

Emma was aware that Gage had begun speaking, but could make little sense of his words. Until she heard the word ‘threesome.’ And her blood ran cold. *Oh, my God! He’s going to do it! He’s actually going to share me!*

Before she could react, Karl approached the stage and said, “Gage, it’s urgent that I speak with you right now.” He emphasized the last two words. “Cole, can we use your office?”

Opening one eye just a slit, Emma risked a peek. Karl looked grim.

“Of course,” Cole said. “You know where it is.”

“What is it, Karl?” Gage asked. “Can’t it wait until after we do this scene?”

“No.” Karl shook his head adamantly. “Now.”

Clearly annoyed, Gage sighed. “Very well. Now.” He descended the stairs. Emma could hear his retreating voice saying, “This better not be what I think it is,” as the two men walked away from the stage toward, Cole’s office.

Stomach roiling, panic replacing the languor of her limbs with urgency, she sat up and slid down off the exam table. The fact that she was utterly naked mattered to her not at all. The rest of the guests were milling around, so no one paid any attention to her as she ran down off the stage and looked frantically around. Where the hell was Cole’s office?

At that moment, Cole caught her attention, and when he saw the desperation in her expression, he pointed to his left. She scurried across the floor, arriving at the partially open door. Gage and Karl were having a heated discussion.

“The woman’s in love with you, you shithead,” Karl was saying, his voice low and growly with anger. “And you’re in love with her, except you’re too fucking stubborn to admit it. Stubborn or stupid, not sure which. Either way, you’re about to ask her to do something I’m pretty sure she’ll never be ready to do.”

“I don’t love her!” Gage swore vehemently. “I’ll never love anyone. Been there, done that. Never again. I’ve told her from the beginning that this is strictly about sex. That I can never love her or anyone, for that matter. If she’s fallen in love with me, it’s her own damn fault! That’s why I need to do this! To reinforce the fact that she’ll never be more to me than a sex partner. That’s why I haven’t gotten in touch with her for the past four days!”

“Yeah, and they’ve been the most miserable four days of your entire fucked-up life!” Karl threw at him. “You’ve wandered around your home and the office, growling and yelling at everyone like a bear with a sore paw. You’re constantly picking up your phone to call her, then changing your mind, making you even more grouchy and out of sorts. You can’t concentrate, you haven’t done a lick of work the entire time. Damn it, man! Admit you love her and put you, her, and everyone else out of your misery.”

“I don’t love her!” Gage insisted. “And sharing her with you will prove it.”

Emma pushed the door open.

Startled, both men turned in her direction, looks of shock on their faces.

“Emma, what—” Gage began, but Emma’s raised hand stopped him. She stepped into the room.

“How long have you been standing there?” Gage asked belligerently. “How much did you hear?”

She just looked at him, a mercifully numbing calmness creeping over her.

“Red.”

At that one word, both men gasped.

“You don’t mean that!” Gage yelled, taking a step toward her. “I’m the one who ends a relationship, here, not you.”

“And you just did.” Her voice was flat, almost robotic. She directed her gaze toward Karl. “Karl, would you please take me home? Or, if you can’t, I can call a cab. Except I have no money to pay the cabby.”

“Nonsense, of course I’ll take you home.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you,” Gage snapped. He turned to Emma. “You’re not leaving. Not until you and I have talked about this.”

“Oh, I think you’ve already said everything that needs to be said.” Emma’s quiet voice was ice cold, but resolute. “You’ve always been clear. Our relationship has never been about anything other than sex. Just my bad luck to fall in love with you.” Her chin trembled. Ruthlessly, she clenched her jaw, willing it to stop before she resumed speaking. “I’ll get over it. So, don’t worry. You’re off the hook. If I ever...misread your tenderness and affection for me...if I ever...harbored any hopes that you might someday return my feelings, you’ve certainly dashed those hopes tonight. So, I see no reason for us to continue.”

“You can’t mean that!”

“Watch me.”

She turned to leave, but he grabbed her left arm.

She didn’t struggle or try to pull away. She just looked pointedly at his hand. “Let go of me.”

“Not until we’ve talked,” he insisted.

Emma didn’t say anything else. Instead, her right fist swung around in a perfect roundhouse punch, landing hard on his left cheek and snapping his head back. His grip loosened and she pulled her arm free.

“I’ll be waiting in the lobby,” she said to Karl and left the room, shoulders squared, head high, as regal as a queen.

Sightlessly, she strode through the club, past Gage’s guests, and through the door out into the lobby. For a moment, she just stood there, alone, hugging herself, rubbing her upper arms and shaking so badly, she wasn’t sure how long she’d be able to keep from collapsing. Where was Karl? Why wasn’t he right behind her.

Someone else came out to join her. Cole Raskin. Moving to stand in front of her, he gave her an assessing look.

Throat thickening, eyes filling with tears, she just clamped her lips together and shook her head slightly. She knew that if she uttered a single word, she would dissolve into a torrent of tears, and once she started, she feared she’d never stop.

Someone else joined them. It was Stacy and she was carrying a dress, which she unzipped and dropped over Emma’s head, covering her nakedness. She pulled her arms through the arm holes, zipping it up the back, and tugging the skirt down. It was a simple white cotton sheath dress, with a scoop neck and no embellishment. At Emma’s questioning glance Stacy just said, “It’s Slave Rachel’s. She said you could have it.” Giving into impulse, she gave Emma a hug, which Emma didn’t return. She couldn’t. She was holding herself too stiffly to move, knowing that if she relaxed even the slightest bit, she would crumple.

The next person to join them was Karl.

“Wait here, Emma, with Cole and Stacy, while I go get the car.” He looked at Cole. “Don’t leave her alone.”

“Not for a second.”

No one spoke. There was nothing to say. The wait for Karl to return seemed interminable, but was no more than two minutes. He put his arm around her shoulder and led her outside, assisting her into the back seat.

Somehow, Emma managed to hold herself together through the ride home, through the walk from the parking space to her house, through the opening of the door and thanking Karl for the ride home and being such a good friend.

“I don’t want to leave you,” he said, clearly torn between staying with her and going to ream Gage a new ass hole.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” he insisted.

“Okay, I’m not fine. But I will be.” She raised her chin. “Because, even though he’s hell-bent on destroying his own life, I’m damned if I’m going to let that stupid-ass man destroy mine. I will get over him. And I will be fine.”

Karl’s insides were tearing up. He’d never felt so helpless in his life. “I know he loves you! I’ll talk to him. Try to talk some sense into him—”

“No.” It was spoken quietly, but adamantly. “If he loves me, this is a decision he has to come to on his own. I deserve no less.” She went up on tiptoes and kissed Karl’s cheek. “Good-bye, Karl.” She went inside and shut the door.