



IRRESISTIBLE

REILY GARRETT

Irresistible

By

Reily Garrett

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to Darius, Leyna, and Raptor, the incredible trio, loyal, kind, and energetic. Three incredible beings who don't understand the words "give up." To Faith, whose love and compassion changed my life. In life, I've found no therapy better than a dog's loyalty, patience, and love.

Books by Reily Garrett

Carnal Series

Carnal Beginnings

Carnal Innocence

Bending Fate: Prequel to Carnal Whispers

Carnal Whispers: Mind Stalker

Carnal Obsession: His Heart's Prisoner

Immortal Lovers Series

Unholy Alliance

Kurupira Romance Series

Tiago

McAllister Justice Series

Tender Echoes (Prequel to Digital Velocity)

Digital Velocity

Bound by Shadows

Inconclusive Evidence

Carbon Replacements

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Chapter One

"Time to head home, Abrielle. She's asleep and I can stay." Jackie's whispered words eclipsed her soft footfalls through the darkened hospital room. "How many times has she awoken?"

"Just once." Shrill screams had brought a nurse and orderly running earlier as the victim's subconscious relived her recent descent into a world filled with confusion, terror, and pain. The nurse had injected a bolus of medication into the teenager's IV port while giving a brief description of its purpose, not knowing Abby had majored in biochemistry.

The familiar two a.m. chill swept a shudder down her spine as her thoughts catalogued the recorded bruises, abrasions, and stitches on the newest victim. Physical injuries would heal within a few weeks. Psychological wounds ran deeper and might take years to scar.

Abby's dark and cunning imagination would conjure images of the attack for her own subconscious to incorporate into nightmares in the event sleep found her that night.

"Jesus. She was a virgin yesterday. Now she's a statistic with few to grieve her stolen innocence, sixteen and attacked in her own bedroom." Jackie edged closer to the bedside, her hand hovering over then withdrawing without touching. Physical contact would only be initiated with permission.

Abby wondered if fear, anger, and a need to regain control of her life create a compulsion to cut her hair, rip apart any clingy or V-neck tops in her wardrobe, and dismantle her bed so the mattress would lie on the floor?

"The mother left within an hour of arriving, wanted to know who she could sue." Abby traced her fingers through her therapy dog's thick fur. Galen lay quietly at her master's feet, chuffing softly in commiseration of the night's tragedy.

Abby's anxiety level fluctuated, having risen and fallen like a kite catching sudden updrafts then dropping when the breeze quieted, snatched hither and yon at fate's discretion. The similarities between this victim and her own remembered past forged a bond shared exclusively by assault victims, with no verbal commiseration, only the twisted and tangled darkness within each soul.

Despite the tomb-like silence giving Abby's imagination free rein to coax new and remembered horrors for the express purpose of crippling her resolve, a hard-won inner peace dominated the darkness trying to ascend. Years ago, she'd spent months unable to leave the safety of her apartment after dark, but little by little she'd gradually taken back the fragments of her life. Time helped the healing process, but each casualty of hate and violence had to find their own path, taking their next step when the clutches of fear and anger slipped their grasp.

"Thanks for coming. We shouldn't be short-handed for long. Our two new girls are almost up to speed." Accepting the temporary position of case manager at the crisis center meant filling in when caseloads overflowed the dedicated volunteers' capacity. Jackie shook her head in disgust.

"Poor kid's gonna have a tough road ahead."

"At least she won't be alone. We'll be there for her when she's ready." In truth, the gravity of the situation would crush her if she thought about it too long. Like many rape survivors, flashbacks were a part of everyday life, attacking when least expected, decreasing in steps over time yet wreaking havoc at the most inopportune moments.

"Giving her statement wiped her out." Abby's aching muscles were slow to obey in gaining her feet after the emotionally draining evening. Maybe an hour's soak in the tub would relieve the insidious buildup of stress. Enduring the exam had depleted the rest of the adolescent's emotional reserves.

"I think it does for all of them. It was good that you were here."

"All right, I'm going home and get some sleep." Home. The concept sounded wonderful—if only she had one, a place of safety and refuge where evil didn't lurk in every shadow, holding a knife and slobbering at the thought of carving its initials into her breast.

Once inside with the door locked behind her, she would meticulously check every window, every closet, and underneath each bed. The last existed as a matter of habit since she'd purchased low-setting frames. At least it was a step up from setting her mattress on the floor. *Baby steps*. That was what her ex-Doms would've said.

Initially, nothing had helped her poor sleep pattern. However, in the last six months, she seldom woke with a scream on her lips or sweat coating her skin, fighting an imaginary psychopath. That development had led her to anticipate the next step in her journey of uniting the tattered pieces of her soul, returning to North Carolina.

Her short, bobbed hair, once long and luxurious, barely blocked the chill on her neck. The unusual style characterized one of the drastic changes and existed as another obstacle to conquer sometime in the future.

After the lowlife psychopath ripped away her ability to relax and enjoy loved ones, she'd woken up in a similar hospital bed with bruised ribs, a broken arm, and vaginal tears. *And that was just the physical damage.*

A psychologist's recent suggestion of returning and meeting with the two men she'd abandoned in her bid to outrun the demons stalking her held merit in her mind, but reality hadn't quite caught up yet. Her dominants had loved her and would've supported her if she'd stayed, yet after skirting the edges of sanity, she couldn't face them. Now the time had come, regardless of how her fingers had trembled when she'd posted a letter asking them for a meeting.

"Hey, Galen. You being a good girl tonight?" Jackie rubbed the silky fur behind the husky's ears, tail thumping and a wide doggy grin being the husky's standard greeting. "Never seen a husky as a therapy dog, but she's really great. Everybody loves her."

"Yeah, I just lucked out. I'm not sure what mixture makes up her heritage, but I sure as hell appreciate her." If not for the calming comfort of her furbaby, she might have remained locked in a nightmarish hell for years to come. The bag of doggie treats hanging from Abby's belt was a link to her own tortuous journey in healing. The canine's ears perked as the plastic baggie's rustle caught her attention. With gentle precision, Galen took the offered treat.

The hospital corridor loomed ahead like catacombs set deep in the earth, quiet and filled with the constant interplay of shadow and light from an artificial source, each darkened room containing a personal hell for some poor soul. The med nurse standing by her cart patted Galen on the head in passing. Night nurses deserved comfort, too.

Galen's four-paw wake-up the following morning signaled the canine's impatience for their daily jog. That plus thirty minutes of thrashing her gym's sand-filled punching bag reminded her she could neither exhaust nor outfight the remaining monsters of her imagination. Regardless of how exhausted she became or hard she focused, she knew demons waited patiently in the wings, ready to pounce at her earliest sign of weakness.

Over time, she'd realized the benefits of exercise far outweighed the

use of any drug, of which she'd tried her share, but still provided only a temporary fix. Winning the struggle that slowly drained a victim's soul of hope was the optimum goal, not easily obtained, but worth the fight. It was time for her next step, face and defeat, once and for all, the monsters that waited for her to slip and fall. In order to move forward and start meeting people, she needed closure from her old life, which entailed facing the two men she still loved most in the world.

Determination to tamp down anxiety wasn't helped by the large stack of files on her desk that greeted her after stepping into the temporary role as the center's case manager. Thank God for private offices. The volunteers hadn't seen her dismay at the number of new assaults, which would require an all-day caffeine infusion to keep her eyes open and focused on the needs of the victims. Warm summer nights dictated the stack would grow this weekend.

Not scheduled to work for the next two days meant she and Galen could finish unpacking and perhaps enjoy an evening picnic on the beach where she could continue to sort the confusing tangled mess mistakenly called life and figure out how to broach the apology to her ex-lovers.

"Abrielle?" The tentative knock on her door announced the newest recruit. Like many other volunteers, Cami's history of rape necessitated piecing life back together one day at a time. "That's quite a number of... When's the director scheduled to start?"

"Next week. Come in and sit." The open-door policy proved essential in maintaining an even rapport within the unit.

"Good, you really look tired. There's two men out there. Said they wanted to see you." Worrying her lower lip between her teeth combined with the furrowed brow detailed Cami's uncertainty.

"Did they say why?" According to the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network—one out of every ten rape victims was male. It was unusual for men to come forward, especially in person. On the other hand, supporters of female victims often donated time and materials to the cause.

"They each showed me their ID before I could get the words out. Morgan Weller and Finn Coltich."

Oh, God. Her heart rate rocketed, pounding in her chest and thundering in her ears. She'd hoped to put this confrontation off for at least another week, as outlined in her letter.

Her dominants were both very large, imposing, well-built men. If they'd kept in shape, they'd give anyone pause. A part of her had dreamed of

coming back to her men and starting over, begging for the adjustments that would allow her to breathe, then thrive. *They're not my men anymore.*

"Okay. Send them in. You should be on your way out with Donna and Sarah, yes?"

"Yes. We're going out to eat and then to a movie. But I won't leave you here alone with these two men. They're huge." Cami's hair swung forward with the tilt of her head to cover the thin, slightly puckered scar stretching from her right temple to the corner of her mouth. Her hesitant demeanor contradicted what she'd described as a strong personality prior to the attack. Life post-assault wasn't just a matter of obtaining some sleep aids and trying to stomach food while praying the police caught the assailant. It affected every breath the victim took—each and every second of their waking lives—after enduring nightmares in a repetitious hell.

"Cami, I'll be fine. They're...old friends. Go, enjoy your night out. I'll see you back on Monday." Her throat clogged on the word *friends*, but she had no reason to expect anything more since she'd treated them as brutally from an emotional aspect as the pervert who'd ravaged her body. Actually, that wasn't quite accurate. She deserved more harsh words than they would choose to say. *Have they come, moved up my timetable with a desire to vent their own pain?*

Cami twisted her mouth into the all-too-familiar salute to indecision. "You sure? I don't mind hanging around for a bit."

"Yes. Go. Have fun tonight. Galen and I are gonna head out in a bit, too." At the sound of her name, the black-and-silver canine sat up for attention and nudged Abby's leg. Sifting her fingers through the dog's hair provided a counterpoint to the skyrocketing angst razing her mouth and mobilizing her adrenaline stores. The flat, pursed nature of her lips kept them from trembling.

The sound of the front door closing consigned Abby's world to a new hell, forged when she ran from her men's loving arms. This meeting had been her therapist's suggestion, confronting memories of a time and place when she'd felt safe and secure. From that platform of safety, she could branch out. For the last year, she'd stressed the same steps to others.

What if they just want to yell at me and leave? In her heart, she knew they wouldn't, despite how she'd abandoned them. They both practiced the lifestyle she used to enjoy...Until she had run afoul of a dirtball with a

knife on her way home from work.
She ached for the old days.

Chapter Two

“Hello, Abby,” Morgan’s greeting issued from lips that appeared a little firmer, the lines surrounding his mouth a little deeper, yet his eyes penetrated everything in their path, dissecting, evaluating. Some things never changed.

The tone said it all, declared what her mind couldn’t comprehend. That deep voice could seduce anything between heaven and hell, destroying months of mental preparation to remain neutral. The intonation released anxiety’s hold around her libido one syllable at a time until undeniable warmth invaded every cell in her body. The conflicting emotions equaled sitting at the devil’s side as flames licked up one’s nether regions, all while he fed small slivers of dry ice, which summed up her physical responses, burning both inside and out.

Nothing could stop her gaze from bonding to the dark eyes that haunted her sleep, the scattered, unconscious fantasies where she reveled in Morgan’s caresses even as her other partner drove her lust to uncontrollable heights.

All those pipe dreams had vanished one night in a cold, filthy alley.

“Hi, Morgan. You look...good.” If anything in the world could resuscitate her battered soul, Morgan was one of two that stood the best odds. But that opportunity had sailed when she fled North Carolina. She used to describe his looks as dark and dangerous—black hair, blue eyes, a stubborn jaw that reinforced the strong angles of his face. Then she’d learned new, horrific, and painful meanings of the terms.

Stepping up beside him, the other half of her lost life offered a sincere, heart-melting smile. “Hello, sweetheart.” Like Morgan, Finn didn’t make a move to enter her domain—as if aware of the changes she’d endured. Sandy blond hair accentuated dark, emerald eyes that turned stormy when heated with desire. Now, they held emotions she couldn’t disentangle, something unfathomable fringed with accusation that sliced through air thickened with anticipation. If they raked her over the coals, it was nothing less than she deserved.

Both stood over six-foot-two, able to cocoon her with a sense of security with their mere presence. Searching their gazes, her men, the ones she’d known and loved, the intensity was still there, but now tempered with a steadfastness that declared her determination inconsequential.

Security, that most coveted prize she’d thrown away in her misguided

attempt to outrun terror and shame. However, she was no longer a submissive, anyone's submissive, and she had the scars to prove it.

"Hello, Finn." As much as Morgan's self-confidence screamed dominance, she didn't fear him. Like Morgan, he echoed a time when she had taken their presence for granted. Jellied legs wouldn't sustain her weight, despite how slim and toned she'd become through exercise and an inability to eat properly. She remained seated and indicated the chairs opposite her desk.

"Thank you." In tandem, both men strode in and sat with more self-assurance than she remembered.

"Before you say anything, I want to apologize..."

"For running away when you needed our help? Or for breaking our hearts?" Finn was the first to begin listing her sins.

And this is supposed to be the easy part of recovery. "Actually—both. I know I should've done more than leave a note. But, well, I couldn't. I was scared and confused and hurt."

"Scared we couldn't keep you safe?" A thread of Finn's anger bled through his disbelief.

"We didn't keep her safe, we failed. That's why she ran." Morgan closed his eyes as pain washed over his expression. Two fingers covered his mouth as if trying to suppress an old argument and emotions bubbling under the surface of his restraint.

"No." Abby blew out a sigh, trying to collect her emotions. "Look. First of all, it wasn't your responsibility to protect me. *I* failed. *My* arrogance and stupidity landed me in that position. I'm sorry I ran, but nothing I can do will change the past. I needed time to heal."

"If you were healed, you'd be in vet school. It was your dream." Morgan accepted Galen's sniffing welcome before reaching under her head to stroke her chest. "She smells Lexus."

"Who's Lexus?" *Their new submissive? Oh God.* Abby's wary glance flicked from Morgan to Finn. An all-encompassing dread filled her stomach as the wad of bile rose in her mouth. Knowing some great upheaval approached at the speed of a freight train didn't help one prepare for the devastation. She'd known this was coming.

"Lexus is our Bernese Mountain dog," Morgan replied, his sad smile confirming an understanding of her thought's direction.

"Things change, Abby. We get that. We've changed, too. Come to dinner with us and talk. You used to love the little restaurant down the highway before Saunter's Cove. It's quiet, and we can watch the late

surfers while we eat.” Morgan’s tone threaded concern with the subtle command.

“Um, Galen—not all businesses welcome service dogs...” She didn’t remember seeing canines by the cozy tables under the brightly colored awnings.

“She’s welcome to join us. They won’t have a problem getting along. Lexus is well socialized and the owner at Lucca’s Café loves dogs.” Morgan squashed her refusal before she’d given it voice. “You owe us that much, Abby.” Morgan’s innate strength flooded the room to surround her in swathing comfort.

Unlike Cami, Abrielle’s scar wasn’t visible unless she wore deep V-neck shirts or unbuttoned her collar, both remnants of a past life. Still, self-consciousness forced her to fiddle with the necklace around her throat, disguising her need to ensure adequate coverage.

As if understanding her impending refusal, Finn stood and ambled around her desk while maintaining eye contact. That same intensity used to scrutinize her every breath during a scene, watching her for signs of increased stress. “I know you’re not afraid of us, sweetheart. We just want to take you to dinner. No strings attached. We need to see for ourselves that you’re all right.”

“You’re going to want...” With two dominants in the room, one standing almost behind her, Abrielle’s words faltered. She merely nodded permission before Finn’s knuckles barely skimmed her shoulders in the lightest of touches, as if he could absorb her shame into his strength, so she couldn’t breathe it deep into her lungs with every inhalation.

A quiet gasp escaped with the contact before heat, so much wonderful heat, invaded to the very depth of her spirit. She sighed as her lack of control saw her head tilting into his touch.

“We want nothing but to take you to dinner. We’ll keep it casual. We need to see that you’re in one piece and on a healing path.” Morgan’s grin widened with her obviously weakening reserves.

She hadn’t relaxed her guard in the presence of a man for two years. Now, she could barely focus as Finn’s strong fingers probed the tight muscles of her shoulders and neck, reminding her how often he’d done so after a scene. Though time never dissolved the horrific memories completely, it *could* dim and keep them from throwing her world off-kilter.

“If you tell me to stop, I will, but I know you’re enjoying this. Nothing is going to be the same as it was, but it doesn’t mean life can’t be good again, sweetheart,” Finn whispered close to her ear as if to avoid

breaking the mesmerizing spell he weaved through his resistance-melting massage, one stroke at a time.

"All right. But I don't want to be out late, okay?" Her request, meant to maintain a small semblance of control over her life, was a last-ditch effort to forgo the old habit of disintegrating at Finn's feet. She caught Morgan's smirk and knew the same expression graced Finn's face.

Ever the gentlemen, they kept their ensuing conversation to the present, inquiring about her work at the center, hobbies, and places she'd visited with Galen.

"I want to know what your lives are now. Are you still working for Trenton Security?" It wasn't what she really wanted to know, but she forfeited the right to ask personal questions when she'd fled after the attack.

"No, about eighteen months ago, we left the firm and branched out on our own with only a few employees. Since then, we've tripled in size, cover the tristate area, and consult with a number of federal agencies." Finn's murmured words held the cadence of a well-versed clairvoyant. "We've extended our work into digital forensics."

"Our expansion has allowed us to free up time when we need it," Morgan added. "Like now."

His presence, as much as Finn's, radiated a heat, an entity all its own that curled around her spirit, drawing her out of her shell to explore the unpredictable ground between them. Details of their work floated through the inner landscape of her consciousness, heard but only vaguely comprehended.

"We've never hurt you, Abby. We never will. And you have to know by now that we'll walk with you every step of this journey. Tell us about your life—not just as it is now, but what you want it to become. We want to help." Few men embodied the strength Finn radiated, as if he could shake up life's events and rearrange them to his preference.

They were obliquely asking permission to delve deeper than the surface of her life.

Mere words could never convey the bizarre turn her path had taken. Overnight, everything had become unfamiliar with no comfort or safety. Every shadow was suspect, every man a potential lowlife from hell. The simplest activity, an innocent conversation, took on a new dimension when she couldn't concentrate, couldn't sleep, and couldn't eat.

If she'd learned one thing from her ordeal, it was how to fake *normal*. Both Finn and Morgan would see through her façade, but she pasted a

smile on her face while recounting her first days after finding Galen. As the memories flowed, her smile felt genuine. It was the closest she'd come to feeling relaxed in two years.

Both men laughed when her stomach growled.

Morgan stood. "Let's go and get a bite to eat." He led them out after she secured her office.

Despite their size, Morgan and Finn's presence didn't eliminate the need to search the shadows and tree line for would-be stalkers. That habit would probably withstand the test of time. With a man by each side, she admired their tolerance when she paused, no comment or nonverbal impatience while she performed her instinctual safety checks.

"*He* has never been identified or caught." Her men would understand to whom she referred. Was her assailant concealing his presence in some other neighborhood, waiting for the right moment to destroy someone else's world?

Both men had paused beside her, Finn turning her to face him, letting her witness the depth of conviction in his gaze. "Abby, as God is my witness, we will keep you safe."

Doubt, shame, and insecurity, like the shadows reaching from the nearby copse of trees, yawned wide in an attempt to swallow her whole, yet over the past two years, hadn't she beaten them back, one illusion at a time? Tenacity from a growing well of determination allowed her to reach up, tentatively cup his stubbled jaw, and revel in his strength. "Thank you. Not because I want to depend on you—I don't. But to know that you have my back means more than you could know."

"We'll take my vehicle." Morgan opened the back of his SUV and ushered his dog, Lexus, out.

"He's well trained, considering he could've easily jumped out through the open window." Abby watched as Lexus and Galen sniffed each other in greeting.

"And you would expect something less?" And there was the brash self-assuredness which defined Finn's character.

The two canines were of even temperament, neither invading the other's space nor confronting their counterpart head-on. Galen sniffed a nearby bush, communicating her lack of challenge before Morgan motioned them to load up.

In guiding her to the front passenger seat, Finn was careful not to make physical contact, something he wouldn't have thought twice about before her living nightmare began.

“Thank you for respecting my space.” Earlier, in the office, she’d almost begged for his continued touch, the contact reverberating in her memories of their prior life. Since the attack, she’d protected her territory and appreciated his understanding even if she couldn’t sort her confusing emotions.

“We won’t touch you without your consent, and not even then if we think it might make you uncomfortable.” Morgan’s insight came as no surprise. As a Dom, he’d spent many hours observing her responses during their time together, altering his touch, his approach, his goal, depending on her reactions at any given moment.

Easy conversation filled the ride with quiet details of their expanding business, scuba diving, and biking. Time stood still for no one. The burning question she couldn’t bring herself to ask still lingered between them—who was their new submissive?

Chapter Three

The beachside café was one they'd enjoyed many times, albeit without canine companionship. Instead of sitting inside and admiring the view through the wall of windows, they enjoyed a table on the deck where they could listen to the waves' crash and retreat while watching surfers hot-dogging for the beach bunnies.

"It's good to see you relax a bit," Morgan commented.

"Anxiety's a funny thing. At one time, it was my constant companion, rarely released its grip unless fate deemed fit to throw me into an all-out panic attack. But not so much since I found Galen. Huskies don't usually come to one's mind when thinking of therapy dogs, but she makes a wonderful companion, so content, so calm, and so even-tempered." Only once had the dog growled, but no doubt her canine friend would protect her if necessary. Abby had been standing outside a grocery store when an arguing couple had raised their voices and had come too close. One look at the raised hackles and aggressive posture had silenced them as they quickly moved along.

Open-air dining used to be part of their normal routine since each shared an affinity with outdoor activities. Still, she caught their quick intakes of breath after she flinched from the male waiter standing too close. A suggestive throat clearing from Morgan and lifted brow from Finn sent the young man back three paces.

With their dinner served, a small act of defiance included a light wine, another step forward in her arduous journey. She'd forgone alcohol since her attack, yet now defied that ban, like capturing a lost piece of her soul and adding hope to the evening's menu. A little bit of liquid courage might help with the expected barrage of questions and accusations she deserved to hear.

"Um, guys..." Galen nudged her knee, sensing her trepidation.

"Abby, we're not going to interrogate you. You'll share with us whatever you're comfortable with disclosing at a time of your choosing. Eventually we'll have no secrets, but trust takes time. We have much to rebuild and must be patient." Morgan spoke with the same assurance that had melted her inhibitions when she'd first met the sexual dominant.

"You're assuming we'll pick up where we left off?" *Wait. They don't have a submissive?* Discussions with her counselor had centered around facing as much of her previous life as tolerable, then deciding on a future

path. Many of her conversations had detailed the loving and secure atmosphere of living with her two men. Step by painful step, she'd advanced, feeling alone, struggling to forge a future where she could love and be loved once again, her ultimate goal. With the understanding that they had certainly moved on, she'd found it difficult to even *think* about facing them.

"No. We can never go back." Finn's clenched fists relaxed as his gaze slid to a yellow beach flag warning of moderate surf and currents. "But we can move forward. Both Morgan and I have studied the aftermath of assault and spoken at length with victims, learning all we can in an effort to help you when you returned."

"You knew I'd return?" Her crab cakes captured the tasteless consistency of dissolving foam.

Morgan's eyebrows straightening to one line only increased the rate at which she picked at her food. Finn's ill-disguised smirk signaled the ridiculousness of her thoughts.

"We've been waiting, acquiring knowledge. And yeah, we knew you'd return...when you could." A long sigh escaped before Finn gave her *the look*. That half grin that declared him one step ahead of her, as always.

Just as in her past life with them, she fell into the mesmerizing tone, the unspoken command that led her to speak her mind. "Learning?"

"Yes. We've...studied the situation, determining ways to help when you came back to us." Finn's sad smile equaled an invisible caress, stroking her guilt until it swelled, choking her thoughts.

"How'd you know I would *ever* come back?" A slice of euphoria swept through her chest with the realization that her men had never stopped caring, never stopped planning for their future. At the same time, the invisible exhilaration subdivided her terrors, temporarily relegating them to another plane of existence where pain, fear, and shame couldn't smother her.

"Because we're the men who love you," Finn murmured.

"But you don't know me—not anymore." The two men she'd loved, the ones who'd encouraged her choice to go to vet school, were both family after a sort and had sat by her hospital bed with a combination of pain and fury etched in each line of their faces. Their gazes had filled her with undefined emotions still haunting her dreams with their lack of clarity. Many victims were charged in the court of public opinion and found guilty long before the pervert was caught, if in fact he was *ever* caught. But that was not what she'd witnessed in her men.

At the time, she'd done the only thing she could, emptied her trust fund and run from the hospital, the city, and everything she'd loved, all to start a new life in hopes of escaping her nightmare. She never outdistanced the horror, and had finally realized that the lingering remnants were seared with a heat so intense, they intertwined with her spirit and wouldn't release their grip without ripping her soul in half.

"You're still the same person, Abby, albeit with a few new twists. Which is why we'll take this slow. Baby steps." Morgan signaled the waiter for the check. "Abby, have you ever known either of us to lie or deceive you?"

Without hesitation, she answered, "No, never."

"Then come home with us tonight, no sex or reference to intimacy. We just want to talk this evening—in a quieter atmosphere more conducive to relaxation." Finn's sincerity rarely met refusal.

Abrielle's stomach tightened in response. How could she refuse a safe haven, if only for a while? On the other hand, their previous time together had entailed a fast-paced carnal life melded by common understanding and interests. "You didn't move on..."

"We couldn't, not without you. We can help you, sweetheart. Give it time. Give us a chance. Be as patient as we're prepared to be." Unpretentious concerning his own appearance, put Morgan on a lifeguard stand and bikini'd girls would line the beach as far as the eye could see. Yet instead of moving forward with his life and having any woman he desired, he'd waited for someone who was broken, who was damaged, and who didn't know if she could ever be with a man again. She'd never re-enter their previous lifestyle.

How could they have put their lives on hold for so long, not truly knowing if I'd come back?

"How'd you find me? I'd planned on meeting with you next week to give you both closure." *Along with myself.* Her thoughts returned to the finer point of how they'd moved up the meeting, already prepared to help her, like a time warp that sent her world spinning back to an era when they'd always anticipated her needs.

"We've always known where you've been, sweetheart." Morgan's soft confession, like his gaze failed to guard the guilt radiating from every pore.

Each of his words added extra weight to the lever pivoting on the fulcrum of her conscience. The thought of heaping her pain on their shoulders steeped her in shame, for they'd done nothing to deserve it.

“Closure for the past, yes. We all need that. We’ve bided our time until you took another step forward in life before making contact. We want to be part of your future in whatever way you’ll accept.” Finn went on to explain how they’d branched out in tech security, knowing where she was but never invading her personal space.

“We couldn’t accept the thought of you never coming back to us,” Morgan added.

The silence grew, evolving into a maelstrom of bewilderment, astonishment, and optimism.

“Considering your thoroughness, you probably know what brand of kibble I feed Galen.”

Finn just grinned. “The same food we give Lexus. We knew you’d do your homework and only feed the best. We got Lexus more for security for you when you returned, whereas Galen is your therapy.” Morgan adjusted his collar, the only outward sign of uncertainty.

A sanguine comfort emerged from her shadowed world in realizing she’d always had a security blanket of sorts, even if she hadn’t known about it. Finn’s computer skills had always been top shelf. Now he had put them to good use and helped move their lives ahead in gaining independence, instead of her approach, buckling under pressure and devolving into a frightened animal that skittered away at the slightest provocation. Through his own trials, he’d earned his rite of passage.

Neither man remarked when she pushed the rest of her food aside, unable to tolerate any more. They really had changed, respecting her need for control and tolerances in moderating her life.

“We’ll drop Finn off to collect your car so it’s not sitting at the office overnight.” Morgan stood and held out his hand, waiting patiently. “Tell me or give me a sign that you don’t feel safe and I’ll back off.”

She could either reject the offer and remain secluded in her hellish world of shadows and anxiety, or accept Morgan’s strength and plunge forward with them by her side. Desperation for an ordinary life narrowed the choices in her mind one path at a time, each trail taken by other victims to an uncertain cusp. He was giving her a choice, not demanding, just waiting.

The warmth of his fingers spread to strengthen each muscle fiber in a way known only between lovers. His dominance, though a part of him, didn’t instill fear or force a retreat. It was more of a comfort to know his strength would protect her at all costs. She should never have run. On the other hand, could she step back into a relationship, albeit a different

type? Would they accept that? The concept was something her counselor had encouraged her to explore or at least consider, even if it was nonsexual. She wasn't prepared for old longings to sweep her away.

The thought of someone, anyone, seeing her scars—much less touching them—twisted her mind with doubt. These men had known a self-assured woman who'd made her own decisions and then pursued what she wanted, not a girl who surveyed and suspected every shadow of concealing the devil incarnate.

With a hand at her waist, Morgan guided her through the clematis-covered archway toward their vehicle. Flashbacks of their time together allowed an intertwining of fingers after Finn stepped up and reached for her hand, again stopping short of contact. She'd closed the distance.

"If only I'd have listened to you and called a cab that night." Tears blurred her vision to the point she stumbled on the gravel parking lot when memories assaulted her hard-won equanimity. Not surprising, an arm under each elbow lifted her up and turned her sideways until she was sandwiched between her two men, just the way she'd loved, before, in another lifetime. Each moved inward until she gazed directly into Morgan's eyes and felt Finn pressing against her back.

Instead of panic, excitement coursed through her veins, thawing the long-frozen parts she'd determined useless. Neither touched her sexually. "You're surrounding me." A glance around the darkened lot revealed no one else present.

"We're protecting you." Finn's breath on her neck summoned a series of heated recollections to sift through her mind as his exhalation stirred the fine hair on her nape.

On the heel of those memories, a small thread of anxiety coiled in her chest, gaining momentum, winding its way around her heart and squeezing her lungs until her breath caught, choked on a wad of flashbacks, vivid in horrendous detail.

Just like that night.

Instantly, her men backed up, yet the cool summer breeze bearing the spicy scent of gardenias failed to stop the rising sense of terror. "I c-can't breathe. I can't breathe..." Panic lanced through her chest so quickly she couldn't focus. The voice that failed to scream so long ago now strangled on a sob. Hoarse, desperate pants failed to draw in air while the tingling around her mouth spread and that familiar dizzy, fuzzy feeling invaded her mind.

"Look at me, Abby." Morgan placed his hand on her shoulders, willing

her to meet his gaze. "It's not us or this place that's threatening you. It's the thought. Breathe with me. Watch me...we can do this together."

"Exhale first, Abrielle. You can gain control." Finn placed one hand on her belly and the other on her breastbone. "Your chest muscles are too tight. You have to let air out before you can breathe in."

Sounds dimmed. Shallow breaths alternated with choking sobs, her entire body shaking. Words made little sense; numbness around her mouth joined forces with the tingling in her limbs to heighten her terror. Still, something in Morgan's gaze refused to let her look away. Despite the alarm ripping through her mind, her body followed Morgan's lead, matching him breath for breath while Finn's touch lent a semblance of stability.

Within minutes, white noise separated into discernable voices again with nothing but praise and encouragement.

"M-my chest h-hurts."

"Because your muscles are too tense. Watch my hands, sweetheart. Close your mouth and inhale by pushing your stomach out. That pulls air in. Good girl. Now open your mouth and exhale."

She knew this tactic, had taught it. Teaching and doing were two different things when mind-numbing terror sunk its talons deep into her soul. After the initial strings of coherent thought disrupted the obstruction preventing intelligible sounds, tears of humiliation trailed her cheeks. "I-I'm so sorry. I sh-shouldn't have come. Please take me back to my car."

"First of all, no. Not just yet." Morgan cupped her cheek, refusing to let her hide. "You're not going to avoid situations just because they make you anxious. We're going to face them, together. If you still wish to leave, we'll see you home."

Here was the man she knew and had never stopped loving.

Finn stepped to her side. "You did well, sweetheart. You got through it, just as we'll continue to do until you've conquered all your triggers."

Morgan picked up the thread. "You've taken the first step. We've waited until you were ready. Now that you are, we'll continue. What you're feeling is scary, but it's not dangerous."

"Wait until you've regained your equilibrium and think this through, sweetheart." Finn's fingers trailed small circles up and down the back of her arm.

As if willing his courage and vitality to surround and shield her, Morgan continued, "Don't stop, Abby. Concentrate on slow, deep breaths."

"Good girl. You're doing very well." Old inclinations and obsessions filled

her with the need to please and obey Morgan as much as she needed to become whole. She'd thought herself ready, even dreamed of feeling their warmth cocooning her. She'd accomplished the prerequisite steps to meeting them, yet now her subconscious rebelled? *Why? Am I doomed to a future of fear and loneliness?* If she couldn't feel safe with these men, she had no hope of any type of relationship with anyone at any time.

Minutes passed in a vacuum of meaningless thoughts without granting the slightest glimpse of insight or sanity. As she became more aware of her surroundings, she realized she stood in the corner of the lot beside their vehicle. Even if someone had entered or exited the restaurant, they wouldn't have seen her. Galen and Lexus stood beside the trio, whining until Abby brushed a shaking hand through her fur.

"I-I don't know what happened. I'm sorry. It's not what *he*..." Without hesitation, she wrapped her hands around Morgan's waist and hung on for dear life. These men who'd been her port in any storm still cared. The evidence lay as much in their actions as their words. She hadn't realized how much she still loved and needed them.

"Abby, triggers can come from anywhere. A touch, sight, smell, memory, anything can take you back to that night. We'll learn and deal with them one by one." Morgan petted her hair while brushing kisses across the top of her head.

Chapter Four

Morgan had held her hand all the way home. Each mile driven yielded more words of encouragement and praise of her strength and determination. Why had she ever run away?

Entering the two-story colonial initially felt strange, as if someone else had lived as Morgan and Finn's submissive, enjoying, no eagerly anticipating the bondage, the sting of Morgan's crop or Finn's hand, and their ever-inventive games.

In stunned surprise, her gaze roamed over the furniture to the knickknacks she'd collected on their vacations, then the brightly colored throw pillows both men hated but tolerated because of her love of the crazy patterns and soft textures. Yesteryear's treasures now paled like washed-out dreams, dulled by the weight of her struggles but not forgotten.

She stood in the center of the great room staring through the tears weighing her lashes, gratitude choking her thoughts.

Without explanation, she locked gazes with Finn and asked, "Why?" He would understand.

"Because we've been waiting for you." With the grace of a predator and the gentleness of a cherished lover, Finn settled her on the sofa before each man took a seat beside her.

Lexus's name suited his size, yet the canine had instantly won her heart with his nuzzling and soft chuffing. He and Galen each pressed against her knees as she sat between her men.

"Bernese Mountain dogs are known for their loyalty and providing companionship," Finn murmured.

Leaning against Morgan's chest with his arms around her, she moaned when Finn lifted her legs and then removed her sandals to rub her feet and ankles. Her hum of appreciation encouraged him to continue. "I-I never thought I'd tolerate, much less enjoy, anyone touching me again." Her tongue twisted around the words as if they didn't belong in her world. In fact, it was heaven. No doubt existed concerning their desire to see her relaxed and content.

Her bottled-up need to socialize and connect on a personal level ruptured the armor that had kept everyone at arm's length for so long. Each man watched her intently, taking in every word, every sigh, smiling as her thoughts spilled forth, hesitantly at first, then randomly as they

came to mind.

Reminiscing over snorkeling and scuba diving, quiet evenings on the porch along with favorite movies, took her back to a place of safety and equanimity as if three fractured souls reunited, becoming one homogenous unit. Tentative plans to pursue aquatic activities animated a part of her life she'd thought long dead until the realization occurred—she'd have to wear a bathing suit and expose the scarred remnant of her attack.

"Hmm, I don't think I'd like that thought. What is it, sweetheart?" Finn momentarily stopped the massage, lending weight to his words.

"I don't look the same after..."

"Nothing remains the same, Abby," Morgan said. "Whatever you're afraid to show us won't affect us the way you fear. Trust me. We've never had issues in that department."

"We fell in love with your mind, your indomitable spirit, and your soul. Any scars you may carry, we'll consider a testament to your strength, your will to survive. But now, it's time to stretch those wings you consider singed, and fly. We'll help you soar." Finn continued to erode her futile attempts to remain secluded.

"I expected both of you to demand details and explanations..."

"No, Abby. You'll tell us when you're ready. We'll be here to listen. And—we'll remain platonic for as long as necessary. If this is to be the extent of our relationship, then that's what it'll be." Finn's remark held all the assurance of a man who stood by his word. A standard for both men.

"I-I can't talk about the rest of it yet, but since I know you both are wondering—I came back after my psychologist urged me to face my fears and take back more of my life. It took a lot to work up the nerve to contact you both."

"You've never had cause to fear us. Why hesitate?" Morgan asked.

"I didn't fear you...just the thought of your rejection kept me away."

"Well, sweetheart, consider us in your corner." Finn held his lower lip between his teeth, a gesture that usually meant he wanted to say more.

"And on that note, we have an idea. We want you to write a letter." Morgan rarely held back on a suggestion if it might help someone. His strong fingers penetrating the knots in her shoulder kept her calm when a tendril of doubt snaked through her thoughts to kindle that thread of ever-lurking anxiety.

"What kind of letter? To whom? I haven't been in touch with our old friends...And I've gone to the gym early enough to avoid others." With no

living family, to whom could her ex-Dom refer?

"The letter will be one you'll never have to send or even share with another living soul. You'll address it to your attacker, describing how you feel, what you've experienced, and the consequences of that night. Tell him what you'd want to do to him. After it's written, you can trash it, burn it, whatever you like. This is a new beginning." Morgan's strong fingers dug a little deeper as her muscles tensed with the horrific memories hovering in her thought's periphery.

"What's the purpose?" In helping others, she'd encouraged victims to take steps necessary to regain control over their lives. Facing their attacker in a courtroom or addressing them personally in a safe environment helped many women. All too frequently, the rapist wasn't known or couldn't be found. Of all the treatment modalities discussed, she'd never thought to simply write a letter in hopes of excising her inner demons.

"Consider it a biopsy, a purging of poison clogging your system." Finn continued his ministrations as he spoke, obviously unaware of the disparity he was producing in her emotions.

Heat from both Finn and Morgan's bodies warmed parts she hadn't expected would ever thaw. Her emotions, polarized by memories of her beloved men and the hatred of a stranger, churned her gut to a new level of raw.

Old patterns were difficult to change. She valued and wanted their strength over her hate, anger, and fear, but her subconscious waited in the wings, ever mindful for the right time to strike. "What if I wanted to purge the toxic crap with, um, exercise?" She let the suggestive tone convey her meaning, anything to put off delving into a night of horrors. Yet her inner voice dictated it a dangerous path she shouldn't yet tread.

"Not tonight, Abby. We have to walk before we can run. Tonight, you write a letter if you want to move forward. We have a long road ahead of us. If you don't feel able to do this yet, that's okay. We'll wait until you can."

Not one to be denied, Finn placed a pen and pad of paper in her lap. Obviously, they'd thought this out ahead of time. "Tell me if it's too soon."

Within the refuge of Morgan's arms and Finn's acceptance, she picked up the pen. "I don't know how to start. There are chunks of time, memory, missing." *Things my conscious mind isn't ready to deal with yet.*

Morgan's soft breath on her cheek couldn't grant her immunity from self-recriminations, her stupidity of walking alone at night. Self-defense

classes had been of little help when her body had frozen in terror.

“Start with leaving work, if you like. Write what you know.” Finn’s silk-and-gravel voice both soothed her inner demons and provoked the horrendous images coming to mind.

Ripping the virtual bandage holding her emotions in check released a flood of soul-wrenching flashbacks, the sudden fear in a gloomy, foreboding parking lot, fumbling with her mace, the rush of footsteps approaching. A vague sense of riding in a vehicle, panic when someone belted a restrictive strap across her chest and another over her legs. A warm blanket, soothing voices, and red flashing lights reflecting off glass. A bright light first in one eye, then the other. Then awakening in the hospital bed, the smell of astringent stinging her nostrils.

A nurse had spoken calmly, explaining that she’d recover. And the pain, a razor’s edge of pain sweeping across her breast, mixed with confusion and disorientation. Her arm was in a cast, a rib broken. Bruises marred her skin. Over her right breast, a bulky bandage covered fifteen stitches. Later she’d learn they were initials carved into her skin, a tangible recording of her epic fall.

The greatest damage couldn’t be discarded, sewn shut, cleaned, or restored. Self-worth, privacy, energy, and confidence were stripped in a matter of hours since there wasn’t enough space in her mind to reconcile the horrors of the night with hope for the future. The replacements, slimy tokens, now existed as a major part of her psyche, eclipsing the inner light once an integral element of her worldview.

The next day, she had run, yet never outdistanced the horror, isolation, or stark terror that had become her life. She’d avoided all contact with people, lost the ability to enjoy a simple meal, and couldn’t sleep at night. Her self-imposed new schedule included reading at night and waiting until daybreak to lie down and intermittently doze.

For months, she’d refused to seek help, living in a reportedly secure apartment complex. Without television, newspapers, and little contact with her neighbors, her life spiraled to a narrow focus of watchful trepidation. “There were many days at a time when I wouldn’t speak to anyone.” Her well of tears was endless, inflaming her eyelids to obscure her vision, which instilled more fear.

“One evening, I heard a woman’s scream and called the police. I don’t know—something just snapped. That night I called a rape crisis center and ended up talking most of the night. The next day, I called again. Then again on the next. Finally, I sought the help of a psychologist.”

Memories gritted out in a numb awareness as she relived those horrific nights, recording grisly details in black and white, laying bare her weaknesses, and knowing she'd burn the letter. Unveiling the invisible monsters enhanced the tactile definition of each word, each aspect of her life that some worthless bastard had ripped to shreds. "It was months before I could sleep at night, then another year before I could sleep without a light burning bright in the bedroom. I still have several nightlights strategically placed, and I still occasionally wake up at two a.m. and have to take a shower yet never seem to scrape away the filth." A certain detached lucidity allowed her to take a cleansing breath without choking on the memories.

"Gradually, I was able to tolerate more food, in small frequent meals. I gained a little of my weight back." Locking gazes with Morgan, she willed him to understand her plight. "It was like fate turned off the lights, dumped me into another world and whispered, 'Screw you'."

Paranoia had become her live-in companion.

"I'd been so happy that night when I walked out of the lab. I'd already finalized my plan to apply to Raleigh's veterinary school. I just wanted to breathe in the fresh air, like it was a whole new world that had opened up just for me and—and anything was possible. I wanted to talk about our plans to move to a big house in the country where we could have dogs and maybe horses."

Finn leaned back to reach into the end table drawer, extracting a sheath of papers. "These are obviously outdated, so we can start a fresh search when you're ready."

Fresh tears spiked her lashes as she recognized he held real estate listings. "Always a step ahead of me."

Morgan wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Sweetheart, we've been ready to make the move. Just waiting for you. But you're stalling, Abby."

"My letter writing skills suck, big time." Abby sniffled and wiped her nose on the handkerchief Finn placed in her hand.

After discussing the framework of what she'd say to her assailant if given a safe opportunity, scathing words poured from her deep well of pain, giving new and abhorrent life to the written word where fear, shame, and broken dreams, along with her inability to function as a normal human being took form. From the safety of Morgan's arms, she described what she'd like to do to the bastard that had ripped her life apart. In her heart, she didn't have it in her. It wasn't who she'd been and wasn't who she was now. *Is it?*

Anger gave way to tears, and her men took turns ensuring a safe haven within their arms. When her sobs and hiccups refused to expel the filth within, when her broken whimpers subsided, she relayed what details she remembered of that nightmare from hell. She hadn't intended to do so, but it poured out, an unstoppable verbal avalanche of pain.

Instead of condemnation or any host of negative projections, each man conveyed sincerity in his gentle touch and words of reassurance. In all her sessions of working with a therapist, she hadn't accomplished a fraction of what she'd done in this one night. Though in the back of her mind, she realized the catharsis was possible because and only because of the groundwork laid in the doctor's office, one horrid hour at a time.

The one thing she lacked the courage to reveal, her darkest secret, existed as a failsafe in the event she was ultimately defeated by life's burden. A small bottle promising eternal oblivion nestled in a dark corner of her purse and was ever present in her mind.

How many times had she emptied the contents into her hand and thought, *This would end my pain*, only to place them back in the bottle? Those hours in the middle of the night where she'd prayed sleep wouldn't take away her ability to remain vigilant, exhaustion had made her sick in mind and body. As time marched on, oblivious to her plight, she'd handled those pills less often but could never evict their presence from her thoughts or gain the strength to flush them down the toilet.

The vessel of hate and bitterness within her emptied, albeit temporarily, leaving her drained and desolate. She knew with each sunrise it would fill once more from the inexhaustible stockpile of doubt and insecurity. Soothing murmurs and gentle strokes on her arms and lower legs temporarily subdued the rest of her inner demons.

Sleep came in the form of a hollow, barren reservoir, which signified a step up in her world of nightmares both waking and unconscious. Somewhere in the wee hours of the morning, she woke to Morgan carrying her to bed, then nestling her under the covers while he and Finn lay on top, snuggling but not restricting.

Bright morning sunshine brought another positive change. Upon awakening, instead of the instant, guarded deliberation that usually haunted her risings, she woke to Morgan stroking her back and Finn rubbing her arms, the combination allowing her fertile imagination to deny the fatalism consuming her for two long years.

"I remember Saturday mornings like this, except you two are overdressed." Her attempt to unbutton Finn's shirt ended with him taking both her hands in one meaty paw and confining them against his chest. All the while, he watched her intently. That was all she'd intended—initiate a physical contact, positive and warm.

"You're waiting for me to freak out because you're holding my hands. I'm not going to, you know. Last night at the restaurant was a...I don't know, something that hasn't happened in a long time."

"Regardless, sweetheart. It's going to be a while before we venture into that territory again." Finn stroking his thumb over her knuckles ignited more than friendly warmth before he released her.

"The next few weeks will entail a lot of conversations and little else, except for copious amounts of cuddling," Morgan murmured from behind her, his warm breath stirring sensations she'd thought long dead. "We've arranged our schedules at the office so that one of us can be with you when you're not at the center," he added.

"I'm glad you didn't sign a year's lease on the house where you've been staying." Finn's smile widened after his feather-light touch over her lips produced a groan.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. We're gonna spend the day moving you home, where you belong." Finn's smile held a trace of uncertainty. A first.

"As long as you're okay with it." Morgan's touch, though sensual, never roamed to where she wanted, where she needed. "We'll remain platonic until we feel you're ready for the next step. If you decide this is no longer what you want, we'll help you relocate."

She'd long believed that physical contact would initiate a waking nightmare, but she was wrong. Instead, he rekindled a need for more, to see where it would go and how much she could accept. She truly was—ready for the next step. *Everyone heals at their own pace.*

Nothing had ever felt like home more than being with her two loves. The fact that they'd waited for her, giving her time to regroup, spoke of the depth of their feelings. How could she deny them all what she desperately wanted?

Since her cottage had come furnished, there wouldn't be much to move. A Spartan lifestyle meant she could flee on a second's notice.

Despite this spacious home's comfortable and familiar surroundings, insecurities insulated her like a layer of steel bubble wrap. In conversations with her therapist and other survivors, years might pass

before she could walk inside without immediately checking doors, windows, and closets, her long-standing ritual. If they moved to a new home, would that feel different to her? Would she still wake up at two a.m. with the compulsion to scour her skin until raw? The idea of a new and fresh start *felt* like the next step.

The following days passed just as decreed—quiet evenings, long walks, and easy conversations. Except for driving to the center, she was never alone, nor did she initially care to be. Even then, she knew Finn would check on her through the GPS on her cell. Nightmares occasionally haunted her sleep, but each time—her men offered comfort and gentle caresses, talking her through the horrors until she drifted off to sleep again, safe and secure.

With new volunteers and a more experienced counselor stepping up as staff manager, she had more time for herself, for life. Days began to flow into a routine where Finn jogged with her in the mornings, and Morgan went with her to the gym.

En route to work two days prior, a panic attack had taken her by surprise. The black hoodie on a jogger reminded her of that fateful night, and that the healing path never mimicked a straight, sleek line. Her vulnerable days were not a distant memory. She'd pulled her vehicle to the curb to regain control while going through the steps to regulate her breathing and focus. Sparse traffic had prevented commuters from witnessing her humiliation, a small consolation when she found herself taking two steps forward and one step back. Still it was an improvement over prior attempts to regain her sanity.

Once she'd reached the center and called Finn, they'd talked through the experience. Minutes later, he'd appeared by her side, ever assessing, keeping her company until she'd insisted he go.

In time, she began to realize they had as much difficulty in allowing her *alone time* as she used to cherish it. Only through many conversations and promising to take both dogs did she gain time to sift through her thoughts while walking alone on the beach during early afternoons. She still wasn't ready to face her old friends.

Chapter Five

"I'd forgotten how much I love the beach and our strolls." Abrielle and Finn laughed as Lexus and Galen padded into the house and plopped down at her feet. Each night they'd taken a long walk, enjoying the scent of the sea, discussing everything from their work to the *must-haves* in a new home. The past week, she'd enjoyed speaking with other beachcombers collecting shells or just out for an evening constitutional.

"What a wonderful day. The furbabies had a great time, too." She'd taken so many routine things for granted for so long, not merely the activities they'd enjoyed together, but things like sleeping through the night, marveling over a beautiful sunset, taking a relaxed breath and not being fearful of what lurked in the shadows.

Morgan brushed a lock of hair behind her ear as he kissed her forehead. "Yeah, I'd say so. Lexus usually comes back in and settles for the night."

Finn completed the sandwich from behind, his body heat seeping through her pores. "Are you going to let your hair grow out?"

"I didn't think I ever would. *He* used my ponytail..." She couldn't finish.

"Complete the thought, sweetheart. And know that we'd never use it to control you." Finn rubbed her shoulders in soothing gestures.

"He used it...That's why I've kept it cropped. But now, I don't know. I think I'd like to grow it out again. These past few weeks have made me re-evaluate a lot of things in my life."

"Either way is fine with us. I never thought I'd like it short, but it looks great," Morgan added.

"Letting it grow out feels a little defiant in a way. Like I'm taking another part of my life back."

"Good for you, sweetheart. Good for you." Finn led them to the kitchen. "How about a nightcap?" From the liquor cabinet, he removed a bottle of cognac.

"I'd love one." Another sliver of defiance. "You know, it's the first time I've been outside at night and not jumped at every shadow and noise."

"We noticed, sweetheart. Baby steps." Finn regarded her for several heartbeats, evaluating the situation with that fierce intensity that stole her breath before handing her a small snifter of golden liquid. He had a knack of looking at her as if he could delve inside and extract her worst fears, examine them, and offer a different perspective.

"If my steps get any smaller, I won't be moving forward at all. Did you notice that I no longer run around checking the locks and peeking under the beds?"

"We noticed, Abby." Morgan's infuriating grin matched the seductive heat in his gaze. His prow forward ended with them nearly chest to chest. The feather-light glide of his fingertips over the sensitive curve of her lips induced a trembling that spread throughout her body.

Denying herself the visual impressions derived from closing her eyes heightened the sensations coiling in her lower abdomen. The man was an absolute demon when it came to tantalizing her with their mutual attraction. A deep inhale brought his spicy aftershave mixed with his natural scent to stir a longing that made her ache.

"Now, I sleep through the night..."

"Yep. We've seen that, too," Finn admitted.

Frustration with their platonic petting and tactile double entendres neared the peak of her endurance. The results she desired would require a bit of scheming, but it was time to move forward. She'd always known how to push them to the edge of restraint, evident in heavy sighs, strained voices, and dark gazes that screamed lust.

For now, she would plant the seed in their minds to avoid concern when, in a few weeks, she'd set them on their respective ears. She intended to knock their socks off.

"Morgan, it's been five weeks..."

"Not gonna happen, Abby. Not yet." He purred the words, raw, hungry sensations, a sensual threat she'd enjoy while insulated within their world.

"When we discussed the possibility of a vanilla relationship..." Considering the good fortune she'd enjoyed since returning, she was still afraid to voice her ultimate goal.

"Abby, we've known for two years that life will never go back. We decided back then, that when you returned, if you still wanted us as lovers, it would be without any BDSM elements—ever."

Last night proved the most torturous since moving back, enduring their sensual yet incomplete petting. In her heart, she'd finally come home. As many times as she'd told victims that their lives could never go back, and she knew this to be true, it didn't mean life wouldn't get better...much better.

Today had included another afternoon where introspection provided insight and fortified her resolve. Tonight, she'd not just physically demonstrate the obvious, she'd tip the scales to where they could no longer withhold the pleasure that would enfold them all in a world of bliss. She'd serve a smorgasbord of aphrodisiacs tailored to induce blue ball status before serving up the coup de grace, wrapped in a virtual bow from which neither could walk away.

Every time her men touched her with the lightest of strokes and the heat of an unquenchable flame, lust became a palpable thing, pounding through her veins, growling, clawing at her belly. Day after day, week after week, her feelings, threaded with hurricane-force desire, had swelled from the spark that wouldn't die, from emotions much deeper, stronger, and eternal. How else could she evolve from a frightened rabbit to a weak-kneed ball of sensual torment in the presence of her men? Two months of chaste kisses and unfulfilled needs would come to an end.

Reviewing her strategy as she cleared the table of dinner dishes, she detected no holes in her plan. Thanks to her clothes having remained in the spare room, she owned an assortment of sexy lingerie from which to choose. The fact that she'd lost weight wouldn't matter once the lace hit the floor.

Morgan helped load the dishwasher as Finn wiped the table.

"I want what we used to have."

"Life can never go back, sweetheart. Only forward." Finn approached her from behind, then lightly wrapped his arms around her waist and snuggled her against his chest.

"See, I don't panic when you hold me tight. Do you guys—not want me the same way..." To feel Finn's gentle touch surfing under her t-shirt and skimming up her belly brought the familiar rush of warmth. As usual, he stopped short of her breast, but not before twisting his hips, allowing her to feel the hard length of heat through his trousers.

"A physical response isn't what I'm talking about," Abby murmured.

Morgan's narrowed gaze spoke volumes. "Jesus, Abby, do you have any idea how much we need you?" His hard body pressed her from the front. "I go to bed and sport a hard-on every night, all night. Hell, sometimes I think I'll explode." Sapphire-blue eyes darkening with desire caused her belly to clench with need.

"I see the curve of your neck joining that sweet spot of your shoulder and I want you." Finn pressed himself more firmly to her back. "The little grin that tightens your mouth on a low moan makes me harder than a

bullet. Hell, parts of me are raw, waiting until we know you're ready."

"I've missed our sandwiches...I've missed you both so much."

"We're right here, sweetheart. Not going anywhere," Finn whispered in her ear. "There's not a moment in any day that I don't ache to hold you, to push deep inside the haven of your body and watch you come apart in my arms."

"I know you've been testing me. Holding my hands, my body certain ways, to see if I'd react. And I trust you to help me if I do freak out...But I haven't."

"Soon, Abby. Soon." Morgan's growl could've been a promise or a threat.

It didn't matter. She trusted them.

Morgan's grin against her scalp stirred her hair before he cupped her cheeks, holding her still, their gazes locked, breaths mingled. She whimpered. The trail of kisses leading to her jaw precipitated the jackhammer of her heart against her ribs. Her panting breaths brushed a lock of silky, black hair across his temple before he nibbled at her lips with a softness and hunger that was madness, heat flowing from the twining of their tongues, the exploration of her mouth as if she nourished his soul.

Finn's weightless touch skated under her t-shirt and up her flanks before the barely-there caress whispered along the underside of her lace-clad breasts. Her whimper enlivened his animated craving. After folding down the cups, his deft fingers molded her breasts, plucking, rolling, and flicking the bud until every sensation centered on those sensitized, hardened peaks. The slow glide around her areola drove her to a new height of twisting, aching, unfulfilled hunger.

The low groan filling the room with expectant exhilaration purred from her own throat. "Finally." Weakening legs weren't a problem as both Morgan and Finn pressed in against her, always supportive. She *wanted*. This promise, this all-encompassing bond that was ripped from her with such cruel indifference, but now surrounded her, encased in a virtual lair of all-encompassing love.

"Hmm, I think that's enough for now. Don't you agree, Finn?" Devilment danced in Morgan's gaze even as his fingers, which could make her see stars, wove through her hair in arousing strokes, dragging each tingling little shock across her flesh until she shivered.

Wait. Enough of what? "But we just started..."

Finn readjusted her bra before he let his fingers graze down her flanks,

lingering at her waist, and then patted her ass.

Her thin cry from denied fulfillment deepened into a growl of frustration.

Morgan smiled with that lazy, decadent confidence that set him apart from any other man.

Finn kissed her neck. "Bedtime, pet. Off you go."

Once again, they'd worked her to a fevered pitch of need and then denied them all release. Just like every other time they teased her, their own need evident in the hard lengths pressing against her belly and ass. At what point would they capitulate?

The bathroom tile felt cool under her bare feet. Her reflection in the bathroom mirror, tempered with an all-consuming hunger roiling through her veins, revealed color in her cheeks that neither of her men would've missed. They'd intentionally ramped her to the edge of paradise, then sent her off to prepare for bed. Why? They'd never been mean-spirited. It wasn't in either of their natures.

Dressed in a black lace baby doll she hoped to not wear for long, thick tendrils of doubt floated around her, creating merciless images of rejection snarling in her mind. There'd been no mistaking either man's erection just minutes ago, but like every other time they had taken her to the edge, they'd backed off.

The lace's deep V exposed scars that she'd hidden for two years. What would her men think of her now? Angry red lines long since faded to thin white reminders were carved in the fabric of her life, her soul, the salute to her arrogance, humiliation, and weakness. She was not the woman they'd known.

She no longer considered herself fragile, but wondered if their feelings would change with the visual reminder. *Knowing something happened and seeing the damage done are two different things.*

Would they forever treat her like a filament of glass that might break in a strong breeze? It was not where she willed her mind to go, but thinking about their previous life, the one including impact play, brought with it a sliver of fear. They'd assured her that the BDSM aspects of their lives would never resurface and that it didn't matter. It hadn't been what their relationship was about. She'd never known either to break their word or try to deceive.

They'd spoken only once about finding the bastard who'd ripped their lives apart, and then tabled the conversation. Yet Morgan and Finn weren't the type to give up. No doubt they were searching, given the information from when she'd sobbed out the sketchy outline of that

horrific night.

Rustling from beyond her door signaled their presence in the bedroom. As if by unspoken agreement, they'd always been on the bed before her, letting her advance at her own pace. They'd also maintained the spare bedroom with all her belongings, indicating she had a choice. *No, I choose my men.*

This is ridiculous. I'm ready to blow their minds, among other parts.

Opening the door wide gave her a priceless view to preserve forefront in her mind. Both men stopped in their tracks. Morgan fumbled with the sheets on the bed while Finn dropped one of her shoes as he headed toward the closet.

"New method of catching flies, fellas?" Adding a little bit of sass would've earned her a punishment in their past relationship. Testing her limits had always been her nature.

"Oh look, Finn. Our little woman is trying to push us...Abby, even though we've permanently tabled impact play, you know that comment is going to cost you, right?" Morgan's stalk brought countless memories of laughter and inane pleasure where nothing mattered but the next kiss, the next caress, and the next stroke.

"Maybe she doesn't remember how we enjoy pushing back..." Finn's gaze narrowed as it raked her from head to toe, heating all the parts she wanted him to touch.

Her entire body quivered as Morgan took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Speak your mind, pet."

"Better than being treated like china."

"I know just the answer, Morgan. What do you think? Believe she's ready?" Finn circled behind, his voice husky and confident, melting the last of her hesitation with the intent outlined in his tone, his prowling steps, and his breath that became harsher, brushing against her in such a way that evicted anything other than desire.

"Are you certain you feel ready, pet?" Morgan smoothed his fingers down her arms, sparking an intensity of need she couldn't fathom while his breath bathed her neck in its warmth. "At any point, if you want us to stop, just say so. Otherwise, let's begin."

"Okay. I..." She didn't want to ruin the moment with remembering how her old *safe word* couldn't stop her attack two years ago.

"Stop that thought right there, pet. You are not going to turn control of this experience over to the monsters in your imagination." Morgan's reproach snapped her thoughts to the present.

They didn't give her time to linger.

"Any problem with taking requests?" Finn urged her sideways, then guided her to lie on the bed.

She shook her head. Her breath hitched, her mind hooked on the realization that they'd finally come to their senses and knew that she wanted this, wanted them, with all her heart.

"Face up and spread your legs, sweetheart. You're going to watch everything we do." The lazy grin hiking one corner of Finn's mouth spoke of a long night ahead full of sensual pleasure.

"No problem at all. I trust you." During the past weeks, they'd each secured her hands within their own, watching for signs of distress. In the back of her mind, she knew they'd been testing her.

"Tonight is about staying in the moment...with a twist." Morgan shed his t-shirt and tossed it on the chair. The vision of solid planes and angles could distract anyone for hours.

"Twist?" Words tangled in her mind and refused any semblance of order. "You knew—about this—tonight?"

"Did you think we *wouldn't* know what you were planning?" Finn's smile held the infuriating knowledge of un-divulged secrets. Without preamble, he slipped out of his shirt, revealing a torso that could make the most chaste woman salivate over sculpted muscles and the fine smattering of golden hair.

"You're going to recite different aspects of the periodic table. Hence, you'll *not* be able to direct your thoughts where we don't want them to go. There's still too much crap rolling around in that beautiful mind." The bed gave under Morgan's weight as he knelt between her thighs, nudging them wider, making her vulnerable in a way that made her beg for more.

Knowing they wouldn't indulge in any impact play, ever, she suddenly realized their diabolical minds had pulled something worse from their collective hats. Tonight would involve delayed orgasms. "Oh God."

"No, pet. Just two guys bent on ensuring your pleasure. Now—you'll spell out each of the alkaline earth metals on the periodic table before you come." Finn sat beside her before drawing them up over her head, his gaze calculating, evaluating. "Eyes open, pet, either on me or Morgan. Hang on to the headboard's spindles. If you let go, we stop. It'll give you something else on which to focus."

"For each wrong answer, your orgasm will be delayed three minutes." Morgan nudged her gaping jaw shut with one finger. "Yes, pet, we remember the lineup of the periodic table."

“Three minutes is an awfully long time when edging...” Without further hesitation, she began, “Beryllium, b—e—r...”

Morgan’s soothing caress mapped her body, one agonizing inch at a time, just as he’d done years ago, first over the lace of her lingerie, then untying the satin bow to let it float to the side and roaming underneath. “More beautiful than I remembered.” Her chest tightened when his gaze settled on her scar. His concerned frown mixed with guilt, which churned in her belly and halted the breath she so desperately needed. Gently, with his eyes holding her frozen like a relic suspended in its glass prism, he leaned in and kissed the slightly puckered line. “A badge of courage.”

Finn’s light tap on her forehead rebooted her mind. The heat of his touch then circled her ear, grazed the sensitized flesh of her throat, and kindled the fire forming in her breasts. Morgan’s fingers traced around the tightened peak of her breast, eliciting a whimper through lips slammed shut, holding on to the sensations of silken fire spreading through her chest. Her heart beat harder, crashing against her ribcage as if trying to connect with Morgan directly.

“Calcium, c—a—l—” Her thoughts stuttered again when Morgan’s heat feathered down her belly and through her curls.

He readjusted himself to fit in the nook of her legs, the hard planes of his chest rubbing in just the right way to make her whimper. Shades of distant memories of their heated bodies driving her to a place where she couldn’t think, could only receive the sensual pleasure they inflicted, flooded her with an animal hunger that couldn’t be denied. The insidious warmth flickered into small flames that soon filled every fiber of her soul.

Each time her voice faltered, Finn lightly touched her forehead or temple. When she resumed her assignment, his hands kept busy, molding her breasts and plucking, rolling, flicking her nipples before leaning in to suckle. Everything they did, every touch, heated breath, sizzling kiss, took her back to a carefree time when nothing else mattered more than the next caress, the next stroke. They gave everything of themselves, transforming her to a creature driven for sensation and completion.

A teasing slide of Morgan’s fingers drawing a figure eight around her groin forced her hips to twist with a need only her men could fill. She tried to direct his touch where she needed it, but each time, he’d pull back. A thin cry escaped her lips when he finally circled her clit in heated bursts of tingling jolts.

Within minutes, her men’s focused attention saw her writhing out of

control. "Please, Morgan. It's been so long. I need to come."

Sliding farther down her body, Morgan nuzzled her briefly before hooking his hand under her calf and sliding first one leg then the other over his shoulders.

"Yes. And you've been good. Don't you think so, Finn?" The possessive gravel in his voice signaled the height of his own hunger.

"Absolutely. Though next time, she won't be allowed to come so quickly. We have all night." Finn brushed his parted lips across her nipples before soft, gentle licks teased the puckered flesh to painful points. The sensitized, swollen nubs hardened with the tip of his tongue flicking back and forth before moving to the other breast. When he pulled back, the shock of cool air arched her back in a plea for more.

Morgan leaned in to kiss her navel. Before she could process the sensations of his tongue rimming the indent, small nips down her belly produced a slight sting soothed by that incredible mouth. Erotically warm breath trailed the rough pad of his tongue to her folds, swelling, tightening with the need for release. Neither could compare to the volcanic heat radiating from her core, ever building, ever widening. His slow exhale blew a gentle heat to flame the fire as he cupped her ass and lifted. Without hesitation, he nuzzled her tight curls before she felt the magical heat of his tongue exploring her, reminding her the power they held over her was all for her pleasure.

Pressing her head into the pillow and arching her back was limited by Finn's ministrations and holding on the spindles. "Finn, Morgan, please."

Jagged bolts of electricity arced from Finn's nibbling at her breast to Morgan's teasing of her core. Yet enlightenment struck with the knowledge that she'd needed this connection to feel complete. Not just the sexual release but the intimacy of their touch, the freedom to revel in their joining on a spiritual level.

A tender retraction of the wishbone-shaped fold exposed her sensitized clit. Holding her open allowed Morgan's slow exhale to fire up the long-untouched nerve endings while a long, slow lick ended in lightly pinching the nub between his teeth. When his fingers circled her entrance, she begged, pleaded for him to fill her while he hovered as if absorbing the expectation of pleasure yet to come.

"Ahh, sweetheart. Soon." Morgan's caress ended with the barest of penetration before setting up a smooth, leisurely pace. Just enough for her body to register and clamp on to him as she tried to tilt her hips for more. The overwhelming need and emptiness inside grappled with and

tried to pull him in to fill her completely.

Her legs trembled with long-suppressed desire, ever tightening in need of the perfect release her men could give. Panting breaths drew shorter, her body clenching, over-sensitized to every touch, every breath, and every lick. Her words, her very thoughts were stolen, but her voice was given back in the form of cries that became screams with the invading rush of pleasure.

A gentle nip jettisoned the periodic table out of her mind in favor of the explosion taking place in her body. Every muscle seized in a pleasure so fierce and outside of her experience, her wordless scream echoed in the room.

Time ceased to matter as her sheath contracted rhythmically, her hips writhing with the intensity of Morgan's shallow and gentle probing. The combined efforts with Finn's increased pressure on her nipples brought her body to a shuddering, gasping haze of wonder where nothing existed outside the exquisite sensations wracking her body.

When coherent thought returned, it was to Finn's amused admonishment. "Well, look at that. She failed to finish the Noble gases before she climaxed. Guess that's another three-minute delay on her next orgasm."

"God, I've missed you guys so much." With the release of her hands came the freedom to twine her fingers in the silk of Finn's golden locks. Watching his eyes widen when she sifted through the fine smattering of chest hair, she mewled when he stopped her short of his happy trail.

"Please? I'm ready."

"Hmm, sweetheart, I know you feel you are. But tonight doesn't entail us removing our pants. Not yet." The bulge in his pants betrayed desires his mouth refused to voice.

"Not tonight, Abby." Morgan's growl barely registered before his head dipped between her legs again. His foresight saw him blocking her attempt to close her legs.

"Ah, I don't know if I can—so soon." Long-neglected body parts flared to a burning need with a simple flick of his tongue.

Within seconds, another burst of heat unfurled, circling outward from Morgan's overwhelming persistence. She could no more recite elements from the periodic table than stop the monstrous orgasm from ripping through her body. Arching of her back was contained with Finn's steady pressure on her belly.

She could do nothing but receive as pulses of electricity detonated an

explosion wiping her mind clear of the past, ejecting all thoughts so that she could just *feel*.

The rumbling growl from Finn's chest sent vibrations against her fingers, forcing a moan to bubble up her throat. He continued to feast on her breasts with the thoroughness and patience of a man thoroughly enjoying himself.

The floating sensation persisted as Morgan gentled the pressure, drawing out her pleasure. "So long..." Words became meaningless entities, for nothing could describe the gift they'd given her.

"We know, sweetheart. We know. We're going to take care of you," Finn murmured between kisses that trailed to her jaw before he took her mouth once again. "Let's give her a little break, Morgan, before I have my dessert." Finn smiled as his light touch feathered down her throat, his lips twisting with mischievous intent before plucking her nipple.

Wrapped in a blanket and sandwiched between her men brought a level of peace and contentment she couldn't remember ever achieving. Each dominant had spent hours fine-tuning her responses until she'd almost fainted. When they'd stopped the activities in favor of cuddling, she could only mumble her appreciation before sleep claimed her.

Chapter Six

Some dark and foreboding premonition cast a web of trepidation to ensnare her senses. Morgan had warned her to stay put until he arrived, then ordered her to take a cab when she told him she couldn't wait to get home. She had exciting news and didn't mind walking to the outer lot where she'd been forced to park earlier.

Fear sent its scaly tentacles to wrap each vertebra in its steely, cold grasp, impeding her attempt to move faster. She should've ditched her pigheaded determination and arrogance and listened to her Dom.

A darkness imbued with oily malevolence untainted by the merest touch of shrouded moonlight instilled a panic the likes of which she'd never endured. Why was she always the last to leave the lab?

The idyllic setting resonated peace of mind with the morning sunshine, but surrounded by trees at night, it engendered an entirely different mindset. Instinct saw her reaching for the mace she carried in her purse regardless of the lack of evidence to support her irrational apprehension.

The figurative rotary tool plunging into and scattering her thoughts descended to her throat but failed to dislodge the lump forming. The distant co-coo of an owl doomed her to dropping the mace.

"Don't bend over and pick it up. That's where the woman always gets it in the movies." Instead, she fished the keys out of her purse and fumbled with the fob to unlock the door. She'd retrieve the mace tomorrow.

The slight chirp coincided with a gust of air and soft steps rushing her from behind. Before she could turn, the prick of a needle pierced her neck. Rough hands forced her against the car as her world went black.

Abby fought against the strong arms holding her down. How could one person have so many hands? Though she tried to scream, her attempt ended with a gurgled sob. Fingers bit into her arms while her legs were secured under something heavy.

"Abby, dammit. Wake up." Distant words zeroed in on the part of her psyche that obeyed that tone. Morgan.

Confusion gave way to an insidious truth she could never escape. One hiccup, several sobs, then an explosion of grief brought back all the details of waking in an alley, naked and bound, while the razor edge of a knife cut into her breast. The metallic taste of terror remained in her mind, as when she'd woken up in the hospital bed, confused and in pain.

"Abby, relax your jaw. You're biting your lip." Finn's command.

The grasp holding her shoulders gentled, and she realized nothing restricted her leg movement. "Oh God, oh God. I remember. I remember."

"Sweetheart, you're safe." A faint trace of light dispersing predawn shadows revealed Finn's worried countenance.

Misery and heartache poured out with each tear and each choking sob despite both men insulating her from the outside world. Staring straight at the ceiling above her, she couldn't face either with the memory of evil's touch filling her mind.

"Abby?" Morgan's murmur held the tentative consistency so unlike his nature.

"No..." With the intent of curling into fetal position, she attempted to roll on her side. The nightmare no longer just clung to her thoughts; it invaded every aspect of her being. "It's never going to get better."

Finn prevented her from turning away, forcing her to remain vulnerable. "No, sweetheart, you don't need to consign everything you think and feel to some dark corner of your mind. You can talk to us. We're right here for you." Readjusting her position, Finn cradled her back against his chest, offering his warmth and protection.

Morgan's grazing touch wiped the tears from her eyes before caressing her cheek, all while whispering soft sounds of comfort.

In the next instant, she wrapped her arms around Morgan's neck and continued to sob against his chest.

"Yes, sweetheart, it will get better. Recovery is not a linear process. It's convoluted and sabotaged by our subconscious that continues to throw out landmines and set tripwires to nail you when you least expect it."

When her tears dried up to leave intermittent shudders and occasional hiccups, she asked, "Which is why the *no intercourse* last night?"

"Correct. We're not taking any chances." Finn kissed the crown of her head, rustling her hair.

"I'm okay now. I'm—sorry."

"Abby, tell us about your nightmare." Morgan's caress across her shoulders elicited a shiver.

"I-I don't want to go back there."

"Sweetheart, your subconscious will continue to replay the events your heart refuses to face. Bridge the gap, go there and defeat those monsters. We'll be right by your side," Morgan crooned against her hair.

Remnants of the dream dissipated under their controlled determination to leave a reality that was time to face. Each stroked her sensitive flesh in a nonsexual, supportive way to lend the strength she coveted. Her

stomach muscles were sore but quivered, not used to such activities for a long while.

"We have a way to go, sweetheart. We'll cuddle while we talk." Finn murmured against her ear.

"I remember. I—woke up in the alley...after he drugged me." Obscured aspects of her attack she'd hadn't recalled before now flooded her in horrific detail. Each flashback ravaged her mind, eviscerating that which her subconscious had tried desperately to hold back for so long. Whimpers morphed into sobs, then wails of helplessness and anger. Yet within their safety and shelter, she poured out every detail and every fear until virtual ground glass shredded her insides.

Through it all, they simply held and encouraged her to shed light on her deepest pain. Nothing could ever wash it clean, but she knew that time would lessen its grip on her soul.

"I'm sorry. It seems all I do around you guys is cry."

"That's probably because you've kept everything bottled up for so long." Finn raised her jaw with a gentle caress until their gazes met. "Don't worry about that. It's not the last time you'll cry, and you'll have more nightmares. But—we're here for you, Abrielle. Always." The promise rolled off his tongue with the assurance written in his gaze.

With tears spent and exhaustion taking its toll, she snuggled down and lay quietly while they nuzzled and petted, offering words of encouragement and promises of a brighter future.

Warmth from the brilliant morning sunshine and her men's cocooning effect created a familiar heat in her lower belly before she opened her eyes. Last night's catharsis had helped her in more ways than she could've imagined, her direction of life somehow clarified with the remembrance and purging the specifics of the attack. She realized she'd have more dark days ahead, but for the first time in two years, she found she could look forward with enthusiasm.

She let her fingers drift down the valley of corded muscles forming Finn's V until he caught her hands and held them snug. "Nuh-uh, sweetheart. Not yet."

"You know, those orgasms last night in quick succession were wonderful, and you'll never hear me complain..."

"But you want us to fill you," Morgan whispered as he pressed against her back.

“Yes. And I want to touch you and—”

“In time, sweetheart. In time. We don’t want to trigger a negative reaction. We’ll do this slowly.” Finn’s words warmed her as much as his thumb sliding over her knuckles. “We’ll get there, sweetheart. Be patient.”

“But...”

“No. And it’s time for breakfast, pet. Grab a shower and come out to the kitchen. No touching yourself, understand?” Morgan correctly read her intentions.

“Yes, but don’t think the nightmare that woke me will change the way I feel about you two.” They’d not only reawakened her libido, they’d driven it to unknown heights.

Unused muscles were sore, but she smiled when remembering their admonition. Not only would neither one bring her harm, they’d learned what they could to help in her recovery. They’d anticipated her needs *and* the possible reactions.

It felt like forever since she’d thoroughly relaxed in a long, hot shower and actually closed her eyes. Pampering herself with scented shampoos and body washes no longer seemed extravagant, but rather something to be enjoyed at leisure.

Because of their feelings for her, Morgan and Finn would never stop looking for the deviant that distorted their lives. Now, with the resources, skills and more details, they would find and dispense their own form of justice on her assailant. It was written in their gazes and something she’d have to address to protect *them* from breaking the law.

After stepping out, she took the time to style her hair and apply makeup, another treat she’d avoided for two years. She may never get to the point of wearing low-cut sweaters or a bikini, but then again...*one step at a time*.

Her grin widened when she entered the kitchen to find platters full of breakfast meats, eggs, and steaming hot pancakes. “Thanks, guys. You spoil me rotten.”

“Ah...but you always give back tenfold. Even when you don’t realize it.” Finn pressed against her back, wrapping his arms around her waist.

In the center of her placemat rested a sheath of papers, not real estate listings. With trembling fingers, she picked them up.

“An application to vet school?” Tears of gratitude brimmed her eyes.

“You can still volunteer at the center if you like. But it’s time you moved forward, Abby.” Morgan closed the distance and cupped her cheek. “If that’s a path you no longer want, then we’ll help you find a new one.”

Regardless of what turns her life took, she knew these two would always have her back. Yet to truly move forward, they could have no secrets.

“Morgan, Finn. I-I have something to give you. I know I should’ve been upfront with you from the beginning...I haven’t told you everything you’d want to know.” Padding over to the counter and digging into her purse, she extracted the small bottle she’d long ago designated as *the alternative*. She hadn’t opened the plastic container in months, but knew its contents by heart, the look and weight of each pill, so small yet so potent, their power to eliminate all pain, complete. Her knuckles turned white with the grip holding the bottle against her chest. If she turned around and surrendered her final solution, would she encounter disgust, or worse yet, pity?

Nothing in the room stirred. Even the dogs, sensing something important, remained still. Slowly, she pivoted and leaned back against the counter to steady her trembling legs. Maybe she could make them understand first. When her swirling emotions registered in their concerned expressions, they each took a step forward. If they touched her, she’d lose her nerve.

One hand held up, stayed them. “Please, no. I have to get this off my chest. Please don’t judge me. I know how you both feel on the subject, but I was in a very dark place for a very long time.”

Morgan tugged his lower lip between his teeth. Finn scrubbed a hand over his jaw. Neither spoke for a moment, guilt evident in their expressions.

“We’ve never judged you, Abby. Never. We never will. Though neither of us have endured your experiences, we’ll support any healthy decisions you make.” Morgan advanced to her left side, holding out his hand for her last secret.

Finn’s long strides closed the distance until he towered over her. “Sweetheart, it’s all right. Trust us.”

Her hand ached with the death grip maintained on her final recourse.

Finn brushed his knuckles along her cheek, then down her jaw. “Open up, sweetheart. Let us in. All the way.”

Morgan’s gentle touch on her fist likened to a great seal being broken. The epic cosmic disturbance depleted her last reserves, siphoning her resistance into the ether.

With tears spiking her lashes and trailing her cheeks, she sighed. “These were just in case...” Rotating her forearm, she opened her hand,

the bottle resting innocently in her palm. "I'm ready to give them up."

When Finn's deft fingers flipped off the cap and dumped them in his palm, Morgan plucked up the container and read the label. "Tylenol with codeine. This prescription is dated from before your attack. Why do you have these?"

"If—If it had become unbearable..."

Morgan dropped his chin to chest. Finn closed his eyes. The look of pain gracing their expressions broke her heart. In her mind, they were both blaming themselves for failing her. They never had.

"We've known, Abby. And we have a confession of our own." Morgan offered.

"I, um..." She couldn't look either one in the eye. Her gaze fell to the last resort, praying she hadn't made a mistake.

Wait. They're different!

Similar white pills would ease pain when taken in the correct dose. If taken all at once, pain would never be a problem again.

"Those pills...aren't right! They're supposed to have a letter and some numbers on one side. These don't." How many times had she held these in her palm, studying them, caressing them?

"Abby, from the time you moved back in with us, trusted us to take care of you—that's exactly what we've done. We lost you once. I couldn't survive that again," Morgan murmured. "We exchanged them."

The full range of her emotional spectrum flashed through her thoughts after stunned disbelief gave way to a simple understanding.

"Yes, sweetheart. We want you to come to us with your problems, not run away." Finn returned the pills to their bottle and capped them.

"You knew? All this time, you knew?"

"The fact you didn't know of the switch tells us you haven't looked at them since you've been here." Morgan turned her to face him, then pulled her in tight to his chest. "I hope you'll forgive us."

Finn stepped up from behind, brushing her hair aside to murmur against her neck. "Yes, Abrielle, we knew. We also knew we'd never make it if you left us again."

"I won't. I promise I'll stay. No matter what."

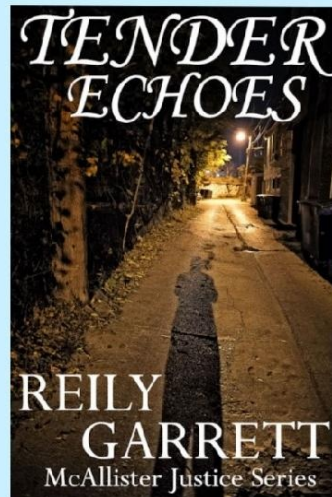
"What do you think, Morgan? Is she ready for the next step?"

When Finn hooked his fingers in the waistband of her linen slacks, she was on board with whatever they had in mind.

Finally...

The End

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About the Author

Reily is a West Coast girl transplanted to the opposite shore. When she's not working with her dogs, you can find her curled up with a book or writing her next story. Past employment as an ICU nurse, private investigator, and work in the military police has given her countless experiences in a host of different environments to add a real world feel to her fiction.

Over time, and several careers, many incidents have flavored the plots of her stories. Man's cruelty and ingenuity for torment and torture is boundless, not contained by an infinite imagination. Witnessing the after-effects of a teenager mugged at knifepoint for a pair of tennis shoes, or an elderly woman stabbed repeatedly with a screwdriver for no apparent reason, left an indelible impression that will forever haunt her subconscious. In counterpoint, she has observed a woman stop her vehicle in severe, snowy weather to offer her *own* winter coat to a stranger, a teenager wearing a threadbare hoodie. Life's diversities are endless.

Though her kids are her life, writing is Reily's life after. The one enjoyed after the kids are in bed or after they're in school and the house is quiet. This is the time she kicks back with laptop and lapdog to give her imagination free rein.

In reading, take pleasure in a mental pause as you root for your favorite hero/heroine and bask in their accomplishments, then share your opinions of them over a coffee with your best friend (even if he's four-legged). Life is short. Cherish your time.

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