *was* speaking to me. After all that silence, hers was the voice of an angel.

“I thought you might be getting lonely, so I set this up. It’s kind of a headset on my end. Goes through my cell phone. I would have spoken to you yesterday with this, but, ah, honestly, I couldn’t figure out how to get it to work until this morning.” Guilty laughter. “Hmm. The morning clouds are still pretty heavy... I think it’s going to rain. That’ll be good for my plants, don’t you think? It’s been a little dry this month so – ah! Jerk just cut me off.” A pause. “Anyway, I left some fresh cut flowers beside the bed for you this morning. They smelled lovely. I know you didn’t notice, but they’re there. I had Alice and Sarah over last night as well. Sarah looked in on you; she said you looked strange like that. Isn’t that funny? Want to know what I cooked?”

Yes, say anything, just don’t stop talking!

“I made a delicious halibut chowder. Haven’t made it in a while. Had spinach and leeks, some bacon. Very rich. Alice brought some crusty bread and wine. Very rustic. I enjoy that. I know you would have liked it. Or would you have? Do you like fish? Imagine that. Something I don’t know about you. Aha! It’s starting to sprinkle. I knew it. Well, looks like the traffic’s getting heavier, so I need to concentrate. I’ll talk to you later. Enjoy your rest.”

No, don’t go! Don’t leave me alone like this! Crap.

Alone again and salivating like crazy at the mention of food, all I could do was wait and hope she would talk to me again soon. Which she did, about seven hours later. As the hours passed I had grown increasingly pissed at her for making me wait so long to hear from her again, but I forgot all about that once I could hear her voice. She mentioned being at the gym, so I knew she had left work already.

“The temerity,” she said angrily, sounding slightly out of breath. “I was just getting off the machine and I overheard some anorexic bitch snickering, making a comment about my weight to her friend. What is this, high school? She probably hasn’t enjoyed real food in years. Are pointy hipbones really that attractive? And who wears full makeup to the gym, anyway? I mean, really.”

I was angry for her. I liked the way Evelyn looked. There wasn't much point in denying that anymore. She was overweight, sure, but she was curvy and soft, and so very strong. Everything I wasn't. Everything I couldn't be. And didn't that stupid skinny woman, whoever she was, know that Evelyn could probably pick her up and snap her like a celery stalk?

"Ah, well. People are rude. No point in dwelling on it. Remember when *you* used to make comments about my weight?"

Yes.

Then she chuckled. "Her friend didn't look too bad, though. I wonder what *they* would look like in your braces. Broken. Mascara running... begging... mmh."

I was getting a disturbing glimpse at Evelyn's private thought processes. She was basically thinking aloud and I was just a fly on the wall for all she cared. Did she really go around thinking about stuff like that all the time? Oh well, I suppose it didn't matter to me what she talked about, as long as she kept the silence at bay.

Another long period of quiet frustration, and then, "There you are. Just like I pictured you all day long. All still and quiet. I haven't just been talking to myself, have I? You can hear me, right?"

"Yes!" I mouthed. She must be right in the room with me, but she was still talking to me through the earphones.

"Great! I'm so pleased it worked. I have a little surprise. Something came in the mail today for you. I ordered it last week, so yes, I had been planning this... what? What are you trying to say? Ooh. No, dear, I'm not letting you free just yet. You should enjoy what I got for you, though. I was concerned that lengthy blindfolding and total darkness might hurt your eyes. I'm going to take your blindfold off now, but the lights in here are really bright so you really don't want to open your eyes."

She removed the blindfold. The light did hurt my eyes even though they were tightly shut. I desperately wanted to force them open so that I could see something, anything, if only for a moment, but they refused to open in the light. I felt her fitting something over my eyes. It seemed like she was putting a pair of large, padded sunglasses on me. I opened my eyes, but it was all darkness again. Then, slowly, the black was replaced by pale blue light. All I could see was pale blue. Then the color started shifting: pink, white, blue again, dimming, brightening, throbbing. It was hypnotic. "What's going on? What is this?"

"What? Oh, it's simply a pair of light goggles. It's supposed to be very relaxing. Is that ever a bad thing? It stimulates alpha-waves, or so the ad said. Isn't that interesting? This way you won't be in the dark all the time. Now if

you'll excuse me. I've been talking your ear off and I bet you want some peace and quiet."

No, wait, keep talking! Crap!

Chapter 33

At first I was grateful for the light visor thing. At first. It didn't take too long to realize that, in my position, it was as bad or worse than total darkness. I mean, darkness is natural. You close your eyes, it's dark. You turn off the lights at night, it's dark. But nowhere in nature is there perpetual white nothingness. It became even more disorientating than the blindfold. I was floating free in a bright limbo that I couldn't escape from. The rhythmic shifting and throbbing of the light (first hour after hour, then day after day) seemed to be eating away at my mind.

The days passed, and Evelyn continued to talk to me at random. Sometimes she would go a whole day without hardly saying a thing to me. Other times, she would chatter on endlessly about whatever occurred to her at the time. She could talk about picking up her dry cleaning or make comments about some client after a session; the topic of the one-sided conversations didn't matter. I was so desperate for any sound, for any confirmation that I still existed, that I clung to her every word. Her voice and the grip of the braces were the only sure things in my world. After being alone in the quiet pastel oblivion for long enough, I would almost weep at the sound of her saying my name. Soon after that, the touching began.

After I had been like that for about a week, Evelyn started my physical therapy again. I was stiff and sore, but being flexed again felt so good, even if it did hurt a little. That night – I'm guessing it was night because I had just had an enema and felt Evelyn getting into bed beside me – Evelyn snuggled up beside me. I was so sensitive to everything. I could feel her body heat as she got close and the brush of her breath on my cheek. I jerked in surprise when she unzipped the crotch of my bodysuit. Her fingers started to tease and rub me there.

I had a fleeting thought of *Oh, no!* before losing myself to the wonderful sensation. It didn't matter that she had touched me like this not so long ago and I hadn't wanted it. *Now* I wanted it. Now I wanted it more than anything in the world. After all that time of bodiless, isolated hell, her touch was indescribable. She explored deep inside me. Within minutes, my whole world was reduced to my crotch. My whole existence was reduced to just my pussy. All I knew was the pulsating light, her touch, and my spasming wetness. There was nothing else. I never wanted it to end. When she finally brought me to the final orgasm, it was the most intense in my life. I exploded. I gushed. I was frothing at the mouth and

realized I was crying. A minute later I felt her settling into her side of the bed, presumably leaving me alone with my thoughts for the night. I didn't even have the wits to harangue myself for having enjoyed myself so greedily.

It kept going like that. I completely lost all track of time. I pretty much lived to hear Evelyn's voice or feel her touching me. Everything else in between was torture. I screamed, I cried, I begged. I probably babbled incoherently half the time. I couldn't be sure. I couldn't hear myself speak, anyway, so it didn't matter. In my more lucid moments, I intentionally drooled on myself because, by that time, that act was fully tied to my arousal. I would feel it trickling down my chin, down my neck, and collect in the sweet spot in the hollow of my neck where it felt *so good*. I was trying to recapture the pleasure that Evelyn's fingers gave me, but mostly all it did was frustrate me and make me more eager for the next time she would touch me. Her touch was all I lived for.

.....

My dreams and hallucinations became more and more intense and confusing. I guess, in the absence of outside stimulation, the most fantastic of thoughts become more real than anything else. For instance, I once woke to a sensation of pain in my left arm. I realize that the goggles had been taken off. The room was mostly dark and I was still in braces. My left arm was locked in a position that had it sticking straight out to the side, over the edge of the bed. There was a growing sensation of pain in my forearm, and it kept getting worse and worse. There were these terrible, wet, sucking and chewing noises coming from beside the bed. I couldn't turn my head to see what was going on, but out of the corner of my eye I could just make out the curve of Evelyn's back. She was hunkered over at the side of the bed. I cried out and Evelyn spoke up, sounding as if she had her mouth full. "Go back to sleep," she said. "I had to work late and I'm starving." Then the wet, sloppy, chewing noises resumed, accompanied by a fresh wave of pain. *My arm! She's eating me!* I thought. My mind, unable to cope with the horror any longer, finally rejected the experience as being real. "I want another dream, I want another dream!" I screamed, and then I woke up – for real – to the light of the goggles and my body, braced, but uneaten and in one piece.

For a while I was sure I was a little girl again. I lived out a whole day in my head, back in the house I grew up in. I had on my new Easter dress, which I was so proud of. I was playing in the yard, even though I knew my mother told me not to wear my new dress outside. I wasn't sure why, but being able to run and play was such a great thing that I just had to go outside. Then my mother appeared on the porch and she scolded me in Evelyn's voice. I started towards the porch, but

tripped on a tree root and fell into the dirt. I started to cry because my knees were scraped and my beautiful dress was dirty, but my mother was laughing at me. She told me I looked better that way. Every time I tried to get back to my feet, my mother pushed me back down into the dirt, telling me to stay down, over and over. Eventually, I stopped trying to get back up. That's when my mom tossed a cookie onto the sidewalk and told me to 'fetch'. I crawled to it in my new dress and ate it off the ground, and it was the best cookie *ever!*

I was at work, and was desperately trying to get some records organized and turned in before lunch, but nothing was going right. I didn't recognize anybody at the office and nobody was doing what they were supposed to. I kept trying to talk to people, but my voice sounded like it had the volume turned way down low and nobody paid attention to me. I was at my desk trying to staple some papers together, but I just couldn't get the damn stapler to work right. My fingers felt arthritic and useless and I just kept fumbling with the thing. I went out to look for help, but people just stared at me as if I was a leper. In the hallway I ran into Jonathan Quinten, my ex-husband, and he was wearing purple scarf, for some reason. I begged him for help, but he pushed me away. He told me I had been fired and should leave the premises, or else he would call security; he said I wasn't wanted there. Confused, lost, I stumbled into the break room where a crowd of people were laughing. At their center was Alice. She wasn't the old Alice, though, she was the pretty, new Alice, except she was standing. That didn't seem right. I got angry. I had gotten rid of her, so what was she still doing here? Had *she* gotten me fired? She was showing photos to the people, and although I couldn't see them, I knew they were pictures of me wearing diapers. I wanted to yell, but all that came out was a mouthful of spit that ran down the front of my blouse. That didn't seem to disturb anyone; they all acted like it was quietly amusing, like 'oh, there she goes again'. Alice stepped forward and took the stapler from my hand. She told me that she would take care of that problem, and wasn't it nice of her to do so? I nodded, frightened, because suddenly I couldn't move an inch. I could only watch as she pinched my lips together and stapled them shut, several times. It hurt like crazy, but I couldn't move until she was finished. I clawed at my bleeding, pierced lips and fled from the break room, followed by everyone's laughter. I ran into the restroom, where a woman was just leaving a stall. A clear catheter tube dangled from underneath her skirt and dragged on the floor. She angrily told me that the restroom was for women only, and that I didn't belong there. I caught my reflection in the mirror and turned to stare at myself. The staples weren't there, but neither was my face. Gazing back at me was a blank-eyed porcelain doll's head. As I watched, cracks began spread

across the porcelain surface. The cracks got wider and spilling out from them was nothing but pulsating, white light that got brighter and brighter until it absorbed me whole...

.....

“Hello, puppet, are you having a nice a day?” Evelyn’s voice came through my earplugs.

“Glkk.”

“I wish you could see these trees. The countryside up here is wonderful. Alice and I are traveling upstate, to look at some possible real estate. She says ‘hi.’”

Huh? That dragged me out of the stupor I was in. Did she say what I think she said? She’s on a vacation? I’m like this and she’s on a vacation? What about ME?

“Just wanted to let you know that cell service is spotty up here, so I might not be able to talk to you predictably for a couple of days. We’re having a great time! Sarah couldn’t come this time, she’s working, but she’ll be able to check in on you, so you have nothing to worry about. Don’t fret, I instructed her not to have any interaction with you, so your rest won’t be disturbed. I miss you, though. Oh... I think we’re getting into a bad cell so I’ll just cut this conversation short. Talk to you soon.”

I was stunned. I couldn’t believe she was out gallivanting around while I was stuck in that *hell*. I was alone. Abandoned. And I was extremely pissed because if she was off somewhere else, that meant she couldn’t touch me and make me come! That wasn’t fair! I wouldn’t get feel her touch for *days*! What right did she have to deprive me of that? I started to cry.

Some time later I felt my feed bag tube being replaced. I wasn’t sure, but I thought it must have been Sarah. It had to be, unless some burglar had broken in and decided I looked thirsty. That thought got me laughing, until it dawned on me that someone really *could* break in. *I’d be helpless!* I thought. *They could use me any way they wanted and I couldn’t even tell them to stop. Evelyn can use me any way she wants, but that’s different, because she’s Evelyn, and she was God. Right? Why would she leave me alone like this when I need her? I don’t wanna be alone! Save me! Evelyn, Evelyn, Evelyn, Evelyn. What a beautiful name. Evelyn, Evelyn, Evelyn, let me hear your voice. I’m sorry I got mad at you, just please talk to me again. Evelyn, Evelyn, Ev–*

“Okay, we just checked into a hotel.”

She heard me!

“We looked at some nice places today. But nothing has really clicked so far.”

Wait, what are you looking for again?

“We’ll head out again tomorrow. Going to shower and nap, and then we’ll head out for dinner. Oh! I almost forgot. I almost hit a deer today! Can you imagine? It just went bounding right across the road in front of us. That’s a first for me. Come to think of it, that was probably only the second deer I’ve seen in my life. Except for you, dear... you give me that deer-in-the-headlights look all the time. Hmm. My phone is beeping. I think I need to recharge this—”

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Another day passed, which for me might as well have been a week. Evelyn kept talking to me intermittently, not telling me anything important, but I didn’t care. I just needed her voice to rescue from the growing chaos inside my head. Finally, she told me she was coming back.

“I’ll be home in a few hours,” she said. “Are you glad? Did you miss me?”

I giggled with unrestrained joy. A few moments later I just about had a heart attack when I felt a hand between my thighs.

“Surprise!” said Evelyn. “I already got home. Sorry, did I give you a start? I couldn’t help myself.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake! I couldn’t stay pissed for longer than a second, though; coherent thought disappeared when she started rubbing me. I needed the sensation so much I could hardly stand it.

“Did you miss me? Did you miss this? Oh, my, but it looks like you did. Poor thing. So wet. Are you happy now? Hmm? Getting there? You’re so pretty in your braces. Did you know that? Such a pretty puppet. I want you to come for me, puppet. Come now. Come *now*.”

Oh, god, yeeessss!

Chapter 34

I later learned that I was kept that way for around four weeks. By the end, time had lost meaning. I had almost forgotten that there was a world outside the braces, Evelyn’s voice, and the touch of her hands. Those were the only things that existed for me. I can’t even recall completely what it was like. They say that the mind erases the memory of pain. I’m not even sure that my brain was working right. Maybe I just went into sort of intermittent comas. What came out the other side of that ordeal was not the person I used to be. It was hardly a person at all.

I woke (though I didn’t know I was asleep) to the dizzying feeling of being lifted off the bed and placed on the floor. It felt strange and uncomfortable, and I wanted to be put back on the bed where it was soft. Limb by limb, the braces loosened and came away. I couldn’t even get excited about it, because I was sure

that it was just another hallucination. I had dreamed so often of being freed that I couldn't tell the difference between fantasy and reality when it finally happened. I had lived through this in my head a thousand times. Fresh air caressed my eardrums as the plugs were removed. Something went into my mouth and was twisted.

“*H-h-hss-ss.*”

“There, there.”

Could I actually be hearing Evelyn's real, beautiful voice, unfiltered by the headphones? The light glasses were lifted off my face, and in comparison, the bedroom was as dark as a cellar. “*Hssssss!*” I screamed in shock. “*Hsss! Hss! Hssssss!*”

“Okay, just relax. I know this will probably be a little bit overwhelm—”

“*Hssssss!*”

“Yes. Something like that.”

My mind was still chaotic. I couldn't make sense out of what was going on. My capacity for logic and reason was temporarily fried, stuttering like a cold engine trying to start. I was little more than a small, frightened animal. As bad as being sensory-deprived was, having it taken away was like being thrown into an icy lake. It was a change, and experienced had taught me that change was bad.

I blinked wildly, having difficulty bringing anything into focus. Everything seemed to be made of abstract shapes and colors that my mind couldn't put a name or meaning to. I hooked my clawed fingers into the bed sheet hanging from the bed, forming the idea that I could wrap it around me and put myself back in secure, cozy darkness. I wanted a safe place where I couldn't move, didn't *have* to move, and didn't have to deal with anything too real. I couldn't get the bed sheet loose; all I could do was wobble myself back and forth a little. Animal frustration took over and I began to cry, hiss, and gurgle. I might have pissed on myself.

“Alright, that's enough of that. Kathy. Snap out of it!” came a shout, followed by hard slap to my face.

In reaction to the sudden, unexpected pain, I screamed and writhed. The stinging in my cheek did seem to jump start my mind, though. I was hurting and didn't know why. After my fit, I stared around, trying to make sense of things. Looming over me was Evelyn. I recognized *her*, alright. At that moment, she was most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I drank the sight of her in, hungrily, achingly, desperately. A real, live human being and not one conjured from my head. She was both beautiful and terrible to me, as if I was a mortal not worthy to look upon something divine; she was a goddess of pleasure and pain.

Evelyn stroked the cheek she had just slapped. “It's nice to see your face again,” she said. As her hand passed over my face, I sucked her thumb into my

mouth. I could feel the coolness of her smooth, polished nail against my tongue. I bit down gently, trying to hang onto her hand, as she pulled her thumb from my lips with a wet pop.

“*Hsssuuss..*”

“Are you trying to say something?”

“Ssss. Ssssth. Ssthis... rrr-real?”

She chuckled. “Yes, this is real.”

Still not fully believing, but *hoping* it was true, I went limp as Evelyn stripped me and gave me a sponge bath. I didn’t try to crawl or test my muscle strength. My stiff muscles screamed from the sudden activity, but I welcomed it. I was just so happy to be free. Deliriously happy. I marveled at the sensations of the wet sponge on my back and the nap of the carpet against my face. I either blanked out or fell asleep during most of clean-up. I had suddenly become so weary. Even though I had been immobile and senseless for weeks, I felt as though I hadn’t had a good rest in all that time. I probably hadn’t. I was barely even roused when my boots were taken off and my corset was replaced with a brand new one.

I woke up a little as Evelyn rolled me back and forth in an effort to get the thicker doll suit on. It was warm and cozy. She had to use safety pins to make the suit narrow enough around the waist to fit the new corset. I touched my waist. “S-so small.”

“Eighteen inches. You weren’t using it for anything, anyway,” she commented. When she sat me up to adjust it, I could see myself in the bottom of the mirror. I was startled by my own reflection. I didn’t recognize myself. I mean, I still *looked* pretty much the same as before, but my face just didn’t *fit*. Evelyn looked at me. “Sugar, are you crying?”

I couldn’t speak. Everything was still too confusing. I felt as if I had no identity. Logically, I knew that my name was Katherine, and I remembered my past, but it didn’t make any sense with who I was *now*. What I used to be and what I had become didn’t mesh. Oil and water. I could remember technically how to do my old job, how to work the system, how to get things done and done on time, but all of that was so *meaningless* now. All those years of schooling and experience were as useful to me as an calculus textbook was to an infant. I could remember being the good, efficient office tyrant, and how I would do anything to get ahead. Now I would do anything, anything at all, to simply avoid punishment and earn some pleasure. The person I had been didn’t exist anymore. Everyone already thought she was dead, and now even *I* thought she was dead. All that remained was some weird, broken creature that would be whatever Evelyn wanted it to be.

Evelyn was hovering over me, studying me for, I guess, signs of a nervous breakdown or something. I *was* having a sort of breakdown. Seeing myself in the mirror was freaking me out more and more. I wasn't the person in the mirror. I *hated* seeing my reflection. All it did was remind me what I was, what I lost, and how far I had fallen. It reminded me of a dream of being human. *Not me, not me, that's not me!* I screamed inside. With what strength I had, I wrenched myself from Evelyn's grip and fell heavily backwards onto the floor. *Not me, not me!*

It doesn't have to be you. If you become something else, something that doesn't care that you are what you are... then you won't have to feel bad about it. Or feel guilt about feeling good about it.

It hurts to be a human the way you are. Just don't be human any more.

Can... I?

"Hssssss! Mmmmah." I was frothing again.

Evelyn pinned my wrists against my chest to keep me from flopping.

"Kathy, what's the matter? Are you hurt?"

"Hss! Mmmask. Please," I gurgled through the saliva puddle in my throat.

"So soon? I would have thought after just getting out—"

"Please! Hsssssss!"

Evelyn winced and wiped my spray off her cheek. "Alright, okay, calm down. I have it here. Here you go."

I felt my panic draining away as she pressed the firm mask against my face. Evelyn was still trying to calm me down, but it wasn't necessary. In fact, I was already practically euphoric. With the mask on, I didn't have to deal with being a person anymore. A doll didn't care about anything. Right? I sighed in relief and started giggling.

Evelyn was looking at me like I was crazy. "Maybe," she said hesitantly, "you need a nap. Would you like a nap?"

"Uh huh." Now that I had the mask on, I could relax. I still wasn't one-hundred percent sure that I wasn't having another hallucination, but it didn't *seem* like one.

I saw myself again the mirror, when Evelyn sat me on the bed so she could get undressed for a nap. That was so much better. What a pretty, cool, shiny, impassive face I had. Nothing could get out, but nothing could get in, either. My padded, fake-looking breasts. The heavy-stitching on my shoulders that made my arms look sewn-on. Yes. That was better than trying to be human.

As Evelyn cuddled me up against her naked body, I became so happy. Mostly, it was just the full-body contact with somebody after being deprived for so long. It was also wonderful to simply be in a different position than the one the braces forced me into. I loved the feel of her strong arms around me, the feel of

her powerful muscles beneath her soft skin. I loved how she squeezed me to her. I even loved the softness of her fleshy belly pressing against me and how it fitted so nicely against the concave curve of my tiny, corseted waist. Katherine would have hated it. Katherine could barely stand being touched by the woman who was an evil, kidnapping, sadistic psychopath. But... if I wasn't Katherine, if I was something else... then it was okay not to hate it. Right?

.....

I must have slept for a while, because the bottom half of the inside of my mask was soaked. I squirmed a little to get myself into a different position, but I was still too weak to do much. I couldn't see Evelyn's face from where I was. "Evelyn? Are you awake? Evelyn? Evelyn? Are you asleep?"

"Mmm? I was," she said, sounding muzzy.

"Is this still real?"

"Seems to be," she replied sleepily.

"That's good." It seemed like a miracle, actually. I was still half expecting to see the bedroom dissolve in white light and to feel the braces all around me again. I mulled over a question for a minute, then asked, "Why did you do that to me?"

"Hmm? Do what to you?"

"Put me in there like that for so long."

She adjusted herself so that she could see my face. Or rather, see my eyes, since my face was safely hidden. "Put you 'in there?' In where?"

"In... in my... inside myself."

"That's a very interesting way to put it. I did it to see what would happen."

"Oh." The thought of how cruel it was to treat me as a guinea pig was stifled before it could even be formed. *Why shouldn't she experiment on you? It's not like you're a person or anything.* "Are you going to do it again?"

"I don't think I'd have a reason to. But I will if I want to," she said.

"Oh." I guessed that was fair. A small part of my psyche shrank in terror at the thought of that happening again, but I summarily suppressed it. Nothing was up to me anymore.

"You have to admit," she said, giving me a tight squeeze, "that it certainly made you more receptive to me. I like that."

I melted against her, enjoying the realness of the embrace of the queen of my world. "It's just that... Evelyn... I think something broke in my head."

"Broke in your head?"

I wiggled in mental discomfort. "I think I've gone crazy."

She snorted a surprised laugh. "Think so? It took you long enough. But what makes you say that?"

“I-I think...*hss!* I think Kathy’s... dead.”

Evelyn looked thoughtful for a moment. “That’s okay. We didn’t need her, anyway. Did we? Kathy wasn’t very nice, was she?”

“No.” *No, she wasn’t.*

“No. And you’re much more pleasant, aren’t you? You appreciate it that I take care of you and touch you, don’t you?”

“Yes.” *Yes, I truly do.*

“And you know that I’ll always take care of you, whether you like it or not.”

“I know. I like it.” *I need it.*

“That’s nice to hear,” she said as she kissed the tip of my nose. “Then it’s settled.”

“Evelyn?” I asked hoarsely.

“Yes?”

“So it’s okay if I’m crazy?”

“Sure,” she chuckled, rolling onto her back and shutting her eyes, “whatever floats your boat.”

I smiled beneath the mask.

Chapter 35

I think a week had passed since I had been released. Life went on as usual after all that, on the surface. Things were profoundly different for me. Inside my head. After all, I was having to get used to not being me anymore. It was the only way I could cope with the changes and humiliations I was going through; the only way to avoid total, catatonic insanity or suicidal depression. It was actually a relief to not have to follow any of the rules of civilized behavior. It was like having the freedom of unformed infancy all over again. Evelyn didn’t notice, not at first. I didn’t tell her what I was thinking, and I guess she was just too pleased to see me more receptive to her to delve too deeply into why. Who’d have thought that going crazy could feel so liberating?

In the face of having a crumbling identity, I had to adopt a new one. A safe, unchallenging one. So I became Evelyn’s doll, just like she trained me to be. I would be very still and quiet and not bothered by it at all. I found I *wanted* to try to be still for as long as I could. I got pleasure from trying to be the dolliest doll I could be. But it wasn’t just acting; at those times, in my head, I *was* a doll. I fancied that, instead of dealing with the reality of having crippled, weakened muscles, I was full of stuffing. It was as good a fantasy as any, and more comforting than the truth. I took to staring into the mirror with a kind of fascination, imagining that the mask’s face was really my own and that I was truly

pretty. I even requested from Evelyn a hand mirror that I had seen in the bathroom cabinet. I usually kept it somewhere convenient to me, like under the bed or beneath the living room sofa, so that I could pull it out and gaze at my reflection whenever I wanted. I started to do that a lot.

Beneath the mask, behind the doll façade, I became a monster. I thought of myself as a freakish beast. I already thought of myself like that before then, but this time I kind of enjoyed the freedom of it. I indulged the more vulgar aspects of my psyche that being civilized keeps in check. Underneath the mask, I was a creature of pure Id – like a deranged two-year-old – and I liked it. I almost reveled in it. And I was capable of things I never would have imagined. Every time I'd feel shame and disgust, I'd just remind myself that I didn't have to worry about that anymore. I certainly became more sexual than ever before. I attacked Evelyn's pussy with fervor, like a beggar at a banquet. I even masturbated for the first time since I was kidnapped. Hell, I very rarely masturbated even before then. Now I was acting like I was the fucking inventor of the orgasm. I don't even know where all that came from. I don't know, maybe it was some craziness-induced loss of inhibitions, or a greedy hunger for something that made *me* feel good for a change. Maybe it was all of the above. Buried way deep down, there was still a part of me was shocked and disgusted with myself, but I just couldn't help it. And I didn't want to.

.....

“Puppet,” Evelyn said as she entered the living room, “it's such a lovely day outside. I was going to...” She trailed off and tilted her head, examining me. “What are you doing?”

I had backed myself up until I was halfway under the coffee table, and my floofy, ruffled doll skirt was all bunched up around my waist. I was working on getting myself off by grinding my crotch against the thick table leg. It was easier to rub off against something, I had discovered, than to try to masturbate effectively with my weak, uncoordinated fingers. I wasn't embarrassed at all about being caught like that (if I was, I successfully smothered the thoughts before they could make me feel shame), but I didn't appreciate the intrusion when I was so close. I growled at the distraction and pushed my forehead against the carpet, drawing my arms around my head to block out the light.

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

“*Hss!*”

“Oh, I see. Are you still mad at me?” she asked with gentle condescension in her voice. I frowned into the carpet. Earlier she had to forcibly take the mask away from me. She told me she liked to see me in it, but not *all* the time. I hated to be without it. Without the mask I felt exposed... ugly. “How about we make a

deal. If you agree to come outside with me, I'll give you something slightly more fun than that coffee table."

"Mask?"

"Not yet. Later."

"Hsss!" *Oh well. She isn't going to change her mind.* Reluctantly mollified, I let her take my wrists and drag me from under the table. Turning me to face away from the couch, she sat on the edge of the cushion and thrust her foot between my legs so that the curve of her foot and shin was pressed into my crotch.

"Go on, make yourself come," she said. "I want to see you squirm."

In minutes, I was writhing on the floor, drooling into the rug in happy ecstasy, as I ground myself against Evelyn's leg. It was so intimate, in a strange sort of way. I thought of my ex-husband and how he always wanted me to be less constrained in bed. *Look at me now!* I giggled to myself. He had wanted an animal in bed. I was an animal now, alright. I could even hump a leg to prove it.

"So, do you feel better now?" Evelyn asked, placing her foot on my butt and gently pushing, rocking me back and forth. "Lovely. My foot's all wet."

I did that! I thought proudly as I chewed on my thumb.

So a little while later, I was sitting in the wheelchair under the shade of a big tree in the backyard. I was getting a good view of Evelyn's bottom as she worked to plant a tray of pansies in a flower bed. I had never even seen the backyard before. It was pretty. It had that manicured *Home and Gardens* look to it that I'd come to expect from Evelyn. I was okay with being out there, since the fence was high and I felt reasonably secluded.

The tree above me kept dropping little seedpods on me. There were at least a dozen of them on my lap. Well, that was okay. I was little more than mobile furniture, anyway. I watched some kind of flying beetle land on my arm, slowly make its way out to my hand, spread its wings, and take off again.

The problem was that the back fence seemed to border an alley, and there were two young kids peeking in through a crack in the boards. I had been watching them out of the corner of my eye. Evelyn hadn't noticed them, but I had. You learn to become very aware of your surroundings when you half to stare at a wall half the day. They had been there for several minutes. I think they were first giggling at the size of Evelyn's rear end when she bent over, and that made me angry. That was my queen's butt they were laughing at, broad or not. But then they saw me, sitting so still in a wheelchair with my head leaning to the side, like a cast-aside marionette. I wondered if perhaps they were among the children who had come to the door last Halloween. They might have taken candy of Evelyn, not even realizing that there was a real monster inside, locked away in the attic.

That's right, I thought as I felt their eyes on me, *stare at the freak. Am I*

terrible to look at? You have no idea what I've been through. You'd be just like me you'd gone through it. If you survived it, that is. This is what happens to you when you're tortured for vengeance and forced to become a lonely sociopath's (goddess's) plaything (loved one). You'd go crazy, too. If you were lucky.

Once I decided that they had ogled me for long enough, I acted on impulse. Might as well give them a show. Leave 'em with something to talk about, right? I tossed my head in their direction, strings of saliva flying from my wide-open mouth, hissing as loud as I could. The spying eyes went wide. I lurched out of the wheelchair and landed untidily in the grass. I clawed at the turf, hissing and cursing, dragging myself in their direction. The faces disappeared, followed by the patter of running feet. I was having a blast! I didn't even hear the sound of Evelyn approaching.

"—are you doing? What in god's name has gotten into you? You're going to get grass stains on your dress!" She plucked me off the ground and put me back in the chair and roughly brushed me off. I could only giggle at it all. "Oh, this is funny? What is it with you and this wheelchair? You always go flying out of it. What do I have to do, tie you to it?"

"That might work," I mumbled, still snickering.

"I think you've had enough sun for one day. I'm taking you inside." She pushed the chair towards the back porch.

"Can I have the mask again?"

"Oh, for the love of... fine! If it'll settle you down. I swear."

I smiled. "*Hss!*"

.....

I was in a foul mood. I had found out earlier that Evelyn was going to be leaving for a day or two to go out of town with Sarah. She wouldn't tell me where, but I didn't care about that. I was nearly phobic about being separated from Evelyn for any longer than the time she spent at work. I just couldn't feel safe anymore if she wasn't nearby. She had conditioned me to need to be close to her, and now she was going away. And worse, Alice was going to be my babysitter. How screwed up was that? Alice, in a wheelchair, taking care of me, someone who could barely get onto the bed on her own. Blind leading the blind. I guessed she was just there in case of some sort of emergency. I suppose I could have appreciated the thought that Evelyn wanted someone there to watch me – instead of just coldly leaving me to fend for myself – but I wasn't feeling too gracious.

To compound my mood, I had been asking to watch tv all evening, but Evelyn kept telling me no. She was getting some last minute paperwork done or doing bills or something before her little trip and didn't want the distraction. I

suspected it was also a punishment because I had tried to bite her earlier.

I hadn't meant to. Evelyn had been occupied vacuuming upstairs and I had gotten a sweet tooth. Evelyn kept some of her cooking staples under the counter, including a box of confectioner's sugar. I couldn't taste much, but I could still taste the sweetness a little. I made my way into the kitchen and worked the cabinet door open. I had intended to simply dip a dampened finger into the box, but with my poor coordination, I managed to pull it over and spill half the contents onto the kitchen floor. Well, that would work, too.

Evelyn caught me sprawled on the floor, lapping sugar off the floor in slobbery, sugary bliss. Of course, I got scolded for making a mess and eating without permission. When she had reached down to pull my face out of the powdered sugar, I snapped at her hand. It wasn't out of anger. It was half-playful, if anything. It was just an animal reaction. And I was an animal, now, so...

Anyway, I had gotten away with only a very ominous-sounding warning from Evelyn that made me squirm in mental distress. My goddess was angry at me. I hated that feeling. Evelyn had dragged one of the hard, wooden chairs into the corner of the kitchen and sat me on it, telling me to be still. So, that's what I did. Hardly a punishment. Body limp, head rolled back, three, two, one... doll.

So now I was in a bad mood for not getting my way. Childish, maybe, but that's just a benefit of being crazy, right?

"I can hear you pouting back there," said Evelyn.

"*Hss!*" I had been lurking around behind the armchair while Evelyn was working on whatever it was. I was bored and, even though I knew I could have just zoned out, I guess I wanted to be a pest. Probably not the safest of inclinations, given my status quo, but insanity made me reckless. "I wanna watch tv."

"I already told you no." The sounds of a page being flipped and the scratching of a pen.

"*Hsss! Hssss! Hsssssss!*"

"No." Evelyn started to get up, and for a second I thought I had pushed her too far. But instead of coming after me, she just stepped past me, saying something about a file in her office, and went upstairs.

Feeling irritated that I couldn't even get her attention enough to get cross with me, I paced around behind the armchair. There was a side table against the wall back there, next to the entry to the foyer. I knew that on top of it stood some framed photographs, a few knickknacks, and a flower vase.

Acting on impulse, I kicked at one of the table legs with my booted foot. I certainly wasn't strong enough to budge the furniture, but I could hear some of the things on top shift a little. I kicked it again, and again. I was rewarded with the

flat, slapping sound of one of the picture frames falling over. Maybe it was a photo of Alice. A few more kicks brought about a heavy *thunk*. A moment later, the vase tumbled over the edge of the table and landed on the small of my back, shattering to pieces. I hardly felt it at all, not with my tight-laced corset protecting my waist like steel armor. I looked around at the scattered vase pieces, experiencing an almost giddy feeling of extreme *oh shit*-ness. Then I heard Evelyn's footsteps.

"What was that noise? What – ow!" she exclaimed. I guess her foot had found a vase piece. "What the hell is going in here? Are you hurt?"

I hissed and shook my head. I was hiding my face in my arms, forehead pressed against the floor. It's funny; I wasn't really that concerned about punishment. At least I had gotten her attention. And feeling that vase shatter sure was satisfying.

"I'm waiting."

"I... bumped it," I replied glibly.

"Did you." She rested her hands on hips. "Did you 'bump' it on purpose?"

"No," I said. A small chunk of vase rolled off my back and hit the floor.

"Look at me," she said. "Look me in the eyes. Tell me that you didn't do it on purpose."

I looked up at her. "I didn't." But she kept holding my gaze until I cracked a tiny smirk. It just slipped out.

That was all she needed. She pounced instantly. "I knew it! You little *liar*. You can't fool me."

Even though it wasn't remotely funny, I had to restrain the urge to burst into laughter. I might have been crazy, but I guess I wasn't *that* crazy. Not enough to laugh at Evelyn when she was angry. Evelyn had me by the hair and was spanking me on the butt. They weren't love pats, either. She could really hit hard after all that working out, and it instantly brought tears to my eyes. "*Hssss!* Sorry! Stop!"

She let go of my hair and forehead thumped the floor. "You're this close. Do you understand me? *This* close to going back in braces. I'd do it now, except you only just came out last week, and you need time for your body to recover. Another stunt like this and I won't care about that. You know I love you, but you can be so *aggravating* sometimes." I was put to the side while Evelyn cleaned up the mess I made. She held up a piece for me to see. "This vase used to be my mother's."

Ow. That was unnecessary. The person I used to be would have felt savage pride in destroying something Evelyn valued. Now, I could only feel guilt.

"You know," Evelyn said conversationally, "if you're determined to always make everything a chore, I could just kick you out. Send you back into the world

all alone. It would certainly make things less stressful for me. Think you'd like that?"

I blinked at her. Surely she wasn't serious. Was she? I couldn't be sure of anything, anymore! She had to be kidding, but all the same I felt a chill of dread at the thought. *Threatening to kick me out? Leave me alone out there, with all those horrible people? Who would take care of me?* "But what would I do?"

"I don't know. I guess you'd just have to fend for yourself."

"Wha...? No, don't kick me out! Please!" I wasn't even sure if I was playing along with a weird joke or genuinely having to beg to remain in captivity. Does it even count as captivity if the captive begs to remain?

"Fine," she said. "I guess I'll let you stay."

Well, that was a relief. That was not a laughing matter.

Later on, when she was getting finished with the work she was doing, I thought maybe it would be strategically wise to try to get back on the good side of my goddess. I would abase myself. I crept along the base of the couch and started licking her bare foot. It didn't work. She pulled her foot away and told me stop. Dejected, I crawled under the coffee table to resume my sulking.

Chapter 36

"I'm not sure I should leave," said Evelyn.

Alice shook her head. "It'll be fine. I can handle things." They were gathered in the foyer. Evelyn was standing hesitantly by the door. Petite Sarah was gripping Evelyn's suitcase handle with both hands, looking slightly overburdened and eager to get on the road. The auto-enema and IV stand for my food and drink had already been set up downstairs. I was watching events from the shadows farther back in the hallway.

"It's just she's been acting out, lately," Evelyn said.

Acting out? I snorted. *I'm nuts. 'Bonkers!'*

"I can especially handle *her*," said Alice.

"Alright, just remember to call if there's the slightest problem. And don't hesitate to use the remote if you need to."

"I will."

The 'remote' in reference was a remote control trigger for the electric plug in me. It was wired up and attached to a small receiver and battery at my waist, *under* my outfit. I couldn't even get to it to attempt to turn it off. I hadn't actually had a punishment-style shock in a long time. I wasn't planning on earning one.

The others finished saying their goodbyes. Both Evelyn and Sarah cast me warning glances before leaving. I rolled my eyes. *Yeah, I'm going to make my big*

getaway. After all the shit I've been through, like I'm going to try something now. Hadn't I proved myself when those cops entered the café? Even if I had been planning something, I wouldn't have put it past Evelyn to just be staying somewhere nearby – like at Alice's place – as a test or something.

Alice turned her chair towards me after they had left. She didn't look any happier to be stuck with babysitting me than I felt about having her there. "So it's just you and me now," she said dryly. "Might as well test this thing out."

"What... *hsss!*" Searing pain radiated from the butt plug. She was *shocking* me! I hadn't even *done* anything! She wouldn't stop, either. In seconds I was flopping in agony on the hardwood floor. "*Hsssss! Hssssssss! Hsssssssn*ot a toy!"

The pain stopped. "What do you know? It really does work." She looked at the remote. "It's not as much fun as I would have thought. It's like beating an already beaten dog. We'll just call that one punishment for breaking mom's vase."

I was trying to catch my breath from the pain. "It was—" I almost started to say that it had been an accident, but then I realized word of my lying about would have already reached her ears. So I just shut up.

"Just stay out of my way and we'll be fine."

I tried to do just that, but sometimes incidents are unavoidable when one person is in a wheelchair and the other is spread out on the floor. She almost rolled back over my feet a couple times, making me hiss in pain, though I don't believe she did that intentionally. I just couldn't help getting in the way. I hid in the guest bedroom for a while, but Alice started watching tv and my desire for that forced me to venture back out into the living room. I really couldn't hold much of a grudge against Alice for shocking me out of spite. After a year of this, I was far too used to suffering for no other reason than that it suited someone's fancy. It's just the way things were.

.....

Alice, tiring of playing solitaire on the laptop, finally spoke up. "How can you stand to wear that thing?" she asked, referring to my mask. "Nobody's forcing you to now, are they? Why don't you take it off?"

"Don't want to. Makes me feel safe."

She arched her brow. "Safe?"

"And... prettier," I said.

She stared at me.

"It does!" I insisted.

"Whatever."

Besides, it's my real face, I added silently.

We maintained a civil silence until that evening. We really didn't have

much to talk about. I found I really wasn't very adept at carrying on any kind of normal conversation, anymore. Besides, what would Alice and I have to talk about? The weather? Or work? The latest innovations in wheelchairs? Perhaps a discussion about the textural differences in crawling over tile or carpet in minute detail, or the best way to get saliva stains out of satin? The only thing I was really curious about was her and Evelyn's childhood and how they both turn out to be such sadistic psychos, but I thought it best not to ask about that when she had that clicker in her hand.

.....

Alice had just gotten off the phone with Evelyn for the umpteenth time (Evelyn kept calling to make sure everything was okay). She had moved herself from her wheelchair to one of the sofas and was reading a magazine. I had taken the hand mirror that Evelyn had given to me from under the sofa. I had it on the floor and I was hovering over it, face down, so that I could look at myself and reassure myself that I still pretty. Sometimes I kissed my reflection, my porcelain nose and lips tapping against the glass.

Some part of me was starting to wonder if I really *was* as crazy as I acted at times like that. Was it all just contrived? Was I just deluding myself, again? Either way, I couldn't be bothered by such thoughts. I was enjoying myself, after all. It was such freedom.

Alice glanced over at me. "Oh my god. Are you... are you *masturbating*?"

My newfound lack of inhibitions had gotten the best of me. I was lying on top of my arm and slowly grinding myself against my fist while I looked in the mirror. I didn't think it had been that obvious. "Gckk."

She stared at me disbelievingly. "What's wrong with you? Stop that!"

I lifted my head. "Why?"

"I don't wanna see that! Cut it out."

"Evelyn lets me." I pouted.

"I'm not Evelyn."

I sighed and rested my face on the mirror. A few quiet minutes passed.

"You're doing it again! Stop that!"

"*Hsss!*" Frustrated, I jerked my arm out from under me and propped myself up. *That does it*, I thought. "Does it bother you that much?"

"Having you do that in the same room, ten feet away from me, is really weirding me out a bit, yes."

"I never knew you were such a prude," I said teasingly.

"I'm not a prude."

"Don't you ever watch Sarah playing with herself?" I asked. "At home?"

"That's a whole different—" she began. "That's none of your business!"

Why I am even being dragged into this conversation? Just... be quiet." She returned her focus to the magazine. After several minutes, I saw her jaw begin to tense. Finally she lost her cool. "Stop staring at me."

"I just wanted to ask a question."

She looked up. "A question." She closed the magazine and placed her hands on her lap, a mockery of attentiveness. "Alright. What's your question?"

"Do you still think I'm attractive at all?"

"No," she said, "I don't"

I tilted my head. "Not even just a little?"

"No."

"Oh. Alright." I couldn't say my feelings were hurt. I had become, after all, a monster, and how could she be attracted to that? I was just curious. After a thoughtful pause, I asked, "Do you think Sarah and Evelyn are having sex?"

Alice coughed up a laugh of amused disbelief. "What? What in god's name would make you ask that?"

"Just wondering," I said, slowly crawling forward, "since they're off alone together and everything."

I saw a specter of doubt cross her face, then she broke into a knowing smirk. "Oooh, I see what you're playing at. Sorry. That's not going to work."

"And since you and Sarah, well, you know," I pressed, crawling closer. "I was wondering, can you still feel anything down there?"

An ominous cloud darkened Alice's expression. "Oh. We're going back *there*, are we? I thought we already had this out," she said.

"No, honestly, I don't mean it like that. I just meant, well, if you do, if you want, I could lick you," I said.

"What?"

"I will... if you want. I don't mind. I'm really very good at that. Evelyn and Sarah don't have to know, if you don't want. I won't tell."

"Stop this."

"I'm really good, I can show you! Or... or you could eat *me*," I offered.

I had intended, when I started this line of questioning, to simply mess with Alice and make her uncomfortable as a revenge for making me stop masturbating, or something. But the more I talked, the more turned on I was getting, and the more desperate. Alice *was* very pretty now, and despite all I had done and all that had been done to me on her behalf, I just... I don't know! I just wanted to know if someone could still like me, want me, in some human way other than being Evelyn's toy. I just wanted to be likeable! And sex was the only outlet available to me at the time. "E-Evelyn... Evelyn doesn't like to do that. But you could! I'd like it! If you wanted to."

Alice was transferring herself to her wheelchair. “This conversation is over.”

I pawed at her feet. “No, wait, just listen. *Hsss!* I know I can make you feel good. Whatever you want. Just say it and—”

She wheeled herself towards the hallway. “You’re disgusting,” she said over her shoulder before leaving. I heard her go into the bathroom and shut the door.

I rolled onto my back, pressing my hands over my eyes. I didn’t know whether to giggle or cry. Part of me was pleased that I was actually able to chase Alice away, because that meant I still had some kind of control over something; I could still affect people around me. But most of me was hurting and ashamed. Long ago I had manipulated Alice’s low self esteem and then rejected her. Now that *I* was desperate, she had rejected *me*. And she was in the right both times. She was right: I was disgusting. Now matter how you looked at it.

I wanted Evelyn back. She was strong and she would hold me and tell me what to think. She would forgive me for being what I was. She’d make everything okay. Only Evelyn would ever want me now. For anything.

“Oh, god, I’m pathetic,” I said aloud, then shook my head. “*Hsss!* No! No.” I was only pathetic for a person. For a monster with a screw loose, I was perfectly normal. Perfectly okay. This sort of thing was expected of me. Right?

I’m a doll, I’m a doll, I’m doll. I’m not a person. I don’t feel. I don’t feel. I kept repeating that to myself, until I was calmed down, until I was convinced. Then I zoned out and lost track of the world.

Chapter 37

I guess you could say things were tense between Alice and I all through the next day. The tension was mostly on her part, though. Me, I was just crazy. I could take things as they came. She was the one who was forced to interact with me to take care of me. I could sense her unease when she had to get close and do things like replace my bag or plug in my tubes. Maybe she thought I was going to start throwing myself at her again. I toyed with the idea, but I decided enough was enough. Evelyn would be home in the evening, and Alice would go, and everything would be back to normal. I could keep myself from doing something nuts for that long, couldn’t I?

As it turned out... no, not really.

It was late afternoon and I was playing with Jinx. He was under the sofa, swatting at a piece of ribbon as I pulled it back and forth. We were both easily entertained. Alice rolled by on her way to the kitchen. As she passed the sofa,

there was a crackling, crunching noise.

“Dammit,” she muttered, backing up. I turned myself around and saw that she had rolled over the hand mirror, shattering it. “What did I tell you about leaving your things out?”

She hadn’t told me anything of the sort, actually, but I wasn’t going to argue. Curious, I reached out and picked up the frame. Dozens of glass shards fell out onto the floor.

“Don’t do that! Oh, that’s wonderful. Now you’ve made a mess. No! Don’t touch them! Be careful, just back away. You’ll cut yourself.” Alice sighed. “Just don’t move. I’ll go get the dustpan.” She skirted around the scattered glass and headed into the kitchen.

I barely heard her. I was staring at my many reflections. Moved by something I can’t explain, I picked up one of the larger shards. The tip looked dangerously sharp. Seductively sharp. *If I’m really a doll, I told myself, then I can’t bleed. I can’t be hurt. I’m just full of stuffing.*

That makes sense. Why don’t you try it and find out?

I looked at my forearm, all covered in thick, faux-flesh colored lycra. I pressed the glittering tip of the mirror glass against my wrist and pressed. And pressed harder. It didn’t really hurt. I was right! I wasn’t human anymore. I dragged the glass across my wrist; it snagged the lycra, which stretched but didn’t tear, and slid across my skin. I gasped. Suddenly, there was pain. Scarlet circles bloomed like flowers in the material. *I’m bleeding*, I realized with a kind of morbid fascination.

There was a loud clatter as the dustpan and broom hit the floor. Alice was in the doorway, staring at me. “Oh my god! What’s...? *Stop that!*” she shrieked.

I spared her only a distracted glance. I hardly even heard her. My pulse was pounding in my ears. *Blood. I was bleeding. There was pain.* I wasn’t a doll, after all. I was just a regular, fucked up person. A terrible, horrible, fucked up person who had once routinely hurt other people for no other reason than because they had been in my way, and had done so without a scrap of remorse.

But, then again, maybe not. *Maybe* I just had to go a little deeper. Alice was beside me, reaching for me, but I was too absorbed in my thoughts to pay her any mind. She grabbed me by the arm that was holding the glass. “Drop it! Let it go!” she was saying.

I hissed in annoyance. I was trying to work something out, here, and she was distracting me. I jerked my arm out of her grip. As I did, the shard sliced across the palm of her hand. I didn’t even notice it at the time. She recoiled hard enough to roll backwards a few feet. She clutched her hand, glaring at me with anger and surprise. “Ow! You... you *cut* me. You vicious little... how *dare*

you?”

I was only vaguely aware of what was going on around me. Alice had been cut? How did that happen?

No, forget that. Just... go a little deeper. Just a little. I pressed the glass back against my forearm.

“No!” Heedless of her injury, Alice reached for my arm again, gripping it like a vise, digging her fingers in. “Let it go, god damn it, *now!*” She twisted my wrist until I howled with pain and dropped the glass.

“Wha?” I didn’t know what was happening. The crazy fugue state that had been sheltering me since I had been released from the sensory deprivation seemed to finally evaporate altogether. It was like I was waking up from a dream. I was just me again. I looked from my bleeding wrist to the shard of glass that had been in my hand. *I had hurt Alice? But I didn’t mean to!* I moved towards her, hesitantly.

“Stay back!”

Why is she looking at me like that? I didn’t mean to hurt her. Of course, Alice couldn’t see the surprise and confusion on my face. What must I have looked like to her? All she could see was a freak on the floor whose wide eyes stared from a calm and pristine porcelain doll’s face; who a moment ago had been wielding a blood-streaked sliver of mirror. That had to be unsettling. “*Hss!*”

Blood was dripping from her left hand, which she had in a tight fist. She looked unbelievably pissed off. I was frightened. “Move away from the glass,” she ordered. “Do it.”

I backed away from the broken mirror and its scattered pieces. “Wait—”

And suddenly, she was on top of me. She rolled right over my arm and lodged the wheel against the base of my neck. Both my head and arm were pinned to the floor. I hissed and writhed, flailing weakly with my other arm. I had a wheelchair on top of me, and I still wasn’t completely sure of what was happening.

“You want to die? You want to kill yourself?” Alice was shouting angrily. “You want to end it all? Just say it!”

Kill myself? Why would she think that? I hadn’t been trying to kill myself. Had I? “Hssssss! No! Hssssss!”

The pressure left my neck as Alice moved her chair back. I did the only thing I could do; I made a run for it. I got as far as the foyer in front of the stairs when my nerves erupted in electric pain. She was using the remote, and she was using it for far longer than was necessary. I don’t think she had any idea how much that thing hurt. I screamed and convulsed and beat the floor.

I went completely still as the shocks finally stopped, though I was bawling

my eyes out. She approached me from behind, grabbed me by the sleeve of my dress, and roughly flipped me over onto my back. She was so angry that she slid out of the wheelchair and crawled on top of me, supporting herself with a forearm across my chest. I could barely breathe, but I was still screaming.

“*Attack* me, huh? How about now?” She smacked me on the side of the head. I saw stars. I didn’t even try to defend myself. “Get that damn thing off,” she growled, clawing at the mask, ripping it from my face and throwing it to the side.

I watched my mask hit the wall and break in two. It was as if my heart split in half along with it. My mouth fell open in shock. That was my *face*! “*Hss! Hssssssssss!*”

“Cut that out!” She slapped me again, forcing my attention back to her.

“*Hssss!* Don’t kill me, don’t kill meeee!”

Her anger abated, just a little, once she could see the pain and fear in my face. She thumped my body against the floor. “So *now* you want to live? What’s the hell’s the *matter* with you?”

“I didn’t mean to! I’m sorry! I swear to god!” I sobbed. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“What’s got into you? Have you lost your mind?”

“Yes. No! Not right now. I don’t know!”

Alice was panting from exertion. She slowly closed her eyes and she bowed her head a little. Our adrenaline was fading. “‘Acting out’ she says,” she muttered under her breath. “So you lash out at me because I won’t let you kill yourself? Is that how it is?”

“I... no...” I stammered. Did she think I was really trying to kill myself? That was ridiculous! Wasn’t it? I was just a little crazy, that’s all. I wasn’t trying to commit suicide. Was I? I had only wanted to end the confusion, to prove that I was just a doll, to stop the pain. That sounded a whole lot crazier now than it had a few minutes ago.

Had I really been that out of it? Would I have just kept cutting myself and bleeding until I died? *Oh my god*, I thought. *Did Alice just save my life?* I had an image of that grave of mine in the mausoleum, except it wasn’t empty, *I* was in it: motionless, dead, rotting. “But... I-I don’t wanna be dead!”

“Yeah,” Alice said, slowly rolling off of my body so that she was on her back beside me. “Yeah. That’s just what I said, too. After the fact.”

I started to cry harder. Is this the sort of thing Alice had had to go through, emotionally, because of what I did to her? Had she gone just crazy enough from depression and from everything I had taken from her to lose sight of the fact that she really didn’t want to die? I still could never know exactly what she had been

feeling back then, but now I had a much, much better idea of it. “I’m so sorry,” I cried. It seemed like apologies were all I could say anymore.

We stayed like that, on our backs on the floor, for a while. Alice eventually spoke up. “What you need to do is decide if life, even the life you have now, is still worth living. That’s what it comes down to.”

“I want to live. I do!”

“Fine.” She pulled herself over to the wall at the base of the stairs and propped herself up. “Then stop feeling so sorry for yourself. It doesn’t matter whether you’re justified in feeling that way or not; it’s just no way to live. It eats you up. You have to get over it. Take it from me. I’ve been there.”

“I-I’ll try,” I said shakily. My arm was throbbing but didn’t hurt too much. The wrist of my bodysuit was soaked through with red, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped. The injury wasn’t bad. Just superficial. Alice had managed to stop me before I did too much damage. Ironically, I had probably hurt her worse than myself. I rolled over to look at her. She was still clutching her left hand in a fist. Blood had filled the tight crevices between her fingers. “Does it hurt?” I asked.

“Yeah, a *little*,” she said sarcastically. “It stings like hell.”

I looked around at the mess and started to cry again. There was blood on the floor. My catheter bag had come loose in the struggle and I was slowly wetting myself a drop at a time. I didn’t have the slightest clue what to do. I couldn’t stop shaking. “... help...”

Alice studied me, sighed, then held out her good hand. “Come here,” she sighed. Unsure of what she wanted, I approached hesitantly. She took my shoulder and coaxed me on top of her, putting her arm around my shoulders. My head rested on her chest. I could hear her heartbeat. She patted my back. “Shh, calm down. It’ll be alright.”

I couldn’t explain what I was feeling. Even after everything I had done to hurt her, there she was, trying to soothe me. My actions had crippled her and had almost cost her her life, and still she had turned around and saved mine. My eyes burned.

“If you ever get thoughts like that again... you can talk to me,” she said. “Alright?”

I nodded.

Following a period of awkward silence, I whispered, “I was jealous of you.”

“What? When?”

“At work. You had everything I wanted, and everyone liked you, and you never had to be the way I was or do any of the things I had to do to get there. You were just good at it. And I was jealous, and I wanted to tear you down. I’m sorry.” *Don’t hate me.*

“Oh. Yeah. I figured it was something like that.”

I couldn't tell if that made her mad at me or not. “Do you think you could ever like me?” I asked. I had already been brought too low to feel pathetic for asking that. It just seemed like everybody always hated me. I wanted to be liked.

After almost a minute, Alice sighed deeply. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

I felt her nod. “Okay.” Her chest heaved a silent laugh. “I'm still going to tease you, though.”

So it was finally okay between us. Not perfect, but okay. It was a start. In spite of what had just happened, I felt a calmness settle over me. I had no doubt that she would continue to tease and even hurt me, because she simply had too much in common with Evelyn in that regard. But as long as she didn't hate me when she did it, I guess I could handle that. That didn't make all of our problems disappear. She was still stuck in a wheelchair, and I was still her sister's crippled plaything. We would just have to learn to live with that. At least we didn't have to be enemies on top of it.

There was the rattling of keys and the front the door swung open. I turned my head to see Evelyn and Sarah standing there in the doorway, surveying the scene with open-mouthed surprise. I could only imagine what was going through Evelyn's head upon entering and finding broken glass and bloody handprints everywhere – on the floor, on my broken mask, and on me – and me lying on top of her sister.

“Uh... there was a small, um... incident,” explained Alice.

Then the fireworks began.

Chapter 38

I tried my best to stay as inconspicuous as possible during the chaos that followed. Sarah alternated between coddling Alice and yelling at me. Alice was trying to assure her that no one was mortally wounded and that, no, an ambulance would not be necessary. Evelyn just glared at me in complete silence. I withered under the force of that glare. It was like feeling the wrath of god spear through me and pin me to the spot: just some tiny insect specimen impaled on a needle, feebly kicking out the last of my strength. I didn't want her to be mad at me. I wasn't even afraid of being punished right then; I just didn't want her to be mad at me. It hurt.

After Sarah had gotten Alice back into her chair and into the bathroom to tend to her hand, Evelyn hauled me upstairs and hurled me onto the bed. I landed painfully and cried out. A bed may be soft, but it still hurts when you land nose

first. I laid there breathless for a moment before pushing myself onto my back so I could see what was going on.

Evelyn paced back forth at the foot of the bed. Every few seconds she looked like she was about to say something, but then stifled it with an irritated gesture. She was so angry. I had made her angry before, but never to the point of rendering her speechless. To my own surprise, I wasn't very concerned about my fate. I had done something bad and now I had to live with the consequences. Evelyn had taught me that, well enough. But that didn't mean I still couldn't be concerned with my own self-preservation, nor that I wanted to be punished for a misunderstanding. I ventured to speak first. "Don't be ma—"

"An *incident*?" Evelyn blurted. "An *incident*?"

"Wait—"

"She said you cut her? Cut yourself?"

"Well, it's—"

"What am I supposed to think when I come home to find you and my sister on the floor, covered in her *blood*?"

'Covered in blood' was a bit of an exaggeration, I thought. Lightly spattered, maybe, but not *covered*. Despite my attempts to stay calm and reasonable, I was starting to cry. I had lived too intimately with her for too long to be able to disconnect myself from her emotions. Her anger caused me emotional distress to the point of physical pain. "*Hsss!* It wasn't—"

"So what's the excuse for this, and, *oh*, I can't wait to hear this one."

I just stared at her, frightened and cringing. "I..."

"Well? Out with it!"

"You..." I began, expecting to be interrupted by another outburst. "You don't understand. I wasn't thinking right."

"You've got that right. Do you have any idea what I'll do to you for this? *I* don't even know yet! That's how upset I am: I can't even think of what I'm going to do you," she said with a terrifying hint of hysteria in her voice. She sounded as if she was so surprised by the depth of her own rage that she found it almost comical. "I told you to behave. I didn't think I had to specifically warn you not attack Alice with sharp objects. I thought that would have been implicitly understood!"

"*Hssss!* I didn't mean to! It was an accident!"

"An accident? An accident is rear-ending someone. An accident is tripping down the stairs. An accident is *not* slashing people with a broken mirror! Are you *insane*?"

"Yes!" I cried. "No! I mean, not now, but then. I thought I was something else. I mean—"

“*What?*”

“Noo, see, it was... *hsss!*” I was too distressed to think of the right words, and that definitely wasn’t helping the situation.

She stopped pacing and took hold of the baseboard of the bed, leaning towards me. “You attacked my sister. You better come up with a damn good reason for that, though frankly, I can’t imagine an excuse good enough. Did she attack you first? *Did* she?”

“No.”

“Do you remember, when you first got here, what I said what would happen if you had tried to hurt my sister directly?” Evelyn asked.

“Y-you said I’d already be d-dead.” I had no problem remembering something like that.

“Yes,” Evelyn said deliberately. Her knuckles were white. “Yes, that’s precisely right.”

I had no idea what she was thinking, but I could make a good guess. She couldn’t possibly be thinking about *that*, could she? After all this time? I wouldn’t be able to do a thing to stop if her, if that’s what she had in mind. And even if she wouldn’t do something *that* drastic, there were a thousand other terrible things she could do to me, if she was angry enough. “B-but you can’t do something like that,” I insisted desperately.

She gave me a queer sort of smile. “Why can’t I?”

I was about to reply when there was a knock on the door, which was still slightly ajar. Evelyn blinked. It was Sarah.

“Evelyn? Alice said she wanted to talk to you,” Sarah said.

“Not now, Sarah,” Evelyn replied, not taking her eyes off me. “You two go home. I’ll handle this.”

Sarah didn’t leave. “I want to take her to the ER to get her hand looked at – she might need some stitches. But she refuses to go until you talk to her.”

Evelyn made a noise of irritation in her throat. She pointed at me. “You don’t move. I’ll be back.” She then left and went downstairs with Sarah.

All I could do was wait it out with a fatalistic sense of dread. I wondered what they were talking about down there, and I thought of all the dreadful things that might await me once they were finished and Evelyn returned. I couldn’t do a damn thing about it. All I could do was stare at the ceiling and wet myself. Whatever was going to happen that night was going to happen, and I didn’t think anything I could do or say could prevent it.

A little later I heard the front door close, and I knew I was alone with Evelyn and her anger. *Think happy thoughts, think happy thoughts... oh, crap.* I cringed into the duvet when she entered the room.

Evelyn appeared to have been calmed, somewhat. She peered intently at me. “Alice pleaded for clemency on your behalf.”

“She did?” It was hard to imagine Alice coming to my defense. She really was a whole lot nicer than I ever gave her credit for.

“She said you tried to commit suicide. Is that true?”

“She...? I-I don’t know. I think, maybe... I don’t know!”

Evelyn took my hand and examined my wrist. The suit hadn’t been torn, so my skin wasn’t visible. She quickly and non-too-gently undressed me, leaving me naked but for my corset. I felt even more helpless without my clothes. The shallow cut on my wrist had already clotted into a welt of bright scarlet. I experienced an unexpected feeling of deep shame when I saw it. Evelyn let go of my arm. “I want the truth, Kathy.”

I winced. “*Hsss!* I don’t know! I don’t know what I was thinking! It all sounds so stupid now. It made sense at the time.” I was having to confess my own deranged thoughts, and it was humiliating.

“Tell me what you were thinking.”

“I-I didn’t plan it. I didn’t mean to hurt Alice, please believe me! It’s just that, I had the glass, and she grabbed for it, and I guess I pulled away or something and then she was bleeding and so mad...”

“Why did you have the glass?” she asked.

“I... did this.” I glanced towards my arm.

“And why would you want to hurt yourself?” She was using her psychiatrist tone with me; composedly and verbally peeling me.

I mumbled a response, and Evelyn told me to speak up. I swallowed, reflexively, and saliva spilled from the corner of my mouth. “I thought I might be full of stuffing.”

“Stuffing.”

“Like a doll,” I said, as if that clarified everything. “I know, I know. I’m nuts.”

Evelyn rubbed her face. “You thought you were a doll?” she asked, managing to sound both exasperated and angry at once. “And you cut yourself to try and prove it?”

“Yes?”

Evelyn reached for me. For a second, I thought she was going to hurt me and I hissed in fear. She picked me up under my arms and swung me around. She was holding me off the ground at arm’s length, facing the mirror. Even under those circumstances, a part of me marveled at and admired her physical strength. She shook me until I opened my eyes and looked at my reflection. No doll there. Nothing so fantastic as that. Nothing but a limp, crippled woman with a wet chin

and frightened eyes, an impossibly narrow waist and hardly any muscle tone worth noting. It hurt to see. I wanted my mask so much, but that was broken on the floor downstairs. Evelyn shook me every time I tried to look away.

“You’re not a doll. *This* is what you really are, Kathy! Nothing is ever going to change that,” she said from behind me. “You understand?”

“Yes, yes! *Hssss!* Please stop.” I begged.

“No, I won’t stop,” Evelyn said, though she deposited me back onto the bed. “You’re not crazy, Kathy. I know crazy. I work with it every day. And you are not it.”

“B-but you said!” I blubbered. “You said it was okay if I was!”

“I wasn’t being serious, you twit!” she snapped back.

“But you *wanted* me to be a doll!”

“It makes me happy for you to look like one, even to act like one, but I want you to remain Kathy on the inside, and fully aware of what you are. And of why you’re here,” she said.

“But—”

“Quiet. You can play at being crazy all you want, but that doesn’t make it real. Want to know what I think? I think your traumatized self constructed a little fantasy so that you wouldn’t have to face reality. It allowed you to enjoy things that you were ashamed of enjoying, because, after all, you were crazy. Does that sound right? It shielded you from finally accepting that your place is right here, with me, that this where you *belong*. Yeah? I thought so. It was the final defense between being who you were and accepting who you are now. I’ve known what’s been going inside you. Don’t you turn away from me, you *look at me*. I’ve known what your recent little fits of pique were all about. Stupid me, I let it pass. I thought we would work it out naturally, given a little time. I didn’t think your fantasy, when it finally crumbled, would defend itself so violently by having you attempt *suicide* to avoid facing reality.”

I gurgled angrily, but only because it all made such horrible sense. And I was mad at her, too. She kept taking things away from me! She had already taken my life, my body, my dignity, and my mind. Now she was taking the luxury of being crazy. Not only that, it made me sound so foolish when she spoke of it all aloud. I wanted to hate her for saying those things, but I couldn’t. Not really. I could fear her – I could do that easily – but I could no longer summon up the will to truly hate her. She had taken that ability away from me, too. “*Hssss!*”

“Cry all you want. What’s done is done. Now I have to decide what to do about this. I can’t let you try this again,” Evelyn said, resuming her pacing.

I could probably guess what she was thinking. If someone was utterly determined to die, they would somehow find a way. The only way to be

completely sure someone wouldn't attempt suicide was to make them incapable of doing *anything*. Evelyn had the means to do that. "I can't live that way."

"What? Speak up."

"Please don't do anything bad to me," I begged in earnest, hoping to reach her before she did something rash. For all I knew, I was a hair's breadth away from being paralyzed for life, just for my own safety. "Don't poison me all the way. I couldn't stand it, I'd die inside. Please, I'll never do anything like that again, I swear. I swear."

"You could try it again at any time, and I—"

"But I don't want to! I told Alice I want to live! I do!" I insisted.

"You've always been good at telling people what they want to hear. Oh, I wish I could believe you. I just don't know. It's such a risk..." she trailed off, deep in thought.

"Alice could do it again—"

"Stop," she warned. As always, Alice was a touchy subject. Even now, Evelyn didn't like me mentioning her depression and resultant suicide attempt.

"No, listen! Alice could still hurt herself, but would you do something like that to her to keep her safe? She said she wouldn't, and all you can do is trust her. I told her I wouldn't do it again and she believed me! Please, believe me, too."

You have to.

Evelyn looked at me long and hard. "Even if it means living with me?" she asked.

"Yes! Yes." I meant it. Crawling around and drooling on myself sucked, but it was better than being dead, that's for sure. If only I had reached that conclusion before reaching for that broken mirror earlier. I wondered if trying to kill myself counted as an escape attempt. If so, it was the most permanent escape there could be.

I watched Evelyn pace some more. To my surprise, I realized she was crying. Evelyn was *crying*. I had only seen her cry one other time and that was when she was hurting from a sprained foot and worrying about being able to take care of me properly. This time was no less disturbing. I hated to see her cry; it was like the foundation of my world was jeopardy. She was supposed to be the one who made *me* cry, or come, or get angry, or be happy. That's just the way it was. "Evelyn?"

She wiped her cheeks with the heels of her hands, then got onto the bed and straddled my legs. She took me by the shoulders and gave me a sharp shake.

"You will *not* leave me!"

"I-I know," I insisted.

She lifted me up and hugged me fiercely, crushing my face into her bosom.

“When I came in and saw you, the blood... my first thought was that you were dead. I couldn’t even... Don’t you ever make me feel that again. *Ever*. I couldn’t bear to lose you now.”

“O-okay.”

“Promise me!”

“I promise,” I cried into her chest. She kept holding me like that for a long time. I was still marveling over how much she seemed to need me. I was actually *wanted* by someone, even though I was freak. She wasn’t just saying it to manipulate me. She really meant it.

When she finally let me go, I crashed hard. It had been a long, stressful day, after all. A busy day. I had attempted suicide, recovered my sanity (sort of), fought and reconciled with Alice, come close to getting paralyzed, and had to calm down an irate Evelyn and convince her I wasn’t a threat to myself. All in one evening. I was at the physical and emotional end of my rope.

Evelyn, having composed herself, tended to my wrist, gave me a quick sponge bath, and got me situated for bed. Then she had to call Alice and check on her. Turns out Alice did need a few stitches in her hand. I felt pretty guilty about that. I was sure I’d be hearing about it for a long time.

After cleaning up downstairs and taking a shower, Evelyn slid under the sheets with me and wiped my chin dry. She looked at me with her head on her pillow. “You were saying something a little while ago, when Sarah came in.”

“You mean when where you scaring me into an early heart attack?”

A husky chuckle. “Yes, then. You said something about me not being able to do whatever I wanted with you. You know you’re completely under my power. What’s to stop me from doing anything to you I pleased?”

“Well, just that, you know,” I said uncomfortably. “*Hss!* I mean, you could do whatever you wanted, but it’s just that you... you promised you’d take care of me. If you did something, uh, really bad to me, well, it wouldn’t be taking care of me. Right?”

She looked momentarily surprised. “You’re right,” she said softly, rubbing my tummy even though I couldn’t feel it. “You’re absolutely right. I almost forgot that. I’m so sorry. Forgive me.”

I gurgled through my valve, unable to look at her. I was feeling such strange... not love, certainly not that. But, then, what? Need, definitely. Some species of affection, maybe? I stared at the dolls on the shelves until Evelyn settled down and turned off the light.

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I stayed awake for long time just thinking things over, in spite of my total exhaustion. I cried a little while to myself, just to release some of the stress. After

that, I felt oddly at peace. I rolled over to look at Evelyn's face, gently illuminated by the moonlight. I was going to be seeing her next to me in bed like this for the rest of my life. I was sure of it. For all appearances, we might as well be lovers; not even most marriages lasted as long as we had been already together. Or been as intensely intimate.

I would never date, or walk, or hold down a job, or make virtually any decisions for myself again. I would always have to be whatever Evelyn, my demonic angel of mercy, wanted me to be. And all she would let me do was to do nothing, just relax and let myself be taken care of. What choice did I have but to learn to accept it? If I couldn't, then I'd just be miserable forever. I didn't want that. As Alice said, that was no way to live.

I rolled over and pulled myself to Evelyn's side of the bed without disturbing her, which wasn't easy with my weak muscles quivering like they did whenever they were overtaxed. I got up close to Evelyn and, after studying her face for a moment, I kissed her lightly on the cheek. Just to, you know, see what it was like. Just to try it out. She licked her lips and mumbled something inaudible, but she didn't awaken.

Okay, I thought. I guess... I can live like this.

Chapter 39

Several weeks went by after that fateful day. I was sitting on the couch, watching tv with Jinx. I had been masturbating (it was just a pleasurable habit that I was neither able nor willing to quit), but I gotten bored with that after a while. I don't remember what it was I was watching, but I do remember that it was something funny and that I genuinely laughed, a little bit, for the first time since... well, a long time. I was wearing a light flower-print summer dress. My lycra suit and dollish dress had gotten stained with blood, and Evelyn hadn't been able to get the stains out to her satisfaction. Being the perfectionist she was, it bothered her so much that she wouldn't let me wear them. She was going to have all new ones made. I thought that was a waste, but, whatever; it wasn't my money.

Of course, since she was such a pervert, I couldn't get away with just wearing regular clothes and looking semi-normal. She had gotten a pair of lightweight leg braces that weren't nearly as heavy duty as the ones I was used to, and they only went up to my thighs. I hardly noticed them at all when they were unlocked for crawling, but it was impossible to ignore them when I was sitting up and looking at my lap. Especially not while wearing a short dress. I mean, what was the point? I was already permanently crippled, I couldn't walk, and wearing them didn't benefit me in any way. All they did was make me *look* more disabled.

I guess that was the whole idea. Evelyn thought they were adorable, and made sure I heard all about it at every opportunity.

Evelyn came in from fetching things from her car. She had a huge stack of flat cardboard boxes. I hoped they weren't meant to involve me in some way. She had been acting strange – strange for her, anyway – for days. Excited, as if she had some big secret. She leaned the boxes against the stairs and came to adjust a ribbon-style barrette in my hair. “Don't you just look precious,” she commented.

“No, I don't,” I mumbled.

“Yes you do, and don't argue or I'll just have to *tickle* you!” she said, attacking my ribs.

“*Hssss! Ssssstop!*”

Thank god, she did stop. “Who's the prettiest crippled girl, ever?”

I sighed. “I am.”

“There you go. And don't pretend to be so grumpy. I saw you smiling about something when I came in.”

“*Hss!*” I changed the subject. “You need to vacuum the rug in here.”

“Think so, do you?”

“I have a very close and personal relationship with the carpet. You'd notice dirt quicker, too, if you had to drag *your* boobs over the floor wherever you went.”

“Nag, nag, nag,” she said good-naturedly. “Fine, grouse all you want. Maybe you'll cheer up after you hear my news.”

“News?” I looked up at her.

She spread her arms and announced, “We're moving!”

“*Moving? Where?*”

“Up north! Well, the northern part of the state. A beautiful rural area. It's absolutely gorgeous,” she said with a smile. “What did you think I kept making all those house-hunting trips up there for?”

“I didn't know that's what you were doing,” I said angrily. “Nobody tells me anything! Moving why? You love this house.”

“I like a house, I don't 'love' a house. I decided it was time for a change,” she said. “Besides, even though you're dead to the world, it's still a little risky around here. That became quite clear that day in the coffee shop. When we move, you'll be far removed from anyone who might remember the old Katherine we all treasured so. You'll be able to be seen in public, occasionally, and no one will be suspicious that you're anything other than you appear. Just think of it as finally and completely starting a new life as a new person.”

“*Hssssss!* What about me? My feelings? What if I don't want to move? Don't I have any say in the matter?” I had gotten so familiar with this house that in some sense was still a cage for me. I was comfortable in it. I was terrified of

simply leaving the house, much less traveling to some place far away I knew nothing about. I could already feel the chill of agoraphobia creeping up my spine.

Evelyn laughed at me. “What *if* you don’t want to move? No, you don’t have any say in the matter. Silly thing.”

I glowered petulantly into the corner, gurgling to myself, a string of saliva hanging down to my chest. I know it was stupid, but I did sort of feel as if I was a part of this relationship and that I should be allowed some sort of input in a decision this major. But I supposed she was right. It’s not like my opinion mattered anymore. I was just a decoration, to be moved from one place to another at will. If I started thinking along the lines of having opinions, I’d just end up making myself depressed.

“Don’t be that way. I know you’re frightened by change. You’ll like it, once you get accustomed to it. Trust me.” She sat down and put her arm around me. “Besides, it doesn’t matter where you live, as long as you have me to take care of you, right?”

“I guess,” I said sullenly, but wasn’t so easily mollified. “But... okay, but what about your work?”

“I quit.”

I just stared quizzically at her. “Your job? You quit your *job*?”

She nodded happily.

“What? *Hsss!* How? Why? What about... what about money? How could you do that?”

“It was getting old, puppet,” she said. “It was really starting to stress me out. The endless flow of problems, and so few resolutions. I wasn’t very happy with it anymore, so I quit.”

“B-b-but...” I just couldn’t wrap my head around how someone could just up and leave a decent, good-paying job. If you had one, you hung onto it, no matter the cost! Stressing out was just part of the bargain. You didn’t just up and quit. It was an utterly foreign concept to me. “But you just can’t.”

“Can, could, and did,” she said. “I’ll figure out something after we move. I already have some ideas.”

“*Hsss!* Okay, okay, I don’t want to think about that,” I decided, pushing the subject of job-quitting aside. “What about Alice? You’re just going to leave her here?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Alice and Sarah are coming, too. We pooled our resources and we’re all going to live together. Won’t that be wonderful? It’s better for everyone. I can take some of the burden of helping Alice off Sarah’s shoulders, and you’ll have them around to help take care of you when necessary. It makes perfect sense.” As she spoke, she was slowly hiking the hem of my dress

up my thighs, revealing the thick brace straps.

“Oh, nooo,” I moaned. Living with Alice and Sarah? They would get to see me *all the time*. I would never have any privacy! “But they’ll tease me.”

“No, they won’t. Well, not always. But let’s not talk about this anymore for now,” she said, caressing my braces, then sliding her hand up my thigh.

I felt myself becoming wet as my body responded to how it had been trained. The effects of that hellish time in sensory deprivation had stayed with me, so far as needing Evelyn’s touch went. When she touched me like that, everything else just seemed to disappear, and all I wanted was to have my weak and fragile body softly crushed in her strength. Perhaps there was some small part of me that still wanted to resist the irresistible, but most of me by that time was wholeheartedly thankful that such a terrible person as myself was allowed to feel such pleasure.

I remained aware on some level that this was simply how my mind had been programmed to think after countless days of relentless psychological and physical torture, but I just couldn’t summon the strength to worry about it anymore. Evelyn would always get her way and doing what she wanted could sometimes feel so good.

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Later, after I had eaten her out for what seemed like hours, I sprawled exhausted between her thighs. She pulled me up so that my cheek rested on her cushy belly and she stroked my head. “Oh, my puppet, my slave,” she chuckled, “I so rule you.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“Oh, I just remembered,” she said, rolling onto her side to get something from the nightstand. Squeezed between her fleshy thighs, I went with her, hissing in annoyance as she reached into the drawer before flopping back onto the bed. “Here we go. I finally found a glue that would work.”

“*Hssss!*” I cried happily. *My mask!* I hadn’t seen it for weeks. Evelyn had kept saying she would fix it for me, but said none of the glue she tried would hold the edges strong enough. I was starting to worry she didn’t want me to have it anymore and was just making an excuse. I could still see the seam of the crack running from the chin to the corner of one eye and on up the forehead. I started to reach for it. Evelyn didn’t tease me and went ahead and put it on my head.

“Wipe your chin, first. There we go. It’s not perfect, but I think the crack suits you. Very apropos.”

“*Hsssss!*” I could have cried as I felt it snug on my face. Safe and inhuman again. I suddenly felt the strangest urge to suck my thumb, but the opening between the lips wasn’t big enough for that. Why would I even think of

something like that? I might not have been as crazy as before, but I don't know if anyone could have gone through what I had and retained all their marbles.

Evelyn absent-mindedly fussed with lining up the mask. "It's so funny. When I first had you here, all I wanted was to make you suffer for as long as humanly possible. Now, all I want to do is hold you. Stroke you. Wipe away your tears."

"You..." I began tentatively, intuitively afraid of saying something to anger my goddess. "You know you're the... cause of most of those tears."

She didn't get angry. Instead, she laughed. "Of course. If I didn't make them, then I couldn't have them to wipe away, now could I?"

I replied with a non-committal hiss. It was true, in a twisted sort of way.

"And if you didn't have something to cry about," she went on, "you couldn't have the pleasure of being comforted. You know, something occurred to me the other day. These past few weeks have really been lovely. You've changed."

"Oh, really? You think?" If she was trying to make some sort of jab, it wasn't going to work. Now that I had my mask back, I was invulnerable again. Sort of.

"Sarcastic attitude notwithstanding. I guess I'll never be rid of that," she grumbled. "I was *trying* to pay you a sincere compliment. What I meant was, everything has been going very nice and smoothly. No fights. No hissy fits. You seem much calmer, and that makes life so much more pleasant. Don't you think?"

"I guess," I admitted. It's not like I had a choice. I had been literally and psychologically crushed into a mold that physically and mentally prevented anything but a grudging placidity. Boredom, terror, boredom, terror; enjoy it or suffer, suffer and enjoy it; accept it, accept it, accept it or go so nuts you cut your pretty doll wrists until you bleed... get broken and glued back together, like my face. Accept it.

"Yes. And even better," Evelyn continued, "I don't think I've ever seen Alice so, well, upbeat. You've made her happy, you make me happy... Sarah, well, she still has a chip on her shoulder, but she'll come around. See how happy you can make the people around you if you want to?"

"But I'm not doing anything. If I am, it's only by providing sadists with a source of amusement."

She giggled. "See? You just made me laugh right then. It's just your natural self shining through without all those facades of nastiness and ambition from before. I think I can pronounce you well on the path to recovery."

"Does that mean I can go now?" I asked.

"Nooo, I think I need to keep you under lifelong observation. Just to make sure you don't slip back to your old ways. Remember, I *am* your doctor, and it's

for your own good.”

“What about me? What if *I’m* not happy?”

“You aren’t? Not even sometimes? Tiny little bit? No? I think you’re lying. I’ve seen you happy. I think, in the future, you’ll spend a lot less time being morose and a lot more time being happy. Just give it some time.” She peered at me, then said, “I think I know something that will make you quite happy. Or at least relieved.”

“What?”

“I want you to trust me. And I want most of all to be able to trust you. I hope I can, now.”

“Okay?” *What’s she getting at?*

“That myotoxin I keep in the refrigerator. I threw it all away,” she said.

“You did what? Why?”

“Would you rather I kept it? I want to be able to prove to you that I can trust you. I decided that I wouldn’t be needing it anymore. Oh, I can always get more, if the need arises, but it would give me time to give it more consideration by the time it arrived. And you won’t have to worry about being paralyzed as a result of impulsive anger anymore.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” I was on the verge of tears. I couldn’t believe she could be so nice to me. I pressed my masked face into the soft mound of her belly. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“See? I guess you *can* still find things that make you happy. Now you simply have to avoid doing something that will make me regret I threw it out. You won’t, will you?” she asked.

“No, never, I promise,” I vowed.

“That’s good to hear. At the very least, maybe it will help you relax a little to not have that stuff in the house. Speaking of relaxing,” she said, sliding me from between her thighs and propping me against the pillows. She locked my braces’ knee joints so that I wouldn’t be able to go anywhere. “There you go. *Tch*, my tummy’s wet. I need to get cleaned up and start tackling the house. So much to pack. I don’t even know where to start. Maybe the office? Oh, this is going to be a headache and a half, I swear. Want to give me a hand?”

“*Hssss!*”

“No? Very well, I don’t mind. Now, be still.”

And I went still.

Epilogue

That pretty well sums up how I came to be who I am, where I am... what I am. The first year of my new life. It's been nearly two years since we moved here to my new home. About three since I was kidnaped and turned into Evelyn's toy. Has it really been that long? I've gotten used to the idea of being Evelyn's lifelong plaything, I've gotten used to being weak and helpless, I've even gotten used to the fact that this is how it's always going to be. I won't claim there haven't been some rough spots since we came here. And it's a good thing Evelyn never seems to grow tired of me being the way I am, because I sure as hell can't change now. The person I was no longer exists. The person I've become is... well, she's doing okay.

I cried a few times during the trip here. Mostly it was nerves, but I suppose there was a deeper undercurrent. Being driven so far away from everything I knew in my old life – even the bad stuff was at least familiar – was the final nail in the coffin, so to speak. It was almost like being kidnapped all over again. I mean, the first time I was kidnapped, I was unconscious during it. This time I had to sit quietly and watch the mile markers telling me I was getting farther and farther away from everything I had ever known and everything I used to be.

I guess it turned out for the best. The house they picked out turned out to have only one story, you know, so that Alice could get everywhere without troubling with stairs, but it has a kind of sprawling layout so that it's not too small for all of us together. I was a little skeptical when I first saw it. It's in the middle of nowhere! Feels that way, anyway. The nearest neighbors are on the other side of a big field and lots of fences. It's totally alien to me, having lived my whole life in the Big City, and then spending the better part of a year in an attic and a bedroom. The space is just too big and empty. It seems like everything is made of trees, weeds, and bugs.

Evelyn and Alice were ecstatic; they had grown up in a place like this, though it took Sarah a long time to get adjusted. She had never lived outside the city either. Happiest of all of us was probably Jinx. Being an indoor cat, he just didn't know what to do with himself once he had all that space. I've learned, however, that he is frightened of mice. Is our whole family dysfunctional in some way, or what?

The nearest city is about thirty minutes away, and although it has most of the amenities of where I used to live, it's not a trip to be made spur of the moment. You can't just pop over to the mall for some shopping. Not that I'm taken out of the house very often, but sometimes I am. For special occasions. I don't do well in public, though. Staying out of public is more my choice than something forced upon me. Keeping me shut up in the house is actually a mercy. Heck, even

locking me up isn't necessary. Like I'm going to make a break for it, now? Right.

I *have* gotten more used to being perceived by the rest of the world as some handicapped person. It's what I am, after all, regardless of how I became that way. But I just hate being seen by strangers, even though there's no chance of anyone any of us knew recognizing us. It makes me want to disappear. Whenever they have company over, Evelyn just sticks me in a back room. Says I'm not feeling well if guests have met me in public and ask about me. I never make a peep, nope, you won't hear a sound out of me. I know which side my bread's buttered on.

Evelyn had me memorize a whole new history for myself, just in case. I had a stroke at a young age, that's my cover story. She even called in a favor from a former client who knew someone who could make false identities. I have an ID card and a birth certificate and stuff like that. It's not in depth enough to stand up serious investigation or to get me on disability or anything, but it's enough in case some kind emergency comes up. I'm actually very thankful I have it. I wouldn't want to risk being taken away from Evelyn for any reason now, but especially not because I wasn't able to prove I was who I claimed to be if something happened.

There are some good things about being way out here. It's quiet, for one. I cope better with quiet. I can sit in a chair on the side porch with the ceiling fan on and watch Evelyn do her gardening under the trees in the evenings. It's really nice. I can say for certain that the slow pace doesn't bother me at bit anymore. Last winter I saw real snow for the first time in my life. All day long I did nothing but sit by the window and watch the snow come down, blanketing everything. It was so beautiful. Sometimes... sometimes I can even forget that all of this was against my will. Sometimes I can pretend that this was how I intended my life to be. Sometimes, I believe it.

It didn't take long for Evelyn to narrow down a job she wanted. She bought a local plant nursery that's only a few minutes away. She does landscaping projects. She's a crazy plant lady. She probably knows even more about gardening than she did about psychiatry, and her knowledge in that area was not inconsiderable. I think it's a waste, buying a nursery, since with her education I know she's capable of so much more. She makes decent money doing it, but she could have gotten more back at her old job. I just can't get my head around it. I guess old habits die hard.

For her part, I don't think she could possibly be more satisfied with her work. During the rare occasions I'm taken out somewhere, we always have to take long detours so she can show me various yards she's worked on. The yards do look nice. She tries to explain the projects to me and I can only nod, smile, and pretend like I have some clue about what she's talking about. I can barely tell a pansy from a petunia, myself. Alice was hired on to work in the store, at least

until she finds something she wants to do more. Nobody asks me, but I think that's also a waste, given Alice's job experience. They seem happy enough to be able work with each other, like its some childhood dream of theirs or something. Sarah does technical writing, which she can do from home, so I'm rarely left completely alone anymore. Lately, however, Sarah's been thinking of taking up painting again, like she did in college. My god, I just realized I'm living with a bunch of hippies.

It was hard learning to live with everybody under one roof. It felt like I never had any privacy. At least there's enough floor space so that they aren't always tripping on or rolling over me. Alice and Sarah have one wing of the house to themselves so that we weren't always bunched up. I've seen some pretty strange things, too. Never in my wildest imaginings would I have pictured Sarah tied up in an archway and getting flogged by her wheelchair-bound lover. I guess that explains a lot, though what it explains, I'm not exactly sure. Alice has really strong arms, too, because of the wheelchair. She can hit hard when she wants, too. I'm so thankful Evelyn's sadism doesn't require that sort of thing. I don't think I could deal with being beaten, on top of everything else. I wasn't even supposed to be watching it – Evelyn allows them their privacy – but I'm quiet, and people don't notice me peeking around the bottom edge of doorways. I mean, it's not really my fault that I snoop; the sound of a whipping somewhere in the house demands investigation! I've been caught watching, of course, but I probably shouldn't tell them that sometimes I've masturbated while watching them do that stuff.

My relationship with them have, by necessity, improved. I get along with Sarah a lot better now. Since Evelyn and Alice are off at work at together, we're pretty much stuck with each other for company. And Alice... well, I guess Alice is sort of like an older sister to me now. That's the best way I can describe it. She teases me and I sometimes antagonize her, but, well, there's no hate in it anymore. I will always feel guilt for what I did to her, but I think it's pretty fair to say that I've done my penance. I've done my best to make up for it. What more can I do? Anyway, it's a strange dynamic, living with the others, to say the least. I'm treated as Evelyn's lover. But I'm also her slave. Her property. Mostly, I'm treated by the others as some kind of cross between a family member and pet, I guess? I mean, sometimes they see me as I'm a person. Other times, I'm that strange hissing thing underfoot. There's no sharp line between the two. All these things going on at once. It's a strange mix... it's hard describe.

And what do I do nowadays? Not a lot. I sit around, I crawl around, I make Evelyn happy in whatever way that's required. I hiss. I drool. I masturbate compulsively. I watch tv when I'm allowed. I look at magazines when I can reach

them. I watch birds. Sometimes I'm in braces and sometimes not. I wear those lightweight leg braces a lot of the time. I barely even notice them anymore. I'm seldom put in the whole-body immobilizing set these days, but sometimes. I'm still unhappy when that happens because it feels like punishment. I have lots of new doll clothes for Evelyn to dress me in, and I have several new masks. The first one, cracked though it may be, is still my favorite. I spend at least half my time in those masks. A lot of the time, when I'm in that zoned-out doll mode, I'm just treated as a decoration, which honestly doesn't bother me at all anymore.

On some days I feel more crazy than on others. There are days when I'm not entirely convinced that I might not really be a doll, after all. Close enough, I guess. I allow myself to sink into that fantasy, sometimes. Not in a destructive way, though, like that other time. It's just... I don't feel like I'm completely human anymore. I am, but... I'm not. Most of the time.

My waist is now close to fifteen inches around. I can hardly believe it whenever I see myself in a mirror. I feel like I'm in danger of snapping in half. Evelyn boasts she can make me even smaller. The stent in my throat has pretty much become a part of me. I haven't eaten any real food in so very long. I do miss that. But I can taste and smell now. Evelyn got this new style of tube that lets air in around the sides, so I no longer have to live feeling like I have a perpetually stuffy nose. Smelling things is underrated. It's great. And I've spent so long on the floor, it's hard to remember what walking actually feels like. That's probably what I miss most of all. I don't know. There are some days when I don't really think about walking at all. I guess after a few more years, I'll stop missing it and get used to that, too.

I can get sad thinking about the all things I can't do anymore. But there's a difference between feeling sad about something you've lost, even mourning for it, and being depressed all the time.

And now the big question: do I still want to escape? No.

Thoughts of escape don't really cross my mind anymore, to be honest. I mean, this is my home now. This is where I belong. This is my family, as odd as it sounds. What I do wonder about sometimes is what my life would be like if I had never been kidnapped by Evelyn. I wonder what I would be doing now. Would I still be a cold, petty, and lonely, doing anything to get ahead in a job that didn't really amount to much anyway? Probably. I wonder, if I could compare both paths side by side, in which one would I have more happiness? I'll never know. But, compared to what my life was like before she took me, even though it amazes me to think it, I think maybe this is better. I'm not happy all the time, obviously, but... when I am, the happiness is *realer* now than anything I ever knew in my past.

A few weeks ago, Evelyn got the bright idea of having me tell my story. At least detailing what happened in that first year. She says that in the event of anything happening to her, Alice, and Sarah, then at least I'll get to have my story known. Until then, it'll be locked away, safe and sound. Anyway, I can neither type nor write with my hands the way they are, so she's been transcribing my dictation on her laptop in the evenings. She's writing this down now, as I speak. She *claims* she hasn't editing any of it to make herself look better, so I guess I just have to trust her on that. I've read through some of it and it all looks pretty factual. Then only editing she's done is to tame my rambling and put it all into a better narrative form. I can't be one-hundred percent sure that all of my thoughts and everything that was spoken is fully accurate, but it's pretty close. Much of it I was able to recall with crystal clarity, once I got going.

She thought it would be a good idea for me to talk about all of this stuff, but it hasn't been easy. It's dredged up a lot of bad memories. I cried when having to relive some of the events I've talked about. I've tried hard to suppress much of it, but Evelyn says that's rarely a good idea. And a lot of it is so embarrassing; I'd just die if anybody ever reads this. Although, by the time anyone ever does, I guess I'll already be dead or beyond caring. What's been funny is watching Evelyn's reactions to my innermost thoughts and the things I did which she's only just now learning about. It's actually pissed her off sometimes, but hey, this was her idea. I have diplomatic immunity! Other times, she's started to get all emotional and cry. Like when I talked about how I kissed her cheek while she slept that time. She never knew about that until now. She got all weepy and had to stop writing for a while.

And what's my relationship with Evelyn like nowadays? Well, what can I say? I guess I can admit it now. I love her. Oh, great, see, she's getting all weepy again. Yes, I'm talking about you. I love you, you psycho bitch. Are you happy now? I need you more than anything in the world. Oh, no, you've gotta stop or I'm going to start crying, too, and then we'll never get this done. Okay? You didn't write that part down, did you? Promise? Okay, good.

Where was I? Oh, yeah. What can I say? I love her. Someone reading this might wonder how I could have feelings for someone who did everything she's done to me. It took a long time, but I've been under her foot for years, remember. I've had a lot of time to get used to it. I literally can't imagine life without her. I guess if she had been nothing but cruel all those years, I certainly wouldn't feel anything for her. Terrified awe, maybe – like in the beginning – but certainly not love. But she hasn't been cruel always. And when there is cruelty, well... it's just how she shows her love.

She's the center of my world. She's everything to me. Everything I know,

good or bad, comes to me through her. She's my pagan goddess, coming to bed smelling of damp earth and heliotrope bath salts. I fear her. I worship her. I live for her touch. I'd die without her. I'm her puppet. I look however she wants, I do whatever she wants, I even feel whatever she wants. It's not so bad now that I'm used to it. It's nice to be needed.

And let us not forget: she takes very, very good care of me.

Do you think that's enough for now? I'm pretty tired and I can't really think of anything more. I mean, that's everything. My life story, I guess. The end? Is it time to say good night?

Good night, puppet.