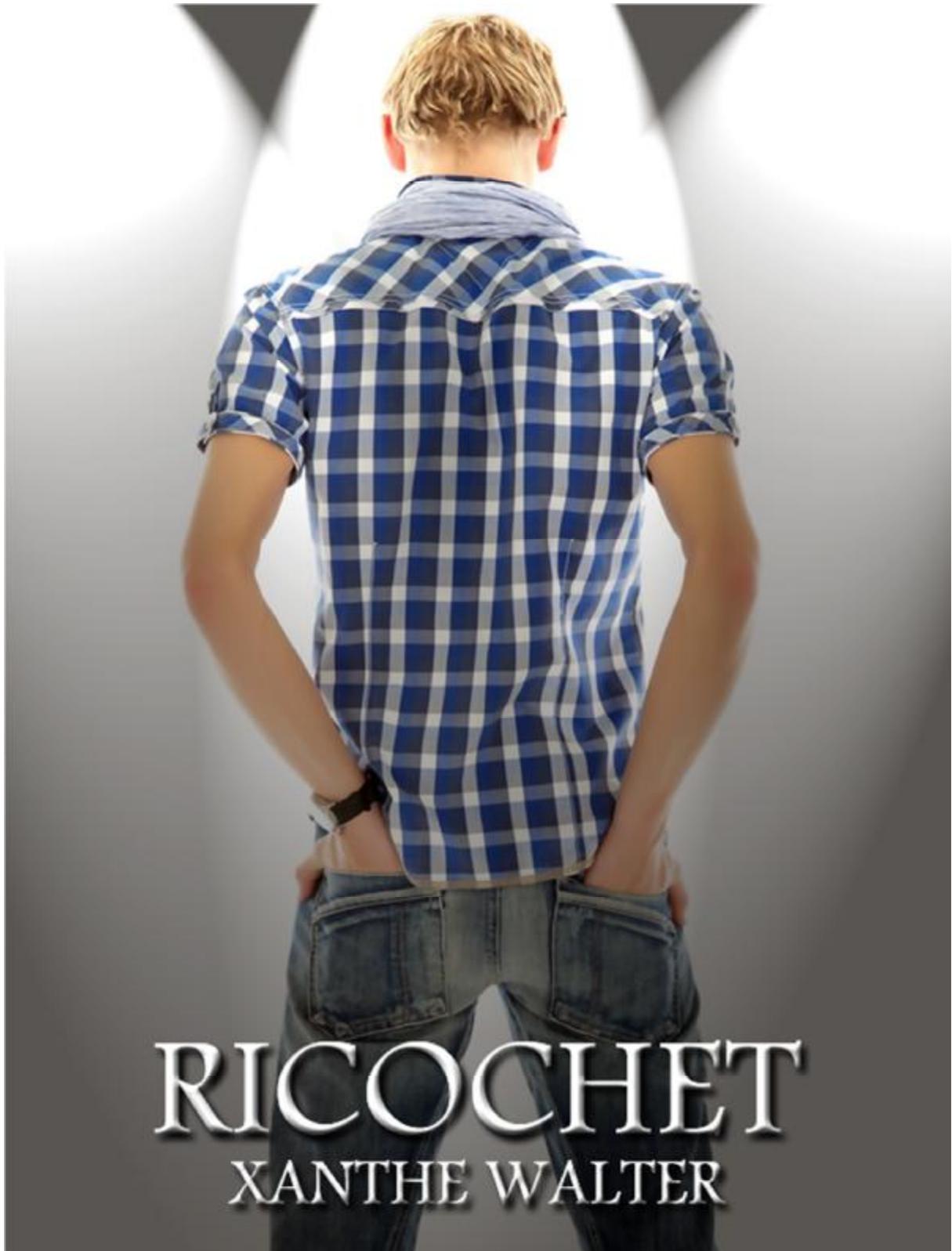


Ricochet by Xanthe



RICOCHET

XANTHE WALTER

<http://www.xanthe.org/ricochet/>

Story Notes:

Ricochet is an epic, 173,000 word original character novel, telling the story of a control freak sub and a wayward dom, and their journey towards finding each other - and themselves in the process. It has all the angst, humour, drama and sexiness you'd expect to find in one of my BDSM universe stories.

Read the first fourteen chapters for FREE here! If you want to buy it, you can find it on **Smashwords** and **Amazon** for only \$5.99

Teaser Chapters 1 - 14 by Xanthe

Chapter One

Rick turned over in bed and gazed at his beautiful conquest of the night before. The young man was still wearing the gaudy diamanté play collar that Rick had buckled around his neck and his hands were lightly bound together in front of his body with the black silk scarf Rick had fastened around his wrists. When Rick pulled back the sheet, he positively purred at the sight of the bite mark he'd placed on the sub's juicy, curved bottom during the night.

Rick leaned over and began kissing his way down the sub's back, one vertebra at a time, until he reached that luscious ass. The young man stirred, murmuring something, still half asleep.

"Come on, baby - open up for me," Rick murmured in his ear, impatient to plant his tongue deep inside the sub's ass, where his hard cock had been most of last night and intended to be again this morning.

"You're insatiable, Rick," the young man complained, moving his leg obligingly anyway.

"Oh, yeah, I am, and you're beautiful." Rick took hold of the sub's butt cheeks and pulled them apart. "Such a pretty sub... mmm... that's good... you taste so good, baby," he murmured appreciatively between licks.

He had no idea what the sub's name was, but he'd long ago learned that using generics like "Baby" and "Sweetheart" was a good way of not offending his conquests by getting their names wrong. He'd never been any good at remembering names and besides, what did it matter? These beautiful subs he picked up in the most exclusive clubs in L.A. knew they weren't getting a permanent collar from him.

What they were getting was a night with Richard O'Shea, one of the lead actors on the hit TV show *Collar Crime*. They also got to keep the gaudy play collar that Rick loved fastening around their pretty necks. Rick always made sure they enjoyed their "night in paradise" as

he liked to describe it; he loved showing the succession of gorgeous young subs who graced his bed a good time.

This particular gorgeous young sub arched his back as Rick opened him up expertly with his tongue. Rick drew back, reached for the lube, and squeezed a dollop onto his hand. Then he took hold of the sub's hard cock and stroked slowly. The sub moaned in pleasure, and Rick anointed his own cock with the lube, positioned himself, and then slowly sank himself into the sub's sweetly tight, hot channel.

He fucked him hard for several minutes until they both came, and then Rick threw himself down on the bed, panting.

"Man, that was good. You were good, baby." He smoothed the sub's dark curly hair with his fingers and kissed the side of his neck.

"So were you. I can't believe I'm in bed with Agent Alex Tanner from *Collar Crime!*" The sub gave an astonished giggle. "My mom won't believe me when I tell her. She loves that show, and she loves you on it. You're her favorite character - she likes it best when Chief Christie gets annoyed with your antics, swings you over his knee and spanks that cute ass of yours. Hey - how do you do that?"

"Do what, honey?" Rick played with the sub's hair, gently twirling it in his fingers.

"Play a sub so convincingly onscreen when you're such a dom in the bedroom?"

Rick had been asked that question dozens of times, but he didn't mind - it amused him. "It's called acting, sweetheart." He smiled indulgently at the sub.

"Well, you're great at it! So, tell me about the other actors." The sub pressed a little kiss to Rick's cheek. "Tell me about Daniel Mayfield. I loved him in the *Insubordination* movies but he's even better as Chief Christie."

A lot of the subs Rick slept with asked him about Daniel Mayfield. His co-star played one of the most dominant characters on TV and half the subs Rick slept with were in love with him - which was a shame as Daniel was a sub in real life.

"Daniel's a really cool guy. Nobody has a bad word to say about Daniel."

"And what's Matthew Lake like?" the sub asked eagerly. "He's such a sweetie as Agent Harris on the show - is he that cute in real life?"

"Matty?" Rick smiled. "Well, don't tell anyone but..." Rick lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Matty's a monster! He has this big entourage and on his first day on set he made them measure his trailer to make sure it was the exact size specified in his contract."

"Seriously?"

"Oh, yeah, Matty's a total diva. He has tantrums on set and orders everyone around."

The sub's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You're kidding me!"

Rick laughed. "Aw, okay, you got me. Matty's great, and yeah, he's just as much of a sweetie as Ben Harris. He can be kind of serious, but I tease the shit out of him until he lightens up. I drive him nuts." Rick winked.

"Hmm." The sub frowned. "It seems to me you're a lot like your character, even if you're not a sub."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Rick agreed easily. "I love Alex Tanner - he's a fun guy to play. There's a lot of me in him."

The sub looked at him thoughtfully. "It can't be easy for you, being a dom playing the naughtiest sub on TV. Do you have to work hard to persuade the subs you pick up that you're actually a dom?"

"Did you have any complaints?" Rick grinned, slapping the sub's bottom.

"No, but it was weird at first. I'm so used to seeing you as Alex Tanner, fooling around on TV. It must be tough for you in real life."

Rick shrugged. "Look, sweetheart - I'm not complaining. I do okay."

"Well, you're young, rich, famous, and incredibly handsome." The young man snuggled in close and rested his bound hands on Rick's chest. "So I guess you're not short of willing subs throwing themselves at you."

"I've never exactly had a problem in that department, but since the success of *Collar Crime*, yeah, it's been nice." Rick winked.

Rick rarely slept alone these days. He pretty much had his pick of every young, beautiful sub in L.A. - and he intended to make the most of it while it lasted. He spent most of his free evenings in clubs, looking for subs to bed. He could usually talk a potential conquest into coming home with him within five minutes of meeting them. Any longer, and he lost interest and moved on to a more promising prospect.

"Matt's a sub, isn't he? Have you slept with him?" the sub asked curiously.

"Me and Matty?" Rick frowned. "No way! He's a neat freak, and I'm easy come, easy go. We'd drive each other nuts."

"I love how you two are always bickering onscreen."

"We're a lot like that in real life, too." Rick trailed his index finger down the sub's tanned back.

"Maybe you secretly have the hots for each other?"

"Boy, you do ask a lot of questions. It's like being interviewed by *TeeVee* or something. Now, it seems to me there's too much talking and not enough action going on in this room." Rick reached down and squeezed the young man's ass. "I think someone is due an O'Shea special spanking."

"Really? Why?" The sub grinned naughtily. "Have I been bad?"

"Oh yeah, baby, you've been bad." Rick sat up and patted his knee. "You've been really bad. Now, come here."

He reached out, hauled the sub over his knees, and spent a few moments just savoring the view. He adored giving spankings - nothing too hard or painful, just a slow building up of warmth and sensation in a sub's ass. He loved watching buttocks wobble under his fingers, leaving a faint imprint of his hand that quickly faded, to be replaced, just as quickly, by another. He enjoyed how the skin felt, warming under his hand, and the pleasure of turning pale flesh into a rosy blush and then a deep pink in hue. He started every morning by handing out a spanking if he could, whenever he had a willing sub in his bed.

This sub was definitely willing. He arched his back and squealed excitedly as Rick slapped his ass, and Rick grinned and wrapped his arm tightly around the sub, holding him close - this was going to be good.

He spanked him for a good ten minutes, taking his time, warming him up slowly and then building to a crescendo that had the young man panting with pleasure.

"Man, that's good. You're turning me on so much. I'm gonna have to fuck you hard after this," Rick said happily as he went about his work. "A beautiful hot ass like this should never be wasted."

The sub's squirming confirmed he was of the same opinion, and Rick delivered a few more swats and then couldn't ignore his hard cock any more - he needed to get in this sub and fuck him through the mattress again.

"You ready to go again, baby?" he asked, pulling the young man up and untying the scarf from around his wrists so he could position him on his hands and knees. "Quickly, 'cause I need to get to work."

"What time is it?" The sub glanced around the room for a clock.

Rick's bedroom was painted a shiny white, the doors and dressers were a sleek black, the drapes and carpet a deep scarlet, and the bed sheets were made of a sensuous red satin because he liked how that felt against his skin. The bed was an expensive Delallio, the ornate headboard a swirling pattern of metal curlicues to which Rick could attach handcuffs or rope to keep subs in place while he fucked them.

The one thing Rick didn't keep in his bedroom was a clock - when subs entered here, he wanted it to be a timeless zone where they could relax and forget about everything except surrendering to the Richard O'Shea sexperience.

"Oh, shit." Rick glanced at his watch and sat bolt upright. "Shit, shit, shit! I'm late! Sorry, babe - another time. I gotta run."

He wasn't just late - he was so late that filming had probably already started. He should have been at work ten minutes ago.

He slid off the bed and ran into the bathroom, took a hasty shower, and then ran back into the bedroom and grabbed the nearest clothes to hand - the leather pants and plain black shirt that he'd worn clubbing last night. The sub in his bed was lying on his back, elbows propped up, looking startled by all the frenetic activity.

"I'm sorry, baby... so sorry... oh, damn it - you look so hot like that, too, all tousled. Wish I had time to fuck you again." Rick leaned over and kissed him on the lips and then drew back regretfully.

He ran for the door and then glanced back to see that the sub had turned over and was lying on his front again, his beautiful blushing ass on full display.

"Oh, what the hell! I'm already late - what's another ten minutes? I can't leave that lush ass un-fucked."

Rick turned back, unzipping as he went, and got out his semi-erect cock. He didn't undress; he just slapped some more lube on his cock, pulled the sub up onto his haunches, and thrust straight into that waiting hole. He loved how the sub's warm ass cheeks felt against his balls as he hammered into him and the way the young man threw back his head and shrieked in pleasure as Rick fucked him through the mattress.

Rick came with a shout and then quickly pulled out, grabbed a handful of the sub's thick, dark hair, and pulled his head back. He delivered a loud kiss to the sub's mouth, then released him and ran for the door again, tucking his cock back into his pants and zipping up as he went.

"Help yourself to breakfast, if there's anything in the fridge," he called. "And let yourself out."

"You're leaving me here alone?" the sub asked, in a surprised tone.

"Sure - why not?" Rick grinned over his shoulder.

"Because I could steal all your stuff!"

Rick paused, his shoulders tensing. He turned, with a shrug. "You could, yeah. You gonna do that, sweetheart?"

The young man frowned. "No, but it's kind of weird you leaving me in your place alone, a big TV star like you..."

"Well, my housekeeper will be here in about ten minutes, so if you're gonna clean me out, be sure to do it before he gets here." Rick gave a cheery wave and continued on his way.

"Wait! When will I see you again?" the young man asked.

Rick grimaced. "Oh, soon. Real soon. I'll call you."

"You don't have my number."

"I'll find it. I'll look you up." Rick grabbed the door handle.

"You don't even know my last name."

Rick hesitated and then turned around again. "You're right... what is it?"

"Newman."

"Right... Newman... uh..." Rick made a face.

"You don't remember my first name, do you?" the young man accused. "It's Greg. Greg Newman. You should remember my name, Rick. Makes me feel kinda cheap and dirty after what we did last night."

Rick sighed. He walked back to the bed, sat down next to the sub, and ran a gentle hand over the young man's cheek. "Greg, you were great, but don't go expecting anything," he said softly. "I don't do relationships, and I don't do reruns except on TV. I showed you a great time last night, didn't I? And this morning, too - yes? Let's leave it there." He pressed a kiss to Greg's dark, curly hair and got up. "You can keep the play collar," he said. "As a memento of your night with Richard O'Shea. Something to tell your kids about one day, huh?"

He ignored the flash of outrage in Greg's eyes as he ran to the door again. He just managed to duck in time as something flew over his head and hit the wall, before sliding to the floor; it was the gaudy play collar he'd put on Greg's neck last night.

"You can keep your fucking collar, asshole!" Greg yelled.

Rick winced. Not his best exit ever, he thought, as he wrenched open the door and fled towards his garage - but not his worst, either. One sub had daubed "SHITHEAD LOSER" all over his bedroom walls in bright pink lipstick, while another had helped herself to the contents of his toy chest before leaving. It had taken him years to build up that toy chest and it contained some of his favorite play equipment. He'd been sad for nearly half an hour before he realized it was a good excuse to go shopping, and then he'd spent one of the best days of his life flashing his credit card around some of the most exclusive toy boutiques in L.A., rebuilding his collection. Every cloud had a silver lining, and if anyone was going to find that lining, it was Rick.

He ran down the stairs to his garage, threw one long leg over his shining black Harley, revved the engine, and sped off towards the studio.

Chapter Two

Matthew Lake stared at Daniel Mayfield, and Daniel stared back, tapping one finger lightly on his script as they waited.

"Where the hell is he?" Matt hissed. "I wouldn't mind, but this is the third time this month."

"You've kept count?" Daniel raised an eyebrow, and Matt bit on his lip, flushing.

"I count everything. I can't help myself. I also know how many times it's rained this month and how many times you've tapped your finger on that script," he confessed.

"It can't be easy being locked up inside your brain." Daniel glanced at Petra, the show runner, who was standing to one side with a look of thunder on her face, bashing her finger repeatedly onto the keypad of her cell phone. "Wherever he is, I have a feeling Petra will have something to say to him when she finally gets him to answer his phone," Daniel murmured.

"Poor Rick." Matt felt a surge of genuine sympathy for his co-star. Rick was the most infuriating actor he'd ever worked with, but he also had the ability to lift a set just by setting foot on it. His huge personality brightened every room he was in, and he made the long hours and hard work fun, even on the days when they really weren't.

A second later there were the usual loud clattering sounds and change in energy that signaled Rick had arrived, and he strode onto the set, still in his own clothes, waving his arms around apologetically.

"I'm so sorry, everyone!" he yelled. "Domestic emergency."

"You mean you overslept?" Daniel asked smoothly.

"More likely a sub slept over," Matt muttered, and Daniel stifled a laugh.

"I'm here now! I'm ready," Rick announced to the room at large. The cast and crew loved him, for all his wayward ways and truly abysmal timekeeping, so Matt could sense that Rick was instantly forgiven - but not by Petra.

"It's the third time this month, Rick," she scolded.

"Who's counting?" Rick spread his arms wide. "Well, except Matty, of course, but he counts everything." He shot a grin in Matt's direction.

"I'm counting," Petra snapped.

"Three times in a month isn't that many."

"It's only the ninth today."

"Ah. Okay. Sorry." Only Rick could somehow manage to look naughty, contrite and utterly adorable all at the same time. He was like a big, overgrown puppy.

"I want to see you in my office after this scene's done," Petra said grumpily. "And you're not ready. Go and change your clothes, get your ass into make-up, and put your damn collar on." She turned and stomped off, and Rick grimaced broadly at her retreating back.

"I'm in trouble," he lamented to the room, with theatrical mournfulness.

"Yes, you are. Now go and get ready. Filming's been held up for long enough because of you," Daniel said tersely. Although he was the lead actor on the show he rarely threw his weight around, so if he handed out a reprimand it really stung.

Rick certainly got the message, and he hurried off to his trailer to get changed without the usual theatrics, much to Matt's relief.

Matt paced around the set, going over his lines repeatedly in his head while he waited, hating the delay as it gave him too much time to fret about his performance in the upcoming scene. They were on the set of the gleaming silver and black command center that was the *Collar Crime* H.Q., crammed full of high-tech computer screens and gadgets - although it looked a lot more impressive on TV than it did in real life.

He was relieved when Rick returned a short while later, dressed in character as Agent Tanner, with a plain black collar fastened around his neck. He was six feet four of such ludicrous good looks that Matt wondered how anyone could have been put together so well and still be human. He had jet-black hair, tanned skin, a perma-stubbed jaw, and a pair of broad shoulders that looked fantastic in the tight tee shirts the show liked to put him in. His long legs looked equally good in the jeans his character habitually wore, too. His most beautiful feature was his liquid-green eyes; they looked out of place with his tanned skin and dark hair, but they had a depth and luminosity that the camera loved.

He ran across the set, sank gracefully to his knees on his mark at Daniel's feet, and looked up at him through his thick eyelashes, instantly in character.

"Hmmm... don't you look like the perfect sub," Daniel commented, glancing at his script and then down at Rick again.

"I know. I'd fuck me, for sure." Rick winked, and Matt rolled his eyes.

"Let's get started!" the director bellowed, and Matt took his position and tried to get into character as the rookie young field agent, Ben Harris.

Ben came from a strict Lenkan family who had disowned him because of his decision to join the collar crime unit. They liked to keep their subs sheltered and arrange jobs and marriages

for them inside their own community. An outcast from his own people, Ben was always searching for a place to belong.

Rick played Agent Alex Tanner, the wayward sub that Chief Christie had tamed during the first season of the show. He was a maverick ex-army ranger, who'd received a dishonorable discharge and was living by his wits on the streets when Christie had seen something in him and recruited him to work on the newly formed collar crime unit.

The unit was a specialist task force charged with investigating crimes involving collars, in cases ranging from domestic abuse and employee harassment to international espionage. Alex was famously naughty, getting into all kinds of scrapes that earned him a punishment from the tough, totally toppy Chief Christie every few episodes.

"So, what stupid stuff has Alex Tanner been up to now?" Rick asked, glancing at the page in his hand.

"Damn it, Rick - don't you even know which scene we're filming?" Matt snapped, his nerves frayed by the late start.

"As I'm on my knees, I'm guessing it's one where Alex gets what he deserves. Again." Rick grinned.

"If only life imitated art," Matt muttered under his breath.

Rick shot him a wounded look. "Was there something you wanted to say to me, Matty?"

"Yes! You waltz in here, hours late, and you don't even know what we're filming. It's not just Alex Tanner who deserves a punishment, you idiot."

The room went silent, and everyone looked at him. Matt bit on his lip and started counting down from one thousand in his head, which usually calmed him.

"I know which scene we're filming, Matt," Rick said quietly.

"Good - so could we damn well start filming it, then!" the director yelled.

Rick was word perfect in his scene, which made Matt feel terrible about his outburst. They shot several takes, but each time he put in a flawless performance.

Right at the end of the final take, Daniel opened the prop file that was supposed to contain their mission for the week, while Rick and Matt looked over his shoulder at the contents as they'd rehearsed... only to find those contents had been replaced by a recent edition of *Show Scoop* magazine. The front cover showed a big photo of Daniel, sitting bare-chested in a hot tub, under the headline: *Hot Tops in Hot Tubs! Take a look inside at our hot tub hotties!*

Matt smothered a laugh, Rick kept a studiously straight face, and Daniel delivered his line without missing a beat. The director called "cut", and Daniel immediately turned to Rick and delivered a mock spanking with the rolled-up magazine.

Everyone laughed, and Matt felt his bad mood fading as it always did in the face of Rick's practical jokes. Ever since the *Hot Tops in Hot Tubs* edition had come out, Rick had been teasing Daniel about it mercilessly. He'd bought a dozen copies and it had become a running joke that he'd place them strategically around the set for Daniel to come across during filming. On one memorable occasion, he'd pinned the picture of Daniel in the hot tub on the noticeboard in the chief's office, and nobody had even noticed until the episode aired. Matt had no idea how Rick had managed to smuggle the magazine into the file for the scene's final take, but it had lifted the mood on set.

The crew dispersed for a coffee break, and Rick ran over to where Matt was standing. "Hey, buddy." He hit Matt playfully on the arm. "I'm sorry I was late."

That was always the problem with Rick; it was almost impossible to stay mad at him. Rick could be exasperating but there wasn't an ounce of malice in him.

"Am I forgiven? Say I am. Please." He got down on his knees, pressed his hands together in supplication, and fluttered his dark eyelashes outrageously.

Matt sighed. "You're forgiven."

"And am I still an idiot?" Rick asked, batting his eyelashes even more.

"Oh, you're definitely an idiot." Matt rolled his eyes, but he couldn't stop the little grin curving his lips, and Rick was on his feet in an instant, laughing. He slung a heavy arm around Matt's shoulders, tucked him into a neck lock, and then planted a big kiss on his hair.

"Yay! I hate it when you're mad at me, Matty. Now... where's the cookie table? I'm starving. No breakfast, and I expended waaaay too much energy last night - and this morning. Look... concave." He grabbed hold of the hem of his tee shirt, pulled it up, and pointed at his ripped six-pack.

"Any excuse to show off how much you work out," Matt said, laughing anyway because Rick's good moods were always so infectious.

"You betcha." Rick winked, running off towards the cookie table.

"Hey!" Matt called after him. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Hmmm?" Rick turned back, in the process of cramming a giant chocolate-chip cookie into his mouth.

"Petra? She said she wanted to see you after the scene."

"D'oh!" Rick slapped the side of his own head. "Thanks buddy. I dunno what I'd do without you and your memory. I wish you could learn my lines for me, too."

"Yeah, well, we all wish you could learn your lines for you, instead of hiding them on crib sheets around the set," Matt retorted, but Rick was already halfway out the door.

Matt watched him go, shaking his head. So much drama, for so little point - that was Rick all over.

He glanced over and saw that Daniel was reading a book, as he often did during a break in filming. With his bulging muscles and shaved head, Daniel looked like the last person you'd want to meet down a dark alley at night. Matt had been scared of him for his first month on the show until he'd realized that Daniel wasn't remotely like the tough sub he'd played in the famous *Insubordination* movies, or the commanding Chief Christie on *Collar Crime*. People sometimes mistook his aloofness for arrogance, especially as he was such a big star, but Matt had soon figured out that he was just very shy.

Matt considered going over and talking to him, but he didn't want to interrupt Daniel's reading, so he pulled out his cell phone instead and saw that he'd missed a call from his dom, Emily. He'd been dating her for about six months, and they were good together. She was cool, calm and collected, and he liked how smooth their relationship was: no drama or bumps in the road. She always did what she said she was going to do and was where she said she'd be. He knew where he was with her, and that was the way he liked it.

The sex was pleasant, too. Not that she ever managed to take him down, but he liked serving her, and she liked being served. It was a perfectly smooth arrangement that suited them both well. He pressed for voicemail and listened to her message.

"Matt - it's Emily. I see you're in my diary for this evening, so I'll pick you up at eight. Please don't wear that red shirt; it does nothing for you. Don't make me come up to the house to knock. Be ready on the porch."

And that was that; all perfectly to the point, which Emily always was, and which Matt liked... so why did he feel like something was missing?

Chapter Three

Rick loped into Petra's office, still eating his cookie. Petra was a plump, attractive black woman, several inches shorter than him but tough as nails and easily able to out-top pretty much any other dom in the room. She glared at him and didn't offer him a seat; this didn't bode well.

"Rick, you're a screw-up," she told him bluntly.

"Aw, I'm not that bad. So I like a little fun - who doesn't?" Rick flashed her his most disarming smile.

"Look, I've been in the industry for years, Rick, and I've seen actors as big and hot as you are right now disappear without a trace. Too much partying, too many drugs, too much alcohol..."

"I don't take drugs," Rick said, wounded. "And I don't drink that much, because..." He made a wilting motion with his hand in the direction of his groin. "Now, I'll admit I like partying - I like getting attention from all the pretty subs - but can you blame me? Before I was famous, I used to have to work a lot harder to sweet-talk subs into my bed, but now they practically fight for that pleasure. How can I resist? They're so cute and willing. All they want is for me to run my hands over their sexy bodies, and I'm only human. You're a dom, Petra - you must understand."

"Maybe you have a sex addiction," she mused.

"Because I like subs? Show me a dom who doesn't like subs."

"There's a difference between liking them and consuming them. You party like it's going out of style, Rick, and I bet you never go home alone."

"Well, where's the fun in that?" Rick winked. "So what if I sleep with a lot of subs? I get my yearly STD vaccination. I'm not hurting anyone."

"Whatever. It's your life." Petra shrugged. "But you don't fuck up my show. I've soft-pedaled with you so far, Rick, because you're one of the main reasons this show hit so big, but nobody's indispensable."

"You're not going to fire me, are you?" Rick asked, genuinely shaken.

Petra shook her head. "No, but I am going to come down on you like a ton of bricks every time you screw up, so I strongly suggest you don't go out clubbing any more during filming. You can party on hiatus."

"That's only two months of the year!"

"Then you'd better make the most of them." Petra gave a sweet smile. "In addition..."

"There's more?" Rick asked, aghast.

"Yup." Petra fixed him with a stern look. "You're not to be late, by so much as one second, for the rest of the season. If you are, you'll go straight to the discipline room and take licks. Hell, I'll march you there myself."

"Aw, Petra." Rick crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a sulky little frown. She ignored him.

"I've been reviewing your contract." Petra waved her hand at a file on her desk. "I note that there's no get-out clause from corporal punishment." Some stars had those written into their contracts but not many, as those stars were generally judged to be difficult, thinking

themselves bigger and better than everyone else. All the same, it was rare for a show to physically punish one of its stars; they were usually too busy trying to keep them happy. "So, we're going to make a start on addressing your tardiness problem right now," Petra told him firmly. "You'll report to the discipline room at 1pm for six with the strap."

"What?" Rick stared at her.

"Six this time - so you know I mean business. Next time you're late it'll be seven, then eight, and so on. No upper limit." She smiled at him sweetly. "I'll reset the numbers at the end of each season, so you'll start out next season at six again."

"Petra!"

She sighed. "Rick, honey, you're a nice guy. Everyone loves you like crazy, me included, but I figure that you need treating like I treat my subs: you screw up - you get punished. If it saves you from self-destructing, and your career from going down the pan, then I'm happy, even if you don't thank me for it. Like I said, Rick, I've seen it happen before."

"You're a mean, mean woman, Petra." Rick stuck out his lower lip in a pout.

Petra rolled her eyes. "And you're one of the good guys. I'm doing this out of love. You're worth saving, Rick." She stood up, grinning at him.

"Hah! Love!"

"Yes, honey. Love." She patted the side of his cheek and then went and opened the door. "Out - get back to work. And report to the discipline room at 1pm sharp."

"Yes, Chief," Rick grumbled, ambling towards the door. He was still dressed in his character's clothes, and he felt entirely in character as Agent Alex Tanner after a chewing out by Chief Christie.

Petra snorted. "Oh, trust me, Rick - Chief Christie is a pussycat compared to me. You screw up, and I will punish your ass until you get back in line."

"Ah well. You win some, you lose some." Rick grinned at her cheerfully as he left the room.

The thought of official discipline didn't bother him; he'd experienced it plenty of times in his life and while he didn't like it, he could handle it. The lack of partying bothered him more. What the hell was he going to do with himself for the next four months if he couldn't go out clubbing?

An idea occurred to him, and he took a detour to find the craft services manager, Gloria. This whole discipline thing might suck, but if anyone knew how to make the best of a bad time it was Rick, and Gloria was just the person to help.

"Hey, people!" he announced when he returned to the set, jumping onto Agent Tanner's desk so everyone could hear. "It's party time! Our beloved leader, Lady Petra, says this cute

little tush has to take some punishment at 1pm." He patted his ass theatrically. "So, you're all invited." He flashed a broad grin around the room. "The popcorn and Cokes are on me."

The room exploded in a buzz of gossip, and Rick laughed. He figured it was better to let everyone know about his imminent punishment and give them all some fun at his expense, rather than getting embarrassed about it and skulking around, hoping that nobody would find out.

"About time. Someone should have taken a paddle to your tardy ass years ago," one of the crew called out, and Rick mock-spanked his own ass in response.

There was a general mood of amusement in the room. Someone would probably sell the story about Rick O'Shea taking a workplace spanking to the *Daily Investigator*, but Rick didn't care. There was no point trying to control this kind of story - it always got out. He didn't think it did his reputation as a hell-raiser any harm anyway.

He jumped down off the desk and was engulfed by a crowd wanting all the juicy details about what Petra had said to him. He spent the rest of the break laughing about it until it was time to shoot the next scene. Then the crowd around him dispersed... except for one person.

Matt stood before him, looking genuinely shaken. "Rick... I'm so sorry. I can't believe Petra did that."

"Oh, hey." Rick flicked a strand of blond hair off the kid's face. "It's fine."

"But... I mean... did she give you any warning?"

"I think she might have mentioned it last time I was late." Rick shrugged. "I wasn't really listening."

Matt let out an exasperated sigh. "Damn it, Rick, you're so stupid."

"I know. I can't help it." Rick spread his arms wide in a gesture of helplessness. "Hey, Matty, it's okay. Don't worry about it."

"About what I said earlier, about you deserving it - you know I didn't mean that," Matt blurted. "I was just nervous about the scene and all that waiting around didn't help, and I took it out on you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, sweetheart - I know that." Rick gave Matt a fond smile. Underneath the OCD and the weird counting fetish, the kid had a good heart. He was a cutie as well - twenty-five years old, about five ten in height, with a strong, slender body that he kept toned by doing vigorous bouts of yoga. He had a mop of unruly blond hair and the sweetest pair of blue eyes Rick had ever seen. No wonder he was able to bring a special kind of innocence to his portrayal of Agent Ben Harris; there was something of the little boy lost about Matt, just as there was about the character he played. "You take things way too seriously, Matty. Life's too short and none of this shit really matters."

"Yes, it does," Matt protested. "It's your career, Rick. There are some things you should take seriously."

"Lighten up, kid." Rick patted Matt's arm. "Now, what are we shooting next?" he called out, glancing around. "And if it's a scene where I have to bend over the chief's desk for punishment, then I'm going home."

Everyone laughed, and Rick soaked it up. He was on fire for the next few hours, laughing and joking around between takes, keeping the cast and crew entertained while hitting it out of the ballpark during scenes. He loved feeling like this - although it was a shame it took an imminent punishment to spike his adrenaline so effectively.

At 12:50 he rounded everyone up and led them over to the discipline room, feeling like the pied piper - he had most of the cast and crew behind him, laughing and joking as they went. Petra was waiting by the door, a sour look on her face.

"Leading a revolt against your sentence, Rick?" she asked, glancing over his shoulder at the crowd he'd brought with him.

"No way! These guys are here to watch the fun," Rick replied. Gloria was standing outside the discipline room with a table full of sodas and popcorn. "Help yourselves, guys," Rick yelled, waving at the table. "Let the entertainment begin!" he added, running into the discipline room like it was his favorite place on earth.

The room wasn't used very often, so it smelled musty, but the studio disciplinarian was ready and waiting. He came over, hand outstretched.

"I'm Miles Green, and I'm going to be performing your discipline today. I'm a great fan of yours. Oh, man! I can't believe I'm gonna be spanking Richard O'Shea!"

"Hah! Enjoy it, my friend. Half the country would love to be in your place - well, fans of the show anyhow. They can't get enough of Alex Tanner taking a good spanking."

"You're not Alex Tanner, though," Petra told him, coming over. "You're an actor, not a federal agent, Rick."

He laughed and put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in for a hug. "Aw, c'mon, Petra, it's gonna be fun. Don't spoil the show. We've gotta keep the mob entertained, or they might turn ugly." He jerked his head in the direction of the viewing gallery, which was now full to bursting point.

Petra rolled her eyes at his obvious over-dramatization. "Just remember, unlike on the show, your ass does actually get tanned in here. We don't cut away, and you don't get to act the reaction shot. Although it might improve your acting to actually experience it once in a while," she commented darkly.

"Aw - are you saying my acting sucks?" Rick pouted.

"No, I'm saying that you're playing one of TV's most famous subs - but you're a dom. It won't do you any harm to take a spanking every now and then - it might help you get in character." She went to take her place in the viewing gallery.

"I much prefer giving them," Rick called after her.

"Ready?" Green asked, pointing at the spanking bench.

"I'm ready. You guys ready?" Rick yelled to the audience.

"Ready, Rick!" came back the howled reply. People were laughing, chomping on their popcorn, and generally enjoying themselves, and that made Rick happy.

He walked over to the punishment bench with Green beside him.

"So, I have to read you your rights and stuff," Green said, opening a file and drawing out a laminate.

"Save it - I know the drill. I've been here before." *Too many times*, but there was no reason for anyone else to know that. If Petra thought six with the strap was going to have any effect, she really had no idea. He'd taken worse - far worse.

"Here goes, people. The great Richard O'Shea ass gets an airing. Savor the moment." Rick announced, as he slowly pulled his belt out of his jeans, sashaying from side to side like he was doing a striptease. His co-workers all whistled and catcalled, and he took a bow and threw his belt onto the floor.

"Uh... we don't usually do it this way," Green murmured to him. "Just... uh... well, pants down and over the punishment bench please, Mr. O'Shea."

"Aw! You're taking all the fun out of it." Rick allowed himself to be nudged over to the bench, and he took down his pants and boxers and leaned forward. It might have been a while, but it was an old, familiar position - he knew what to do.

The punishment bench was designed to hide the miscreant's private parts from the watching crowd - all they could see from their position was his face - and that was easily visible so that people could see justice being done, etched in his reaction. Some people screamed when they were punished - and Rick decided to do just that.

When the first stroke fell he gave a theatrical yelp, which caused the crowd to laugh. He let the laugh warm him - being a clown had always been his refuge whenever he was under fire.

His ass felt hot just from the one stroke, but he could handle it. He stuck his ass out even more, winking broadly at the crowd, and screamed loudly at the next stroke. He yelped and hollered his way through the next four, making a huge fuss about each one, while winking and grinning at the audience the entire time.

When his sixth had been delivered he stood up, pulled up his pants, and came forward to take a bow, amid the sound of riotous applause.

"My dear co-workers, I apologize for my many faults and defects, and most particularly my crappy timekeeping," Rick told them. "I trust you feel I have been duly and adequately chastised - and that you will find it in your hearts to forgive me."

Another round of applause assured him that his audience agreed on both counts - and, more importantly, that they still loved him.

They started to file out, and he retrieved his belt from the floor as he watched them go. Daniel came over and gave him the kind of shrewd, knowing look that Chief Christie was always giving Alex Tanner. Rick found himself squirming as much under that steady gaze as Tanner always did.

"One of your more embellished performances," Daniel murmured.

"Well, over-acting always was my forte," Rick replied, trying to deflect the intensity of that steady gaze. He glanced down at his belt as his fingers fumbled while threading it through his jeans.

"Oh, I think you're a much better actor than you give yourself credit for," Daniel said gently.

Rick glanced up at him sharply, and Daniel reached out, squeezed his arm briefly, and then he left. Rick stared after him, feeling antsy after the punishment, although he had no idea why. His ass was hot and sore, but that wasn't the problem. He could handle that, but the weird emotions he was experiencing weren't so easy to handle. He wasn't sure what to do with himself, so he wandered over to Matt's trailer and knocked on the door.

"You weren't there," Rick said, brushing past Matt when he opened the door, and going inside.

"No."

Rick turned to see Matt shrugging. "Why? There was popcorn and soda. It was fun."

"Not for me. Honestly, Rick, why do you get yourself into these scrapes? It's all so avoidable. Sometimes, I swear you go out of your way to cause havoc. Why can't you just...?"

"Be more like you?" Rick raised an eyebrow. "Counting every bird in the sky, every cookie on the table, every time someone sneezes? Always obeying the law to the letter, never getting into trouble, and never once allowing yourself to let your hair down and have a good time?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake! I just like things to be in their proper place and organized. It's simpler that way. Anyway, why the hell do you care if I was there or not?"

"I don't, I just wondered, that's all. I thought you might still be mad at me for being late today."

Rick poked at the fruit in the bowl on Matt's coffee table thoughtfully, like he was seriously considering eating it.

"Leave it alone." Matt slapped his hand away. "Everyone knows you haven't eaten anything healthy since about 1973."

"Just how old do you think I am?" Rick asked, pouting.

"You're thirty-two. Your birthday is on November 5 when you'll be thirty-three," Matt told him automatically. "It's numbers." He shrugged apologetically. "I can't help myself. They stick in my brain."

"You're weird, Matty." Rick stared at him, his head on one side. "But as long as you're not still mad at me, I don't care."

"I'm not still mad at you." Matt sighed. "I just don't like the thought of you taking licks in public. It's demeaning."

"Nah. It's fine. I'm a dom - I can handle it."

"Well, sometimes I've wondered," Matt said thoughtfully.

"If I can handle it? Of course I can. I once -"

"Wondered if you're actually a dom. You do play Alex Tanner very convincingly."

Rick looked up and then burst out laughing. "Oh, Matt. Matty Matt Mattser. I've known I was a dom since I was about thirteen years old. But hey, if you ever want me to top you just say the word, and I'll prove it." He gave Matt a lascivious wink.

"No, thank you," Matt replied primly. "I prefer my doms a little more..."

"Boring? Talking of which, how is that accountant you're dating? Emmy, Emma, Ermentrude... whatever her name is."

"It's Emily, and she's fine. It's great. Wonderful. And... uh... the sex is good." Matt thrust his chin out defensively as he said that.

"Oh, I'm sure the sex is very sensible, well-organized and controlled." Rick grinned.

"Contrary to popular belief, it isn't actually necessary for sparks to fly in order to have good sex," Matt replied tartly. "Emily and I share common values and attitudes and are very well suited."

"Of course you are. Her job is counting things and your hobby is counting things; it's a match made in heaven."

"I've certainly kept count of how many stupid things you've done since I met you," Matt retorted.

"Really?" Rick winked. "How many?"

"Sixty-two - if you count every single instance of lateness as coming under the general umbrella of 'late'. If you count each one individually, then it's 109."

"Wow. Can you list them all, as well?"

"I can, starting with the day we first met, when you showed up on your Harley making a loud fanfare and parked it in the showrunner's parking space."

"Hmm... you know, I can count, too. For example, I can count every single orgasm I've given to every single sub I've ever topped. D'you want to hear about those?"

Matt flushed. "No."

Rick laughed; teasing Matt was always so much fun.

"Oh, you're infuriating. I can't believe I ever felt sorry for you having to take public discipline," Matt said irritably. "Did it hurt, by the way?"

"Nah. Well... yeah. But I deserved it. The worst part was that Petra 'strongly suggested' I shouldn't go out clubbing again until hiatus."

"But that's four months away."

"I know! That's what I said." Rick shook his head mournfully. "She didn't care."

"Is she allowed to do that? I mean, you can do what you like in your personal time, can't you?"

"Well, like I said, it was more a suggestion than an order, but as she has the power to fire me I guess I'll just have to do what she says." Rick shrugged.

"Hah! Four months without clubbing? I bet you don't last more than a week."

"A whole week?" Rick grinned. "Wow - you've got a higher opinion of me than I thought. I don't think I'll make it through the weekend."

"If you get yourself fired, I'll never forgive you," Matt said plaintively, sitting down on the couch, next to the fruit bowl.

"Aw - this means you do actually like me after all." Rick gave Matt a cat-got-the-cream smile. "I knew you did really, even though you call me names, and throw things at me, and stuff."

"I do not like you! I'm just thinking about all the fuss the press will make if you go and get yourself fired. They'll hang around my house for weeks, looking for a quote."

"Nah - I think it's because you like me." Rick flashed Matt his most infuriating grin and strode towards the trailer door.

He managed to duck, just in time, as a well-aimed apple almost hit the back of his head.

Really - subs throwing things at him twice in one day? Rick chuckled to himself as he left the trailer: he must be doing something right.

Chapter Four

They filmed the rest of the day's scenes, and then they had to do a publicity interview for the entertainment show, *TeeVee*. Matt quickly changed from his Ben Harris clothes into his Matthew Lake clothes - there wasn't much difference in their styles, but Matt tended to be more casual than Ben, who often wore suit pants and a sports jacket to work. Matt preferred tee shirts and jeans.

On his way back to the set, he was joined by Karl Morgan, who was playing the new bad guy on the show this season. He was a tall, lean man, with olive skin, blond-brown hair, and dark eyes. He was very good looking in an elegant, classy kind of way, which suited his character - the smooth-talking, sinister Jason Jarvis - down to the ground. He was also British, with a cut glass accent that half the subs in the crew kept swooning over.

"Hey, Matty. How are you?" Karl asked, falling into step beside him.

"I'm fine... um... but..." Matt hesitated and then plowed on. "I don't want to be rude, Karl, but I prefer Matt, or Matthew. Not Matty."

"Oh. Okay. Sorry - I thought everyone called you Matty."

"No, only Rick, and I think he only does it to annoy me."

"Oh, I see." Karl grinned, and Matt tensed, wondering if he should have admitted that. Sometimes, when he told people not to do something, they did it all the more. At least, that had been his experience in high school. Karl didn't seem like any of the mean doms he'd known in high school, though, because he just gave an easygoing smile. "I've noticed Rick likes to tease. He's quite the center of attention around here, isn't he? He's such a larger than life kind of guy."

"Yeah, that's Rick. You get used to it. Or you ignore him. Or throw things at him. Or all of the above." Matt grinned sideways at Karl. "That's what I do."

"Uh, Matt - can I ask you some questions about Daniel?" Karl asked tentatively. "I've got a few big scenes with him this episode, and I'm kind of scared of him, to be honest. I've seen

all the movies in the *Insubordination* franchise, and I'm a huge fan of his. I don't want to screw up around him."

Matt found himself relaxing. He didn't know Karl that well yet, but he got the feeling that he was a nice guy.

"Oh, don't worry about Daniel. He's nothing like Tom Duke from *Insubordination* - or Chief Christie, come to that."

"That's a relief. I used to fantasize about Tom Duke when I was a spotty adolescent - he's the kind of tough sub that most doms would like to tame in their fantasies, but I think I'd be threatened by all those surly one-liners if I met a sub like that in real life."

Matt laughed. "I love the *Insubordination* movies. They're such action classics. I wanted to be Tom Duke when I was a kid, but I think even then I knew I was never gonna be a tough sub. Daniel is nothing like Tom Duke, though, so don't worry. He's really shy, and sometimes people mistake that for aloofness, but it's not - he's just very reserved. You'll find him reading between takes - or at the gym."

"Yeah, those biceps look even more impressive in real life than onscreen." Karl grimaced. "He's a scary-looking guy."

"He might look intimidating, but he's not really. You'll do fine."

"Great. He's such a legend that I really don't want to fuck up in our first big scene together tomorrow."

"If you do, he'll help you fix it, so don't worry."

Karl nodded thoughtfully. "I heard he lost his wife a couple of years ago? Wasn't he married to Suzanna Dawson?"

"Yeah, he was. She was his manager as well as his wife, and a huge Hollywood player. It almost destroyed him when she died. I'm not sure he'll ever get over that."

Matt wondered if Karl was interested in Daniel in more than a purely professional sense, and he hoped not, for Karl's sake. Daniel hadn't so much as looked at another dom since his wife's death. He even still wore her collar off set, signaling very clearly that he still felt he belonged to her and no other dom was going to get close. Karl was also about ten years younger than Daniel - was it possible that he had a crush on the older sub?

They reached the set and found Sharlene Milton, the petite, pretty presenter from *TeeVee*, standing there, microphone and camera guy at the ready.

Rick loped up a few seconds later - for once he didn't keep them waiting, so Matt wondered if the punishment he'd taken earlier had actually done its job. Like Matt, Rick had changed out of his character's costume and was in his own clothes; black leather pants, a tailored white shirt that clung to his body and a dramatic, floor-length black leather coat that

showed off his broad shoulders to perfection. His jaw-length black hair was artfully tousled, there was a pair of trendy new sunglasses perched on his head, and he was wearing his favorite item of jewelry - a thumb ring shaped like a panther's head, made of white gold with rubies for eyes.

Matt felt positively underdressed standing beside him in a pair of faded jeans and a blue and white plaid shirt, with a scarf slung loosely around his neck.

Petra got them all organized around Sharlene - with Rick and Daniel, as the two big stars of the show, on either side of her. Matt was placed beside Rick, and Karl beside Daniel. Cara and Casey came rushing up excitedly, a blur of squealing energy as usual. Petra fixed them with a stern look that calmed them instantly, and they took their place beside Matt, holding hands. They were identical twins with long blonde hair, big baby-blue eyes and perfect golden skin. They weren't the brightest bulbs in the box, but their sweet natures made them favorites with everyone on set. They played undercover agents on the show, always swapping into different colored wigs and outfits and confusing the bad guys by seemingly being in two places at the same time.

Estelle strolled along after them. She was the grand dame of the show, a character actress in her sixties. She always walked with a slow, graceful elegance, which was completely at odds with the salty language that tumbled out whenever she opened her mouth. Estelle played Chief Christie's boss with a quirkiness that gave the show a lot of its humor - along with Rick's antics as Agent Tanner. Estelle had a cloud of white hair, a throaty laugh, and was rarely seen without a long, slim cigar on the end of a cigar holder.

Sharlene threw back her mane of tumbling brown hair, flashed a massive smile at the camera, and then began.

"Hi - I'm Sharlene Milton reporting for *TeeVee*, and you join me on the set of HBC's surprise hit *Collar Crime*, now in its second season on the back of unprecedented ratings last year. The producers have promised us bigger and even more dramatic storylines this season than its barnstorming first year."

Sharlene turned her fixed, megawatt smile on Rick. "Richard O'Shea - you play the naughtiest sub on TV at the moment," she simpered. "But in real life you're not a sub at all. How does it feel playing one? And how do you manage to do it so convincingly?" She fingered the plain silver collar around her throat and gazed up at him through her eyelashes. "Maybe the sub in your life gives you coaching?" she suggested throatily.

"Well, there isn't a sub in my life right now," Rick replied, giving her a wide smile that showed off his dazzling white teeth. "And my friends call me Rick, Sharlene." He winked at her, and she positively melted in front of him.

Matt sighed. Rick's inevitable and unsubtle flirting with every new sub in sight, collared or not, always grated on his nerves.

"Well, Rick, I'm sure that special sub is waiting out there for you somewhere," Sharlene said.

"If you weren't collared, I'd say I was looking at her right now," Rick replied. It was all Matt could do not to roll his eyes. "As for playing the naughtiest sub on TV - this job is the most fun I've ever had at work."

"Every time we watch the show my dom says to me, 'if that boy was mine he wouldn't sit comfortably again for the rest of his life'." Sharlene laughed.

"Yeah, Alex Tanner does get into a lot of trouble," Rick agreed.

"It's strange seeing you without that big ol' black collar you usually wear on the show."

Rick ran his hand over his bare neck. "Well, I'm off-duty and out of costume right now," he said, gesturing to his clothes. "I don't think the chief over there would let Alex wear these kinds of clothes on one of his ops, do you?" Rick said, glancing at Daniel.

It was a clear attempt to direct Sharlene's attention away from himself and onto the star of the show, where it belonged. Matt had often noticed that while Rick loved the limelight, he never tried to take it away from any of his co-stars, and often actively worked to ensure that the shy cast members got their fair share.

The ploy worked, and Sharlene thrust her microphone under Daniel's nose. "Daniel Mayfield, you play the chief of this motley band of *Collar Crime* agents - a man with a dark past and a tough way with the subs on his team."

"I think the chief just wants to keep them all alive," Daniel replied, with a courteous smile at Sharlene. "And he has to keep them on a short leash to ensure their safety."

"And you, Matthew Lake." Sharlene turned to him, looking a lot less interested than she had been when talking to Rick. "Last season your character, Ben Harris, was the newbie on the team, but I hear this season that you might finally win the chief's trust - and even be given that much-coveted apprenticeship collar."

"Well, it's possible - but I think Ben has a lot of growing up to do first - and some mistakes to make as well," Matt replied, smiling at her through gritted teeth. "He wants to wear the chief's apprenticeship collar and really feel part of the team, but the chief will make him earn it."

Sharlene couldn't have been less interested. She turned back to Daniel. "It's unusual, isn't it, Daniel, for a boss to collar his workplace subordinates? I mean, usually a dom only collars a sub when they're sexually or romantically involved. But the chief hasn't taken any of his subordinates to his bed - the collars he gives them are for work only."

"It is unusual." Daniel nodded. "But not completely unheard of. The show runner, Petra Davies, based the character of Chief Christie on a real life guy she met a few years ago when researching a show about the Marines. That guy was as much of a hardass as Chief Christie, and I think he's the inspiration behind the character."

"Well, I did not know that!" Sharlene exclaimed.

Daniel nodded. "Apparently, it's not unusual in small law-enforcement teams, or combat teams, for a boss to give their subordinates apprenticeship collars. It can create a sense of bonding and trust in a team like this."

"So that's why the chief collared Alex Tanner and the twins?" She glanced at Cara and Casey, who waved back at her.

"Yes, it is. We covered it in an episode at the beginning of last season, and I think it fits in well with the theme of the show," Daniel replied. "These guys are a crack unit of federal agents whose specialty is investigating crimes involving collars in situations like fraud, espionage and coercion. I like that the show's writers have done something unusual with the characters' own collars - it's a fresh look at an old cliché, if you like."

Sharlene nodded enthusiastically. "Well, it certainly seems to work if the ratings are anything to go by. Viewers are definitely intrigued. But it also seems like the chief wants to have his cake and not eat it by collaring the subs on his team and yet not sleeping with them. What's that about, Daniel?"

Daniel gave a secretive little smile. "Oh, you'll find out in the episode airing tonight, so make sure you watch. We're going to find out why Chief Christie is keeping them all at arm's length."

"Rick..." Sharlene's voice became a purr again as she turned back to him. "The cast of *Collar Crime* is well known for being composed almost entirely of subs!" She sounded as if this was the most amazing thing in the world. "What's it like being the only dom in the cast?"

Rick grinned down at her. "Oh, it's great, Sharlene. I love it. Who wouldn't - being on set with all these beautiful subs?" He glanced around at his co-stars with a beatific smile, and Matt fought back an urge to stamp on his expensive black cowboy boots.

"Uh... Rick's not the only dom in the cast," Karl said.

Sharlene whirled around. "Ah yes - Karl Morgan - you're new to the cast this season. I hear you're the new villain who knows something about the chief's dark and mysterious past. Can you give us any clues about that?"

"Sorry." Karl winked. "You'll have to watch and find out. But it's safe to say that the chief is hiding a dark secret - and Karl knows all about it."

"And you're a dom playing a dom - I believe your character, Jason Jarvis, is a dominant, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. You should ask Matt here about that - Jason has some big scenes coming up with Ben soon. I can't tell you more except that I'm looking forward to filming them." Karl shot Matt a mischievous grin, and Matt's stomach did an anxious flip.

"Well, I look forward to finding out about that dark old secret," Sharlene said, her brown eyes gleaming. She exchanged a few brief, uninterested words with the twins, looked

horrified when Estelle blew a cloud of cigar smoke into her hair, and then turned back to the camera with that megawatt smile fixed firmly in place. "And that's all we have time for - but be sure to watch the exciting new episode of *Collar Crime* tonight to find out what Chief Christie has been hiding!"

Matt let out a sigh of relief as the interview ended, and turned to go. He knew publicity was necessary, and he was grateful to have a job on a hit show, but he hated doing these stupid interviews. He watched as Rick leaned casually against the wall and said, "So, Sharlene, that's a pretty collar around an equally pretty neck, but I don't see your dom anywhere around, and my trailer is just over there, so..."

Matt rolled his eyes. Trust Rick to dive straight in there. Sharlene looked very interested, but at that moment a tall, dark, exotic-looking woman approached and snapped a lead on Sharlene's collar with a little snarl in Rick's direction. Rick grinned and spread his hands in a good-humored gesture of defeat.

"Hey - it was worth a try," he said to the woman. She glared at him and led Sharlene away, one hand cupped possessively around her sub's shapely bottom.

Matt was glad to get out of there and drive home. He did his yoga practice when he arrived home, to unwind and get himself in the right frame of mind for his date with Emily. Yoga both calmed him down and kept him supple and strong, and he enjoyed the discipline of it. After that, he took a nice warm bath and rubbed lotion into his body. Emily expected him to present himself without a hair out of place, so he took the time to groom himself thoroughly. He ensured he didn't have one single strand of pubic hair - Emily liked him to be smooth, and he took great care in his personal appearance.

Emily was a service-oriented dom and that suited Matt fine. It didn't really chime with his own personal fantasies, but they were full of scenarios that scared him: it was far safer to have them as fantasies than to act on them.

He was ready and waiting on his porch at 7:55pm in case Emily was early. He was wearing a vivid blue shirt that he hoped brought out the color of his eyes, and a pair of navy blue chinos. He had spent some time styling his hair, which seemed to have a mind of its own and often wanted to spring up messily rather than sit flat on his head. Emily insisted that it be neat, so he took a long time smoothing it into submission.

She drove up in her expensive car at 8pm on the dot, and he ran out to get in beside her. Emily was a partner in a big accounting firm and made more money than he did, as she liked to remind him frequently. He liked that she was hard working and focused - those were qualities he appreciated in a dom.

They went to a nearby restaurant - not a very pricey one, as Emily was a great believer in saving money and not spending it on frivolities.

"So, tell me what you've been doing since I last saw you," she said, beckoning over the waitress. "How long has it been?"

"Eight days, Ma'am," Matt said promptly. Emily liked to maintain a formality to their interactions, to ensure that Matt was always aware that she was his dom and he her sub. Sometimes she gave him permission to address her by name, but he had to earn that with good behavior first.

Emily glanced at her diary. If Matt had got the number of days wrong then he'd be punished, but Matt was confident he hadn't - remembering numbers was his forté.

"Very good. Continue." The waitress handed Emily a menu and then tried to hand one to Matt. He wasn't collared, so this was normal etiquette, but Emily gave a hiss of disapproval and batted the menu away. "My sub will have what I order for him," she said imperiously. She nodded at Matt to continue and then opened the menu and began studying it, ignoring Matt completely.

"Uh, well, I guess the big news is that Rick was late again today, so Petra ordered him to the discipline room to take licks."

"Very interesting gossip, I'm sure, but that's today. You seem to have omitted the events of the previous seven days, and you know I like to hear your report in chronological order," Emily informed him, looking up sharply.

Matt took a deep breath, looked at Emily, and tried to focus.

Emily was an attractive dom, and Matt knew he was lucky to have her. She would have been completely out of his league before he got the job on *Collar Crime*. She was tall and slender with alabaster skin and long brown hair. Her eyes were dark brown, and she always dressed immaculately, in tailored suits that suited her slim figure. She had a flat, angular kind of body, one that held few surprises but was perfectly proportioned and symmetrical in every way. Matt liked the neatness of Emily and how completely smooth and unruffled she always was. There was something blank and restful about her. She wasn't complicated. She was ordered and organized, and he knew where he was with her because of that.

"So, Tuesday... I had to work late because Rick was having trouble with a scene - and boy did we all have to hear about it, over and over again. I think he was having one of his 'look at me' moments. And then..."

"Excuse me - waitress - what are the ingredients in this dish?" Emily asked, beckoning the waitress over again. The young woman knelt beside the table, smiling up at Emily, clearly a sub enjoying the part of her job where she could offer her service to an attractive dom.

Matt wasn't sure if he should continue or not, but Emily waved her index finger at him so he took that as his cue to go on. He wasn't sure how Emily could possibly have heard a word he said as he rambled through the week's events, because she was listening to the waitress the entire time. Finally satisfied, Emily turned away from the waitress and looked at him again.

"Which leads me to today," Matt said. "And Rick taking discipline for being late. I must admit I did kind of feel sorry for him. I mean, I know -"

"You felt sorry for him?" Emily wrinkled her attractive nose. "He broke the rules and inconvenienced everyone in the process. If I were Petra, I'd have punished him severely months ago. It's entirely what he deserves. He gives doms a bad name."

"Uh... I wouldn't go that far. I mean, Rick can be a pain in the ass, but he's fun, too."

"Fun?" Emily looked disgusted. "You just said that he caused you to work late on Tuesday because of his childish, attention-seeking attitude."

"Well yes... but..." Matt trailed off. He didn't know how to explain to Emily that with the long hours they worked, Rick's energy and zest for life could make all the difference between a hard, boring day, and a fun-filled one. The downside of Rick was the bad timekeeping and occasional grandstanding during filming, but Matt thought he'd take those any day because Rick made him laugh so much.

"Very well. That appears to be your week. I am disappointed, Matthew, that you still show a lack of maturity in your approach to your work. You're very lucky to be in a hit TV show - you should exhibit a more serious attitude."

"That's not fair! I am serious about my work. And yes, I'm lucky, but I do think talent might have had something to do with why I got the role and am successful at it. I work hard, Emily." Matt protested.

She fixed him with a hard glare. "I have not given you permission to use my name this evening, and for that little show of petulance you can sit in silence for the rest of the meal while I tell you about my own week."

She beckoned the waitress over again and proceeded to order for them both, choosing something that she knew Matt didn't like, presumably to punish him for his outburst.

He sat and gazed at her obediently for the rest of the meal while she talked about her week. He couldn't drift off, as she sometimes questioned him about it later during sex, and if he got any details wrong then she punished him - and it wasn't sexy punishment. Matt liked the idea of sexy punishment but her punishments were never sexy. They usually consisted of him abasing himself in front of her while she laid on stripes with the switch - hard and cool and without any affection to lessen the severity.

Emily had been very clear from the outset about what form their sex life would take, and he'd agreed to it readily enough. It had all sounded very... sensible. In reality, he'd found it less satisfying than he'd hoped, but Emily thought that was his fault, and she was probably right. He knew he had a tendency to overthink things, and he found it really hard to relax and go with the flow during sex. At least she wasn't overly affectionate and never tried to hug him. Matt wasn't a hugger - he didn't like people invading his personal space.

After dinner, Emily drove him back to his place. "I'll come in for sex," she told him. "It's been several days - I trust you haven't masturbated during that time?"

"No, Ma'am. I know my penis belongs to you," Matthew told her. Emily hated words like 'cock' or 'clit' or 'hole'. She insisted on the correct terms for everything.

"Good. Although I'm not sure I'll let you come after that little outburst in the restaurant. Go inside and undress. I want to make some calls to the office first, and then I'll come and make use of you."

Matt went up to his bedroom and undressed slowly, trying to at least get close to being in a submissive headspace. He wished Emily would help, but she felt this was his responsibility. He tried to imagine what it would be like if a dom with the right kind of forceful personality overpowered him and made him surrender, but Emily insisted he surrender simply because she said so, and Matt didn't find it that easy.

When he was naked he took up position in the corner, looking at the wall. He wondered if he'd find it easier to get turned on if he was on his knees, or kneeling on the bed, his head buried in the pillows and his ass in the air. His cock twitched at that idea, but he didn't dare alter his position; this was how Emily liked him.

He was there for a long time. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand a couple of times and an hour passed before finally he heard Emily's footsteps on the stairs. He felt his buttocks clenching in anticipation, wondering how his dom would use him tonight.

"Well, you've done that right, at least," Emily told him as she entered the room. "So I will reward you by having sex with you. But you cannot come until - and if - I say so."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Turn around, come over here, and undress me," she ordered.

He did as he was told, losing himself in the act of servitude. He was very gentle and eager to please and took great care of her expensive clothing, which he folded neatly and placed on a nearby chair.

When she was naked, she walked over to the toy box in the corner of the room, and, to his dismay, took out the switch.

"Prostrate yourself and accept your punishment for your rudeness in the restaurant earlier. I will not be seen out with a surly submissive," she told him.

He got on the bed, laid face down, and then shivered in anticipation, wondering where the switch would fall. She tapped his shoulders, and down over his buttocks, and then he heard the swish of the switch falling... onto the back of his knees. He yelped and jumped - it was his least favorite spot to take punishment.

"Hold still, submissive," she ordered irritably, and he took a deep breath and waited with dread for the next strike. It fell on his thighs this time, and he yelped again. "That will do for now," she said, returning the switch to the toy box, much to his relief.

"Lie on your back and get hard for me, so I can ride you." She pointed in the direction of his cock.

He tried his best to think arousing thoughts - the nearness of his naked dom should have been enough, but somehow it wasn't, and he found himself returning to his earlier fantasy of a dom who would overpower him with sheer sexiness, hold him down and...

"That's good." Emily nodded approvingly at his now hard cock, and then she got on the bed and engulfed it inside her body in one smooth move. She was perfectly in control as she rode him, caressing her body idly with her hands as she rose and fell.

"May I touch you, Ma'am?" Matt asked, longing to run his fingers over her small, pert, white breasts.

"No. You were very naughty earlier, and I don't reward naughtiness," she told him. "I'm only having sex with you now for my own pleasure, not yours."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said softly, and she continued to ride him hard before coming without making any sound at all - her breathing merely hitched a little.

"May I come now, Ma'am?" he asked politely when she was done.

"Not tonight, Matthew. As I said, I don't reward naughtiness." She got off him and disappeared into the bathroom, leaving him lying there with his cock drooping in disappointment. Ah well, Emily was the dom, and she was allowed to deny him orgasm; he just wished it had been done in a more sexy way.

He lay there, counting the shadows the car headlights made on the ceiling as they passed by outside, listening to the sound of the shower.

She returned to the bedroom a few minutes later, towel-drying her hair as she walked, and got dressed again. He felt even more disappointed by that. Wasn't she even going to stay the night? He liked it when she stayed over - sometimes she would put a hand on his thigh, and he could almost believe he belonged to someone.

"You know, Matthew, I've been thinking," she said, sitting down on the side of the bed and pulling on her shiny brown shoes.

"Mmm?" He propped himself up on one elbow and gazed at her beautiful white skin. There was a kind of perfection to her that he found mesmerizing.

"Don't interrupt. I've been thinking that we're really not very compatible."

"What?" He sat up in surprise.

"You see, I don't think that you're really a service-oriented submissive - you don't take as much pleasure from serving me as I feel you should."

He wanted to protest, but she had a point. It wasn't that he minded serving - he liked it - but it wasn't his primary fantasy, and she had clearly picked up on that.

"You can speak now." She looked at him expectantly.

"Uh... well, I do enjoy serving you," he began, wondering what to say.

"A somewhat limp reply. I always did have reservations about you. Your profession is a disadvantage - I'm not remotely star-struck, as you well know. I'm not merely interested in having a trophy submissive, and I'm not enamored by the shallowness of your industry. I feel that anyone who wants to do the kind of work you do must, at heart, be someone with quite different values from myself."

Matt sat there, staring at her.

"I've got a new secretary - a very pleasing young submissive called Eleanor," Emily continued. "She seems much more eager to please than you are, and she doesn't throw any of these silly dramatic tantrums that seem to be endemic to submissives in your line of work - and dominants, too, if Richard O'Shea's appalling behavior is anything to go by."

Emily reached into her bag, took out a hairbrush, and began smoothing it through her damp hair.

"You have a new secretary?" Matt repeated blankly.

"Yes. She's charming. Now, of course, I have not made any advances to her, because you and I have an arrangement, but I feel that after tonight, we should end that arrangement, so I will be free to take a new submissive. Eleanor fits the bill nicely. There is the complication of the fact we work together, but we'll negotiate some appropriate boundaries in advance. It's the sensible thing to do."

"Yes. Sensible," Matt repeated.

"I wanted to give you one last try, but clearly it's not working," Emily told him. "You're a satisfactory submissive, don't get me wrong, but I feel I deserve someone who is more than merely 'satisfactory'."

"You're dumping me?" Matt lay back down on the bed. He felt he should argue with her, or beg for her to stay, but found he had absolutely nothing to say.

"No." Emily looked surprised. "I'm simply ending our arrangement. I think it's run its natural course. Thank you very much for giving me your submission for the past few months. Goodbye, Matthew."

She stood up, picked up her bag, and turned to go. Matt felt his temper rise. "I didn't," he snapped.

"Excuse me?" She paused by the door, one eyebrow raised.

"My submission - you never had it. I went through the motions, but you never made me feel anything. With you, it was all orders - 'do that, come here, smile, eat what I say, be what I want'. Everything was about rules and it was totally soulless, sterile and boring."

Emily's face remained a calm mask - Matt wondered if anything could ever penetrate her utterly rigid worldview. "I'm afraid you're addicted to dramatics, Matthew, and this kind of outburst is a case in point. I clearly made the right decision - we're utterly incompatible. Goodbye."

She left, closing the door with a controlled click, and Matt resented even that. Couldn't she have slammed it shut on her way out? At least that was the kind of explosive finish that would have shown their relationship had meant something to her.

Matt sank back down on the bed, counting the cars passing by again and wondering which one was hers. He was sure he should feel something, but he didn't.

He didn't feel anything at all.

Chapter Five

It had been a bad day, and Rick was only too happy to swing his leg over the saddle of his beloved Harley, pull on his shades, and head out for the open road. Usually he'd go home, take a shower, get changed and then head out to a bar or party somewhere, hoping to find a sub for the night.

Now, with Petra's embargo on clubbing fresh in his mind, he decided to head for the hills instead. He often did this, usually at the weekend or during hiatus. He'd take off alone to ride deep into the heart of the hillside, loving the feel of the bike purring between his legs and the sense of calm that he got from being out on the open road, without the paraphernalia of his everyday life around him.

Rick knew he gave every appearance of being an extrovert, but there was a tiny piece of his soul that recharged by heading out alone, just him and his bike. It restored something to him, a sense of peace and contentment that he couldn't find anywhere else except, maybe, when he was taking pleasure in a sub's body.

He rode up to his special place, a rocky outcrop with an amazing view, that he'd found as a kid. This place had been his sanctuary then, his refuge when times were tough, and the place he'd come to when he needed to escape. As a kid, he'd always dreamed of one day bringing someone he loved here and sharing it with them, but as an adult he knew that was

a stupid dream, and he'd learned to enjoy it by himself, relishing the sense of peace it always gave him.

He felt it doing its job and restoring his soul in some indefinable way, soothing and calming him after a stressful day.

When he felt better, he swung his leg over the bike and rode back down, going as fast as he could, zoning out and feeling himself merge with the bike, loving the sense of power it gave him.

He was so lost in the sensation that he didn't initially hear the sirens. The first he realized he might be in trouble was when the police car overtook him, flashing its lights, indicating that he pull over.

He braked into the side of the road, and two police officers got out of their car and came towards him. Rick took off his helmet, grimacing.

"Do you know how fast you were going, sir?" one of the police officers asked politely. Rick glanced at her nametag and flashed her a charming smile.

"To be honest, Officer Cahill, I might have lost track a little back there," he admitted. Neither of them was wearing a collar, and Rick realized, from the vibe he was getting off them, that they were both doms. He suspected he wouldn't be able to melt them with one of his big smiles and the promise of a day on the *Collar Crime* set if they'd be so kind as to overlook his transgression.

"Don't I know you?" the other officer asked suspiciously.

Rick knew this could go one of two ways: either they'd be happy to let him off with a fine and an autograph, or they'd want to make an example of him to prove that big TV stars didn't get away with anything on their patch. That usually meant a worse punishment than regular folks got, out of some inverted sense of justice.

"I don't think so," he said cautiously.

"Yeah, you're on that show about collars - you play that screw-up sub."

"Are you fans of the show?" Rick asked hopefully, squinting at the guy's name tag.

"Nah - my sub loves it, but it drives me nuts. I like the boss guy, but you ruin it for me. Always goofing off - and you're supposed to be in law enforcement. It makes real LEOs look stupid, and I hate that." He scowled.

Ouch. That hurt. Rick plastered his most charming smile to his face, regardless. "It's just a show - we have to make it entertaining, Officer Dale. The job you guys do is so important - we don't want to trivialize that. Honest."

"So, you're some hot shot TV star, are you?" Cahill gave him a sour look. "That doesn't mean you own the roads. We have laws around here, and you don't get to break them just because you're on TV."

"Sorry, it's been a difficult day, and I guess I zoned out. It won't happen again, officers," Rick said, trying to look as harmless as possible.

"License and registration." Cahill snapped her fingers, and Rick fumbled in his wallet. He handed them over with a wince and watched as she ran his details through her handheld database. Her expression darkened. "Hmm, it looks like you make a habit of this, sir. I think we'll have to take you down to the Justice Hall."

"What? No... c'mon - nobody was hurt, and I wasn't going that fast." Rick had visited the Justice Hall enough to know what would happen when he got there.

"State policy - this is your third offence in a year, and the mayor is on a big drive to improve road safety right now."

"Look, I'm sorry - but is this really necessary? You look like reasonable people, and if you ever wanted to come and visit the set and meet Daniel Mayfield then I'd be happy to introduce you."

Officer Cahill's eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to bribe us, sir?"

"No, I'm just saying we don't need to make a big deal out of this, do we?" Rick spread his arms helplessly.

"Just because you're an actor in some big TV show, doesn't mean the rules don't apply to you."

"I'm not..." Rick paused, and then nodded. Clearly the day wasn't going to go his way, and he was only making it worse for himself; it was better to get it over with. "I respect the work you do, officers, and I'm sorry for screwing up. Here." He handed the bike's keys over to Cahill, and allowed Officer Dale to walk him over to the police car.

The Justice Hall was a big building adjacent to the courthouse. It dealt with simple cases, clearing them through on the spot rather than clogging up the court system.

Rick was processed and then put before the duty judge almost immediately. He pleaded guilty and wasn't surprised to get the statutory minimum of six strokes with the strap.

"Sentence can be carried out at any time in the next two weeks; just report back to receive your penalty. Here." The judge handed back his papers with the sentence written on them. "Do you have a dom who'll want to take the punishment for you? If so, it'll mean filling in another form."

"No dom," Rick said politely. "I'll be taking it myself. Can we do it now?"

She arched a surprised eyebrow, and he guessed most people at least gave themselves a few days to prepare, but he had a very specific reason for wanting to get it over and done with. He had no doubt that the cops, or someone in the bustling Justice Hall, would leak the details of his misdemeanor to the press, so when he came back in to take his punishment the place would be packed with observers wanting to see the big TV star get taken down a peg or two. This way he could get it over and done with before the press got wind of it.

"Sure," the judge said. "Discipline room is down the hallway, on the left."

Rick already knew the way. It might have been a while since his last visit, but the place hadn't changed. It still had the same old beige walls and scratched wooden flooring. The poorly maintained air conditioning made it stiflingly hot, and there was a general atmosphere of nerves and apprehension.

Rick sat down on the bench to wait his turn. Punishments were public - people had the right to see justice being done, but usually only the victim of a crime and their family showed up. There were always a few weirdos who just enjoyed watching people being punished, but Rick didn't know why, because there was nothing interesting or erotic about state discipline. It was a fact of everyday life and not one that attracted a great deal of interest unless it was a special case.

Over in the center of the room, the state punishment officer looked completely bored as he accepted the chit the miscreant at the front of the queue gave him. There was the usual rigmarole of rights being read, and then the wrongdoer was pointed in the direction of the punishment bench. The dull thudding sounds of a swift strapping followed, and then it was over.

This particular wrongdoer stood up, pulled up his pants, and left the room without looking back. Justice might be painful but at least it was soon over, and Rick wasn't afraid of it. He wasn't a first timer - far from it - but he felt sorry for the woman sobbing nervously beside him who had probably never been here in her life.

"Hey - it's okay, it'll be over quickly." Rick fished around in his pants pocket, found a tissue, and handed it to her. She took it gratefully, looking up at him with a sad smile - and then her eyes widened in surprise.

"Oh, shit - you're Alex Tanner!"

"Yup." He'd long ago stopped explaining to people that he wasn't actually Alex Tanner - he just played him on TV. "Trust me to end up in this kind of trouble, huh?" he said, trying to distract her from her impending punishment.

"Does the chief know you're here?" She flashed him a knowing grin, because Chief Christie never allowed any of his subs to take public discipline on the show; he always volunteered to take it for them if the need ever arose.

"Nah - where is he when you need him, huh?" Rick grinned back at her.

"He'll be mad when he finds out."

"I won't tell him if you don't."

"I won't - I promise." She giggled, and he laughed, glad that he'd helped take her mind off her coming ordeal. "I love your show - you're my favorite character on TV!" she told him. "You make me laugh so much. I wish I could be as cool as you."

"Hey, don't use me as a role model - I ended up here, didn't I?"

"So did I," she pointed out, and they both laughed at that.

"Susan Antonio," the punishment officer called, and the woman stood up, twisting her fingers in her tissue.

"Chin up, Susan," Rick told her. "It's not so bad."

She managed a nervous nod and then headed over to the punishment bench. Rick noticed her scuffed shoes and the hole in her blouse. She was skinny, the bones in her shoulders standing out, and she had the pinched look of someone who didn't know where the next meal was coming from. Rick remembered that feeling all too well. Poor Susan was clearly one of life's unfortunates. He had no idea what she'd done, but he hated that she'd ended up here. That had been him once, and he wouldn't wish it on anyone.

She bent over to take her punishment, and Rick closed his eyes, unable to watch. He could feel the palms of his hands starting to sweat, not because he was nervous, but because he hated this so much. He rubbed them on his pants, trying to distract himself.

Susan was a sweet sub - he could tell she was a sub, and an uncollared one at that - and he felt sorry for her. Rick loved spanking his subs - he loved the sensation of pulling them over his knee and gently warming their asses, and he hated that the state took something he adored - something so beautiful and erotic - and turned it into a flat, humiliating, unpleasant form of discipline.

Susan clearly didn't have a dom to take her punishment for her, and he hated the idea of her enduring it. He might not be the kind of dom that any parent would want for their offspring, but he always felt a sense of protectiveness towards subs. He understood Chief Christie's attitude on this because he shared it. He'd never stand by and let any sub of his undergo state discipline; he'd volunteer to take it for them.

Rick mocked himself silently for that thought. Any sub of his? It wasn't as if he ever had a sub for more than a night; he always made sure of that.

Susan sobbed throughout her punishment in a way that made his gut ache. He wondered what on earth she'd done to end up here. Most people never earned themselves a judicial

punishment in their entire lives, and she didn't strike him as some kind of seasoned lawbreaker.

He was glad when it was finally over, and only then did he open his eyes. He watched as she grabbed her bag and shuffled away towards the mainly empty seats. He wondered if she had friends or family waiting for her there, but she seemed to be alone. She put her bag down on a seat, rubbed her eyes with the tissue he'd given her, and glanced at him. He gave her a little salute and her face lit up. That made him feel happier. She might have had a crappy day, but at least she'd met her favorite TV actor.

His name was called so he got up, went over to the punishment officer, and handed over his chit.

The guy grinned at him. "Not often we have a celebrity in here - usually they have their fancy lawyers get them off."

"Not me. No fancy lawyers. I'll take what's coming to me," Rick said quietly. He didn't like the idea of trying to weasel out of it by using an expensive lawyer. It wasn't as if the Susan Antonios of this world had that option, after all. Anyway, it was better to get it over with and move on.

"Okay then - coat off, pants down, and bend over." The guy pointed at the punishment bench, which had been freshly disinfected by a bored looking official.

Rick was acutely aware as he lowered himself over it that it was the second time today that he'd been in this position. He wondered if it was the worst day of his life, but decided that there had been too many other really bad days when he was younger vying for that honor. Besides, he could walk out of here and go back to his nice house and live his nice life - that hadn't always been the case. No, all things considered it was just a regular kind of crappy day. He'd get through it.

"Looks like you're already been in trouble once today," the punishment officer said, coming to stand behind him and looking at the stripe marks from his earlier punishment.

"Yeah, well, trouble's my middle name," Rick muttered, bending his head and bracing himself.

The first stroke took his breath away. This was going to be a lot worse than the licks he'd taken at work - judicial punishments always were.

In stark contrast to earlier, he didn't play up to the audience this time. He took each painful lick without saying a word, just like he had when he was younger, standing in this same place, mute and angry, not wanting to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing him hurt.

At least it was quick. He stood up after the sixth stroke, pulled up his pants over his now very tender ass, shouldered himself into his coat and put his sunglasses back on again for some degree of privacy. There was a little buzz going around the hall, and he noticed several

people had come in to watch - mainly staff - so clearly word had got out that Rick O'Shea from the TV was taking licks in here today.

Usually, he'd give them their money's worth and sign autographs and put on a show, but he was tired, humiliated, and in pain, so he just pulled up the collar of his leather jacket and headed for the exit.

As he walked over to the door, he noticed that Susan was standing, watching, her cell phone in her hand. He hoped she'd called someone to come and get her. He gave her a little smile and a wave and then left the building.

He had to go through the long-winded rigmarole of getting his bike back, which cost him a ridiculous sum of money - and his ass was so sore that he had to force himself to ride it home. He could have left it and got a taxi, but he loved his bike, so he gritted his teeth and bore it.

He was so tired when he arrived home that he couldn't be bothered to put the Harley away in the garage. He just parked it on his drive and slid off it, wincing and cursing under his breath, and then he stomped into his house.

He took off his long black leather coat, got himself a beer from the fridge, and took a few deep gulps before wandering into the living room and turning on his giant TV. He'd had it specially installed, and it took up nearly one wall of his enormous living room.

He thought about eating and went back to the fridge, only to find it empty. He usually ate on set or when he was out clubbing, so all it contained was a slab of moldy cheese and a six-pack of beer. He wished he could unwind in a sub's willing body, but even if that were possible, he was too tired and sore right now.

He put the beer down on the floor, threw himself face down onto the sofa, and turned on the TV.

It really had been a very bad day.

Chapter Six

Matt lay on the bed for a long time, gazing into space. It took him a while to realize that he was moping more for the loss of the relationship he'd wanted it to be than for what it actually was. He wasn't sad Emily had gone. He hadn't even liked being with her very much. He just felt stung that she'd dumped him when clearly he should have dumped her, and he wondered why on earth he'd stayed in such an unsatisfactory relationship for so long.

"Idiot," he berated himself.

Emily hadn't let him come, so he decided it would be an act of minor triumph over his departed, unlamented ex-dom to jerk off.

He reached for his laptop, feeling furtive and naughty, and clicked on one of his favorite porno movies about a young sub who goes to a kink house seeking her ideal dom. The idea of having anonymous sex with a stranger at a kink house horrified Matt, but as a fantasy it turned him on, and he stroked his cock as the sub undressed and knelt to meet her master for the night.

Kink houses arranged for two people with compatible kinks to get together and play. A lot of the kinks listed on the average kink house website scared the hell out of Matt, but this movie was more about domination and submission than any kind of hard edge-play, and Matt loved that about it.

The sub was breathlessly in awe of her dom and the pair had a good chemistry - apparently it was acted by a real life couple who devised their own porno movies, and Matt liked how they played together. The dom wasn't strict or rules-oriented, but he was very forceful. He swept her up and overwhelmed her, ignoring her half-hearted protests and pleas. He was very tender with her, though, even as he dominated her completely, and Matt liked the contrast.

He watched as the dom placed the girl on her hands and knees, then wrapped his fist in her hair and pulled her head back as he entered her from behind. She squealed and panted, and the dom slapped her ass.

"Keep still while your dom is fucking you," he growled, but he stroked her calmly and then reached under her body and played with her breasts until she began mewling with pleasure.

Matt stroked his cock harder as the dom pumped into his helpless sub. He wondered what it would be like to be held in such a position, head back, a dom's hand wrapped firmly in his hair as he was taken mercilessly... and came over his hand.

"Fuck you, Emily," he snapped when the haze of his orgasm had passed, but he didn't feel any sense of victory.

He took a shower, pressing his head against the wall and letting the water pound onto his shoulders as he wondered why his relationships always seemed to end like this. He hadn't had many relationships, but they usually ended with his doms dumping him, often to move on to a sub they said they felt more compatible with. It was the story of his life.

"Why are none of them compatible with me?" he asked as he soaped himself. He tried to give service willingly, to be thoughtful, obedient and to accommodate all their desires in the bedroom, and yet he always seemed to fall short in some way he didn't understand. What was he doing wrong?

He dried himself, pulled on a bathrobe, and then trudged back into the bedroom and turned on the TV. He threw himself on the bed and watched it distractedly, still brooding on his lack of dating success, when a news item suddenly caught his attention.

"Oh, shit." Matt rolled off the bed, pulled on his clothes from his date with Emily, and made a run for the door without even stopping to think about it.

Chapter Seven

Rick was dozing when his cell phone rang.

"Hey, dom-bro!" It was Cilla, one of his dom friends. "I'm watching the news right now. Shit, man - that looks painful. Way to go, bro. You're such a fucking badass!"

"What...?" Rick fumbled for the remote and turned over to the news channel.

"TV star Richard O'Shea was pulled over for a speeding violation earlier today," a smug-sounding presenter said. "It looks as if O'Shea has a lot in common with the character he plays on the hit TV show *Collar Crime* - trouble magnet Agent Alex Tanner."

"What the hell?" Rick stared at the TV in horror.

"You're one bad dom-fucking dom!" Cilla hollered down the phone.

"Yeah, whatever. Fuck off, Cilla." He snapped the phone shut and turned his attention back to the news.

"It hasn't been a good day for O'Shea - our sources tell us he took six in the studio discipline room earlier in the day, too - and then another six this evening at the Justice Hall. Even Alex Tanner doesn't usually get into that much trouble in one day!"

Rick watched, in stunned surprise, as they showed some grainy cell phone footage of him in the discipline room at the Justice Hall. He could feel the embarrassment deep in his bones as he watched every single humiliating second of it. It only made it worse when he realized that whoever had taken the footage had to have been standing... right in the spot where Susan Antonio had been.

"Shit. What a crappy thing to do. I was nice to her as well," he muttered, feeling completely betrayed. It wasn't, strictly speaking, legal to video other people's punishments, so maybe Susan Antonio hadn't been the sweet innocent he'd taken her for. She clearly didn't seem to have any problem breaking the law, even straight after being punished for it.

His cell phone rang again, but he ignored it. The only person he was worried about was Petra - he hoped this didn't mean his job was in danger. He sent her a text, apologizing and saying he'd explain at work the next day. He really wasn't up to any kind of conversation with his boss tonight; he'd probably only say something to make the situation worse.

He turned off the TV and stared blankly at the carpet for a long time, feeling like the entire world was against him. The doorbell rang, and he wondered if it was the press, wanting

some kind of stupid interview. He supposed it was better to get it over with, so he rolled off the sofa, walked slowly to the front door, and opened it.

"Hey, Rick - are you okay?" Matt was standing there, holding a pizza box in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. He was wearing dark chinos and a blue shirt that brought out the color of his eyes. He looked like he was dressed for a date, except for the denim jacket slung over the top, which didn't match his outfit at all, and the silver scarf draped around his neck.

"What are you doing here, Matty?" Rick asked tiredly.

"I saw you on the news." Matt pushed past him and walked into the house. "You looked like shit, and I figured you hadn't eaten, so I thought I'd bring something over. Pizza and sympathy?" He held up the pizza box.

Rick gave a little chuckle and shut the door. "No need, Matt. I'm fine. Okay, so this hasn't been the best day of my life, but I'm fine."

"Bullshit." Matt's eyes blazed angrily. "I can tell you're hurting, and I don't blame you. How dare they show that footage? Nobody should have been allowed to film you. That's infringement. Do you know who it was? You could bring a case against them."

Rick thought of Susan Antonio quietly snuffling into her tissue beside him on the bench. He thought of her thin shoulders, scuffed shoes, and the hole in her blouse and decided he didn't mind her making a fast buck out of his misery. "Yeah, I know, but I won't bring a case. I'd rather let it drop."

"Good luck with that - it'll be all over the papers tomorrow."

"I know." Rick ran a tired hand through his hair. "But if I don't make a big deal of it or complain about it, then it'll pass over more quickly."

Matt nodded, thoughtfully. "You know, for an idiotic lunk, you're actually quite sensible at times."

Rick managed a faint grin at that. "Did you say something about pizza?" he said, brightening a little as his stomach began to growl.

"Yup. C'mon - you can eat lying on your stomach, can't you?" Matt grinned at him.

"Sure - I've had plenty of practice." Rick wished he hadn't said that the minute it was out of his mouth. "You know - from on the show," he added quickly to cover his mistake. "Alex is always eating that way after the chief has punished him."

"Yeah. Sure." Matt patted his arm. They went into the living room, and Matt took off his jacket and scarf and hung them neatly over the back of one of the chairs, while Rick eased himself down onto the sofa with a sigh. "You really are having a crappy day," Matt said, handing him a slice of pizza.

"Yeah, but it's looking a lot better now," Rick said, looking at the pizza, his mouth watering. "Pepperoni and onion? My favorite."

"I know." Matt went over to the sideboard, found a couple of glasses, and brought them back to the coffee table. Then he opened the wine and poured them both a glass.

"Wine - very civilized," Rick said, taking a sip. "And expensive." He let out an appreciative sigh and glanced at the bottle.

"Of course." Matt inclined his head. "You might act like a complete philistine, but I've noticed you always seem to know a good wine when we have a cast party. So - how do you feel?"

"Sore." Rick winced.

"I'm not surprised - twelve hard licks in one day - that has to hurt. What's it like?" he asked curiously.

Rick took a bite out of his pizza. "You've never taken licks in public?"

Matt shook his head. "I try to never get into trouble. It's really not that hard, Rick. You should try it someday."

"Hah, hah." Rick made a face. "Seriously - you've never been disciplined at work, ever?" Matt shook his head as he bit into his pizza. "How about at the Justice Hall?"

"Nope." Matt shook his head again.

"How is that even possible?"

"Actually, it's quite normal for most people." Matt rolled his eyes. "You're the freak here, Rick."

"And you're the control freak." Rick grinned. "Never getting into any trouble - ever?" He raised an eyebrow. "You need to cut loose and take some risks, Matt. You might find you actually have some fun."

"Yeah, because it definitely looked like you were having fun on that news item earlier," Matt responded tartly. "And you didn't answer my question - what's it like?"

"Painful. Hey - didn't you have a date with Ermentrude tonight?" Rick asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah." Matt's face had that pinched look it always got when he was unhappy.

"What happened?"

"She dumped me."

"What? Is she an idiot?" Rick tried to sit up and then winced and flopped back down again. "Are you upset?"

"No. That's the weird thing. I think I should be, but I'm not. I'm more mad, I think."

"That's good. Don't be upset - be mad. You totally didn't deserve for her to treat you that way."

"That's not it. I wish it was. I think I should've got mad at her a long time ago, but I didn't. Anyway, I'm not mad at her - I'm mad at myself. I knew I wasn't enjoying being with her, and I should've ended it, not her. Damn it!" Matt kicked the pizza box and it went flying halfway across the room. He made an apologetic little noise and dashed over to get it and bring it back to the sofa.

"Well, I'm angry with her, even if you aren't," Rick said. "I always hated the way she ordered you around and treated you like you were something she'd scraped off her shoe."

"Really?"

"Yeah, Matty. She wasn't good enough for you. Never could understand why you stuck with her."

"Me neither." Matt sighed.

"Well, I'm glad it's over," Rick said between bites of his pizza. "You should play the field, Matt. You're a good looking sub - doms everywhere must be falling over themselves to sweet-talk you into bed."

"I'm not like you, Rick. I don't think I'd enjoy playing the field."

"You're young - have some fun."

"See, to me, that isn't fun." Matt bristled. "I want to connect with someone, Rick! To find a dom I can really trust and relax with and not..."

"Not?" Rick raised an eyebrow.

"Not have to count with." Matt's pale skin flushed an endearing shade of pink. "I wish I could switch off my brain and not have to count everything all the time."

"It was worse with Emily, wasn't it?" Rick said. "I could tell. She made you nervous, and when you're nervous the OCD is worse. Also, you yell at me more on set." He winked.

Matt laughed. "Well, you do deserve to be yelled at a lot of the time."

"I know. What can I say? I'm trouble - and today that caught up with me, big time." Rick glanced over his shoulder ruefully.

"I'm an OCD freak who can't keep a dom, and you're an idiot who can't keep out of trouble." Matt grinned and held up his glass of wine. "What's left to do but celebrate?"

Rick laughed and clinked his glass against Matt's. "You're right. At least we can be screw-ups together."

He finished his pizza and lay back down with a sigh, yelping as his sore ass made itself felt.

"Do you want me to put something on that?" Matt asked, getting up. "Where do you keep the ointment?"

"What ointment?"

"Whatever you use on your subs after discipline?" Matt raised an eyebrow.

Rick felt irritated, even though it wasn't Matt's fault. "I wouldn't know. I've never disciplined a sub in my life."

"What?" Matt folded his arms over his chest, looking perplexed. "Seriously, Rick?"

"Seriously. Who the hell am I to discipline anyone for anything? I'm the biggest screw-up there is."

"But have you never done a really hard spanking session with a sub because they enjoyed it?"

"No, because I wouldn't enjoy it. It's not my thing," Rick said firmly.

"Really? What is?"

"Hah - that's between me and my subs." Rick grinned up at him.

"So, you hate spanking?"

"No!" Rick was outraged. "I love spanking - that's the point. That's why I'd hate to swing a strap around and do a really hard-core discipline scene. For me, spanking is... well, it's beautiful." He smiled as he remembered spanking that sub he'd picked up last night. "It's an act of intimacy, affection and sensuality - I adore pulling a sub over my knee and building up a spanking, like playing a piano or painting a picture. Just to whale down with some implement for the sake of it, even if the sub gets off on it - that really isn't my scene at all. It's not me, or how I like to play."

Matt gave a little whistle. "Wow - that's almost poetic, Rick. Just when I think I've got you figured out, you go and surprise me. I've never met a dom like you before, although half the time I'm not convinced you are a dom."

"Well, I am," Rick said flatly. "Just not that kind of dom. Look, spanking is a really personal thing for me, Matt. It's special, and a really big deal. I hated being down at the Justice Hall,

not because I took licks, but because I had to watch other people taking them - especially subs. It was like watching something that's incredibly important to me being trampled into the dust. It set my teeth on edge."

Matt sat back down on the sofa again. "You actually mean that? It really did upset you?" He sounded surprised, and Rick realized that Matt had never seen this side of him. Then again, he never usually let anyone see this side of him.

"Yes. Not being punished myself - that wasn't a problem - but watching and listening to it happening to others, especially subs; that was a kind of torture for me."

"You've spent a lot of time in the Justice Hall, haven't you?" Matt said quietly, looking at him.

Rick shrugged. "Some," he muttered.

"So why do you get yourself into so much trouble?" Matt asked. "I mean, first there was today at work, then this evening."

"I don't do it on purpose." Rick took another sip of his wine. "I don't pay enough attention to details, I guess."

"I don't think that's it," Matt said, giving him a thoughtful look.

"Don't psychoanalyze me, Lake. I'm not the one who counts things compulsively." Rick dug his foot into Matt's thigh to make it clear he was teasing.

"True." Matt glanced across the room. "You really have the most giant TV screen I've ever seen, Rick."

"Yeah, well, I earn all this money now, so I wanted to spend it on things that remind me of that fact whenever I look at them." Rick grinned.

"Can we watch something?"

"Sure." Rick grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. "I recorded tonight's episode of *Collar Crime* earlier. Want to watch us for a laugh?"

Matt grimaced. "I hate watching myself. I always think I make really crappy acting choices, while you and Daniel are always so good. I keep wondering when Petra is going to notice and fire me."

"Idiot!" Rick nudged Matt with his toe again. "C'mon - it'll be fun. Isn't this the episode where the chief's dark secret is revealed?"

"Yup. Although we do already know what that is."

"Yeah, but we haven't seen it all nicely edited together with meaningful music. C'mon - let's laugh at ourselves."

Rick grabbed hold of Matt's arm and pulled him down on the sofa next to him. Matt kicked off his shoes and put his feet up, settling down beside him. It felt cozy, and Rick thought how nice it was to have company that he wasn't trying to sweet-talk into bed for a change.

The opening credits came up, accompanied by the high speed, catchy theme song that summed up the show in a nutshell.

There was a moody, authoritative shot of Daniel, followed immediately by three faster shots of him: jumping over a car's hood, gun in hand; looking angsty as he caressed a vintage collar nestling in a box, unused; and, finally, a rare shot of him smiling directly to camera, in which he looked devastatingly handsome.

Matt whistled. "Wow - you can see why he was named the sexiest sub in the world five years running when he was in the *Insubordination* movies."

Then it was Rick's turn - the first shot was of him looking at himself in a mirror while he buckled on his collar before work - which had been the very last scene from the original pilot. That was followed by a montage of him chasing a suspect; lying handcuffed and bare-chested in bed with a sexy smile on his face; and kneeling down in front of Chief Christie, looking contrite.

"Ooh - sexy!" Matt whistled at the bedroom shot. "How many sex scenes have you done on the show so far?"

"Tons. I'm the eye candy, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Hah! I thought we'd all been specially selected to appeal to a broad range of possible tastes, Mr. Up Yourself," Matt commented acerbically.

"Yeah - but I bring the sex, obviously." Rick poked him in the thigh, and Matt rolled his eyes. "Oh, look what we've got here - poor little butter-wouldn't-melt Agent Ben Harris."

Matt's first shot showed him fingering his throat in a disappointed way, clearly upset by the lack of a collar. His montage was him nervously dropping his gun; then gazing up a well shaft covered in grime; and, finally, looking cool, wearing a tuxedo to a party.

"Which episode was that? The tux?" Rick frowned.

"The one where I'm undercover, pretending to be a rich dom at a party," Matt replied, taking another sip of his wine. He'd already gone through one glass and was on his second.

"Oh, yeah. I remember that one. It was your first undercover assignment; you totally fucked up, and Alex had to step in to save the day."

"That's the one." Matt grinned at him over the rim of his wine glass. "I had a lot of fun with that one."

"Ooh, kinky! Did playing a dom turn you on?" Rick purred seductively in Matt's ear.

"Not really. Does playing a sub in every single episode turn you on?" Matt threw back at him.

Rick roared with laughter. "That would be telling."

"The show's about to begin, so shush," Matt ordered, as the massive *Collar Crime* logo came up onscreen.

It was relaxing watching the episode with Matt. They both zoned out and enjoyed it, laughing at some of the bizarre twists the plot took.

"Ooh look - here comes Karl - time for that big showdown with the chief," Matt said, pointing as Karl slunk onto the screen, in character as Jason Jarvis, looking slimy and sinister. "Now, he's a good actor," Matt observed. "I mean, he's a really nice guy in real life, but he's pure evil onscreen."

"Aw, you have the hots for Karl Morgan." Rick poked Matt in the ribs.

"I do not!" Matt giggled, waving a hand to shove Rick away and spilling some of his wine on his own shirt in the process. "Oh, shit..." Matt wiped at the big stain ineffectually, and his entire body tensed up.

"Leave it. It doesn't matter," Rick said.

"But there's some on your carpet! I'm so sorry." He turned a stricken face towards Rick. "I'll pay for it to be cleaned. Oh, hell..." He rubbed at the carpet frantically. "Do you want me to leave?" he asked miserably.

"What? Don't be an idiot. It's fine. Shit like that doesn't freak me out. Just relax." Rick pulled him back onto the sofa. Matt was still tense, so Rick stroked the side of his thigh. Usually Matt shoved people away when they got too far into his personal space, but this time he seemed not to notice, and he gradually started to relax.

"Anyway, what would it matter if you did have the hots for Karl?" Rick said, trying to resume their conversation and further defuse Matt's tension. "He's a nice guy. You could do worse."

"True, but I think he has the hots for Daniel, so it wouldn't be any use if I did."

"Really? He likes Daniel?" Rick blew out a surprised whistle. "Poor Karl. That's never gonna happen. I bet most subs would fall over themselves to be with Karl because he's a good looking dom, but not Daniel. He's the one sub in the world that Karl can't have."

"Yeah. Poor Karl. He's a nice guy, and so is Daniel. I think they'd be good together."

"Talking of good together - this scene between the chief and Jason Jarvis totally rocks," Rick said, as the scene playing out on TV reached a dramatic climax. "Aw! Poor Chief Christie. Jason once stole the only sub he ever truly loved, and it hurt him so badly that he's never allowed himself to fall in love again. He's kept the collar he was going to give her all this time because he never got over her." Rick made a theatrical sobbing sound.

"And now Jason Jarvis is back, intent on hurting the chief again," Matt said. "Cue sinister music!"

"How's he going to do that?" Rick asked. "I don't remember this bit. I sometimes zone out in the scenes I'm not in during the table read."

"Just watch." Matt winked.

They watched in silence as the final scene showed Matt as Ben Harris walking into a bar. In an act of rebellion against his strict Lenkan upbringing, he'd gone looking for a dom to take his virginity.

"Oh, shit," Rick breathed, as Jason Jarvis entered the bar, sat down beside innocent, naive Ben, and turned to him with an evil smile.

"Jason is going to try and steal the chief's agents from him, one by one, starting with poor Ben." Matt grinned up at him.

"Oh no! So, next week are we going to see you and Karl writhing around naked in his playroom?" Rick teased. He was surprised when Matt's shoulders tensed again. "Hey - is there a problem?"

"No. Well, not really..." Matt glanced at him. "Damn it, I knew I shouldn't have drunk so much wine; I'll say something I regret."

"What is it, Matt?" Rick sat up. "Matt?" he said softly, ignoring how much his ass was hurting right now. "C'mon - you're my best friend - you can tell me."

"Your best friend? Really?" Matt said skeptically. "You're the great Richard O'Shea, the hottest thing in town right now. Everyone wants to be your friend."

"Yeah, but you're the only one who came around tonight and brought me pizza," Rick pointed out. "I don't see anyone else at the door. You're also the only one who didn't show up to my public humiliation at work earlier."

"Public humiliation...? But you invited everyone, Rick! You played the whole thing up."

"I had to. People would have heard about it and come along anyway if I hadn't. This way, I made it look like it didn't matter."

"But it did matter," Matt said quietly. "Yes?"

"Yes." Rick shrugged. "So tell me, Matt - what's bugging you about the plot line between Jason Jarvis and your character?"

Matt looked down at the floor. "The writers are building up to a big sex scene. We won't be filming it for a few weeks - first Jason is going to woo Ben and make him fall in love with him. Then he's going to invite him over for a session in his playroom."

"What's the problem with that? You've filmed sex scenes before."

"No, I haven't. I've filmed love scenes before, and they were pretty tame compared to how this will be," Matt said miserably. "In this scene, my character loses his virginity and totally gives it up to the dom who is seducing him."

"I still don't see the problem."

"The problem is that I don't know how that feels. I've never given it up to any dom - not really." He looked so desperately embarrassed that Rick felt sorry for him.

"So that's your dark secret, Matty? C'mon! As dark secrets go, it's hardly that bad." Rick pushed his wine glass away, deciding he wouldn't drink any more in case he confessed to a few dark secrets of his own. He was pretty sure that his would beat Matt's, hands down.

"But in this sex scene, Ben has to fall under Jason's spell, submit completely, and really fly. He has to go into his subspace and stay there for hours," Matt said gloomily.

"And you don't think you can act that?" Rick asked.

"I don't know. I've never been in subspace in my life, Rick. I don't have a clue how to act it."

"Well, I'm not a sub but I still act that every day. You don't have to have lived something to act it, Matt," Rick told him reasonably. "If they wrote you murdering someone, you wouldn't have to go out on a killing spree to know what it's like. You have empathy and imagination - that's part of what acting is."

"I know that. It's just... I know the audience will be able to see it's not authentic. I won't be able to go with it because I can't in my real life, either. I get tense and anxious and that'll show in my performance. I'm also worried about screwing up during the filming. It's going to be pretty explicit, and I'm worried I might freak out if Karl has to tie me up, or gag me, or something."

"Wow, this is really getting to you." Rick put a hand on Matt's shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. "Look, Matt, how about I have a word with Karl, and we go into a rehearsal room, just the three of us, and get you nice and relaxed and talk through the entire scene when it's time? Karl's a good guy - he'll be happy to help."

"I don't want people knowing about me. About my sex life and how completely I suck at it," Matt said uncertainly.

"Karl doesn't have to know. I'll just tell him you're really nervous because it's such a full-on scene. He'll be cool about it. Between us, we'll get you through it."

Matt gave a tentative little smile. "Okay. Thanks. I think that'll help."

"Good." Rick squeezed his shoulder again. "Matt... do you mind me asking something personal?"

"I've already spilled my guts about something very personal, so I guess not." Matt grimaced.

"Why do you repeatedly get involved in relationships with service-oriented doms?" Rick asked curiously. "Because it doesn't seem to me like you actually enjoy them much. I mean, I've been with service-oriented subs, and it's fine, but it doesn't really float my boat. I don't care about being waited on, and I don't like ordering subs around - well, not outside of the bedroom anyway." He winked. "It's not my thing, and I have to say, I never got the vibe from you that it's your thing, either. And yet those are the doms you always go for; there's Ermentrude, and that thick-as-shit guy you were with before her."

"Troy? He wasn't thick as shit, he was..." Matt considered it for a moment. "No, you're right, he was thick as shit. Very good-looking, though."

"And essentially all he wanted was a servant. You might as well have been his PA, Matt, rather than his sub, for all the attention he paid to you. You just ran errands for him all the time."

Matt glanced up at him. "I didn't know you even noticed who I date."

"Well, I do notice you never seem happy with any of them. I mean... you never roll into work late, walking funny, with a giant smile on your face from some really great sex the night before. You never have love bites on your neck, or handcuff marks on your wrists from a fantastic takedown session. You never wince when you sit down and then smile, like you took a really great spanking the night before. You never look well fucked."

"Like all your many subs, you mean?" Matt made a face. "The oh-so-lucky ones who've been treated to 'the great Richard O'Shea sexperience'." He snorted.

"Well, I do ride 'em hard and put 'em away smiling. I know that much." Rick grinned. "Look, you can tell me to butt out, but I just wondered why you always choose people who don't really suit your sexual dynamic. Unless... you do know what your sexual dynamic is, don't you?"

"Yes." Matt's face flushed a bright red.

Rick frowned. "And is it so bad that you can't find a dom who you'd be compatible with?"

"No. I just..." Matt shrugged helplessly.

"Or is it something you don't think you'd be any good at? You know you can be great as a service sub, because you're so organized and like controlling things, but you're so terrified of not being perfect all the time that you don't want to take the risk with something closer to your heart? Do you think you'd let a dom down if you asked for what you really want?" Rick asked quietly. "Because you think you can't do it, or you'd be bad at it?"

"I..." Matt's blue eyes were agonized, and Rick knew that he'd hit a nerve. "Yes," Matt muttered, dropping his head and gazing mutely at the floor.

"Hey - look, I don't know what kind of doms you've met, but plenty would be happy just to try stuff with you - you don't have to be perfect or get it right from the outset."

Except - this was Matt, and even as he said that, Rick knew that in Matt's head, he did. It was all part of the OCD, his need to get things right and be in control, while counting all the cracks on the ceiling at the same time. That was who Matt was.

"I know that in my head... but I can't..." Matt knocked the palm of his hand against his forehead. "I can't do it, Rick."

"What is it that you want to do, Matt?" Rick asked gently. "I know a lot of doms - I could get you together with one you're compatible with, who'd help get you over this. What's your thing? What turns you on?"

"Nothing really way out. Not even anything different or special." Matt looked up, his face flushed with embarrassment. "I'd like to be swept up in my own submission, to lose myself in it. I want to be overwhelmed, to give in, to be taken out of myself, and to float. I want to feel, Rick, instead of thinking all the time." He spoke in a low, passionate voice, and Rick could tell how much this meant to him.

"There are plenty of doms out there who'd be happy to take you on that journey, Matt," he said reassuringly.

"But I can't do it! I'll get tense, and anxious, and start counting, and they'll get annoyed with me, and I won't be able to please them, and I'll want to take back control, and they'll get pissed off with me and be disappointed. Then they'll end it, and I'll be worse off than before we started."

"Wow - you've got this whole scenario figured out." Rick shook his head, chuckling. Then he took another look at his friend, who was sitting there, his face flaming up to the tips of his ears, and the realization hit. "Is that something that's actually happened to you, Matt?"

Matt shrugged. "My first dom. Guy called Lucas."

"Your first dom - and I'm guessing you were his first sub, too? You were both young, and Lucas freaked out because he couldn't take you down. He felt it reflected on his

performance as a dom, and you beat yourself up because you couldn't be the sub he wanted you to be?"

"Yeah. That's about it." Matt grimaced. "Stupid, huh? I mean, everyone else manages to be out there having great sex all the time. It's just me who can't do it."

Rick laughed. "I really don't think everyone else is out there having great sex all the time, Matt."

"You are."

"Yeah. Well." Rick shrugged. "I'm not everyone. Look - what happened to you is just inexperience; you're older now."

"It's happened a few times since then, too," Matt told him. "After a while, I decided to stop putting myself through it. I was starting to come over as a tease who couldn't deliver in the bedroom."

"So it was easier to get involved with service-oriented doms, and be good at that, than try to find a dom who shared your particular dynamic and could be patient and sympathetic with you?"

"Yeah."

"That sounds crappy. You should cut yourself some slack, buddy. Sex isn't about being perfect - it's about having a good time. It sounds like you've got yourself so freaked out about it that it's hardly surprising you can't relax and enjoy it."

"Really?" Matt chewed on his bottom lip thoughtfully.

"Really. You need to stop being so hard on yourself, Matt."

"And on other people; I really wasn't very nice to you earlier, Rick."

"You have a temper - I like that about you. That's your passion showing through, Matt, and it has to show through somewhere, because you keep it leashed most of the time. At least when you're throwing fruit at me, you aren't counting things in your head."

"I never thought of it that way." Finally, Rick coaxed a wan smile out of his friend. "Sorry, all the same. I bottle things up and then explode, but I've never seen you lose your temper once. You're always so laid-back."

"Well, like you said, I do have a lot of good sex - and that helps me relax." Rick grinned at him.

"That's your secret?" Matt rolled his eyes.

"Give me a sub's beautiful ass to spank every day, throw in some hot fucking, and what the hell have I got to explode about?"

They both laughed, and Rick felt he'd at least been able to banish some of Matt's misery. He wished he knew a better way to help his friend, but he decided he'd think about how to set Matt up with a dom he'd be compatible with, now that the loathsome Emily was out of the way.

"Sorry - I came over here to cheer you up, but all I've done is dump my problems on you," Matt said tiredly. "And you've got plenty of problems of your own right now."

"Hell, no - it's been good finding out I'm not the only one with bad shit going on."

"You won't tell anyone about any of this, will you?"

Rick poked his thigh. "Don't be an idiot. Look, Matty, I've got plenty of faults - most of which you already know because, let's face it, I don't do a good job of hiding them - but I'd never betray a friend. I promise."

Matt smiled at him again and then yawned. "Thanks. So - what do you think Petra will do to you tomorrow?"

Rick sighed. "I have no idea. I'm more pissed off that the press will be following me around for the next few weeks, wallowing in this whole thing." He stretched out wearily on the sofa. "Whatever Petra does, I'll handle it."

Matt yawned again, his eyes glazing over. "You know... I think I might have had too much to drink," he muttered sleepily. His head jerked sideways, and he blinked, looking endearingly confused. Rick pulled him down gently, so that he was nestled against him. "Sorry... just... mmm," Matt muttered.

"Don't apologize, Matty," Rick told him. "You're always apologizing, and you really need to stop."

"Mmm, yeah. Sorry," Matt mumbled, and then his eyes closed, and he was fast asleep.

Rick smiled and stroked a hand over his friend's tousled blond hair. "I bet your hair drives you nuts; it's the one thing you can't control." He gently smoothed it with his fingers. "You'd never let me do this if you were awake. You're such a prickly sub, always pushing people away when your eyes say you want to be scooped up and loved. You must drive your doms nuts."

Rick leaned back with a yawn. "You know, not one of my clubbing friends gave a shit about what happened to me today, but you did. You're a good friend, Matty - better than I deserve."

Matt mumbled something in his sleep and moved his head so it was resting on Rick's chest, his cheek squished to one side. Rick smiled and wrapped an arm around his friend.

"Thank you, Matty," he said softly.

Chapter Eight

Matt woke up to find he had a pounding headache and what felt like a mouthful of sawdust.

"Urgh," he muttered, lifting his head blearily.

"Mmmm," a voice beside him said.

He thought about it for a moment, but he didn't remember asking Emily to stay over. Then he realized his head was resting on a broad, solid chest... nothing like Emily's thin body. He took a second to process this. He was lying on a sofa, pressed up against someone bigger than him; someone warm, who had one arm slung over his thigh. Where the hell was he?

The events of the previous evening came rushing back in a jumbled haze, and he sat up quickly. That caused a stabbing pain in his head, and he grabbed hold of it, moaning, as the room lurched violently around him.

"Take it easy," the voice said, and he felt a big hand on his back, stroking reassuringly as his head swam. He opened one eye, cautiously, and saw Rick grinning at him.

"What the... why am I...?" He stared at Rick in disbelief. "Oh, shit! Did we...?"

"Relax. You just had too much to drink last night. We were lying here talking, and you fell asleep. I thought you might as well stay over as you were in no condition to drive home."

"I had too much to drink? Didn't you have too much to drink, too?" Matt asked suspiciously, because Rick was making this sound very one-sided.

"I hold my liquor better." Rick smirked at him.

"I remember it all now." Matt buried his head in his hands. "Did I tell you all kinds of personal stuff? About the sex scene with Karl, and about... oh, shit, did I tell you about my first sexual experience?"

"Yes, you did, and I'll be tweeting all the details later." Rick winked, and Matt thumped him on the arm - hard. "Ow! Don't be an idiot, Matty - your secrets are safe with me. I promised you that last night."

"Oh. Right. Yes, you did. I am so embarrassed." Matt rubbed his head, feeling stupid. "I should have kept my mouth shut."

"Hey - it's fine. I'm good at keeping secrets."

"Really?" Matt raised an eyebrow. "Because that doesn't seem like something you'd be good at."

"Hah!" Rick poked him in the ribs. "That's where you're wrong, Mr. Wasted-after-two-glasses-of-wine."

"Don't remind me. What time is it?" He glanced at his watch. "Damn it, Rick - we'll be late for work."

"Nah - there's plenty of time. I haven't been up this early in ages." Rick swung his legs forward, bumping Matt off the sofa in the process, and Matt landed on the carpeted floor with a yelp.

"No, there isn't," he protested. "I don't have time to get home, shower, and get changed before work."

"Then don't." Rick shrugged. "You can take a shower here."

"But if I go to work wearing these clothes..." Matt gestured helplessly at the large, dark wine stain on his shirt.

"People will think you had a hot date and didn't go home last night. What's the big deal?" Rick shrugged.

"It's embarrassing."

"Well, I could lend you one of my shirts, but I think that'd cause even more gossip, don't you?" Rick grinned at him infuriatingly. "Anyway, who cares? You'll be changing into Ben's clothes the minute you get on set, so hardly anyone will see."

"Oh, forgive me for not wanting to turn up to work late, smelling of liquor, looking like I've just had a one-night stand! Some of us have standards."

"Whatever, grumpy face. C'mon." Rick held out a hand. "Get up and in the shower - you'll feel better after that."

Matt grabbed hold of Rick's hand and allowed him to haul him to his feet. The room swam again, and he lurched into Rick and held on tight. Luckily, Rick was built like a tree trunk, and he wrapped his big arms around Matt and held him up until everything was still again.

"Okay?" Rick was giving him one of those smug grins, and Matt thought it'd be easier to like him if he wasn't so annoying.

"I'm fine, thank you," Matt snapped. He pulled away sharply, wishing he felt steadier on his feet. "Where's the shower?"

Rick directed him to the bathroom in the spare bedroom and found him a razor and a clean toothbrush, still in its wrapper. "I have a drawer full of them," he said with a wink as he left Matt to it.

"Yes, yes, we know, for when one of your legions of subs sleeps over," Matt muttered under his breath, as he shut the door firmly and began getting undressed.

Rick was right about one thing - he did feel much better once he'd taken a shower, washed his hair, shaved, and brushed his teeth.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and emerged into the spare bedroom to see a clean tee shirt lying on the bed. He pulled it on to find it more or less fitted him. He looked at himself in the mirror and sighed as he saw the words emblazoned on it: *You want to spank me, and you know it!* They were the words of an infuriatingly catchy pop song that everyone had been singing a few months ago. Still, it was better than his liquor-stained shirt, so he decided to go with it.

He walked down the stairs and found Rick in the kitchen, brewing some coffee. He had showered and dressed, too - in a pair of black jeans and a tight crimson shirt that hugged his body almost obscenely. There was the usual assortment of leather thong bracelets around his wrists, and he was wearing his favorite thumb ring. A gold ear cuff clung to his left ear, attached by a chain to a ruby ear stud with a long scarlet crystal spike hanging from it. As usual, Matt felt decidedly under-dressed beside him.

"Thanks – shit, I need this," Matt said, taking the mug of black coffee that Rick handed to him.

"You're welcome, and you're right, I do." Rick winked at him, nodding his head at the slogan emblazoned on his chest.

"Hah hah hah hah hah." Matt glared at him. "Was this really the only spare tee shirt you had?"

"Nah, but I liked the idea of you wearing that slogan." Rick grinned. "Also, it's a great shade of blue on you - brings out the color of your eyes. Plus, it actually fits." He stood back and surveyed Matt critically. "It's not mine - some sub left it here a few months ago."

Matt took a sip of his coffee. "And they never came back for it?"

"Nah - I never invite subs back. It complicates things."

"Really? Never?" Matt glanced at him over the rim of his mug, startled. "I mean, I know you get through a lot of subs, but you never see them again after?"

"Nope. I don't do reruns. Once is fun, but twice starts to feel like we're dating, and I don't date."

"Why not?"

"Why?" Rick countered with a grin.

"I don't know - lots of reasons: intimacy, friendship, affection... love?"

"I've got friends for that. Relationships just complicate things. That's why I've got my no reruns policy."

"Wow - those are some massive commitment issues you've got there, O'Shea."

"I freely admit it. Now, if you've finished guzzling that coffee - take this." Rick handed him a motorcycle helmet.

Matt stared at it blankly. "Uh... why?"

"Because I don't trust that you're sober enough to drive yet, so you'll be my passenger on the bike."

"I'm not sober enough to drive, but you are?" Matt raised an eyebrow.

"I only had one glass of wine. You were knocking it back."

"I'm fine. There is no way I'm getting on that stupid bike with you."

"Tough." Rick's expression changed, and he folded his arms across his chest. "Because there is no way I'm letting you get behind the wheel of a car right now."

Rick was usually very easygoing, so Matt had expected him to shrug and give in, but it seemed that he really did mean it about him not driving. He might have a point - Matt had drunk a lot only a few hours ago; it probably wasn't entirely safe for him to drive yet.

"Why don't you drive my car, then?" Matt held up the keys.

"What's the matter...? Oh, wait." Rick rolled his eyes. "You've never been on a motorcycle before, have you?"

"Well... no," Matt admitted. "They always seem noisy, and dangerous, and -"

"Fun and exciting?" Rick raised an eyebrow. "You know, I don't think there's nearly enough fun and excitement in your ordered little life."

"And I don't think there's nearly enough order and routine in your freewheeling existence," Matt retorted.

Rick laughed. "You could be right, but we can't all be as perfect as you. C'mon - let's get moving. I can't be late for work today after Petra's dressing down yesterday."

Matt took the helmet and followed Rick into the hallway. Rick paused to shoulder himself into his long, black leather coat, while Matt grabbed his scarf and put on his own much less

dramatic denim jacket, and they went to the front door. Rick opened it... and they both froze as a dozen camera bulbs flashed at them.

"Rick, Rick - any comment about what happened down at the Justice Hall last night?" a reporter yelled.

Matt stood there, open-mouthed, taking in the sight of the crowd of journalists camped out on Rick's front drive, complete with brightly flashing cameras.

"Damn it - I forgot to lock the gates when I got home last night," Rick muttered.

"Are you worried about your job, Rick?" someone called.

"Do you think Petra Davies will fire you over this?"

"Rick - are you and Matthew Lake having an affair?"

"What?" Matt exploded.

The journalist who'd yelled that out grinned at him. "Well, you stayed over last night, and that isn't the shirt you were wearing when you arrived."

"How did you...?"

"Forget it, Matt. They just want to get a quote out of you," Rick told him quietly. He took hold of Matt's hand and dragged him across the driveway towards his Harley. "Have you never dealt with the paparazzi before?" Rick asked as they walked.

"Well... not like this, no. Have you?" Matt asked, shocked.

"Plenty of times, but that's because I'm always doing stupid things and drawing attention to myself, whereas the most gossip you've ever given them is going out for a meal with your boring accountant dom, followed by a quiet night in."

"That is not..." Matt began, and then he sighed. "Okay, that is true."

"Matt! Does this mean you've split up from Emily Campanillo? Or doesn't she know that you're sleeping with Rick?"

"What the hell business is that of yours? And I am NOT sleeping with Rick!" Matt rounded on the journalist angrily. Rick took Matt's helmet out of his hand, placed it on his head, and began buckling it up under his chin.

"Is it true she offered you her collar, but you turned her down because you're secretly in love with Rick?"

"No! Where on earth do you get this shit?"

"Matty - I've told you, just stay calm and say nothing," Rick hissed, fastening the helmet a little too tight, in what felt like an effort to gag him.

"No way! I am not letting them get away with making up stuff about me!"

"Matt - how does it feel to be another notch on Rick O'Shea's bedpost?" someone yelled. "Do you feel cheap and dirty now? He's had just about every other sub in town, after all."

Matt saw red. He jerked away from Rick and stormed across the driveway... only to find himself suddenly walking on air, his feet kicking out uselessly beneath him as a strong arm latched around his body and swung him off the ground.

"What the hell...?" Matt hollered, as Rick threw him over his shoulder, cave-dom style, and carried him back to the bike.

He plunked Matt on it, jumped on behind him, and put his arms around Matt to grab the handlebars, trapping Matt there. "Now shut up and stay still," Rick ordered, revving up the bike.

"But I -"

"Quiet!" Rick thundered. He twisted the throttle impatiently, and the bike roared out of the driveway and onto the road, leaving a trail of scattered journalists in its wake.

"Oh, shit..." Matt put his arms back and clung onto Rick's solid body for dear life. "I thought passengers were supposed to ride behind the driver?" he squeaked.

"Normally, yes - but I couldn't be sure you wouldn't jump off to get into a fist fight with those idiots back there."

Matt took several deep breaths and tried to relax as Rick wove in and out of the L.A. traffic, trying to lose the reporters chasing them.

"Oh... fuck... oh... agh!" Matt closed his eyes as the bike swerved, and sped up, and swerved again. "We're going to crash and die!" he yelled - and he had to resist an impulse to jab Rick in the ribs when he guffawed in response.

"Don't freak out, Matty. It's fine. I'm good at this."

"No you aren't! You were arrested for speeding yesterday!"

"That's true." Matt could feel Rick's chuckle against his body.

"Stop and let me off!"

"No. Don't be a baby. Besides, you'll be late for work, and Petra will find a way to blame me, and there's no way I'm taking more licks after yesterday."

"Fine, but if you ever get yourself disciplined down at the Justice Hall again, there's no way I'm going to come and bring you pizza afterwards."

"Well, you know what they say - no good deed goes unpunished." Rick said that straight into his ear, and Matt could almost feel his infuriating smile as he spoke.

Matt closed his eyes and tried to maintain his bad mood, but he had to admit there was something exhilarating about flying down the road on Rick's Harley. Rick might be reckless and ridiculous, but there was something reassuringly safe about being pressed up against his broad chest. Not that Matt ever intended to let Rick know that; he'd be insufferable.

Matt was almost disappointed when they swept through the studio gates. All the same, he shoved Rick's hand away when he tried to help him off the bike, and threw his helmet back at his co-star in a huff.

"I hate you," he said, before storming off towards his trailer with Rick's annoying guffaw following him all the way to the door.

Their arrival caused such a stir that people had come out to watch, and Matt flushed and thrust out his jaw defiantly as he marched to his trailer. It really was unbearable. He liked his routines. He liked waking up in his own bed, not on someone's sofa. He liked being in his own home, with his own choice of breakfast cereals, and he liked peace and quiet, not being hauled over some big dom's shoulders, thrown onto his bike, imprisoned between his strong arms, and whisked away against his will. It was... the most fun he'd had in ages.

He stopped short in surprise, his hand on his trailer door.

"Are you okay, Matt?" a concerned voice asked, and he looked around to see Karl standing nearby, a bemused expression on his face. "That was quite a dramatic entrance you made back there."

"Well, it's Rick, so what do you expect?" Matt snapped. "You know what he's like."

He stomped into his trailer, slammed the door shut behind him, and stood there, his chest heaving. He felt strangely exhilarated and alive, and he couldn't remember ever feeling like this before. Damn it - this was another reason to hate Rick. He didn't want to feel this way.

He grabbed his script and sat down on his couch, trying to calm down so he could concentrate. It took a while for his heart to stop beating at twice its normal speed and the flush to fade from his cheeks enough for him to brave his nosy co-workers. There was no place like a set for gossip, and Matt was sure that the news of him staying over at Rick's last night and arriving on his bike this morning would have gone all around the place like wildfire. All he could do was to refuse to dignify any of it with a response.

"Never complain, never explain," he told himself, nodding at his reflection in the mirror. It was a little saying his mother had taught him when he was a kid.

Everything was calm and peaceful when he arrived on set. Daniel was already there, reading his script intently, and Matt was relieved when he didn't ask him any questions or make any jokes about the events of the morning.

"Where's Rick?" Matt asked, realizing they were all ready to shoot the scene but, as usual, waiting on their errant co-star.

"Petra wanted a word with him," Daniel replied, with a meaningful twitch of his eyebrows.

"Oh, shit." Matt had forgotten, in all the drama, that Rick was probably in trouble for his all too public appearance at the Justice Hall the previous night. He had been in Petra's bad books even before that had happened - supposing she decided this was the final straw and fired him? Matt couldn't bear to even think about that. The *Collar Crime* set was a great place to work precisely because Rick made it such fun; it would lose its heart without him.

He studied his script morosely, going over his lines for the upcoming scene, and his heart thudded a few minutes later when he heard Rick's familiar long strides as he walked onto the set.

"Hey, did you start without me?" Rick joked, but Matt could hear that he wasn't his usual ebullient self. He glanced up to see his friend looking pale and chastened.

"Just adjusting the lighting and then we'll be ready," the director said.

Matt grabbed Rick's arm and dragged him into a private corner of the set. "Are you okay? What did she say?" he asked quickly, all his earlier annoyance forgotten.

"Aw - you care." Rick broke into one of his annoying grins.

"No, I don't." Matt bristled immediately. "Oh, for fuck's sake - of course I do. What happened, Rick? Was it bad?"

Rick dropped the act and ran a hand through his hair. "Pretty bad, Matty, yeah. I can't screw up again this season - not once, not in any way, shape or form, or I'm fired. Petra was pretty clear about that. She really means it, too - I screw up, or bring any kind of bad publicity down on the show, then I'm out on my ass."

"She can't fire you. You're the main reason this show is a hit."

"That's nice of you, Matt, but there are plenty of actors in Hollywood who can do what I do. Nobody's irreplaceable." Rick shrugged.

"You are." Matt stuck out his chin obstinately. "Look at those stupid photographers this morning, and the news item on TV last night. They could have caught me and Karl having sex on the lawn in front of the Justice Hall, and that wouldn't have gotten half the publicity you did."

"Nah. They just like me because I live it large." Rick shrugged. "And is that your fantasy? You and Karl making out in public?" He leered at Matt suggestively.

"Don't be an idiot." Matt bashed his arm. "And don't change the subject, either."

Rick sighed. "Look, I don't kid myself, Matt. I'm not a great actor. Daniel is - and you have the chops for it, too - but I'm just very good at the one thing I do."

"That's not true. You should see yourself the way everyone else does."

"A total screw-up?"

"No - an idiot, sure, but an idiot with a big heart who manages to touch people in every scene he's in. You make it feel real, Rick. I do my best work whenever I'm in a scene with you, because you make me relax, and you throw out this good vibe and sort of coax the best out of me. I'd be so anxious I'd freeze if you weren't here, cracking your truly appalling jokes."

Rick looked genuinely surprised by the compliment. "Thank you, Matty," he said quietly.

"So you absolutely mustn't get into any trouble between now and hiatus," Matt told him sternly. "Promise me, Rick - because I really don't want to do this show without you." That sounded kind of sappy, so he added, "You're my only chance of ever winning an award one day."

Rick grinned at that, responding to the teasing as he always did. "Okay, Matt, I'll do my best."

"No - I want you to promise."

"I promise, then. I already promised Petra: no clubs, no subs, no trouble - nothing at all to give the show bad press." Rick gazed blankly into space. "Shit, Matty - how the hell am I going to do that?"

"I'll help you. We all will." Matt gestured around the room. "You can do it. I know you can."

"You have more faith in me than I do." Rick gave a wan smile, and Matt realized that was the truth. Rick didn't have a lot of faith in himself; he seemed to almost expect to screw up, and Matt wondered how much of the goofing off was simply to pre-empt the inevitable moment when it all went wrong for him.

Impulsively, he reached up, put his hands on either side of Rick's face, pulled his head down, and kissed him firmly on the forehead. "I mean it. You can do this," he whispered fiercely.

He released Rick and walked back to his position on set, aware that everyone was looking at them again. Damn it, they were really giving the gossips plenty of fodder today. He wasn't used to being the center of attention, and he felt himself flushing at the scrutiny. Rick came

to stand opposite him ready to start the scene a second later and gave him a little wink, and Matt flashed him an encouraging smile in return.

Rick could do this - he had to.

Chapter Nine

It was like going cold turkey, Rick thought a few days later, gazing at himself glumly in the mirror in his trailer. He felt utterly miserable - it wasn't so much Petra's embargo on clubbing, although that didn't help, but it was that he couldn't be himself. He had to monitor his behavior all the time, watch what he said, and keep one eye on the clock so he wasn't late, and it was making him depressed.

He couldn't even ride his bike in the hills, in case he zoned out and was pulled over by the police again. Even apart from Petra firing him, there was a good chance he'd lose his license if that happened.

So he was stuck in a nightmare of timekeeping, politeness, no sex, and, worst of all, no spanking.

He had been surprised to find that what he missed most of all was not so much the sex as the time he spent with a sub over his knee, gently warming a cute ass. That was something to be relished and savored, something he could lose himself in, and something he knew he was damn good at.

He missed making a sub squirm, squeal, giggle, sigh and melt into a ball of relaxed submission over his knees. That was when he was most in touch with his own dominance - when he was spanking a willing sub who loved it as much as he did. That was when he was the master of the universe, flying as high as his sub on the sensation.

He didn't have any energy these days and felt tired all the time. He didn't like sleeping without a beautiful, naked sub curled up beside him, ready to service him sexually at any point during the night. He needed the distraction of having a sub to explore. Without it, his demons came out and tormented him, keeping him awake at night. Subs were his drug of choice and without that drug he was slowly drowning.

He couldn't go out clubbing to find a willing sexual partner - it was too risky. Besides, the paparazzi were all over him right now after catching Matt staying over.

At that moment there was a sudden flurry at the door, and the human whirlwind that was Matt in a bad mood stormed into his trailer without knocking.

"Have you seen this?" He threw a magazine across the trailer, and Rick caught it in one hand and glanced at the front cover.

Is Rick swimming in Matt's lake? the headline screamed, over a picture of him and Matt emerging from his house a few days ago, Rick's hand clamped firmly around Matt's wrist.

"They made a pun out of your last name being 'Lake'?" Rick shook his head sadly. "That's crappy writing."

"Really? They're insinuating that we're having an affair and your problem is that the writing's crap?" Matt glared at him.

"Well, it is!"

"Yes, it is," Matt conceded. "And this one is even worse." He flung another magazine at Rick.

Rickochet! *TV star Matthew Lake takes a walk on the wild side with his handsome co-star!*

This one had a picture of Rick throwing Matt over his shoulder and striding with him towards his bike.

"**Rickochet!** Hah!" Rick laughed. "Now that one is actually pretty good."

"Yes, yes," Matt said impatiently. "The first headline is a feeble play on my name, and the second is an even worse pun on yours. Hah, hah, very funny."

"Rick O'Shea... ricochet." Rick was still laughing at the joke. "I love it."

"Well, I don't. And I do damn well feel like I'm ricocheting all over the place because of this. My life used to be calm and ordered, just the way I like it, until this happened. Now the paparazzi follow me everywhere, and people think I'm subbing to you and keep asking me what you're like in bed, and Emily left a very snippy message on my cell phone, and... it's all totally fucked up!" Matt threw his hands up in the air.

"Huh. See, for me it's the opposite," Rick said, sitting down on his couch and flicking through one of the magazines. "My life used to be full of fun and chaos and now it's totally boring. I used to actually have a life, Matty, and now I can't do anything, or go anywhere, or be myself in case I screw up and get fired."

"It's like we swapped lives," Matt lamented, sitting down beside him. "I'm leading your high octane life, and you're leading my more structured..."

"Boring..." Rick interjected.

"Ordered," Matt insisted with a glare. "Life."

"I guess we're getting a taste of how the other half lives." Rick found the article about them in the magazine with the *Rickochet!* headline and began laughing again. "*Matthew Lake might play wet-behind-the-ears young agent Ben Harris on the hit TV show Collar Crime, but in real life he's a sexy sub-about-town who knows what he likes in a dom. And what he likes*

is his co-star, legendary sub-tease, Rick O'Shea. Sub-tease? Where do they get this shit?" He glanced up at Matt, who was shaking his head furiously.

"This one is even worse." Matt grabbed the other magazine and began reading. "*Rick O'Shea's sexual appetite is legendary - no sub in town is safe from his advances! But it looks like he's met his match in fiery co-star Matthew Lake. Matthew plays an innocent virgin onscreen, but our pictures show he's not dom-shy in real life! Has Rick finally found a sub who can cure him of his sub-sexing ways?"*

"Sub-sexing? Is that even a word?" Rick glanced at the photo of himself strapping on Matt's motorcycle helmet that accompanied the article. The camera must have caught him at an odd angle, because it looked like he was giving Matt a doting look as he buckled the strap.

"No, it's a walking alliteration and that's all that counts," Matt grumbled.

"This one goes on," Rick said, reading aloud. "*By all accounts, Rick is a real dom's dom, the kind who likes to master 'em and move on. Matthew Lake's friends say they're worried that he might have gotten in too deep. 'Matt's a very sweet natured and sensitive sub,' one Collar Crime insider told us. 'Whereas Rick is a total player, a real sub-seducer, and we're all worried that Matt will get hurt.'"*

"My friends?" Matt grabbed the magazine off him. "What 'friends' did they talk to?"

"They didn't have to - they just make this stuff up. Let me read the rest of your article." Rick reached for the other magazine and read it out loud.

"Rick O'Shea might act like a party-loving dom who is just out for a good time, but insiders say the handsome, easygoing dom is really just looking for the right sub to love - and they doubt that Lake fits the bill. 'Matt has a really fiery temper,' one cast member told us. 'He's blown up at Rick on more than one occasion, and he can be pretty mean when he gets going. We're just hoping their affair doesn't go sour and turn into all-out war. If it does - we'll be the ones caught in the crossfire!'"

"Hah! How come in one of these articles I'm some bad-tempered, manipulative sub, who only wants to snare you in my evil trap, while in the other I'm sweet and sensitive, and you're about to devastate me by dumping me?"

Rick shrugged. "It's all crap." He assumed a dramatic pose. "They clearly don't know either of us, because if they did they'd know I'd never hurt you, Matty!" He fluttered his eyelashes extravagantly.

"Oh, you old sub-tease." Matt winked at him. "As if I'd let you!"

"Hey - you're talking to a dom's dom, you sexy sub-about-town."

"I'm not dom-shy, so fuck you!" Matt laughed helplessly as Rick tackle-hugged him onto the couch.

Rick pinned his arms above his head. "You should be careful - remember there isn't a sub in town who's safe from me!" He held Matt down with one hand and tickled him with the other until Matt was a gurgling mess beneath him.

Then Rick sat back with a sigh. "Thanks, Matt. I needed the laugh."

Matt sat up. "Still feeling down, huh?"

"You have no idea. Look, Matt - I'm sorry about all this shit." He waved his hand at the magazines.

"It's not your fault, and in some ways I'm kind of flattered. I guess I must have really made it in this town if the magazines are making up shit about me. Now, c'mon." He stood up. "We're due on set in a couple of minutes. It's Karl's birthday, so there's going to be cake." He held out his hands, and Rick took them and allowed Matt to haul him to his feet.

He exited the trailer with one arm slung over Matt's shoulder, but without the usual feeling of exuberance he experienced when about to shoot a scene. Being with Matt in the trailer, goofing off, just made him even more aware of how much of a straitjacket he was in the rest of the time.

He felt stifled, and it was making him irritable... and his co-workers weren't used to an irritable Rick O'Shea.

Chapter Ten

The cast and crew had bought a huge chocolate birthday cake as a surprise for Karl - and he did look genuinely surprised; Matt didn't think he was acting it.

"I've never been on such a friendly set," Karl said, coming over to talk as Matt ate his slice of the cake.

"Really? I've only done a handful of other shows, so I guess I've got nothing to compare it with."

"Trust me, they aren't all like this. You guys have been so welcoming. I think it's largely down to Daniel - as the lead, he sets the tone for the entire set, doesn't he?"

Karl cast Daniel a wistful look, and Matt felt sorry for him. "What other shows have you done?" Matt asked, deliberately changing the subject. "I remember seeing you in that adaptation of *A Tale of Two Switches* a couple of years ago."

"You saw that? It was pretty low budget, but I was proud of it."

"I loved it, and I thought you made an awesome Nathaniel."

"Thanks, Matt. Sadly, I've also been in some real crap - one has to pay the bills, after all." Karl made a face. "Before this, I was in a show that only made it to six episodes before it was cancelled - and rightly so."

"Bad, huh?"

"Worse - boring." Karl grinned. "It was a sort of sci-fi thing - a dystopian vision of a universe in which nobody identifies as dom or sub. It was called *Otherworld*." He traced his hand through the air like a title appearing across an imaginary screen.

Matt grinned. "Ooh - sounds kind of kinky."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But instead of going for the kinky angle, which might have been fun, they tried to do it as a sort of serious, high-minded exploration of how such a society would work."

"And how would it work?" Matt frowned. "Are they all switches?"

"Nope." Karl shook his head. "Most people don't identify as dom, sub, or switch, and the minority who do have to keep quiet about it and meet up in special clubs."

"So it's kind of like an inversion of how things work in our world? But who collars who, then?" Matt asked, confused.

"Nobody collars anyone - that's the point."

"So, when a couple get serious about each other...?"

"They move in together."

"That's it?" Matt tried to get his head around that. "Do they even have weddings?"

"Yes - but they use rings instead of a wedding collar and belt."

"So - who puts the ring on who? I don't get this." Matt wailed.

Karl grinned. "They each put rings on each other."

"Oh. Okay. So, there are no big collaring scenes? I love collaring scenes."

"No collarings, no leashes, no wedding belts - no dynamics at all."

"No sharing a plate?" Matt asked. When couples in a romantic relationship became serious, they often started sharing a plate, with the dom hand-feeding the sub. Karl shook his head, and Matt thought about it for a moment. "So, if they can't do any of those things - what was this show actually about?" he asked eventually.

Karl laughed. "Like I said, it only ran for six episodes and then it was cancelled. What shows have you done?"

"Not much - mostly little roles in crappy soaps. This is my first big break."

"Ah, crappy soaps - I remember them well. I was once in one about a dom addicted to kink houses."

Matt gave a guilty laugh. "Kink houses? Really?" He took a large mouthful of cake and munched on it studiously, hoping he didn't look like someone with a secret fascination for kink houses.

Karl glanced across the room to where Rick was standing. "Is Rick doing okay?" he asked quietly. "Only he's usually the life and soul of the party, but he's been kind of grumpy the past few days."

"He's trying to be good," Matt said, around his mouthful of cake. Rick did look grumpy. He was standing by himself, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, looking bored. Usually, he'd be the center of attention, and there would be a large group of people around him, hanging onto his every word while he performed outrageously to his audience.

"Then I guess that's taking its toll," Karl observed.

At that moment, Rick turned abruptly and stalked off in the direction of his trailer.

"I hope he's okay," Matt murmured. "He's been through a lot lately."

"Yeah - I saw the news - and the magazine articles." Karl raised a meaningful eyebrow.

"Oh, please! Don't believe anything you read in those. I went over to Rick's place to cheer him up - I took some wine, and we ended up falling asleep on his sofa after watching an episode of *Collar Crime*."

"So there's nothing going on between you two?"

"What? No!" Matt laughed. "If you'd been here longer you'd know that me and Rick - we're combustible. We argue all the time, and we have nothing in common. There's no attraction there, and besides, Rick likes to play the field, and I..." He paused, unsure how to finish that sentence.

"You're looking for a big romance?" Karl prompted gently.

"No!" Matt protested. "I mean, everyone's looking for love - except Rick, obviously - but no, I'm realistic about that. I'm simply looking for a compatible dom to share my life with."

"A compatible dom? Karl grinned. "You make it sound more like a job interview than finding a life partner."

"It'd be easier if you could find someone that way," Matt said. "You know, put an ad in the paper, interview a few people, find someone suitable and settle down with them."

"I can't believe a cute sub like you has any problems meeting someone."

Matt flushed, thinking of all the doms who'd dumped him. "Maybe I don't date the right kind of doms," he muttered.

"Or maybe you want a dom to charge into your life and sweep you off your feet."

Matt gazed at him suspiciously. Was he wrong about Karl's thing for Daniel? Was Karl hitting on him instead?

"Maybe." Matt shrugged. "To be honest, I don't believe in all that romantic crap. I love it in the movies but in real life the best you can hope for is to find someone you're reasonably compatible with who doesn't drive you nuts."

"Well, maybe - or maybe you have to be open to the possibility of it happening. You're not likely to have a big, romantic love affair if you're too sensible to believe they even exist."

Matt glanced up sharply to find himself looking into Karl's shrewd, dark eyes. No, Karl wasn't hitting on him - he was just a very perceptive dom who knew how to read a sub. Maybe there was some hope for him with Daniel after all.

Chapter Eleven

Rick trudged to the make-up trailer, yawning: yet another early start without waking up with a sub in his bed, or a sweet ass to spank. After nearly three weeks of this he felt like he was walking through mud. Petra was watching his every move at work, and the paparazzi were watching his every move the minute he left the studio.

He felt stifled, listless and bored, and he woke up every morning with a headache that left him foggy for the rest of the day.

"Sheesh." Estelle was in the trailer having her make-up applied when he walked in. "Looks like someone had a bad night."

"Bad night, bad week, bad fucking life," he snapped, thumping himself down in the seat next to hers and sprawling there, gazing at himself moodily in the mirror.

"Well, there's only one cure." Estelle gave a throaty chuckle that sounded completely obscene, as only she could.

"Kill myself?"

"Hell no, sweetheart! That's just admitting defeat. No, what you need is to find a nice sub and fuck their brains out." She gave a ribald laugh and leaned towards him. "If I was thirty years younger, I'd let you tie me to the bed and have your way with me."

"Oh, I agree with the cure, Estelle, but how the hell can I find a sub to oblige when I'm under Petra's house arrest?"

"Oh, please!" Estelle waved a hand in the air. "One does not have to go to clubs to meet beautiful sexual partners. I met my best lovers on various film sets over the years."

"I don't think that really works for me here," Rick said. "I mean, Daniel's great, but you know, no. And the twins are cute, but they're looking for twin doms, and some gigantic big love affair, so that rules me out on both counts."

"What about Matthew?" Estelle asked.

Rick laughed. "Matt? No! He's my best friend."

"And why would that make him an unsuitable lover?" Estelle raised an eyebrow. "My fourth spouse, Erica, was my best friend, and we had a very happy marriage until she died. I'd almost given up on finding anyone who could handle me, but she tamed me. No other dom has measured up since," she said sadly. "I shouldn't really have married spouses five and six. But Erica... what that woman didn't know about Japanese rope bondage wasn't worth knowing." Estelle gave a happy sigh. "Amazing knots, tied in the most deliciously arousing places." Rick stared at her. "Sorry - I got carried away." Estelle winked. "So, if it worked for me and my best friend, why not for you and yours?"

"Because I'm me," Rick said flatly. "And I've got no intention of fucking Matt up with a bunch of romantic promises I'll break."

"Why would you break them?"

"Because I will." Rick shrugged. "Anyway, Matt's too sensible to think of me that way."

"Ah yes. Matt's the most sensible kid I've ever met, such an old head on young shoulders. I swear the boy's never had any fun in his life." Estelle shook her head sadly. "But surely you must have a little black book with the numbers of your old conquests in it, Rick? When I was a young sub, newly arrived in this town, I couldn't move for suitors. Had about five little black books, with some very famous names in them." She winked at him and tapped the side of her nose knowingly. "Those were the days! I fucked hundreds of beautiful doms and don't regret a second of it. Nowadays, you probably keep all that in an e-phone or whatever it is young folks use to keep track of their beaus. Why don't you call up a few exes and see if you can arrange a reprise of your good times together, huh?"

"I don't do reruns," Rick said automatically.

"Maybe not, but you're in a pickle right now, my darling, and you might have to change your ways a little - yes?" She stood up, deposited a little kiss on the side of his head, and then left the trailer.

She did have a point. Rick took out his cell phone and flicked through it. He didn't usually take subs' numbers but some had stolen his phone when he was asleep and put themselves into his address book anyway, anxious to snare a TV star. One more night with someone he hardly remembered from the first time around wouldn't put much of a dent in his no reruns rule, so he called one of the numbers. A sub called Sherry, who he vaguely remembered as having been a real firecracker in bed, answered.

"Hey, Sherry. It's Rick - Rick O'Shea," he said in his sexiest voice. "It's your lucky day. The handcuffs are ready and there's a play collar with your name on it hanging from my finger right now. All you have to do is say the word."

There was a shocked pause, and he grinned to himself, imagining her surprise at getting his call.

"Really? You fuck my brains out, promise you'll call, and then I hear nothing from you for six months, and you think you can just call me and I'll drop everything and come running? I don't think so, buddy."

The call was disconnected abruptly. So, that hadn't gone as well as he'd hoped. He tried another number, and a man's voice answered.

"Oh hi, I'm flattered, Rick, but you shouldn't have left it so long. I found myself a lovely dom, and she collared me last month. She's so lovely." The man sighed happily down the phone, and Rick made polite noises and ended the call.

On the third call, a grumpy sounding female voice answered.

"Hey, Marlene," Rick said, immediately going into his patter. "It's Rick O'Shea. Remember that night you spent in heaven in my arms? Well, we could do it all over again."

"No, we fucking couldn't, asshole," the voice replied. "Marlene is my sub now, and I don't care who you are - don't fucking call this number again."

"Not going so well, huh?" a pretty make-up boy asked, coming over to get Rick ready for his first scene.

"You could say that." Rick glared at his phone.

"So, we're giving you a bloody nose," the kid said brightly.

Rick winced. "I think I've already been given one."

"Aw, c'mon - it's not that bad." The young man smiled at him, and Rick remembered what Estelle had said about finding someone at work and took a proper look at him. He was

probably in his early twenties, nice looking, with a very spankable ass. He wasn't wearing a collar, and he gave off a distinctly subby vibe.

Rick flashed him a broad smile. "So... you're new here, aren't you? What's your name, sweetheart?" he purred.

The boy laughed. "My name's Tim, but don't even think about it, Rick. I've heard all about you, and I prefer long-term relationships to one-night stands, however good that 'night in heaven' might be." He grinned. "I mean, it's still only one night, right? I think I'm worth more than that."

Rick gave a little grunt. "Yeah, you are, honey. You stick with that attitude, and you won't end up alone and grumpy like me."

Tim patted his shoulder sympathetically, and Rick sighed; it seemed like the entire world was against him right now. Tim began applying his bloody nose, and Rick picked up a magazine that someone had left lying around and glanced at it.

Torn between two doms! the headline proclaimed, over a picture of Matt and Karl talking intently, their heads close together. Karl was holding a plate of cake in one hand, his fork raised as if he was about to feed it to Matt. Rick recognized the picture from Karl's recent birthday party, and he knew nothing happened between Matt and Karl then, but the intimacy of the photo implied that they were sharing a plate and for some reason that annoyed the hell out of him.

Couples only shared a plate when they were in a serious relationship. It was a courtship ritual and not one that Rick had ever had any interest in before. The idea of hand-feeding a sub wasn't something he'd ever expected to do, or had any wish to do, so why did the idea of Karl hand-feeding Matt bother him so much? Especially when he knew it hadn't actually happened.

Next to it was a picture of Matt and himself, taken outside his house a few weeks ago. They were both sitting on the Harley, with Matt nestled between his arms. It looked equally cozy, giving every appearance that he and Matt were an item. No wonder the magazine's readers believed the crap that was made up about them.

Between the two pictures was the image of a tear down the middle, separating them, tying into the *Torn between two doms!* headline.

Rick flicked through the magazine to find the article.

Is Matthew Lake the luckiest sub alive? The Collar Crime cutie has two of the hottest doms in town begging him to wear their collar. Who should he choose? Super-sexy and smooth Brit Karl Morgan? Or rough, ready and randy Rick O'Shea? We asked our online readers to decide!

"Rough, ready and randy?" Rick rolled his eyes, feeling irrationally annoyed. He knew it was all garbage, yet it rankled all the same. He scanned the selection of reader comments irritably.

I think he should go for Karl, one gushed. That gorgeous British accent makes me go weak at the knees! Karl Morgan can tie me to the bed any time.

Definitely Karl, another one said. Because, let's face it, Rick is damaged goods. Every sub in town has slept with him.

"Damaged goods?" Rick threw the magazine down and shoved his chair back. "That'll do, Tim. It looks great." He glanced at himself in the mirror to see that he now had a convincing black eye and fake blood stuck to his nose and jaw.

Damaged goods sounded just about right.

Chapter Twelve

Matt stood on the command center set, nervously going over his lines in his head. This was a big scene, with every cast member present, and they had some complicated choreography to do as they searched for a bomb inside the collar crime H.Q..

Rick was last on set, and he stomped over to the red tape on the floor which marked his spot.

"Nice black eye," Daniel said, but Rick just gave a preoccupied grunt in reply.

Matt exchanged an anxious glance with the twins. Rick wasn't a lot of fun these days, and they all missed the energy and humor he used to bring to their long working days.

They ran through the scene, and Rick knew his lines back to front, as he had every day for the past three weeks. In fact, he was the model actor in every respect - never late and never unprepared for his scenes. Theoretically, this should have made working with him a pleasure, but it wasn't. Matt was far more tense when filming now. Rick used to relax him by teasing him before a big scene, which distracted him far more successfully than his usual method of counting. Now that Rick was on his best behavior, the teasing had stopped.

They began filming and had almost finished the take when Estelle screwed up her lines.

"Fuck me sideways with a dildo!" she screeched, and the entire set burst out laughing. Estelle's salty language had made Matt blush when he first acted with her, but now they were all used to her 'Estelle-isms' as they called them, and had even taken to using some of her more insane ones as catchphrases.

Rick got up from where he was crouching with the twins, shielding them from the expected bomb blast. "Let's go again," he growled.

"Sorry, my darlings," Estelle called, as everyone went back to their starting positions.

They had nearly made it all the way through when one of the twins tripped over Daniel's leg and went crashing into Rick, knocking him into the edge of a computer console.

"For fuck's sake!" Rick roared, pulling up his tee shirt to reveal a nasty red mark.

"Oh, Rick, I'm so sorry," the guilty twin said, throwing herself into his arms.

"I'm sorry too, Rick," her sister said, also throwing herself into his arms, even though it hadn't been her fault. The twins had a tendency to act as if they were one person, which had startled Matt at first, but he was used to that now, too.

"Sorry, Rick! Sorry!" They smothered his face with little kisses, and old Rick would have lapped up the attention of two pretty, squealing subs throwing themselves at him and making a fuss of him, but now Rick shoved them away.

"Could we just do the scene?" he said stiffly, returning to his mark and offering up his face to Tim the make-up artist, who was hovering nearby.

"Oh, Rick," Casey sighed.

"Oh, Rick," Cara echoed.

"What?" he demanded.

"Nothing," they trilled in unison, turning to Matt with sad eyes.

"Let's go again," the director said, and by this time you could cut the atmosphere in the room with a knife.

They managed to get through the scene without anyone screwing up this time, much to everyone's relief.

"Thank fuck for that," Rick said, raising his hand to wipe some of the fake blood from his nose.

"We're sorry, Rick," Casey said. "Please don't be mad at us."

"I'm not mad at you. I screw up enough in scenes, so I've got no right getting mad at anyone else for doing it," Rick replied with a shrug.

"Not anymore. You're always word perfect these days," Daniel said.

"Yes, you are, Rick. You never get a line wrong, but..." Casey began. Then she hesitated, blushing.

"But?" Rick raised an eyebrow.

"It's just... we liked you better before," Cara said, and then she clapped her hand over her mouth.

"But we did," Casey continued. "We miss our Rick; the one who gave us hugs, and tickled us, and told us really bad jokes."

"We do. We miss him," her sister confirmed. "It's not the same now. It's not fun anymore. You're not fun anymore, Rick."

Matt held his breath, wondering what would happen next. Rick might explode - or he might slip into the goofy, fun-loving persona that they all preferred.

He did neither. Instead, he stuck his hands into his pockets and gazed at them all moodily. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not angry with any of you. I guess I can either be the Rick who is always late and goofs off, or I can be the Rick who turns up on time, remembers his lines, stays out of trouble and isn't much fun. It looks like I can't be both."

"But Rick, there must be a way," Casey said. "We hate seeing you so unhappy."

"I already told the kid he needs to get laid," Estelle chimed in from where she was standing between Daniel and Karl.

"It's not that! Not completely anyway. It's more complicated than that. It's this - see these hands?" He held his hands out, waving them around. There was an insane gleam in his eyes, and Matt knew that whatever he said next was either going to be very profound or very ridiculous. As this was Rick, he had a fair idea which it'd be...

"These hands were made for spanking, my friends!" Rick announced dramatically. Matt sighed and buried his face in his hands. "Do you know how long it's been since I last spanked a beautiful, round, soft ass? Since I put my hand on a sweetly curving butt and took some sub high into subspace?" Rick demanded.

Matt parted his fingers and peeked at Rick through them, wondering just how far into the ridiculous his friend was going to take this and whether he could bear to watch.

"I'm guessing, a few weeks?" Daniel ventured, looking like he was having a hard time not laughing.

"Yes! And it's driving me nuts. Sex is good - I love sex - but spanking is something else. It's like telling a pianist he can't play the piano, or an artist that she can't paint."

Matt saw Karl shoving his fist into his mouth and turning away, his shoulders shaking as he tried to control a fit of giggles.

"You could pay someone to... uh... oblige?" Daniel suggested.

"Richard O'Shea has never paid a sub in his life, and he's not starting now," Rick snapped.

"Oh, Rick!" Casey threw herself at him.

"Rick!" Cara joined in.

"That's so sad. It's the saddest thing I ever heard," they cooed.

"It's the funniest thing I ever heard," Karl muttered to Daniel, who had to pretend he was having a coughing fit in order to hide his snort of laughter. Karl patted him helpfully on the back.

"If we're done here..." Rick had a pained look on his face. "I have lines to learn," and he stalked off the set.

"Oh dear," the twins said mournfully. "Poor Rick."

"That was classic," Karl sighed, wiping away little tears of mirth from the corners of his eyes. He held up his hands. "These hands were made for spanking!" he proclaimed dramatically.

"Don't mock Rick," Casey said reproachfully. "We love Rick."

"Yes, my dears, we do," Estelle said, gathering them in her arms and fixing Karl with a stern glare. "Karl, you're new here, my love, and you have to understand - Rick is the heart of this show and right now he's struggling. He's always been there for us - each and every one of us - and now I think we need to be there for him."

The smile faded immediately from Karl's face. "I'm sorry, Estelle," he said contritely, and Matt noticed him flashing a furtive glance at Daniel, to see whether he'd screwed up with him, too.

"Estelle has a point," Daniel agreed. "Rick was pretty over the top, but then that's Rick, and I have to say..." He paused, looking thoughtful. "I can't speak for all of you, but work hasn't been as enjoyable for me since Petra put him on his best behavior."

"I agree," Matt said quietly. "Rick isn't Rick unless he's being annoying. I..." He flushed, as he always did when speaking about anything personal, but then he decided it was worth saying, so he plowed on. "I'm not always very confident during big scenes," he admitted. "I get really nervous, but that's never a problem when Rick's around. He calms me down with his teasing and stupid jokes. I didn't realize until this happened what a difference he makes to my performance."

"How very true, my dear Matthew," Estelle said. "I don't think any of us realized how much Rick brightens up our lives with his energy and sense of fun. As you all know, I've worked on a great many sets with a great many true acting legends, but I can honestly say I've never enjoyed a set as much as this one - and Rick is a large part of that."

"Yes, he is." Daniel nodded firmly.

"He totally is," the twins agreed, hanging on to each other, their eyes swimming with tears.

"Then we must find a way to bring him back," Karl said, stepping forward. All trace of mockery was gone, and there was now a determined look in his brown eyes. Matt had the sudden realization that Karl was the kind of person who instinctively led and whom others instinctively followed.

"What would you suggest, Karl?" Daniel asked.

"I have an idea - I just need to think it through. Meet me in my trailer in half an hour, and I'll explain it to you then."

Chapter Thirteen

Rick was sitting in his trailer, strumming on his guitar moodily, when there was a timid knock on the door.

"Rick?"

"Door's open, Matty."

Matt pushed the door open and stood there, looking anxious. "Do you want me to go? Only I'm worried about you, and everyone's freaked out and kind of scared of upsetting you, so if you'd rather be alone..."

"Scared of upsetting me? Shit. I didn't know." Rick put his guitar to one side. "Look, I'm sorry, Matty. The only person upsetting me is me. I know I was just a total dick."

"Well... yeah. Kind of." Matt closed the door behind him and came into the trailer.

"I saw this magazine article," Rick blurted, much to his own surprise. He hadn't realized he'd been brooding on that so much.

"Which one?" Matt sat down on the couch beside him.

"Torn between two doms?" Rick raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, that one."

"You knew about it?"

"Yeah - I read it earlier when I was in make-up. What a load of shit."

"You didn't say anything to me. I mean, you didn't bring it in, like last time, and rant about it."

"Well, like you said, it's all crap, isn't it? I don't know how they make this stuff up. I didn't even know anyone had taken a photo of me and Karl at his birthday thing. We had a good laugh about it earlier."

Rick frowned. "You had a good laugh with Karl about the article?"

"Yeah. He liked being described as a smooth and sexy Brit, or whatever it was they said about him."

"I bet he did." Rick felt absurdly annoyed about that. "Why didn't you show it to me, Matty?"

"Well..." Matt hesitated, making a face. "I was going to, but... to be honest, Rick, I wasn't sure you'd see the funny side of it. You're so on edge these days, and I didn't want to make things worse for you. I know life's getting you down at the moment. With the... you know... lack of spanking and all." He bit on his lip as he said that, and Rick had a suspicion that he was being mocked.

"Okay. Whatever. Look, I need to learn my lines, so..." Rick grabbed his script.

"Oh. Right. Okay." Matt patted his arm awkwardly. "So, we're good?"

"Sure, buddy." Rick didn't look up from his script as Matt left.

"What the fuck was that about?" he growled to himself after Matt had gone. "*Why didn't you show it to me, Matt?*" he mocked in a whiny voice. "For fuck's sake, Rick! Get a grip. You're turning into a total asshole."

He got up and gazed at himself in the mirror. His reflection gazed back, looking sad and wounded with one fake bruised eye.

Rick sighed. How the hell was he going to make it all the way to hiatus?

Chapter Fourteen

The others were already crammed into Karl's trailer when he arrived, and Matt had the sense that the party had started without him. They all looked around when he came in, and Karl glanced at Daniel, who nodded.

"Am I late?" Matt asked, frowning. He glanced at his watch. "You said half an hour, didn't you?"

"Come in, Matt. I was just explaining my idea to the others," Karl said, beckoning him over.

Matt squeezed himself into a tiny gap between Estelle and the twins.

"We think it's a great idea," Cara said.

"Totally awesome," Casey added.

"Sure - I mean, it's completely crazy, but what the hell." Estelle took a long drag on her cigar, blew out a cloud of smoke into Matt's hair, and grinned. "I like crazy!"

"Let me explain," Karl said to Matt. "I thought that as Rick's issue seems to be the lack of a spanking partner..." Karl kept his face completely straight as he said that, "we should provide one for him."

"What? How? We pay someone?" Matt asked incredulously.

"No." Karl shook his head. "Rick's a proud dom - he'd hate that. I thought... seeing as there are so many subs in the cast, and seeing as we all agree that we much prefer Rick when he's happy than when he's not, that we'd draw straws for it."

"Draw straws for what?" Matt asked.

"To find a volunteer," Cara told him. "To be spanked."

"By Rick," Casey added.

"What?" Matt stared at them.

"Only if everyone is happy with that," Daniel said quickly. "Nobody has to volunteer if they aren't."

"Hang on," Matt said, holding up his hand. "Am I in some surreal episode of the show, because this sounds like the kind of insane plan Alex Tanner would dream up. Or Jason Jarvis in one of his evil moments." He shot Karl a suspicious look.

"It is a bit out there," Karl agreed. "But desperate times call for desperate measures."

"We're not going to deceive Rick," Daniel said. "Whoever draws the short straw will go to his trailer and offer their services as a daily spanking partner until Rick can make alternative arrangements."

"Am I the only one who is living in the real world here?" Matt looked around at the others. "We draw straws and whoever draws the short one goes to Rick and asks to be spanked?"

"It's called taking one for the team," Karl said.

"That's easy for you to say. You're not a sub, so I presume you're not going to be offering up your ass for a daily tanning?"

"Not a tanning - just a light spanking," Karl said smoothly.

"And everyone agrees to this?" Matt looked around again. "You all agree - Daniel, Estelle, Cara, Casey? You agree that if you draw the short straw, then you'll actually do this? You'll go over there and ask Rick to spank you?" he asked incredulously.

"Nobody has to agree to anything they don't want to do. You can lay down whatever parameters to Rick that you like," Daniel said firmly. "And if you don't want to draw a straw, nobody will make you. This is entirely voluntary."

"And nuts," Estelle said, blowing out another circle of cigar smoke into his hair.

"Completely and absolutely bonkers," Karl said, with a straight face.

"Totally whack," the twins said.

"Definitely unusual," Daniel added. "But we're all single, unattached subs..."

"More's the pity," Estelle commented darkly.

"So we're free to offer ourselves up for this if we want," Daniel finished.

The twins turned to look at each other, two red spots on their cheeks, and then nodded vigorously.

Matt sat there, completely dumbfounded. Then he remembered how Rick had eulogized about spanking that night at his house a few weeks ago, and how he had made it sound like an almost spiritual experience. Matt had a sudden, vivid mental image of what it might be like to be hauled over Rick's thighs, his pants stripped down to his ankles, and his ass soundly spanked by those big hands.

"I'm in," he said.

It took him a few seconds to register what he'd done, and then he clapped a hand over his own mouth, horrified with himself.

"Good." Karl nodded. "So - we're all agreed? Whoever draws the short straw goes over to Rick's trailer and offers him their ass for a spanking?"

"Agreed!" they all said at the same time - except Matt who was still wondering why on earth he'd joined in this collective act of madness.

"Matt?" Daniel asked gently.

Matt nodded. "Agreed," he whispered.

"Okay, then." Karl opened a box of matches, snapped one in half, and held it up. "Whoever draws the short match is the person who does this."

Everyone nodded, and Matt watched nervously as Karl arranged the little handful of matches in his hand, so you couldn't see where the short one was.

Karl put his closed fist on the table nearest to Daniel, and they all watched, with bated breath, as Daniel gazed at the matches thoughtfully.

Matt tried to imagine the quiet, dignified Daniel going over the knee of Rick O'Shea for a spanking but his brain failed to compute. It simply wasn't possible. It couldn't happen. There was no universe in the world where Chief Christie went over Alex Tanner's knee. It was wrong on every level.

He was sure he wasn't the only person in the room who let out a massive sigh of relief when Daniel drew a long match.

"Now the twins; I take it you want to go as one person?" Karl asked, which was a redundant question because clearly there was no way just one of the girls would go into Rick's trailer if they picked the short straw. The twins nodded, their sleek blonde heads bobbing in unison.

They reached out together and let their fingertips touch each of the matches in turn, as if trying to decide. This went on for several seconds.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Matt said eventually, his nerves getting the better of him. "Just pick one."

They grinned and then suddenly, without seeming to conspire at all about their choice, their fingers joined on the same match at the same moment, and they pulled it out.

It was a long one.

"Just you and Estelle, now. Fifty-fifty," Karl said, putting his fist in front of Matt's face.

"Right. Okay, then." Matt swallowed hard. He thought of Estelle drawing the short straw and wondered what on earth Rick would think if she turned up at his trailer door with this insane offer. He felt a stab of something in his gut, and then realized, as his fingers closed around a match, that the only person he could bear to draw the short one was... himself.

He tugged it out, and then his stomach seemed to go into free-fall as he stared at the broken match in his hand.

"Oh, shit," he breathed. Seconds ago he'd wanted it to be him, but now it was he desperately wished it wasn't as his nerves came rushing in.

"Matt!" squealed the twins, enveloping him in a hug. "You are so lucky. Rick is so fit. We'd love to be spanked by him." They giggled and hugged each other instead. Matt just stayed there, gazing at the broken match in his hand.

"You don't have to do this, Matt," Daniel said, gazing at him keenly. "We can come up with another plan if you don't want to do it."

Despite his nerves, Matt now felt anxious in case this was taken away from him. "No!" he said quickly. "I mean, I want the old Rick back as much as you do. So..." He took a deep breath, trying to work out his see-sawing emotions. "So, I'll do it," he said firmly.

"Good boy," Karl said approvingly.

"Thank you, Matt." The twins enveloped him in another massive twin-hug, and Matt twisted and squirmed away. "Sorry, Matt," they said. "Too much hugging!" They knew he didn't like anyone getting into his personal space. He'd tolerate the occasional hug from them, but he preferred to keep people at arm's length.

"Well done, m'dear. You go and show that big, bad dom what a little tiger you are," Estelle said, making claws with her hands. "Rawr!"

"You are all completely insane, you know that?" Matt told them, standing up.

"And you are a star, Matthew Lake," Karl said, grabbing hold of his hand and pumping it.

"A star idiot more like," Matt muttered. He walked over to the trailer door and turned to look back at them for moral support.

Daniel gave him an encouraging smile, Estelle saluted him with her cigar holder, and the twins clung onto each other and sighed at him happily. Karl just stood there, with a look of quiet satisfaction on his face.

Matt gave them a feeble wave and then opened the door and walked out into the L.A. sunshine.

He closed the door behind him and took a deep gulp of air as he gazed across the studio lot towards Rick's trailer.

Was he really going to do this?

Want to find out what happens next? You can buy the full 173,000 word novel from Smashwords or Amazon for only \$5.99!

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters and settings are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. No money is being made from this work. No copyright infringement is intended.