

A Simple Misunderstanding  
By  
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## Chapter One

As a vet, expressing an animal's anal glands had never been one of Jerry Douglas' favorite duties, but for some breeds, anal sac expression was the best method of keeping the gland from becoming infected or impacted. Unfortunately, sometimes owners thought it was cute when their doggie scooted or ran in circles snapping at its tail and didn't realize, until a rather obnoxious odor began to permeate the home, that their pet had a serious problem. And, when the dog was small and snippy, like the chihuahua he'd just finished treating, the task was more than unpleasant. Not to put too fine a point on it, pushing foul, bloody puss out of a dog's rear end, and appearing unaffected by it, took a strong constitution.

Still, Jerry was a professional, so he did the job, gave the suffering animal an injection of antibiotics, counseled Mrs. Kline on the warning signs of a full gland to keep Pepper from reaching such an uncomfortable state again, and sent her and her trembling dog out front to pay.

Though he'd worn gloves, after expressing an infected gland, he spent about five minutes scrubbing his fingers with antibacterial soap at the sink in his office. It wasn't necessary, but the clean smell helped counter the previous assault on his olfactory senses. So, as he scrubbed, Jerry gazed out at the small dog park near his clinic and spotted her. He glanced at the clock. Five minutes early today. Quickly drying his hands, he told his assistant he was going to take Jack for a walk and loped up his stairs, two at a time, to retrieve his black Lab.

Jack was a gentle dog, and he and Muffin had exchanged sniffs before, so Jerry knew the tiny toy poodle wouldn't get upset if they joined her and her mistress. His purpose for this late afternoon walk, however, pertained more to the animal's mistress, Elly Benson, than the white ball of yipping fluff she owned.

After grabbing a jacket to help ward off the Colorado chill of early October, he jingled Jack's leash. The six-month-old Lab bounced forward in clear doggie excitement.

"Easy boy. Sit, Jack. Let me attach your lead, then we'll go visit the ladies in the park."

Although Jack was eager to romp and play outside, he instantly obeyed Jerry's quietly spoken command. Jerry grinned at his Lab's pained expression, suspecting Jack's excitement for visiting the dog park was far different from his own.

He'd tried for weeks to involve Mrs. Eleanor Benson in a conversation, but she'd shied away from even his most gentle overtures, as if she almost feared to look at him, much less chat. He would have put her attitude down to a shy, reserved nature, but the way she hunched her shoulders in an effort to make herself smaller, as though she sought to be invisible, made him suspect she feared a dire consequence if she mistakenly drew attention to herself. And other than her daily trips to the dog park, she remained locked within her home, drapes drawn and windows closed. A virtual recluse from society.

Then, three weeks ago, when she thought she wasn't observed, he'd witnessed her playing in the park with her toy poodle. She'd bent and slapped her knees in a pretend attack, and the little white dog dashed about the perimeter of the small fenced-in area before bounding back to her for more fun. Those few unguarded moments were the only times he'd ever seen Elly Benson's delight-filled natural exuberance bubble forth.

Though her shyness brought his protective instincts to the fore, what he sought was more of her playful mischievousness. Like the game of hide-and-seek, he'd caught her playing with Muffin a few minutes ago. Yet, the second he opened the gate, he knew a somber pall would fall over the woman like a shroud of sobriety, masking any hint of enjoyment beneath a veil of polite reserve intended to make her invisible.

Yes, the lady was married, but he wasn't trying to seduce her, merely get her to relax and open up around him. Let her true personality shine through the formal reserve she'd adopt whenever anyone was near. A reserve he suspected might be enforced, rather than natural.

"Heel, Jack," Jerry commanded as he led the animal to the small dog park where owners were permitted to let well-behaved dogs off their leads.

After Jerry made certain the gate was securely fastened, he unhooked Jack's leash and gave him permission to romp. "Go on, boy. Do your stuff." Then he turned toward the pale, frail-looking young woman who promptly drew the sleeves of her sweater down and averted her eyes when he glanced in her direction.

He brusquely rubbed his arms over his leather jacket. "A bit chillier today, wouldn't you say?" He opened with a yes or no question even a complete stranger couldn't criticize.

She nodded while casting a quick glance at her watch. That's when he spotted a reddish-purple bruise encircling her wrist. Over the past few weeks, he'd seen similar indications of harsh treatment, like a stiff legged-gait combined with wincing of pain when she threw balls for Muffin, or rubbing her neck and favoring one arm over the other, which put together had him suspecting her husband played on the rough side. Though, this was the first time he'd witnessed evidence of a physical injury.

Accidents happen, and many dominants used restraints that occasionally left marks. However, when notable bruising was coupled with shame and embarrassment masked by a well-rehearsed reserve, his protective radar went on alert. Jerry had seen what ill-treatment did to animals, and Elly Benson showed many of the same characteristics. He'd lay odds if he mentioned those bruises on her wrists, she'd minimize their significance while she struggled to keep the evidence of her shame hidden beneath the sleeves of her bulky sweater. Not conclusive proof of abuse perhaps, but enough to cause doubt in his mind. Doubt that had been percolating inside his head for over two weeks now.

He started toward her, stopping when she backed away with an expression of grave uncertainty on her face. *Okay, down boy. You're freaking the lady out even more by encroaching on her personal space.*

"Sorry," he murmured, holding his hands up in a universal sign of surrender. "I didn't mean to scare you, but I noticed your wrist was bruised."

She promptly yanked the arm of her sweater down to cover the mark, as he'd expected she would. "It's nothing. And, I'm not scared." Her chin came up as though she dared him to contradict her.

A flash of pride, accompanied by sixteen words and three sentences. A miracle. "Sorry, again. Those bruises appear to be swelling and I wanted to make sure you're not injured."

"I'm not." Another glance at her watch, then she slapped her thigh. "Muffin, come. We need to go. Now."

Muffin, however, was more interested in playing a game of nip and dodge with Jack, than in obeying her mistress, so Jerry tried a different tack. "It would seem Muffin isn't quite ready to leave, yet."

Wrapping her arms about her, Elly Benson shivered and stomped her feet a couple of times as if to return feeling to her toes before giving her arms a brisk rub. The afternoon air had acquired a frosty bite, and though her ski sweater appeared warm, she really should be wearing a proper coat and gloves. Then, she curved her shoulders inward and shivered again.

Jerry removed his black leather jacket and headed toward her, palms facing outward. Careful not to make any sudden moves, he approached her as he would a timid animal. "You're

cold,” he murmured in a low, soothing voice. “At least wear this until Muffin is ready.”

“No. Thank you.” She tried to circumvent his approach by walking around him, but he sidestepped her, unwilling to be put off. From what he’d seen over the past few weeks, the lady needed a champion, and he suspected her husband was ill-suited for the job.

“I insist,” he said, inserting a note of steel into his voice, figuring she would respond to his tone and obey. Instead, she held her place and gave another shake of her head, though she declined to meet his gaze. A muted show of spirit that most likely masked a deeply rooted fear firmly lodged in her psyche. A fear of her husband’s disapproval. So, with his arms extended, Jerry remained where he stood and held her gaze. Even in this small clash of wills, he expected to win.

“I can’t,” she whispered finally, eyes still lowered.

“Why not? You’re shivering. Colorado can turn unexpectedly nippy at this time of year, so you should always wear a coat in the afternoon.” Offering logic, not condemnation, he took another step closer.

Though she tensed as if ready to bolt in any second, she let him drape his jacket over her shoulders. “I was in a hurry,” she explained, grasping the leather collar and drawing it close about her neck.

“Ahh. So your bit of fluff was being impatient, was she?”

She nodded, and a tiny smile teased the corner of her lips. “She likes coming here.”

“But of course.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her. Usually it was just the two of them at this hour of day, since other dog owners tended to come closer to dinnertime, after their pets had been fed. “What’s not to like?”

“Thank you.” She indicated his jacket. “Except now you’ll get cold.”

He shook his head. “Superheroes don’t get cold. Didn’t you know that?”

She gave a small, almost self-conscious, laugh and Jerry enjoyed the sound, probably more than he should. “It’s true.”

Regarding him with a touch of skepticism, she said, “So, what’re your powers?”

“You mean outside of x-ray vision, invulnerability to the elements and mind reading?”

Her smile faltered. “No one can read minds.”

Crossing his arms, he placed a fist under his chin and regarded her with thoughtful consideration. “Think not? How about we place a wager? If I’m able to tell you what you’re thinking, you agree to grant me a boon.”

She regarded him with wary caution. “A what?”

“A boon. It’s a cross between a favor and a gift.”

Doubt mixed with curiosity in her expression. “I’m not supposed to bet. Besides, your offer sounds terribly one-sided.”

He gave a considering nod. “Yes, I suppose it does. All right. If I fail to demonstrate my superpower, then I shall grant you a boon instead.”

“But I don’t want anything, and I’m not allowed to accept gifts.”

“A conundrum to be sure, though not insurmountable for any true superhero. Perhaps I should offer a small demonstration first.”

She frowned down at her Rolex again, and the puffy ring of flesh not covered by her watchband was fully visible now. “I really need to go.”

“That bruise looks serious. May I see it?”

When she gazed at him, her face expressed so much dismay he almost relented, but he wanted to determine if the bruising represented a case of play gone a step too far, or if she’d been

held against her will. "I won't hurt you," he promised. "No touching, just a look. Not only am I a superhero, but I am a doctor, too, you know?"

A slight smile followed by a hesitant nod, she extended her right wrist to him. He gently pushed the sleeve of her light blue bulk knit sweater to expose her wrist. Just as he thought. In addition to the reddish bruise and swelling, the flesh was rubbed raw. The lady had been resisting her restraints.

"What happened?" he inquired casually, as he extended his hand for her other wrist. She obeyed without question this time, though her fingers trembled in his grasp.

"Nothing."

He met her gaze, uncertain how far he could push her into admitting the truth before she shut down or ran away. "My mind-reading super sense tells me you're not being truthful. Do you realize the risks you take in lying to a superhero?"

She shook her head and tentatively tried to pull her hand back, but he held on, not ready to release her, yet. He wanted answers to questions that had been running through his mind since he first spotted her in the dog park four weeks ago. However, if she persisted in pulling away, he wouldn't detain her. He didn't hold women against their will.

"Your pulse is racing, and it's the doctor, not the superhero who's detecting that. Do I scare you, Elly Benson?"

"No, sir," she replied in deferential respect, her voice a mere whisper.

"Good. Because I never want to do that. However, these marks on your wrists aren't a result of 'nothing.' So, unless you prefer I employ my mind-reading super skill to extract the truth, I think you should tell me what happened."

"Please," she whispered, pulling her hand back again. This time he let her go, but she remained where she stood, as though uncertain what to do next.

He bowed. "A superhero worth his salt always bends to a lady's request. So, why don't we get our dogs and I'll accompany you back."

"No!" Her response held a note of panic, then she shook her head and attempted a smile; however, he wasn't fooled. "That's not necessary," she countered. "I mean our condo is right over there." She indicated a row of houses, which pretty much all looked the same, then, she reached up to remove his jacket, but he placed his hands over hers to stop her.

"Keep it. If you won't let me walk you home, I want you to wear it. You can give it back to me tomorrow when you and Muffin visit the park again. All right?"

She nodded. "Thank you. For understanding."

This time he shook his head. "Don't mistake me, fair lady. I'm not at all happy you refuse my escort, but I won't press if my company is not wanted."

"No. It's not that..." Another quick glance at her watch. "I'm already late and I—"

"And your husband doesn't tolerate tardiness. Correct?"

"No. I mean, yes. He can be strict about certain things, and one of those is my schedule."

"I don't want to cause any trouble, but I'd like to help, if you'll let me. There are many people here who are more than willing to lend their support, if you and Arthur are having problems."

She nodded. "I know. We're not having problems." She tugged at her sleeves to cover her wrists again, as if she considered the bruises proof to her lie and a testament to her failure to accept her husband's discipline. "It was only a simple misunderstanding. Sorry, but I really have to go."

"All right." He whistled for Jack, and Muffin came pouncing after the big Lab. Jerry

thought the little poodle might even have a crush on his much larger dog.

“Thank you,” Elly murmured as she bent forward to attach a pink lead to her poodle’s matching harness. Straightening, she offered him a shy smile. This one more genuine. Yup, they’d definitely made progress today. He’d actually engaged her in a conversation and she’d let him examine her injured wrists.

“I promise to return your jacket tomorrow, Dr. Douglas.”

“No hurry. I have another one. And call me Jerry. All right?”

“Yes, sir... Jerry.”

“Good girl,” he offered an encouraging smile. “Until tomorrow.”

With a nod, she hurried out of the park and practically ran back to her home. He could only hope his detaining her hadn’t made matters worse.

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Elly’s fingers trembled as she fumbled to push her door key into its lock, but not because of the cold. After she’d hurriedly unfastened the lead from Muffin’s harness, she rushed over to the phone and dialed her husband’s work number.

“You’re ten minutes late, Eleanor,” he replied without even a pretense of cordiality.

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry.”

“So, what’s your excuse for tardiness this time? Weather, improper footwear, or that rat of a dog you own?”

Elly hesitated, unsure if the truth would only make matters worse. “Dr. Douglas, the vet, wished to speak with me, and I didn’t want to appear rude by cutting him off.”

“I see. So, is it more important for you to chat with our neighbors than keep your word to your husband?”

Elly’s heart sank to her feet. No matter how she replied to the question, she’d be punished for the wrong answer. “I’m sorry.”

“Yes, I’m sure you are, but that doesn’t address the issue, does it?”

“No, sir.”

“Your perpetual tardiness is yet another sign of your inability to manage your time properly. I thought I’d made it clear during our previous sessions that timeliness and tidiness are signs of respect, and to ignore either reflects a blatant disrespect to me.”

“I didn’t want to be rude....”

“But you were. To me. I am not pleased, Eleanor. However, you knew I wouldn’t be when you made your choice, didn’t you?”

Yes, she’d known he’d be angry with her, though other than run away from Dr. Douglas, which would have only intensified his suspicion, she’d had little choice. All the same, she answered, “Yes, sir.”

“Then we shall have to deal with your inconsideration later tonight. Hopefully, this time you’ll learn from the lesson. I expect to be home by six. I suggest you not disappoint me further by failing to have dinner on the table when I walk in the door. After we eat, I shall address your failure to keep a simple promise to me.”

“Thank you, sir,” she murmured, knowing he expected her to be grateful for his ‘loving correction.’ Except, Elly no longer thought there was much love in Arthur’s corrections, which made them more and more difficult to accept with the dignity and grace she was expected to exhibit. She’d begun to regret their move to Corbin’s Bend, and they’d only been there a month.

“See you at six,” he replied before disconnecting.

That gave her two hours to get their evening meal ready. Demonstrating an appreciative

willingness to accept her discipline often resulted in a lighter punishment, so Elly intended to do everything she could to express her desire to learn from her husband teachings. Especially, since she was still sore from his last one.

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As Elly removed the roast she'd prepared for dinner and transferred it to a board, the garage door opened. Muffin heard it too and started the peculiar growl-like barking she gave in warning whenever Arthur came home. "Muffin, quiet," Elly scolded in a low voice as she covered the still sizzling roast with tinfoil. Then, wiping her hands on a nearby dishtowel, she quickly prepared Arthur's scotch on the rocks and set the glass on the marble coaster situated on the small table by his chair in the living room.

Muffin's protests softened to a growl. "Shh. If you won't behave, then you'd best get in your bed. Daddy's already upset with Mommy, and you aren't helping."

The poodle gave her a look that Elly could only interpret as resentment. "Yes, I know you'd like nothing better than to give Daddy's leg a good nip, but you can't. Now, go. Beddies."

With a slow, sullen gait, Muffin did as she was bid. Arthur didn't care much for Elly's dog, and Muffin barely tolerated Arthur. Afraid her husband would demand she place her pet in the pound, Elly attempted to keep peace by making sure Muffin maintained her distance. Though the poodle had snapped at Arthur a few times, she'd never actually bitten him, but Elly feared the animal could and would if given half the chance. Man and dog didn't even make a pretense of mutual respect; their dislike of each other was too consuming.

Giving a quick glance about to ensure everything was in its proper place, Elly straightened her dress and held her breath. She didn't dare open the door for Arthur, since she was to keep their front door locked at all times and woe to her if she ever forgot. It was the first thing he checked when he got home, and she'd learned not to interfere with his process. Instead, she stood at a soldier's attention and waited for her husband to unlock their door and enter.

Arthur liked to take his time. In truth, she thought he took perverse pleasure in making her worry, and he was very good at that. Over the last few months, he had her worrying about everything. The doorknob turned, then a key jingled as it revolved the well-oiled tumblers. Seconds later, Arthur stepped inside and dropped his suitcase by the door. He noticed his drink and gave her a nod of greeting. She rarely received praise, but he acknowledged her efforts when she did as he'd asked.

"Is dinner ready?" he inquired, opening the armoire where they kept their coats. Though they'd selected one of the most expensive units in Corbin's Bend, the place didn't have many closets or cupboards, so they made do with new furniture they'd purchased to serve their needs. They still hadn't gotten around to buying the china cabinet Elly needed to store their fine dishes and delicate figurines she'd collected over the years.

"Yes, it's waiting to be served. Would you like me to place everything on the table now, or would you prefer to relax with your drink first?"

He frowned at her. *Now what had she done?* Then, he pulled a large leather jacket out of the closet. Jerry's jacket.

"To whom does this belong, Eleanor?"

She took a deep breath. She'd done nothing wrong. "It's Dr. Douglas' jacket." His left eyebrow arched, which meant she'd provided him with insufficient information. "He's the veterinarian I spoke about earlier."

"I see. And what, pray tell, is his jacket doing in *our* hall closet?"

She drew her lower lip in her mouth and skimmed her teeth over it. Arthur preferred

exactness to vagueness, however, informing him their armoire could hardly be considered a closet would not be good for her health, so she focused instead on how to present her afternoon conversation with the vet without drawing attention to her own error in judgment.

“He believed my sweater wasn’t keeping me warm enough, so he lent me his jacket.”

Arthur ran his fingers over the material and examined the lining. “Why weren’t you wearing your coat?”

“Muffin needed to go out, and I thought I’d be fine in a sweater and slacks.”

With a nod, he hung the jacket back in the armoire. “It would appear you misjudged—again. Colorado falls can be bitterly cold, Eleanor, and you need to dress appropriately.” Closing the door, he turned to regard her through wintry gray eyes. “Must I start laying out your clothing as well in the mornings?”

Not wanting him to see her growing resentment, Elly lowered her gaze. “No, sir.”

“You’re my wife, Eleanor. Every decision you make reflects back on me, and I will not have you prancing about the neighborhood improperly dressed.”

She met his gaze only briefly, then returned her focus to the floor. “I’m sorry, Arthur.”

“So you say, but I believe you need another lesson. I think wearing an anal plug and a diaper through dinner might serve to remind you your actions have consequences.”

Elly bit the inside of her cheek to keep from saying what she thought. Arthur didn’t tolerate back talk, but that plug was truly a punishment for her, and he only made her wear diapers if he determined her actions had been childish. Adults knew how to dress appropriately, children needed supervision and reminders. So, he would help her remember she needed to give her wardrobe more consideration by insisting she dress like a child.

With a shake of his head and a long sigh, he murmured. “Fetch the black plug, lube and one of your bad girl diapers, then meet me in my office. I’ll attend to you there.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You might as well bring the paddle down, too. Perhaps a few swats after the plug is inserted will drive in the point of this exercise.”

Elly gazed at her husband. She wanted to protest that she’d pay more attention to how she dressed in the future, but experience had taught her once Arthur decided on a punishment any hesitancy or argument on her part would only make matters worse for her. So, she went upstairs to gather the requested items.

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Elly’s tears had dried by the time she set the table. Arthur had been matter-of-fact about her punishment, giving her only three swats with the paddle after he’d inserted that oversized, bulbous octopus head into her anus. She hated that thing, but as he’d so often reminded her, punishments were not meant to be enjoyable. They were intended to teach her a lesson, and he expected her to learn rushing about inadequately dressed was unacceptable at any time.

Despite her deep-seated resentment of Arthur’s strictness, Elly did try to be the wife he wanted, and the last thing she sought was to tarnish his image with her inadequacies. Appearances were of prime importance to Arthur, and she worked hard to make him proud of her, but as of late, she couldn’t seem to do anything right. Though he never said as much, she suspected he regretted ever marrying her.

The bulky diaper forced her to walk like an incontinent toddler, which was meant to remind her when she behaved like a child, she would be treated like one. She recalled the time he had taken this punishment to an extreme after she’d attempted to hide a serving of peas beneath her napkin. In addition to the anal plug and the diaper, he’d insisted she change into a short



nightgown and sit at the table with a bib around her neck until he'd finished feeding her two servings of the hated green pebbles. She'd gotten ten swats of his belt over the plug for her subterfuge. His punishment hadn't changed her mind about peas, but she dutifully ate every one she was served whenever he requested them.

At dinnertime, all the food had to be laid out in dishes before Arthur's place setting. He maintained Elly didn't eat properly, so he made sure her plate contained a proper mix of food groups, and she was expected to eat everything he set before her. He didn't approve of snacking between meals, but she was allowed to munch on carrots or celery in the afternoon if she got hungry. Even though she ate lunch alone, he planned each of her meals, telling her what she should and shouldn't eat. A chef salad with various vegetables and a serving of meat and cheese with a light dressing was scheduled twice a week. All sandwiches were to be made on whole wheat bread, and she needed to consume a minimum of seven servings of fruit and vegetables daily. Anything less, provided she wasn't ill, was a punishable offense. Arthur did look out for her, but sometimes she wished he wasn't quite so regimented about it.

Elly was laying the bowl of roast potatoes on the table when Arthur stepped into the dining room. She attempted to smile at him, but when her lower lip trembled, she swiveled to return to the kitchen.

"Eleanor," he said quietly.

Swallowing, she turned back and met his gaze.

"You know I don't enjoy punishing you like this, but these lessons do seem to improve your memory and behavior, and as your husband, I consider it my duty to ensure you learn from your mistakes and modify your actions accordingly."

"Thank you, sir."

"I doubt you mean that now, but I hope you realize when I punish you, like I did earlier, I'm only fulfilling the vows I made on our wedding day to cherish, protect and guide you. And, later tonight, when we review the reasons for your tardiness this afternoon, I hope you'll accept that my discipline is given with a loving hand intent on making sure you are always the best person you can be."

Unwanted tears spilled down Elly's cheeks. "Yes, sir."

"Good. You may finish serving dinner now."

"Thank you." She returned to the kitchen to fetch the rest of their meal.

When they'd finished eating, he rose from the table. "I need to do some work. You may remove the diaper and plug, if you wish. After you've completed your clean-up chores, come to my office and we'll go upstairs together. Just make sure Muffin is locked in the laundry room first." At that, he turned and strode out.

Elly slumped forward with a mixture of relief over her reprieve and dread for what was to follow.

## Chapter Two

Jerry surreptitiously kept watch for Elly Benson all afternoon, but after he'd seen his last patient and she still hadn't arrived at the park, he decided to take Jack out and wait for her outside. Less than fifteen minutes passed before he spotted her weaving a path toward him. Bundled up all the way to her throat in a quilted coat, she wore warm, sturdy boots and padded winter gloves. Clearly, she'd dressed for any possibility of inclement weather. Cold would not be an issue today, but she walked as if her bones hurt. When he noticed she carried his coat and Muffin wasn't with her, his heart sank. He realized at once that her husband had taken exception to finding another man's jacket in her possession.

He stepped over to open the gate for her, but she gave her head a single shake. "I can't stay. I only came to return your coat. Thank you."

Accepting his leather jacket, he placed a staying hand on her arm. "Were you punished last night because you had this?"

"No." Her emerald green eyes held his gaze, but he sensed there was more to the story than she was saying, so he raised one eyebrow and waited.

With a sigh of defeat, she added, "I was punished for not being properly dressed yesterday. And, given the unpredictability of Colorado autumns, I should've known better, as you intimated yourself."

Though she spoke to him without any pretense of hesitancy or deference today, he didn't particularly care for what she said. "Were you late getting home?"

A touch of green fire lit her eyes as she stared at him. "What do you think?"

"I think you're angry enough you'd like to take your frustration out on someone, but you're not sure how, or whom to attack."

She turned away at his words. "I need to go."

"How long before you're expected back, Eleanor?"

Her back stiffened with displeasure, but she didn't yank free of his gentle restraint. "Five minutes."

"Then stay with me for one more minute." When she didn't take off running, he asked, "Do you object to me calling you by your first name?"

"No."

"Then why did you stiffen?"

She briefly met his gaze. "I prefer to be called Elly."

Smiling, he bent his head toward her. "Good to know, Elly. So, tell me. Did your husband restrain you last night?"

Her head snapped up, and she glared at him through eyes alight with unshed tears. "So what if he did? That doesn't mean I'm not submissive to him."

Jerry promptly released her arm. "Whoa. I never said or implied you weren't."

"Well, isn't that what everyone else thinks? I'm such a lousy wife and incompetent submissive, my husband needs to restrain me during my chastisements?"

"No, Elly. No one thinks that."

"Why not? It's true. Thank you anyway for your concern, but I need to leave."

"All right. One more second. I'd like you to schedule an appointment at the clinic for Muffin."

Elly turned back to face him, her bright emerald eyes wide with alarm. "Why?"

"She's about six-months-old now, isn't she?"

"She turned six-months two weeks ago."

"Do you intend to breed her?"

“No.”

“Then you should have her spayed. It’s best to schedule the surgery before she goes into heat and if she’s almost seven-months-old, she’s due any minute. In fact, she may have already had her first heat and you didn’t recognize it. Here.” He handed her his card. “Call my office and make an appointment, give yourself at least an hour, which would include filling out the necessary forms and allowing me time to examine her. If you agree, I’ll board her and schedule the operation for later in the day, if possible.”

“I don’t know. Spaying is a serious procedure, isn’t it?”

He laid a gentle hand against her cheek. “She’ll be fine, Elly. I promise. And it’s better for her in the long run. Animals that undergo the surgery have shown a 96% reduction in certain cancers, and since little dogs go into heat faster than larger breeds, I suggest we arrange the operation as quickly as possible. I strongly recommend neutering to all my dog and cat owners.”

She gazed down at his business card. “I’ll think about it.”

“Fine. Just don’t take too long. Earlier the better.”

With a nod, she tucked his card into her coat pocket and painfully wended her way back as Jerry remained behind, his concern for her increasing by the moment. Given Elly’s display of temper today, which the lady no doubt struggled to keep under wraps, he suspected Arthur Benson was not a gentle dominant. Abuse might be a strong word and a harsh accusation, but Jerry thought the term applied in this case, even though he had no proof. What he did have, however, was a better picture of her situation.

Eleanor Benson sought to be submissive, but she possessed a good measure of pride, as did her husband. To Arthur Benson, however, image was everything. The man drove a Lexus and wore tailor-made suits. He took pride in appearances, and anything that fell short of his exacting standards had to be adjusted or repaired, which included his wife.

Yesterday, Elly failed to dress correctly and report in on time, so Arthur had punished her. Jerry wasn’t sure how, but the man had been harsh enough that Elly had difficulty walking. Despite her pain, she’d managed to hold her chin up and her back straight today and didn’t look away when he spoke to her. She may have bent to her husband’s rules, but he hadn’t broken her, yet. However, Jerry feared such an outcome would only be a matter of time, and he wanted to prevent Elly further harm at all costs. Though his deepening feelings for Eleanor Benson were undoubtedly inappropriate, strong emotions didn’t invalidate a person’s concerns. He needed to talk to Brent. His mentor had more experience in these situations than Jerry did. Maybe Brent could offer a few suggestions.

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After Jerry got Jack fed and settled, he called Brent’s office.

“Carmichael.” That was Brent. All business and direct when events required quick results.

“Brent, it’s Jerry.”

“Hi, Jerry.” Jerry imagined his mentor tilting back in his chair. “What can I do for you?”

“I’d like to talk to you about Mr. and Mrs. Benson. Mrs. Benson, actually.”

“What about her?”

“I’ve gotten her to loosen up a little, and though I don’t have any proof, I think her husband might be abusing her. Yesterday, she sported some serious bruises on her wrists, and today she had difficulty walking. I fear I’m responsible. I tried to keep her talking to me, which made her late, and since she appeared cold, I lent her my coat. I believe Mr. Benson took exception to both those unusual developments.”

“Did she say so?”

“Not directly, but she did admit she got punished for not dressing properly for the weather.”

“Jerry...”

“I know. I would have spanked her for going outside with only a sweater on, too, if she’d been mine to take care of, but I wouldn’t have made her so sore she couldn’t walk.”

Brent Carmichael paused, and Jerry suspected his friend was struggling to be tactful. Brent was naturally protective of the people in Corbin's Bend. No doubt the thought of one of theirs being abused stuck in his craw as well. After a moment, he spoke. "I understand how you feel, but some husbands are stricter than others, and—"

"Brent, please, I don't need the lecture. Okay? What I want is someone to follow up with her and Arthur to make sure he's not harming her, even if it's unintentional."

The only sound Jerry heard was Brent's breathing. Finally, the other man said, "All right. I'll suggest Kelli broach the subject with her. As Elly's mentor, I think she's the best choice, but Jerry, you and I need to sit down and discuss the appropriateness of your fixation with Mrs. Benson. I realize you view Eleanor Benson as a wounded animal and want to shelter her under your protective wing. However, Mrs. Benson is neither yours to protect, nor care for, and I suspect your feelings may be interfering with your objectivity."

"Fine, I'll set up an appointment to talk with you next week, but let me say this. When I asked Mrs. Benson how her wrists came to be so bruised and swollen, she said it was just a simple misunderstanding between her and Arthur. And Brent, putting my feelings aside, what happened to that woman was neither a misunderstanding, nor simple." At that, Jerry hung up. A part of him longed to tell his mentor off, but his rational mind knew the older man was right. If Elly wouldn't speak up for herself, and admit she and Benson had a problem, they could do nothing to help her. And, though his growing feelings for Mrs. Benson might be inappropriate, they weren't interfering with his objectivity. They had practically eclipsed it.

\* \* \* \*

Elly was vacuuming the living room carpet when the doorbell sounded. Muffin gave an excited little yipping noise, which meant someone she knew and approved of was at the door. A glance at the clock informed Elly it was after 2 PM.

"Muffin, quiet." Elly turned off the machine and wiped her hands on her jeans before pointing to the spot Muffin usually occupied when Elly cleaned. "Lie down." Once the dog obeyed, she held up an index finger and gave the command, "Stay." She then went to answer the door. Kelli Stevens, a short, curvy redhead with a touch of gray at her temples, and Elly's mentor, stood outside smiling in her kind and gentle way.

"Hi, Elly."

"Kelli. I didn't expect you to visit today. Did I miss an appointment?"

"No, dear. Of course not. I was nearby and thought we might have a chat, if you aren't too busy."

Elly glanced back at the living room. Would Arthur approve of her entertaining a guest while she was in the midst of cleaning? Probably not. Appearances. "Perhaps it would be best if—"

"Only for a moment. I don't want to keep you."

"It's not that. It's just..." She ran a hand down her jeans. "I'm not exactly dressed to receive company."

Kelli's smile widened. "You look cute and pretty as you always do, dear, but I don't want to impose. So, if you'd like me to—"

"Come in," Elly said, opening the door wider so the other woman could enter. "Would you like some coffee or tea?"

"No. I'm fine. Can you sit?"

Kelli's question would seem odd if it had been asked anywhere else, but in Corbin's Bend, the ability to sit was never taken for granted. Elly wrinkled her nose. "As long as the chair is padded, I'm fine. Let's go into the dining room. Sure I can't get you anything?"

"Positive," Kelli murmured as she followed Elly into the next room and took a seat beside her. Then, in an unexpected move, Kelli clasped Elly's wrist. Surprised, Elly's first instinct was to pull away, but for all its gentleness, Kelli's grip was surprisingly strong. Unfortunately, Elly didn't

like her arms or hands restrained.

Kelli glanced down as she pushed Elly's sleeve back, and Elly renewed her efforts to be free. "Your pulse is racing, dear. Are you afraid?"

"No. Of course not. I just don't like having my wrists touched."

With a nod, Kelli released Elly's hand. "Would you prefer another mentor?" When Elly shook her head in reply, Kelli continued. "The reason I ask is because I don't think you're comfortable enough to be truthful with me. Perhaps you'd rather have someone younger?"

"No. I mean, why would you think so?"

Kelli nodded toward Elly's bruised wrists. "Is Arthur abusing you?"

The blood drained from Elly's face. "Of course not. We had a simple misunderstanding is all. I would never accuse him of abuse. Who said such a thing?"

"Is he overly strict with you?"

"No, not really. I don't understand, Kelli, why—"

"Your wrists show signs of resistance. Were you trying to get free?"

Elly blinked back her tears. The handcuffs Arthur used weren't padded, and she had struggled, but that was her fault, not his. He needed to be strict with her, so she'd learn how to be a wife he could be proud of. She promptly covered her wrists again with her sleeves. "He warned me not to struggle, but sometimes I can't help myself. He didn't mean for this to happen."

"So, it was an accident?"

Nodding, Elly added, "I need to be more accepting of his discipline. He only wants what is best for me."

"And does he take care of you afterward?"

Elly hesitated for a moment, then nodded again. Arthur often had sex with her after a discipline session, though he didn't always remove the cuffs and her gag until he was through.

"Do you enjoy your DD relationship with your husband?"

Blinking, Elly wondered what part about domestic discipline she was supposed to enjoy. Did anyone actually enjoy getting spanked? Not in her opinion, they didn't. She certainly didn't enjoy Arthur's punishments. Did she deserve his discipline? Most times, yes. Did she love him? She tried to, but his strict inflexibility angered her sometimes. He'd changed once they'd moved to Corbin's Bend, but he'd said she'd become lazy and disorganized and needed a firmer hand now. Where was the enjoyment in that? "I think the discipline is what I need to be a better person," she answered carefully.

"But you can't say you enjoy it. I don't mean the punishments, but the rest."

What rest? What else was there? "I'm still learning, Kelli. It's not easy."

Kelli patted her arm. "No, it isn't. But if you two love each other, you'll work things out."

Relieved, Elly nodded more vigorously this time. "I'm sure we will."

Kelli rose and Elly quickly followed her mentor to the door. "Thank you for stopping by, Kelli."

"We're here for you, dear. Don't ever forget that. If you need help, or have any questions, call me. Any time. Day or night. All right?"

Elly gave another nod. "You're very kind. Thank you again."

With a smile, Kelli left and Elly sank against her closed front door. They meant well. All of them. But they didn't understand. And they weren't helping.

\* \* \* \*

Once Elly had finished her vacuuming and dusting, she showered and changed into a dress, since Arthur didn't approve of her wearing jeans or slacks. He was old-fashioned that way, but Elly didn't mind. She liked putting on dresses and heels. Sitting on the edge of the bed to draw up her stockings, she wondered whether Dr. Douglas objected to women wearing pants. She found herself thinking of the vet often and knew she shouldn't, which was one of the reasons she'd been avoiding

taking Muffin back to the park. Their fenced in backyard sufficed to give the tiny poodle exercise, and even though Muffin enjoyed playing with Jack, Elly didn't want to risk Arthur's displeasure by spending too much time with their handsome vet. Then again, Arthur couldn't care less who Elly visited with at the dog park as long as her visits didn't take any of her time or attention away from him.

As if she realized Elly was thinking of her, Muffin jumped up on Elly's lap, balanced on her hind legs like a ballerina, and gave Elly a quick doggie kiss on the nose. Laughing, Elly ruffled her pet's ears and bent down to whisper, "You miss Jack, don't you?"

The poodle let out a small yip, recognizing the other dog's name.

"Me, too," she whispered, letting out a soft sigh. "Now get down, sweetie. You know Daddy doesn't like you up on the bed, and you don't want him to scold Mommy, do you?"

Muffin jumped down with a "harrumph" as if 'Daddy's' preferences were meaningless to her.

The need to schedule Muffin's surgery was another reason Elly avoided seeing Dr. Douglas again. She was so small. Though Elly trusted Jerry to take good care of her tiny friend, she'd heard rumors of toy-sized dogs not surviving the anesthesia, and she couldn't even contemplate the possibility of losing Muffin. Her poodle was the only friend she had. Her baby.

Elly stood up and straightened her skirt. If she didn't see Dr. Douglas, she could claim to have forgotten she needed to schedule an appointment. Except that was a lie; bother it all.

With a swish of her full skirt, she went downstairs to prepare dinner. Arthur was due home at 6 PM and her attention should be on him, not the vet whose hazel eyes, fringed by sinfully long lashes, saw more than she wanted, but whose welcoming smile and friendly chatter put her at ease in a way no one else ever had.

\* \* \* \*

Elly squeezed another slice of lemon on her fillet of sole while Arthur spoke of the chores they'd need to complete prior to the first snowfall. "Winters can be wicked here, I've been told, so I want to ensure we're prepared. I'd like you to make a list of non-perishable items in case we get snowed-in. The Internet should provide a more comprehensive list, but I suggest we procure at least a week's supply of bottled water, a variety of canned foods, including soups, paper goods, packaged meals, etc. Think you can manage this project, or should I see to the provisions myself?"

"I can make up a list, Arthur."

"Let us hope so. When you do, please bear in mind we may lose electricity, so we'll need extra batteries and candles as well."

Elly nodded. He'd most likely rip apart whatever list she put together, but she'd do her damndest.

"Also, I need to add a key to your ring for the new shed I moved into our garage as extra security for the snow and leaf blowers I recently purchased. Where are your keys?"

She tried to remember when she had them last. "My right coat pocket, I think."

"You think? Eleanor, those keys aren't toys to be left about wherever you like. You should always know where they are. If you can't be responsible enough to handle items associated with our home security, then I'm not sure I should trust you with any object pertaining to our safety or wellbeing."

"I'm sorry, Arthur. I'm certain they are in my coat pocket."

"Well, I hope you're right. I must say I'm disappointed in you lately. It seems as if your mind is lost somewhere in the clouds, and I'm not sure how to get you focused back on reality."

Elly swallowed. Last evening was the first night in a month he hadn't punished her, and she'd been so careful today. Still, she needed to be more responsible.

Wiping his mouth with his napkin, he rose from the table. When Elly started to rise as well, he raised a hand to stop her. "No, finish your dinner while I add this key to your ring."

With a nod, she picked up another forkful of peas. Why did he request this disgusting vegetable so often?

Arthur was gone less than a minute, when he called, “Eleanor, would you come here for a moment please.”

That frigidly polite request sent a chill up her spine. What had she done now? Rising from the table, she walked from the dining room, through their living room to the foyer and the armoire where they kept their coats. Arthur scowled down at a small, rectangular slip of paper.

“Yes, Arthur?”

“What’s this?” he asked, holding out the white rectangle. Elly blinked in confusion as she stared down at Jerry’s card.

“Our vet’s business card. He wanted me to call and make an appointment for Muffin to be spayed.”

“I see.” He glanced at the paper again, then flipped it over. “Any particular reason why he wrote his personal home and cell number on the back?”

“No. Not that I can think of. I mean, I didn’t realize he’d added them.”

“Didn’t you?”

“No. I only looked at the information on the front.”

“Interesting. Where’s your phone?”

“In my purse.”

“Would you fetch it for me, please?”

Elly had a bad feeling as she retrieved the requested object and handed it to her husband. He dialed one of the numbers listed on the back of Jerry’s card and put the phone on speaker.

It rang once. “Elly? Are you all right? What’s wrong?”

“This is Arthur Benson, Dr. Douglas. I found your business card in my wife’s coat pocket. Perhaps you’d be so kind as to tell me why you wrote your personal numbers on the back and how it is you recognize my wife’s cell phone number?”

## Chapter Three

Jerry instantly bristled at Benson's patronizing tone. The man was an ass. "I gave my card to your wife, Mr. Benson, so she could make an appointment for her poodle to be spayed."

"That explains why you gave my wife your card, Dr. Douglas, but not why you scribbled your personal information on the back."

"I'm a vet, which means I'm on call and available 24/7. I give my personal information to all my clients, since pet issues don't always follow normal office hours."

"And how is it you happen to recognize my wife's cell phone number? Did she provide you with that information?"

"Not personally. No. However, when Mrs. Benson first moved here she came to the clinic and filled out a card so we would have Muffin's information on file in case of an emergency. As a responsible pet owner, she listed her home phone number, her cell phone number, and even your office number as points of contact. I programmed her numbers into my cell phone."

"Convenient. Did you program my office number into your phone as well?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. Would you like me to read it back to you?"

"That won't be necessary, Dr. Douglas. I have two more questions to ask you."

"Please, Mr. Benson, go ahead."

"Why did you call my wife 'Elly,' and what made you suspect something was wrong?"

"I called her Elly, because she listed it as her preferred name on the card she filled out. As it happens, she doesn't like to be called Eleanor. Were you aware of that, Mr. Benson?" Jerry knew he was pushing the other man's buttons, but right then he'd like nothing better than to punch Arthur Benson's supercilious nose. Silence greeted him. So, after a moment he added, "I suspected something might be wrong because your wife's cell phone number came up on my display after eight o'clock. I don't usually receive calls from clients in the evening unless there's a problem. Does that answer your questions, Mr. Benson?"

"Perfectly. Thank you. Good night, Dr. Douglas. I apologize for disturbing you."

Disconnecting the call, Jerry dragged in a breath and leaned back in his chair. Pompous asshole. It would be a cold day in hell before he'd ever program Benson's office number into his phone. Arthur Benson would be the last person he'd contact in case of an emergency with Muffin or Elly. Though he'd been ready to put the man on hold and run over to his office if the jerk had called his bluff. Luckily, he hadn't. Jerry wished Elly would call and let him know she was all right, but he suspected he'd pissed her husband off royally, which meant Elly would pay, one way or another.

If she didn't come to the park tomorrow, he'd go to her. She still hadn't scheduled an appointment for Muffin, so she was either avoiding him or procrastinating scheduling the surgery. He intended to uncover the reason she kept her distance, and deal with the issue accordingly.

Elly needed more of a social life. She was locked up in that house with only Arthur Benson for human company. Given the circumstances, he found it surprising the lady had retained her sanity, much less her sense of humor. He'd make some calls tomorrow. Perhaps he could have a few neighbors drop by and invite her to join them in a community project. Something had to be going on at this time of year. It was only two weeks from Halloween.

\* \* \* \*

Elly met her husband's gaze as he closed her phone and handed it back to her. "Either your vet is very clever, or you're telling me the truth."

Why would he think she'd lied to him? Everything she'd said had been truthful.

"I abhor liars, Eleanor, and view any form of deceit to be a cardinal sin. For the record, I consider an omission akin to deceit, for it is a willful holding back of the truth. I would have to express my disappointment most keenly if I ever discovered you had played me false. Do we understand each other?"



“Yes, sir,” Elly replied in a whisper. If he caught her in a lie, she’d be lucky to survive his punishment without permanent scars.

“Good. Finish your dinner and clean up. I’d hoped to make it an early night; however, I think you are in need of a focus session, to remind you of your duty to me.”

Elly swallowed. “Yes, sir.” A focus session could mean anything from controlling her breathing while holding a burning candle steady on her stomach, which would spill hot wax on her if she let her mind wander for a second; to crouching naked on her toes with an array of sharply pointed jacks spread in front of her. She had to concentrate on maintaining her balance or her knees would have tiny bits of metal digging into them. Painful, if not injurious. If she lost focus, which she did more often than not, Arthur insisted she endure the pain of her slip for a specified length of time before he allowed her to clean up and start over. Whatever task he set her, she had to keep all her attention on completing it successfully, or continue trying until he determined she was hopeless. Elly hated focus sessions, but they achieved their desired objective. They improved her concentration so well; she rarely committed the same mistake twice.

“Call me when you’re finished,” he ordered before returning to his office. Elly returned to the table. She was tempted to throw the rest of her meal away, but if Arthur caught her, she’d be put back in the diaper and forced to eat the peas out of the garbage. Instead, she placed her plate in the microwave to warm the food up for a minute. Muffin peeked out at her from the laundry area.

“Yes, Mommy’s in trouble again. So, what else is new? You’d best keep a low profile or Daddy will get after you, too.” The microwave dinged. “Go on.” She pointed at the frilly dog bed set next to the dryer. “Back to your beddies.” Muffin obeyed, though Elly saw a hint of resentment in the dog’s stiff-legged gait. Sighing, admittedly she wasn’t thrilled over this turn of events either.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Elly’s legs trembled as she prepared Arthur’s breakfast. She’d taken a couple of tablets for her discomfort, but they didn’t seem to be working, yet. Last night’s focus session had been particularly brutal. After ordering her to strip, Arthur had placed a firm hand at her back and ordered her to bend forward until her torso rested at a ninety-degree angle to her legs.

“Clasp your hands behind you,” he instructed. “If you can’t maintain the position, I will get the handcuffs, but for now I want you to do this without help.”

When her hands were positioned the way he wanted them, he tapped her buttocks with the cane he held in his right hand. “I’ll start light, but you are to ignore the cane and focus on your task. I want you to say the alphabet backwards. If you miss a letter, break position, or make a sound that isn’t a letter, we’ll begin again and the strokes will get harder. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Elly answered, her back already hurting from the awkward position.

“Good. We’ll begin. Keep your mind on your task and pretend I’m not here.”

Elly jerked at the first stroke, but started reciting the alphabet beginning with “Z.” She got as far as “U” before she let out a gasp.

“Not allowed,” Arthur reminded as the cane bit into Elly’s bottom, leaving a stinging line of fire in its wake. “You’re focusing more on your discomfort than your task, Eleanor. Put the pain out of your mind and direct your attention to what I’ve asked you to do.”

“My back hurts. Ow.” Another strike. She lowered her arms and tried to stand, but his left hand moved to the back of her neck and pushed down as the cane whistled and struck again. Elly cried out and tried to rise once more only to feel a cool ring of metal snap about her right wrist.

“I’m disappointed in you, Eleanor.” Tears dropped to the floor as Elly stopped resisting while Arthur finished handcuffing her hands behind her back. She hated those handcuffs, but knew she wouldn’t be able to accomplish this session without them. She was too weak, her brain too disorganized, and her mind too scattered. She failed at almost every task her husband assigned her.

“What is pain?” he asked, his tone calm and reasonable.

She repeated the phrase he’d instilled in her. “A learning tool intended to help me become a

better, more focused person.”

“Correct. Now concentrate on your task, and we’ll begin again.”

Elly did her best, but after her tenth attempt she was sobbing so hard, she couldn’t talk, so Arthur finally relented. “All right, enough.” He unlocked the handcuffs and helped her stand. Pain tore through her cramped muscles and she cried out, unable to move without sharp shards of agony ripping along her back. Arthur turned her into his chest and pressed strong fingers along her spine. Though his massage hurt, it eventually loosened her muscles enough she could stand without assistance.

“This task shouldn’t have been all that difficult for you, Eleanor. You’re not stupid, although sometimes I wonder why can’t you do something as easy as repeating the alphabet. A feat young children can accomplish with ease, and yet you apparently can’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Elly managed, clinging to the small bit of comfort he offered. But after a minute, he firmly pushed her away as if he was disgusted to be in her presence.

“Go take a shower and get into bed. I’m through with you for the night.”

Grateful he didn’t expect anything more, Elly did as he’d instructed, then cried herself to sleep feeling useless and dejected.

This, however, was a new day. And new days offered hope.

Moments after she placed the usual soft-boiled egg and toast at Arthur’s place on their small kitchen table, the man himself appeared looking immaculate as usual. He gave her a nod of greeting and sat down to eat his breakfast and read the morning paper. That was it. No kiss. No words. Just a nod and a dismissal.

With misery churning in her stomach and burning her eyes, Elly slowly lowered herself down onto her cushioned seat and swirled her spoon in her cereal.

“Breakfast is meant to be eaten, not played with, Eleanor. What’s your program of duties for today?”

No doubt, he thought she’d forget what he had laid out for her to do if she didn’t repeat her chores for him on a daily basis. Thursday was manual labor day. “I’m to scrub the kitchen and sanitize the bathrooms.”

“Correct. Did you manage to get any work done on the inventory of provisions I asked for last night?”

When would she have had the time to do that? Elly bit back her retort. “No, sir. Not yet.”

“Of course not. Add that to your agenda for today as well. Might you at least have some idea of the groceries you’ll need for the weekend?”

“There’s the list hanging by the refrigerator you’ve asked me to keep.”

“Fine. Get it for me, please. It’s nearing month end, so I shall begin relocating to my office here. I won’t be traveling into Denver on a daily basis in November, so I expect you to have a complete accounting of items properly categorized for me by the end of the week. If we get a significant snowfall before Halloween, I may choose to move my schedule up.” He waited for her acknowledgment.

“Yes, sir.”

A nod. “Another task I insist you accomplish today is scheduling your poodle’s operation. The last thing I need is more of those annoying, yapping creatures running about this house.”

Having risen from the table to fetch the list, Elly stopped and glanced back at her husband. “I haven’t decided if I want to spay her, yet.”

“What’s to decide? I won’t allow you to breed her, so schedule the appointment. Your vet seems conscientious, I’m certain he’ll take good care of the beast, and I want her fixed. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” No point in arguing unless she wished to feel the paddle on top of the cane stripes she still sported, so she fetched the list and handed it to him.

He glanced over the paper. “Didn’t you request a quart of whole milk last Friday? We agreed

you'd only drink skim milk. So, why do you need more so quickly?"

"The cake I made for you last weekend called for two cups."

"Very well. What are you having for lunch today?"

"We have some left over roast; I thought I'd make a sandwich."

"Didn't you have a roast beef sandwich yesterday?"

"It was good. I'd like another one."

"No. Fix a salad instead. It's healthier for you and less fattening. Your waist is looking a little thick of late, and I don't want you blowing up like a balloon. I trust you aren't out to embarrass me even more before my associates than you already have, are you?"

Recalling how his stylishly elegant secretary had stared down her nose at Elly when they were first introduced, Elly shook her head and reflexively placed her hands on her stomach. He was right. She tended to put on weight much too easily. She'd best be careful.

"Do everything I've asked and I may permit you to have another sandwich tomorrow as a reward."

When she nodded, he scowled, so she answered, "Yes, sir."

"Better. See you tonight. I'll inform you when to expect me later, and, as usual, I expect you to call me if you choose to leave the house for any reason, which includes taking your poodle to the vet for surgery."

"Yes, sir."

He bent and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Until tonight." And a few seconds later, he was gone. Once he was out the door, Elly slumped back in her chair and laid her forehead on the table. She'd been feeling more and more tired lately, and now depression seeped into the marrow of her bones. Maybe she was coming down with something. Rising, she walked into the bathroom and pulled out their digital thermometer. Luckily, Arthur had no interest in medical scenes, so she didn't have to suffer the indignity of enemas or having her temperature taken rectally as she'd heard other dominants often required of their partners.

A glance at the instrument's tiny window indicated her temperature was a bit higher than usual, but she wasn't running a fever, so she wasn't ill. With a shrug, she wiped the digital probe down with alcohol and put it away. Then returning to the dining room, she picked up the dirty dishes and went to work.

\* \* \* \*

Elly was on her knees spraying a mixture of white vinegar and Dawn to scour away the non-existent soap scum from the bottom of their tub when the doorbell rang. Muffin's responding barks indicated the visitors were strangers. Who would be coming to see them? With her thoughts pondering the possibilities, Elly leaned back on her heels then jerked upright with a hiss of pain. A reminder.

After wiping the sweat from her brow with her hand, she used the tub's edge for leverage, rose to her feet and glanced at her watch—2 PM. The doorbell rang again. Corbin's Bend didn't get door-to-door traffic like many other neighborhoods. Outside of the small greeting committee who'd showed up the day they moved in, not many people had dropped by. Kelli did, of course, but Arthur met with his mentor at the clubhouse, so even he didn't visit.

After the doorbell rang a third time, she called out, "Coming."

Moving slowly, she yanked at her long shirtsleeves to cover the marks left by last night's session and traversed the flight of stairs that led directly to their front door.

When she unlocked and opened the portal, three women stood staring at her.

She smiled, despite the uncertainty churning in her stomach. "Yes? May I help you?"

A petite woman with shining black hair and twinkling green eyes extended her hand. "We certainly hope so. Hi, I'm Bethany Angel." Still not certain what this was all about, Elly hesitated for a moment before shaking the smiling woman's hand. Bethany indicated an older fair-haired pixie

with freckles to her right. “This is Angela O’Brien. Better known as Ange to her friends. You may have sampled some of the delicious pastries she sells.”

Elly gave a small shake of her head as she accepted Ange’s proffered hand. “Sorry, but I haven’t. Not yet, at least.”

“Not a problem,” Ange answered and Elly detected a hint of an Irish accent in the diminutive woman’s voice. Though at five feet two in her bare feet, Elly could hardly say she towered over Angela O’Brien.

“This creative beauty to my left is Everleigh Harris, but we call her ‘Ever.’”

In for a penny, Elly shook Ever’s hand and smiled back at the olive-skinned, willowy woman.

“Ever gives art classes to some of the kids in Corbin’s Bend who want to go a little beyond what the school system offers. Now, you may wonder why we’ve all showed up out of the blue today.”

Elly did wonder, but wasn’t sure it would be polite to admit as much, so she merely smiled inquiringly.

“We’re here to ask, no beg you, to help us in the community center with a Halloween project we’re trying to put together for the kids. We won’t take much of your time, but if you could spend a few hours one afternoon or evening, we’d really appreciate it.” Bethany continued with a broad, friendly grin.

Elly was past surprised to shocked. No one in Corbin’s Bend had reached out to her before for any reason. “I’m afraid I’m not at all talented artistically.”

Bethany shook her head. “Don’t worry about that. Ever has enough talent for all of us combined and she teaches. Besides, I’m sure we could use you in whatever capacity you choose from hanging decorations on the ceiling to making ghost and black cat cupcakes.”

The image of decorated cupcakes made Elly smile. “I’ll need to check with my husband first.”

“Of course,” Bethany replied with a wave of her hand. “Trust me; we all understand the HoH’s must give their blessing before we can commit to anything. Here’s our phone numbers.” She pressed a card into Elly’s hand that had all their names and numbers jotted down. “Call any one of us once you get an answer. And if you need support from our household heads, give a whistle and we can send one of them over to extol our virtues to Arthur and explain why you’re so valuable to us.”

Elly blinked. Valuable? They considered her valuable? She blushed. “Thanks.”

With a soft smile of companionship, Bethany countered, “No. Thank you. Come on, girls. Let’s go shopping for supplies. It’s Denver or bust.”

After shutting the door, Elly made sure it was locked, then leaned against the sturdy barrier. She was valued by strangers.... She giggled, tempted to jump up and down like an excited schoolgirl. Consumed by an effervescent desire to share her news with someone, Elly took a deep breath. Arthur would be furious if she called him at work for anything short of a life or death emergency, or to report she was leaving the house for a time. If she admitted she wanted to go for a walk, she’d also have to provide her route, the length of her absence, and report in the second she returned. A delay of one minute was grounds for punishment. Then a vision of smiling hazel eyes came to mind, and she knew precisely what she wanted to do.

“Muffin. Let’s go walkies.”