



Madame X: A Madame X Novel

By Jasinda Wilder

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From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Alpha*...

*My name is Madame X.
My past is locked away.
My present confined to a gilded cage...*

Hired to transform the uncultured, inept sons of the wealthy and powerful into decisive, confident men, Madame X wields culture and wit like a knife. But behind her sophisticated facade X is a woman adrift, trapped between a dangerous past she can’t remember and the protection of a seductive man who claims her body—and her soul.

Undone time and again by his exquisite dominance, X craves and fears his desire in equal measure. And while she longs for the safety of her tower penthouse, she also yearns to escape. But X has never known anything or anyone else—until *he* came along...

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Editorial Review

Review

“One of the most unique books I’ve read in a while...The next book cannot come soon enough...This is one of those stories that will leave you thinking about it for days afterward.”—Smart Bitches, Trashy Books

“*Madame X* is about so many things: dominance, submission, captivity, choices, eroticism, and intimacy. It is the start of a series that is like a coming of age erotica, pulling themes from fairy tales and cautionary tales as well...Wilder balances the eroticism and action beautifully, the imagery created from X’s mind is sometimes surprising but always gorgeous...The best thing is that there is more to come from Jasinda Wilder in this series and I can’t wait to read it.”—Heroes and Heartbreakers

“Unlike anything else I’ve ever read...Compelling and dark...[X’s] story isn’t one you’ll soon forget.”—BookPage

“Poetic and sinfully provocative, *Madame X* is Jasinda Wilder at her absolute, steamiest best!”—Katy Evans, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Jasinda Wilder like you’ve never seen her before. *Madame X* draws you in from the first page and doesn’t let go until long after the last.”—K. Bromberg, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Jasinda outdid herself! Every word, every line in this book was a treat and I savored every bite. Sensual, intelligent and well-paced, I am on the edge of my seat and needing more!”— Alessandra Torre, *New York Times* bestselling author

About the Author

New York Times, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and international bestselling author **Jasinda Wilder** is a Michigan native with a penchant for titillating tales about sexy men and strong women. Her bestselling titles include *Alpha*, *Stripped*, *Wounded* and the #1 Amazon and international bestseller *Falling Into You*.

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1

You are beautiful, today. Your eyes are deep-set and dark brown, with a patina of warmth that I am discovering hides a turbulent ocean of intelligence and cunning and cruelty. You are young, today. Not even twenty-five, I believe. Your youth shows in your inability to sit still on my pristine white leather couch, the way you cross your long, lean, slate-gray Armani-sheathed legs ankle-on-knee, and then stretch them out ankle-on-ankle in front of you, and the way you reach with a Rolex-braceleted wrist and delicately pick at an invisible loose thread on your black V-neck T-shirt, the way you brush at your knee with strong but fragile-seeming fingers, and then touch your jaw and then dig in your hip pocket for your sleek smartphone—which

isn't there, because unshackling you from that device is an integral part of the training program. And you definitely need training.

Your name is Jonathan, today. Not Jon, or John, or Johnny, but Jonathan. You very subtly accentuate the first syllable, Jonathan. It is cute, that little accent on the first syllable of your oh-so-generic name. Jonathan. As if to make sure I am listening before you say the rest, as if to say "pay attention to who I am." You are so young, Jonathan. You are only a few years younger than I am, but age is so much more than how many times one has spun around the sun. Your age shows through in more than your incapacity for stillness; it is in your eyes, those layered brown eyes, how you look at me with lust and calculation and wonder and not a little fear.

You are like all the rest of you—oh, how I hate the lack of a you-plural conjugation in the English language; other languages are so much more precise and effective and elegant. Let me try this again: You (singular, Jonathan) are very much like all the rest of you (plural, the multitude of men-boys that have come and gone before you-singular, Jonathan).

You, Jonathan, look at me with that needy greedy hungry lusty fear, wondering how you can possess me, how you can circumnavigate the rules binding us to this contract, how you can get me to leave with you and be yours and how you can get me to loosen my top or bend over for you a little so you can catch a better glimpse down my blouse, how you can have me in any way at all. But like all the others, you cannot. Not any of that.

I am not for you.

I belong to one man and one man alone, and he does not share. Not what you desire of me, at least.

And you—you, Jonathan, and you-plural—you are not worthy to even think his name. You could not even begin to fathom the sophistication and the polish and the culture and the charm and the elegance and the easy power and the natural domination that man possesses. You just cannot.

He is the sun arcing across the horizon, and you are fireflies flitting to and fro in the night, each of you thinking your little light shines the brightest, never realizing how small and insignificant you truly are.

We are sitting on my couch right now, sipping at Harney & Sons Earl Grey tea, and I am noting your posture and the drape of your arm as you lounge, and the angle of your wrist as you sip, and the sweep of your neck and the shift of your eyes. I see all of this, I note each detail, and I adjudicate it all, make mental tallies and prepare my lesson. For now, though, I sip, and try to let you guide our conversation.

You are an abysmal conversationalist, Jonathan. You speak of sports, like a common boy squatting on a bar stool swilling beer. As if I could ever possibly spare a single moment of thought for such tripe. But I let you natter on about some player, and I nod and ummmmm-hmmm at all the right pauses, and let my eyes shine as if I give one single shit. Because you need this lesson, Jonathan. I am going to let you ramble about this football of yours and pretend to care and will let you go on and on and waste my time and yours, and when you run out of words, or maybe even finally realize I am merely humoring you, I am going to gut you like a fish.

You bore me, so I will not be gentle about it, Jonathan.

“... And he's putting up numbers like nobody's business, you know? Like, he's just a fucking beast on the field, no one can touch him, not once he's got the ball. Every game I'm like, I'm like give him the fucking ball you goddamned idiot, just feed him the ball, it's all you have to do. Obviously I picked him for my

fantasy football league, and he's gonna make me a shitload of money . . ." You gesticulate with your hands, roll them in circles, and you go on and on and on, until I'm having to force myself to hear each individual word as if they're nuggets of sound without substance.

I finish my tea.

I pour another cup, and drink half of that, and you have not finished your first because you're still talking, and it is just interminable.

Finally, I cannot endure it any longer.

I set my teacup down on the saucer with a loud, intentional clatter, and you're startled into silence. I let the absence of noise flow through me for a moment, bathe in the silence and let my thoughts collect, and let you see my displeasure. You sweat, you shift uncomfortably on the leather, and you do not quite meet my gaze. You know you have erred.

"Madame X, I'm sorry, I—"

"That is quite enough, Jonathan." I say it the way you do, accentuating that first syllable, to show you how silly it sounds. "You have wasted nearly thirty minutes of my time. Remind me, Jonathan, how much per hour do our sessions cost your father?"

"I, um . . ."

I eye you with razors in my gaze. "Yes? Speak up, speak clearly, and do attempt to eradicate the noisome filler words."

"A thousand dollars an hour, Madame X."

"Correct. One thousand U.S. dollars per hour. And having just wasted thirty minutes babbling about football, how much have you wasted?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Correct. At least you can manage simple mathematics." I sip at my tea, gathering my ire into a concentrated ball at my core. "Enlighten me, Jonathan, as to why you thought such ridiculous trash would be worth my time."

"I, um—"

I set my cup down with a clatter yet again, and you flinch. I stand up, smooth my dress over my hips—and I do not miss the rake of your eyes over me as I do so—and I move to the doorway. "We are done here, Mr. Cartwright."

"No, Madame X, I'm sorry, I'll do better, I promise—"

"I don't think you will, because I don't believe you are capable of better, Mr. Cartwright. You can't even stop saying 'um' and 'like' and using vulgarity. Not to mention wasting our time together to talk about football."

"I was making conversation, Madame X."

“No, Jonathan, you were not. You were not talking to me, you were talking at me. You were spewing excrement from your mouth, simply for the sake of hearing yourself speak. Perhaps among your . . . friends . . . such trash could be considered conversation. I am a lady. I am not your friend. I am not some empty-headed bar slut that can be dazzled by your white teeth and coiffured hair and expensive slacks. I don’t care how much your father is worth, Mr. Cartwright. Not even remotely. So if you wish to continue these sessions, you’re going to have to improve, and rather swiftly. I do not have time to waste, nor the patience to deal with nonsense.”

“I’m sorry, Madame X.”

I glare at you. “You’re sniveling, and groveling. You act like a child. When you speak you fill your sentences with profanity and yet say nothing of value. And when I call you out on your failings, you apologize like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.”

You just stare at me, sitting forward with your wrists on your knees, fingers twitching and scratching and plucking restlessly. You have no dignity, no posture, no elegance. You have all the charm of a tree stump. My work with you will be a true test of my skills. I find myself angry as I lecture you. Angry at you, for being an apish dolt. Angry at . . . him . . . for making me waste my time on a fumbling, stuttering, cursing man-child like you, because you, Jonathan, are all that represents the worst of my clientele. I am bored with you, and I am angry, simmering with barely veiled contempt; and Jonathan? That does not bode well for you.

“Sit up straight. Keep your hands still. Lean back on the couch and relax. Your body language must exude confidence and control, Mr. Cartwright. You must appear at ease at all times.”

“I am at ease,” you argue.

I do not bother responding, I just pace across the room toward you and stop so I am standing almost between your knees. I keep my eyes on yours, let all the weight of my bearing and training bore down on you, let my total and complete disregard for you show. You are no one. You are nothing. You are a child. A beautiful, spoiled child. And I let all this show in my gaze as I stare down at you.

You shift uncomfortably yet again, transferring your weight from one buttock to the other. You look away first, and you trace the crease of your slacks with a finger.

And I merely stand in front of you, staring you down in silence.

You crack.

“What? What do you want, Madame X?”

“And that is why you’re here. You shouldn’t have to ask that. You should know. Better yet, you should tell me what I want. That would be a start.”

“What would it take for you to be interested in me?” You ask this in a simpering tone, even though I can tell you meant it to sound seductive. Or something.

I laugh and turn away. “Oh, Jonathan. I could never be. You couldn’t possibly interest me. Not in the slightest. You lack . . . well, there is simply too much to enumerate. Which is why you’re here.”

I hear you stand up, and I wait for you to make your move. You sidle up behind me, and yes, you are tall, and yes, you have spent enough time in the gym to have a well-sculpted physique. Without dominance and bearing, however . . . it is nothing. You put your hands on my waist, turn me in place, and I let you.

“Why am I here, Madame X?”

“You shouldn’t have to ask that, Jonathan.”

“Why do you keep saying my name that way?”

“It’s how you say it.”

“It sounds ridiculous.”

“And so do you.”

You lower your brows and the scrim of warmth I once saw is being skimmed away. Good. I want to pare the façade away; I want to get to your true nature.

“I do not,” you insist.

I smile, and it is an amused, cruel smile. “If you want to argue, seek out your sister. Or join a high school debate team. Arguing should be beneath you.”

“Why am I here, Madame X?” You ask it again, and still your hands are on my waist, but you do nothing with that.

My allowing you to touch me is currency, and yet you fail to spend it.

“You really don’t know?”

You shrug. “Not really.”

“Who am I?”

“You’re Madame X.”

“And what does that mean, do you think?”

You blink, and glance up to the right. “You’re . . . you provide a service.” I merely stare at you with a raised eyebrow. You clear your throat and stammer. “Well, I—um.”

“If you say ‘um’ one more time, I shall be displeased.” My voice is cold, but I let you continue to touch me, just to see what you will do.

“I don’t want to say it.”

“Coward.” I let the word drop from my lips like a stone.

You let go, pace a few steps away, flushing, and turn back. “You’re like a . . . a prostitute. Or an escort. But . . . not.”

I let the razors come out of my gaze as you turn to watch my reaction. I stalk toward you, hips swaying with extra seduction, lip curled in scorn. “Oh really? You think so?”

“Well, not exactly, but . . .”

“You think this is about sex?” I stop a hairbreadth away from you. The tips of my breasts almost touch your T-shirt, but do not. “What gave you that impression, Mr. Cartwright?”

You blush, and then pale. “Well, I mean, your name is Madame X. Like a . . . a madam. And a thousand dollars an hour? I mean, come on.”

“What about me says prostitute, Mr. Cartwright?” I lift my chin and keep my gaze unblinking on yours.

“Nothing . . . I mean . . .” You pause and I let the silence hang, let you hang yourself on your silence.

A minute of silence is excruciating under most circumstances; for you, this is pure torture.

“Did you read the contract, Mr. Cartwright?” I arch an eyebrow.

You shrug with insouciance. “Not really.”

“And yet you hope to inherit your father’s company?” I shake my head. “Pathetic.”

You are getting incensed. Your tells are like telegraphs: flaring nostrils, narrowed eyes, fingers flexing into fists. “I’m getting tired of this. I’m not paying a thousand dollars an hour to be insulted.”

“You aren’t paying me anything, your father is. And I hope you do get tired of it. Maybe you will find the internal fortitude to stop earning my insults.”

I turn away from you and retrieve our contract. It is short and simply worded, but iron-clad. You signed it, and so did I, and so did your father. I know the wording by heart, and I know your father read it, but you are simply too lazy and too entitled to be bothered.

With the contract in one hand, I use my other to shove you. The flat of my palm strikes you center-chest, and you’re so surprised you fall backward and sit down hard on the couch. You are shocked into stillness. I put one foot on the gleaming dark African teak hardwood between your feet, place the stiletto of my black Louboutin on your chest, press just hard enough to cause discomfort.

“Pay attention, Jonathan. First, and most important, never ever sign anything without reading it all, every paragraph and subheading, every line of fine print. You’d think your father would have taught you this by now.” You open your mouth to protest, but I grind my heel into your chest and you snap your teeth closed. “I’m going to read this to you, Jonathan, and you’re going to listen. It’s very simple, really.”

I lean forward, and your eyes widen as I intensify the pain. And still, your eyes flit to the curve of my calf where the deep jade of the Valentino dress has pulled up to just beneath my knee.

“Pay attention, you twit. Keep your eyes on mine, not on my legs.” I ease off so you can listen. “By signing this document, the signees agree to the following stipulations as they pertain to both the contractor, hereafter referred to as Madame X, and the client, Jonathan Edward Cartwright III. Item number one: Neither Madame X nor the client shall in any way refer to or discuss with anyone this contract or the services provided, nor the stipulations or conditions contained herein. Item number two: Remuneration to Madame X shall be carried out via electronic bank transfer from the accounts of Jonathan Edward Cartwright II to the accounts of Indigo Services, LLC, the terms of which shall not be added to, enhanced, changed, or in any way amended by either Madame X or the client. Item number three: The services provided by Madame X, acting as a subcontracting agent for Indigo Services, shall not include sex acts of any kind, whether oral, manual, or penetrative, and such acts shall not be inferred, requested, or demanded by either Madame X on behalf of Indigo Services or by Jonathan Edward Cartwright III nor any representatives of the client. Item number

four: The particulars of this contract as pertain to the educational services provided shall remain under the authority of Madame X alone, and may not be challenged, defied, or protested by the client or his representatives, and to in any way seek to alter or challenge the educational program and any methods used shall result in the termination of the contract, which shall result in a termination fee equal to the total estimated billable program hours provided at inquiry, plus a grievance fee of thirty-five percent of the total. Item number five: The educational program pamphlet provided at inquiry is a licensed, copyrighted, and legally protected proprietary document. The pamphlet and its contents shall not be copied, distributed, or in any way communicated to anyone not named in this contract. Breach of this item shall result in immediate termination of the contract, resulting in all of the attendant termination fees, as well as any and all actions necessary to punish copyright infringement.” I pause and glance at you, and see that you have indeed been listening, and that you also wish you’d read the contract, and, probably, the pamphlet. “Well, Jonathan? Any questions?”

You shake your head. “No. No. I see that I was in error by not reading the contract. I’m sorry, Madame X. I hope I didn’t insult you.”

I smile generously and withdraw my foot from your chest. You rub at the sore spot with a palm, and I am dismayed to see that your hand shakes as you do so. “Did you read the pamphlet, Jonathan?”

You shake your head again. “No, no, I didn’t.”

“Stop wasting words. Say what you mean, and only that.”

“Okay.”

“Not ‘okay,’ Jonathan; ‘yes, Madame X.’” It is a test; if you actually obey me, respond with such sniveling submissiveness, then you will have failed the test, and failed it miserably.

Your eyes narrow and you take a deep breath. “You’re playing games with me.”

I smile at you, and this is my razor-blade smile, my predator smile. You shrink away from me as I lean in, and your eyes go to my cleavage. “Eyes on mine, Jonathan,” I snap. “You don’t get to look at me like that. You haven’t earned it.”

“Earned it?” There is hope in your voice.

Pathetic boy.

I put my hands on the back of the couch, on either side of your head. My face is inches from yours, and I can smell your putrid breath, and I can tell you didn’t bother to brush your teeth this morning. I do not even know where to start with you, how I can even begin to salvage your entitled, spoiled, lazy, passive personality. I stare you down until you look away and try to bury yourself into the couch cushions.

When I know you will listen, I straighten and stand with my spine stiff and my head high, literally and figuratively looking down my nose at you. “I am not being paid to be nice to you, Jonathan, so I’m not going to be. I am being paid to teach you how to be a man. How to sit, stand, speak, eat, drink, and think like not just some rich and lazy little bastard, but like the heir to a multibillion-dollar company. I wouldn’t give you the time of day otherwise, Jonathan. I wouldn’t look at you twice. I wouldn’t even bother to smile at you if I saw you at a bar, or on the street. You exude incompetence. Your entire bearing and attitude says you don’t give a single shit how you’re perceived.”

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to care?” you ask.

“Wrong. You must always be aware how you are perceived. Appearing as if you’re so confident in yourself that the opinions of passersby don’t matter is one thing, and that is what you’re after: the appearance of casual confidence, the appearance of insouciance and just enough arrogance to be attractive.” I gesture at you with a finger, sweeping up and down to indicate you as a whole. “Right now, Jonathan? You stink. Your breath is rancid, and you’ve put on far too much overpriced, low-quality cologne. That all by itself is a turn-off. No woman will ever want to be around a man who can’t even remember to brush his teeth before he meets her. And that’s just my olfactory impression. You’re deferent and submissive, yet utterly arrogant. You didn’t bother to read a contract you signed, so you don’t even know what it is you agreed to. This tells me you’re hopelessly lazy and totally incompetent. You have no bearing, no presence. I have no desire to spend another moment in your company, not for anything. You bored me with talk of football, of all things. In a word, Jonathan Cartwright, you are pathetic. We’re done here.”

I point at the door, and you stand up, visibly angry now.

“You can’t talk to me like this—”

“I most certainly can. I do not need you. I have a client waiting list two years long. I did not seek you out; your father sought me out, because you are hopeless. Your father, now . . . he has presence. When your father enters a room, people notice. When he speaks, people listen. And yes, that is due in part to the fact that he’s one of the wealthiest men in the country. But how do you think he earned his wealth? By sitting around and watching football? By coasting along on his father’s coattails? No! He demanded that his peers take notice, and they did. He demands attention and respect simply by merit of who he is. You . . . do not.” I twist the doorknob and pull the door open, gesture to the foyer and the elevator beyond. “Go away, Jonathan, and don’t bother coming back unless you can learn basic hygiene at the very least, if not how to make interesting conversation.”

You stare at me, anger and embarrassment and hurt in your eyes. You hate being compared to your father, of course, but only because you know that such comparisons find you deeply lacking.

I shut the door behind you, and when I hear the elevator door slide open and closed once more, only then do I let myself slump against the door and shake with nerves and breathe. I just insulted the son of one of the most powerful men in the world.

But then, such is my job.

A knock on the door, the silent swing of hinges, and then heat and hardness behind me, a faint but intoxicating hint of cologne, the creak of leather. Hands on my waist, lips at my neck. Breath on my skin.

I don’t dare tense, don’t dare suck in a sharp breath of fear. I don’t dare pull away.

Strong, hard, powerful hands twist me in place, and an index finger touches my chin, lifts my face, tilts my gaze. I cannot breathe, don’t dare, haven’t been given permission.

“You are lovelier than ever, X.” A deep, smooth, cultured voice, like the purr of a finely tuned engine.

“Thank you, Caleb.” My own voice is quiet, careful, my words chosen and precise.

“Scotch.” The command is a murmur, barely audible.

I know how to prepare it: a cut-crystal tumbler, a single ice cube, thick amber liquid an inch from the top. I

offer the tumbler and wait, keep my eyes downcast, hands behind my back.

“You were too harsh on Jonathan.”

“I must respectfully disagree.”

“His father expects results.”

I bristle, and it does not go unnoticed. “Have I ever failed to produce results?”

“You sent him away after less than an hour.”

“He wasn’t ready. He needed to be shown his faults. He needs to understand how much he has to learn.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” Ice clinks, and I take the empty tumbler, set it aside, and force myself to remain in place, force myself to keep breathing and remind myself that I must obey. “I didn’t come here to discuss Jonathan Cartwright, however.”

“I suppose not.” I shouldn’t have said that. I regret it as soon as the words tumble free.

My wrist bones scrape together under a crushing grip. Hard dark eyes find mine, piercing and frightening.
“You suppose not?”

I should beg forgiveness, but I know better. I lift my chin and meet those cold, cruel, intelligent dark eyes.
“You know I will fulfill the contract. That’s all I meant.”

“No, that isn’t all you meant.” A hand passes through artfully messy black hair. “Tell me what you really meant, X.”

I swallow hard. “You’re here for what you always want when you visit me.”

“Which is?” A warm finger touches my breastbone, slides into the valley of my cleavage. “Tell me what I want.”

“Me.” I whisper it, so not even the walls can hear.

“All too true.” My skin burns where that strong finger with its manicured nail traces a cutting line up to my shoulder. “You test my patience, at times.”

I stand stock-still, not even breathing. Breath whispers across my neck, huffs hot on my nape, and fingers toy with the zipper of my dress.

“I know,” I say.

And then, just when I expect to feel the zipper slide down my spine, body heat recedes and that hot breath now laced with hints of scotch is gone, and a single word sears my soul:

“Strip.”

My tongue scrapes over dry lips, and my lungs constrict, protesting my inability to breathe. My hands tremble. I know this is expected of me, and I cannot, dare not resist, or protest. And . . . part of me doesn’t want to. But I wish . . . I wish for the freedom to choose what I want.

I have hesitated too long.

“X. I said . . . strip.” The zipper slides down to between my shoulder blades. “Show me your skin.”

Reaching behind my back, I lower the zipper to its nesting place at the base of my spine. Hard, insistent hands assist me in brushing the sleeves from my shoulders, down my arms, and then the dress is floating to the floor at my feet. That’s all the help I’ll get. I know from long experience that I must make a show of what comes next.

I turn my head, and see tanned skin and the perpetual two-day stubble on a refined, powerful jawline, sharp cheekbones, firm, thin lips, black eyes like voids, eyes that drip desire. My hair drapes over one shoulder. I lift one knee so my now-bare toes touch the gleaming teak, curl my shoulders in, let my gaze show my vulnerability. With a deep breath, I unhook my bra, let the garment fall away.

I reach for my underwear.

“No,” comes the purr, “leave them. Let me.”

I let my fingers graze my thighs, wait. My underwear slides down slowly, and where fingers touch, so too do lips, hot and damp, touching my skin, and I cannot flinch, cannot pull away or express how badly I want only to be alone, to even once have the right to want something else.

But I do not have that right.

Hands blaze over my bared skin and ignite my desire against my will. I know all too well the heat of this touch, the fires of climax, the moments of afterglow when dark eyes drowse and powerful hands are stilled and I am allowed to let my guard down. I stand still, knees shaking, as lips scour and slide over trembling skin. My thighs are nosed open, and lightning strikes with the touch of a tongue to my slick skin.

I gasp, but a single look silences me.

“Don’t breathe, don’t speak, don’t make a sound.” I feel the whisper on my hip, feel the vibrations in my bones, and I nod my assent. “Don’t come until I tell you.”

I have no choice but to stand and accept silently the assault on my senses: down-soft hair against my belly, stubble on my thighs, hands cupping my backside, fury blooming within me. I hold it back, keep it tamped down, bite my tongue to silence the moans, fist my hands at my sides, because I haven’t been given permission to touch.

“Good. Let go now, X. Give me your voice.” A finger pierces me, curls, finds my need and sets it free, and I loose my voice, let moans and whimpers escape. “Good, very good. So beautiful, so sexy. Now show me your room.”

I lead the way to my bedroom, push open the door to reveal the white bedspread, plumped black pillows, all tucked and arranged, as required. I lie down, setting aside pillows, and wait. Eyes rake over my nude form, examine me, assess me.

“I think an extra twenty minutes in the gym would do you well.” This criticism is delivered clinically, meant to remind me of my place. “Trim down, just a touch.”

I hide the clutch in my gut, the ache in my heart, the burn in my eyes. Hide it, bury it, because it is not allowed. I blink, nod. “Of course, Caleb.”

“You are lovely, X. Don’t mistake me.”

“I know. And thank you.”

“It’s just that our clients expect perfection.” A lifted eyebrow indicates that I should finish the statement.

“And so do you.”

“Exactly. And you, X, I know you can deliver. You are perfect, or very nearly, at least.” A smile now, blazing and brilliant and blinding, excruciatingly beautiful, meant to soothe. A finger touches my lips and then traces favorite locations on my anatomy: lips, throat, breasts, hips. “Roll over.”

I move to my stomach.

“On your knees.”

I draw my knees beneath my stomach.

“Give me your hands.”

I reach back with both hands, and my wrists are pinioned in one large, brutally powerful hand. My shoulder blades touch each other as my arms are drawn together, and my face is pressed into the mattress. I swallow hard, brace, breathe.

Oh, the ache, the fierce throb as I’m penetrated. I’m rocked forward and my shoulders twinge and the grip on my wrists holds me in place.

I have no choice but to feel the burgeoning blaze, no choice but let it push through me and make me breathless, and I want to cry, want to cry, want to cry.

But I don’t.

Not yet.

I let myself go when I’m told to do so: “Come for me, X.”

And then it’s over, and I’m turned to lie on my back, gasping, and whispers bathe over me. “So good, X. So beautiful.” A finger to my chin, lifting my gaze. “Did you enjoy that?”

“Yes.” It’s not a lie. Not entirely, at least.

Physically, I am rocked to trembling. Physically, aftershocks still seize me and touch makes me shiver and I am breathless. Physically, yes, I enjoyed it. I cannot help but enjoy it.

Yet . . . there is a space within me, a deep, deep, deep well where truths I do not even dare think live hidden and always buried. Down there, where those truths reside, I know I crave . . . absolution, freedom, a breath taken in privacy, a word spoken without ulterior motive.

But I cannot let those thoughts bubble up. Cannot, and do not. I am a master of self-control, after all. I could hold off orgasm indefinitely. I could go without breathing until told to breathe or pass out. I could remain sitting motionless for hours, until told to move. I know I can do these things, because I have. I learned total control in the harshest of schools.

And so it is child's play to let my body drape loosely in the guise of intimacy on a hard, taut, muscular body until a chime from discarded slacks demands attention.

"I have to take this." A pause, a breath, a tap of finger on a cell phone screen. "This is Caleb. Yes. Yes. Sure, give me twenty minutes. Of course. No, don't let him in until I get there."

A kiss to my temple, a finger tracing my body from shoulder to hip to foot. "I have to go."

"All right." I don't ask when to expect a return, because I don't want to know, and because I wouldn't get an answer.

"Will you miss me?"

"Of course." This is a lie, and we both know it.

"Good. Your next client is in two hours, so you have time to shower, dress, and prepare. His name is William Colin Drake, and he's the heir to a technology development company worth fifty billion. Usual terms and conditions apply. The file on William will arrive in the usual manner."

"Should I expect as much trouble with William as with Jonathan?"

A quirk of a smile, amusement. "No, I should think not. William is a much different animal, from what I've observed." A pause, and a speculative glance at me. "But, X?"

"Yes, Caleb?"

"Watch yourself with William. He's got a mean streak."

"Thank you for the warning."

"He needs to learn to control it, so you'll have to draw it out of him and make him aware of it. But be careful."

Draw out his mean streak. Poke a snake, prod a sleeping bear. Risk injury. It won't be the first time, and it won't be the last. Hopefully I won't need medical attention like I did last time. That's not covered in the contract, of course, but it's understood: Never, ever harm the property of Caleb Indigo; it's just not smart business.

When the door closes behind a broad, suit-swathed back, I shower the sex-stink off. I scrub harder and longer than I have to and fight the boil of forbidden emotions. When my skin is rubbed raw, I force myself out of the shower and dress, apply makeup, remake the bed, prepare tea.

And then I seat myself on the couch and breathe, compose myself, push down the vulnerability, put away the fear and the desire. Once again, I am Madame X.

I spare a single, momentary glance at the small dark dot in the ceiling, hidden in a corner, and let my eyes betray me. I imagine I see a red dot within the black depths of the camera, and I imagine I can see all the way along the trail of electrons and through the monitor to the faces on the other side.

I imagine, but that is all I can do.

There is a decisive rap on the door, and I rise, breathe out slowly, lift my chin, smooth my dress over my

hips, and wiggle my foot in my shoe, breathe, breathe, let the moment linger.

And then I open the door, and I welcome you.

You are handsome, but not beautiful. You hold yourself with dignity, and your gaze betrays arrogance. And yes, as I meet your narrow gray gaze, I see ugliness, a propensity for cruelty, a viciousness.

“I see they didn’t exaggerate how hot you are,” you say.

I ignore your remark, and gesture to my couch. “William, welcome. Thank you for coming. Have a seat, please. Would you like some tea?”

You eye the decanter. “Scotch would be better.” And then you sink down on the couch, cross your ankle over your knee, and wait to be served, and your eyes follow me hungrily. I hand you the tumbler, three ice cubes, a finger of scotch. “I read the contract, and I have to say it wasn’t what I was expecting. Neither are you.”

I hand you the contract, and you read it yet again, and then you sign it, and so do I. “What were you expecting, William?”

“Well, I certainly wasn’t expecting item three, that’s for sure. I signed it, so I’ll abide by the rules, but I’m disappointed, Madame X. I’d love to get you out of that dress.” Your eyes peruse me, take their time cataloging and critiquing my body.

“I’m sure you would, William.”

“Call me Will, please.” You sip with casual elegance.

“All right then, Will. Tell me, what do you hope to get out of our sessions together?”

“I have a better question.” You lean forward, lift the contract as if about to rip it. “What do you say we tear this puppy apart and get to the good stuff? We can always sign it again later.”

I must still smell faintly of sex, despite how ruthlessly I scrubbed: Your nostrils flare, and you inhale, lean closer, let your shoulder touch mine. I take the contract from you, gently but firmly, set it on the coffee table, and slide it away from you.

“I think not, William.” I stand, take the tumbler from you. You don’t protest, but your eyes harden. “You signed it, and you are legally bound by it now. If you do not wish to continue, you may petition to have the contract absolved. If not, then I must insist you keep any further such comments to yourself, as they are neither allowed nor desired.”

You stand up, and you are right in front of me. Your eyes are hard, deep, and swirling with potent venom. “Oh, I think you lie, Madame X. I think they are desired. But . . . I signed the contract, and I’m a man of my word.” You resume your seat on the couch and cross your ankles and grin at me. “So. Teach me. I’m ready to learn.”

I walk away from the nugget of truth in your words, breathe slowly, and then turn to you, let my razor-sharp gaze rake over you, let the silence expand. You don’t shift, but you begin to show signs of discomfort.

“Tell me, William. What is your deepest, darkest secret?”

You are the one to let the silence breathe, this time, and your eyes pierce, and burn. “I’m not sure you really want to know, Madame X.”

“Oh, but I do, William. I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.” I take two steps closer to you. “You don’t really think you can shock me, do you?”

You swallow, and blink, and then you let a smile curl your lips. “Fine, but you asked for it. And . . . this is covered under the contract, yes? You can’t talk about this to anyone?”

“I cannot, and I would not.” I don’t tell you about the cameras, or the microphones.

“I like it . . . rough,” you say. “And I like them . . . unwilling.” You eye me, as if to assess the effect of your words.

I nod. “Go on.”

And you do go on, in ever more graphic detail.

I’ve never been so glad of the third stipulation as I am now.

2

I wake abruptly; I am not alone.

Expensive cologne, just a hint of it in the air. There are other scents layered beneath the cologne, but they are too faint for me to identify. My bedroom is blackout dark, so there is nothing to see but shadows within shadows. My noise machine shushes, the soothing, gentle crash of waves on a shore.

Sleep is nearly impossible for me, because of the dreams.

“Caleb.” I keep my voice low, steady.

There is no answer. I need none, however. I will wait. I sit up, tug the sheet across my chest, tuck it under my arms. The flat sheet—a thousand thread count, softest Egyptian cotton—is my only shield, and it is a thin and flimsy one at best.

Click. Low amber light washes over me, bathing the room in a dim glow. There, in the Louis XIV armchair in the corner beside my bed, next to the floor-to-ceiling window with its black-out curtain. Tailored black slacks, from a suit. Crisp white shirt, cuff links with two-carat diamond inserts. The collar is unbuttoned. Only one button, just the very uppermost; the concession to the late hour is shocking in its uncharacteristic casualness. No tie. I see it folded, the thinnest end hanging out of an inner pocket of the suit coat, which is draped over the back of the chair.

Dark eyes fixed on me. Unblinking. Piercing. Steady, cold, unreadable. Yet . . . there is something. Wariness? Something I cannot fathom.

“Lower the sheet.”

Ah. A slight slur.

I release the sheet, let it pool around my waist. My nipples harden in the coolness, under the scrutiny of that dark gaze.

“Kick it away.”

I bend my knee, lift my leg, push the sheet away with my toe. Red silk underwear, bikini cut. I keep my gaze level, my breathing even, do nothing to betray the hammering of my heart, the churn in my belly.

“To whom do you belong, X?”

“To you, Caleb.” It is the only answer. The only answer there has ever been.

“What do I want, X?”

“Me.”

One button, two, three, and then the shirt joins the suit coat, folded neatly on the back of the chair. Shoes, set aside. Socks folded, tucked into a shoe. Trousers, next. The zipper, so slowly. A torture of moments, waiting for the zzzzzzrip. Waiting for the thin, stretchy cotton of black boxer-briefs to find their resting place atop the trousers, folded in department-store-precise thirds on the cushion.

I do not look away. I follow each motion, and I keep my expression neutral. The body revealed is a study in classic masculine beauty. A sculpture of perfection carved from flesh. Muscles toned, carefully and exquisitely crafted. A smattering of dark hair on the chest, a trail from flat belly to thick erection. It is a body designed to engender desire in the viewer. And it does. Oh yes, it does. I am not immune.

The bed dips. Long, thick fingers with neatly manicured nails sweep through my thick black hair, which is loose around my shoulders at the moment. It is never down, unless I am in bed. Otherwise, it is done up in a chignon, or a neat braid pinned in a coil. Never down. The curve of a woman’s neck and throat is as exotic and erotic as breasts, when properly displayed; this was an early lesson. A tug of the hand, and my throat is bared, my head pulled back. This roughness is unexpected. I stifle a gasp of surprise. Not fear. I cannot, must not fear. I dare not even allow myself to feel it, much less let it show.

Lips, nipping and kissing my throat. Wet, slow, ever so slightly clumsy. Those lips, on my cheek. Sour alcohol-laced breath wafts over me. Fingers delve, dig, pierce. I am not ready, but that does not matter. Not now, not in this moment. Perhaps not ever. Momentary discomfort, and then a finger finds my most sensitive bundle of nerves, sweeps across it, and I feel wetness lubricate me, seep through my privates. A gasp, then. A male grunt, as uncharacteristic as the unbuttoned collar and the intoxicated late-night visit.

A tongue, sweeping across my nipple. Hardness nudging my softness. Penetration. Once, twice, lips on my cheek, my chin, my throat, my breastbone. I am pressed into the mattress by heavy weight, a hand on my hip, a trim waist pressing my thighs apart. I begin to wonder, deep in the recesses of my mind, how long this will last, this face-to-face encounter.

Not long.

Hands on my hips, turning me to my stomach. Drawing my hips up, my knees beneath me. A hand fistling in my hair, another on my hip. Hot, hard presence behind me, fingers searching, finding me damp and ready,

guiding the thick bare member into me.

Long, slow, unhurried. Not exactly rough, but sloppy. Not with the usual efficiency and masterful pacing. No, this is a slow rhythm, lazy at first and then building and building and building. I cannot resist the burgeoning within me, the pressure of an impending climax throbbing through me. I dare not release it, however, so I clench my fists and squeeze my eyes shut and focus on containing it, holding it back.

The pace becomes punishing, then. Closest to rough as it's ever been. But still, even in intoxication, exquisitely masterful. This body was created for sex. Designed to own, to pleasure, to dominate. And I am, all of those things.

Whether I will it, or no.

"Now, X. Come for me, right now. Give me your voice." A rasping murmur, low and strong.

I finally let go with a panting moan at the base of my throat, let the climax burn through me.

Finished, I am allowed to fall forward. Absence behind me. Faucet running. I am nudged to my back, handed a damp, warm washcloth.

"Clean yourself."

I obey, and return the cloth, roll to my side, and let my eyes slide closed. Let my emotions welter, tumble, let the post-orgasmic drowsiness tug me under. Let the deep, powerful riptide of my most private thoughts and fears and desires spin me into a disoriented tumble, far beneath the tumultuous surface of the sea that is consciousness.

Blood. Sirens. Loss. Confusion. Rain in the darkness, lightning gouging the blackness, thunder throbbing in the distance. Weeping. Alone.

"X—wake up. Wake up. You're dreaming again." Hands on my waist, lips at my ear, a comforting whisper.

I bolt upright, sobbing. Hair sticks to my forehead in sweat-smeared tangles. Strands in my mouth. My back is damp with sweat. My arms shake. My heart is hammering.

"Sshh. Hush. You're okay now."

I shake my head. I'm not okay. Eyes closed, fighting for breath—I can see nothing but snatches of nightmare:

Blood, crimson and thick, swirling and mixing with rain on a sidewalk. A pair of eyes, open, vacant and unseeing. Limbs bent at unnatural angles. A stab of lightning, sudden and bright, illuminating the night for the space of a heartbeat. An all-consuming sensation of horror, terror, the kind of loss that steals your breath and sucks the marrow from your bones.

Sobs. Wracked, shaking, incapable of speech. I try to push it down, gain control, but I cannot. I can only sob and gasp and tremble, shiver and weep. My lungs ache. I cannot breathe, cannot think, can only see the blood, the blood, scarlet and thick as syrup, arterial, lifeblood leaking away and mixing with rain.

"X. Breathe. Breathe, okay? Look at me. Look at my eyes." I seek dark eyes, find them strangely warm, concerned.

“Can’t—can’t breathe—” I gasp.

Pulled against a firm, smooth chest. Heartbeat under my ear. I tense; comfort like this is alien. I still cannot breathe, or blink. Paralyzed with fear, with the poison of nightmares in my blood.

“How did we meet, X?”

“You—s-s-saved me.”

“That’s right. What did I save you from?”

“Him. Him.” I feel a presence from my dream, a malevolence, a hunger for that scarlet lifeblood.

“I found you on the sidewalk, bleeding to death. You’d been badly hurt. Beaten nearly to death. Savaged almost beyond recognition. I took you in my arms and carried you to the hospital. You’d crawled, alone, dying . . . so far. A mile, almost. They think you knew where the hospital was, and you were trying to get there. But you didn’t quite make it.”

“You carried me to the hospital.” In reciting the words, I can begin to find my breath.

“That’s right.” A pause, a breath. “I brought you in, and they wouldn’t let me go back with you, but you had no identification and you were unconscious. I just couldn’t leave you alone, not knowing what had happened to you. Not knowing if you’d be okay. So they let me stay in the triage room while they worked on you.”

“You waited for six hours. I died on the table, but they brought me back.” I know these words, this story. It is the only history I have.

“Your head had been badly damaged. Of your many injuries, your cranial injury was the most worrisome, they told me. You might never regain consciousness, they told me. And if you did, you might remember nothing. Or some things but not others. Or everything. Or you might be paralyzed, or have a stroke. With the damage to your brain, there was no way to know until you woke up.”

“And I almost didn’t wake up.”

“I had to leave eventually, but I came back the next day, to check on you.”

“And the next, and the next.” I know all the beats, all the pauses, where to say my lines. I can breathe. I can work my lungs: inflate, deflate; inhale, exhale. Flex my fingers, blink my eyes, focus on curling my toes. Familiar exercises.

“The police found the crime scene where you’d been attacked. It was murder. You had a family, but they’d been murdered. And you’d witnessed it. Seen it all. Barely survived.”

“And he’s still out there.”

“Waiting for you to show your face. Waiting to make sure you can’t ever tell anyone what you know.”

“But I don’t know anything. I can’t remember anything.” This is true. This is a part of the ritual, but it is true.

“I know that, and you know that. But he doesn’t. The murderer is out there, and knows you survived, and knows you saw everything.”

“You’ll protect me.” Another truth.

One of very few. I am protected. Provided for. Kept safe.

Kept.

“I will protect you. You have to trust me, X. I’ll keep you safe, but you have to trust me.”

“I trust you, Caleb.” Those four words, I must bite them out. Sometimes, I do not believe them; other times, I do. Tonight is the former.

It is like eating an orange, trying to separate the seeds from the flesh and spit out the seeds only. There is truth, but also lies. Trust, but something bitter as well, something foul.

“Good.” Fingers in my thick black hair. Smoothing. Petting. “Sleep now.”

Click. Darkness now, a blanket settling over me, the noise machine soothing me with gently crashing waves on an imaginary shore. I let the sound of the waves take me away, like floating away on a tide.

Distantly, I hear the door open, close.

I am alone.

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