



THE HARDEST WORD

hard
choices

Is true submission the one
thing money can't buy?



ASHE
BARKER

Table of Contents

[Legal Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Book Description](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Trademarks Acknowledgement](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[New Excerpt](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Publisher Page](#)



Hard Choices

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Warning:

This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has a heat rating of Totally Melting and a Sexometer of 3.

The Hardest Word
HARD CHOICES

Ashe Barker

Book three in the Hardest Word serial

Is true submission the one thing money can't buy?

A month with the Dom of her dreams. Just one month to learn all that he can teach her, as well as to convince him that he's the Master she wants. The Master she needs. Forever.

But her training ended in disaster when Nick asked her to do the one thing she could not willingly accept—hand her body over to another Dom. Alone again, confused and heartbroken, Freya tries to rebuild her shattered life. However, soon she has no choice but to appeal to Nick for help once more. How will he respond?

Despite his insistence that their relationship is temporary, Nick has missed his silent pupil, and when she returns to his home he's determined to keep her there this time. But when his family responsibilities intrude on their fragile truce they turn to an unlikely source for help.

Nick's friend Dan introduces them to his friend Tom Shore, whose West Yorkshire moorland farm offers the perfect solution to Nick's problem. Freya enjoys the company of Tom's new bride, Ashley, and that of Dan's enigmatic brother Nathan Darke and his brilliant submissive, Eva Byrne. And the surprise return of someone from Freya's past further enriches her growing circle of friends. But when personal tragedy strikes, will her Master be able to set aside his bitterness at her betrayal or was the fragile relationship doomed from the beginning. When everything is at stake, both Freya and Nick face the hardest choice of all.

Do opposites attract, or are some differences just too wide to bridge? And is true submission the one thing money can't buy?

Dedication

As ever, this book is dedicated to Hannah and John for their long-suffering patience, and to my mum
for her unwavering confidence in me.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Chapter One

As my brain clears, I start to work out what to do. Not that my options are many and varied exactly. The clearest certainty is that I need to get to A & E. That means an ambulance probably, or a taxi perhaps. Except the nearest taxis are in the town centre, a good ten minutes' walk, and every time I try to get to my feet I feel dizzy. I can't see me managing to walk into town. I'd end up under a bus more likely. And of course I can't phone for an ambulance. I can't phone anyone.

Shit. Shit. Shit!

I wish, for the umpteenth time, that Summer was still here. But she isn't, and it's a Saturday so Max at the bank won't be in his office for another two days. And there's no one else I can call. No one I can text. No one I can ask to help me. Maybe, in a few hours' time, my body will be over the initial shock and I'll be able to manage more than a few steps without feeling faint. I glance at the clock. It's just going up to five in the afternoon now and I realise I'm looking at the possibility of being stuck here all night, unable to move, my wrist throbbing and swelling and turning all shades of purple in front of my eyes. I so need to be in hospital, I need X-rays and a plaster room. I know that people don't die of broken wrists, but Christ, it fucking hurts.

How did I get to be so alone? I'm a nice person, mostly. I don't have any family but I must have friends. Somewhere. I deserve to have friends. There must be someone.

I wonder about my new best friend, Pat, but he's too far away and in any case I doubt he has my number programmed into his phone. He wouldn't have any idea who the soundless call was coming from—he'd probably think it was some sort of crank. He wouldn't put two and two together and realise I might need help. Summer hasn't answered a call from me in weeks, but in my desperation I stagger across the apartment to find my phone, tucked down the side of my sofa in the lounge. I try to call her, clumsily navigating my way through my speed dial with my right hand to find the last number I had for her. The call goes to voicemail after a couple of rings.

I'm sitting on my living room floor, my injured wrist laid across my lap as I assess my dwindling options. There's one person left who might, just possibly, be able to help me. Nick is nearby, hopefully. As far as I know he had no trips planned, this should have been the last day or so of my month with him so he might still be around the area. And, provided he hasn't deleted me from his speed dial, he'll know who's calling from the caller ID. And he'll know full well that I don't make voice calls. He'll realise. Surely he'll join up the dots.

I grab my phone and find Nick's number. I put the phone on speaker and hit call. And I wait.
"Hello?"

If there were any tears left I could have cried with relief when I hear Nick's voice come on the

line. At least I've made contact. Now all I need is to somehow make him understand enough of my predicament to get him to dial nine-nine-nine.

"Freya? Is that you? Freya?" He sounds concerned now. And maybe a little exasperated. Christ, don't let him hang up thinking I'm just messing about. My panic mounting, I do the first thing that occurs to me. I tap the phone. Twice. My safe signal, or one of them.

Silence. Then, "Freya, is something wrong?" His tone is softer now, and all concern.

He's getting it, thank God. I tap the phone twice again.

"Right. Freya, if you're there and listening to me, can you click into the phone? You remember that clicking noise you can make?" His tone has hardened, businesslike now.

I grab the phone with my right hand and jam it to my ear, clicking as loudly as I can into the mouthpiece. This is working. It has to work. I knew Nick could help me.

His next words confirm it. His tone is calm now, in control. "Okay, I get it. You're there. Now one click means no, two clicks mean yes. So, Freya, is there something wrong?"

I click twice.

"You need help?"

Again, two clicks.

"Are you at your apartment?"

Two clicks.

"Right. I'll be there in twenty minutes. Can you wait that long?"

I'm stunned. I never expected that. He's coming here! Actually coming. I just thought he'd suggest that I needed an ambulance and offer to make the call for me, get the paramedics here. I didn't expect him to just drop everything and come straight round to my flat.

"Freya, is twenty minutes all right?" He sounds worried now, so I give him two quick, reassuring clicks.

"Right. I'm on my way." The phone goes dead. But help is coming, so I sink onto my sofa, and wait.

He's here in just eighteen minutes. I'm assuming he was in Carmel when he took my call, so even on his motorbike he's broken a speed limit or two getting here. I guess that must mean something.

The welcome roar of his bike outside lets me know he's here, then the sound is muffled as he enters the underground car park. I don't see the bike, but I just know it's Nick. Half a minute later my door entry system buzzes. I'm waiting by the door so I press the button to let him into the building and take my front door off the latch. Then, exhausted by my efforts and overwhelmed by relief that my solitary ordeal is over, I sink to my knees.

It's there, kneeling just inside my door, leaning against the wall with my injured wrist cradled in my lap, that Nick finds me moments later. He dumps his crash helmet on the floor as he crouches

front of me. “Christ, Freya, what’s wrong? You look awful. Ashen...” He knows I won’t answer so he does a quick scan and immediately spots my wrist.

“Bloody hell, love, that looks sore.”

I nod, tears once more coursing down my cheeks. He reaches out, his palm gentle against my cheek. “You need to go to casualty, Freya. Get it X-rayed, though I wouldn’t mind betting it’s broken. Are you hurt anywhere else?”

I shake my head.

Suddenly his voice hardens as a thought occurs to him. “Fucking hell, did someone do this to you? Shall I call the police?”

Again I shake my head.

Now he’s puzzled. “So how...? Did you fall?”

I nod then wince as another wave of dizzying pain washes through me. He sees it, and drops the questions for now.

“Right, can you stand?”

I nod and try to get to my feet, but find it just too difficult. I’m cradling my injury with my good arm, and I can’t seem to get my balance. Nick stops my efforts with a hand on my shoulder.

“Keep still for now. Where are your car keys?”

I look at him, baffled. Why does he want my car keys? He needs a phone, surely?

“The keys, Freya? Unless you feel like driving yourself...?”

Crikey! He intends to drive me to the hospital. All the way to the nearest A & E, in Barrow Twenty-five miles away. Now this I never, ever expected. But the sense of relief that fills me as I realise I’m not going to be alone at the hospital is immense. I won’t be reduced to trying to explain my problem to people who don’t know me, not even able to fall back on signing or writing to get my words across. Nick might not know the details, but he does know how to communicate with me, how to pick up my signals. He’ll be able to help, and I feel safe as long as he’s here.

I point with my right hand to my bedroom. The keys are on my bedside table. I hope. That’s where I usually dump them. Nick heads off across my living room into the bedroom, before coming back a few moments later with my keys in his hand. He glances around the clutter of my living room with a wry smile suggesting he remembers my slovenly habits very well. He picks up my discarded jacket which I had left draped across the back of my sofa, and crouches in front of me again to gently wrap it around my shoulders.

“Now, is there anything else you need?”

I make a phone gesture with my right hand, and he glances again around the chaos. I point to the floor in front of my sofa where I’d been sitting when I called him. My phone is still there, just where I dropped it when Nick hung up and I knew help was on the way. He strides across the room to pick it up, and has the presence of mind to then also grab my shoulder bag from the sofa. As well as my do

keys the bag has my purse and credit cards in—so at least I'll be able to buy myself a coffee at the hospital. And get back into my flat later. Coming back to me, Nick slips the phone into the pocket of my jacket before gently helping me to my feet. He holds onto my bag as he manoeuvres me out of the door, before making sure the latch is dropped as he clicks it shut behind us.

A few minutes later I'm safely belted into the passenger seat of my Vanquish and Nick is reversing out of my parking space. He exits the car park slowly, emerging up the slope leading to the outside world, then turns right to cross the bridge over the river, heading for the main road to Barrow. I know we've at least a thirty minute drive in front of us, so I lean my head back against the headrest and let my eyelids droop.

* * * *

I wake up just as we arrive at the hospital, a huge sprawling place that serves all of South Cumbria. Nick heads for a parking area close to the A & E entrance. He sorts out the pay and display before carefully extricating me from the car. His arm is around my waist as he leads me through the automatic doors and up to the A & E main reception desk. The helpful young man behind the desk smiles pleasantly at us.

"Good afternoon." He turns to the screen in front of him, poised to start inputting details.

"Can I have your name and date of birth, please?" It's obvious which of us needs medical attention so his question is directed at me.

Nick answers, brisk and businesslike, "This is Freya Stone. I don't know her date of birth, I daresay she does, but she's aphonic so she can't tell you. Can we skip that bit for now? She needs to see a doctor."

The young man's interest is properly engaged now and he looks at me much more closely.

"Aphonic?" He looks from me to Nick then back again, clearly at a loss as to the implications of this information.

Nick helps out again, "No vocal chords, at least none that work." A good enough description. Succinct. "So she can't talk. And as she's got a broken wrist in all probability she can't do her usual sign language either. So we're stuck with the information I can give for now."

"I see."

And I think he does as he types in a few more details then turns to Nick. "Could I have your name, please? Are you her next of kin?"

"My name's Nick Hardisty. Freya's my...girlfriend."

I glance at him, astonished. He just smiles at me and continues, "She has no family, at least not in this country, so I guess I'm the closest she has to next of kin. You can put my name down. That okay with you, love?"

He turns to look at me, and I just nod, my head whirling. Girlfriend? Next of kin? Not two hours ago I was totally alone, or so I thought. Now look.

“And how did this happen?” The receptionist is once more poised to fill in the blanks.

Nick turns to me.

“Not sure, actually. Did you have a fall or something?”

I nod, then in a moment of inspiration turn to point at one of the empty chairs in the waiting area. I use my right hand to simulate a tumbling motion.

“You fell off a chair?” This from the young man behind the desk. No flies on him. Perhaps aphonic women with broken wrists turn up at his A & E every day. Maybe he’s used to all this.

On a roll now, he plunges confidently on with his next question, “And how long ago did this happen, miss?”

Nick glances at me again. “Well, it was before five o’clock because that’s when you phoned me. Had it only just happened then?”

I shake my head slowly, trying to remember the sequence of events. How long did I sit there on my living room floor, wondering what the hell to do, who to phone for help? It seemed like a long time, but I suspect in reality it was no more than half an hour.

“How long then? An hour?”

I shake my head, using my right hand to give a ‘smaller’ signal with my index finger and thumb.

“Half an hour?”

I nod, and the receptionist glances at the clock on the waiting room wall. “Okay, it’s almost twenty past six now. So shall we say two hours?”

That sounds about right so I nod again.

“Okay, there’s more, but that’ll do for now.” He’s clearly decided he has enough information to at least let a doctor have a look at me. “Please take a seat and someone will call you into a cubicle soon to do an initial assessment.”

Nick thanks him, then we settle ourselves on the hard plastic seating arranged in rows across the waiting area. Less than five minutes later I hear my name being called on a loudspeaker system asking me to go to cubicle three.

“Do you want me to come in with you?” Nick helps me to my feet and waits for my response.

I nod vigorously—it never occurred to me that he might not. Nick again holds my bag, and now my jacket as well, as together we make our way down the long, clinical corridor. Nick opens the door to cubicle three. Inside we meet a motherly-looking casualty nurse dressed in purple scrubs. She has bright yellow Crocs on her feet, and I guess these are the most practical footwear for her line of work. The cubicle has two doors, the one we just entered by and another on the opposite side. This second door is open slightly to reveal the clinical efficiency of the main crash area. I can see staff in similar purple or pale blue tunics hurrying about, and what seems like enough technology to launch a lun

expedition. Our nurse, whose name badge proclaims her to be one Sheila Laycock, rank of Staff Nurse smiles at us both. She gestures for me to scramble onto the trolley, which takes up most of the space in the small room. Nick takes the one chair at the foot of the trolley, my belongings at his feet. Staff Nurse Laycock has a clipboard in her hand and, once she's happy that I'm properly installed on the trolley, she glances at it then at me.

"Aphonic, I see. Would you like a British Sign Language translator or will your friend do that?" She nods in Nick's direction, which he takes as his cue to explain.

"Normally Freya uses sign, and I can translate. But, as you see, her hands are out of action for the time being, at least one of them is. She's left-handed, so writing might be tricky too." He turns to me. "Can you type with your right hand, do you think?"

I make a rocking gesture with my uninjured hand to indicate yes, I probably could. It'll be slow but I'll get by. Standing, Nick shoves his iPhone into my right hand, as the nurse gently lifts my left wrist to examine it.

"The notes say you fell off a chair?"

I may be imagining it, but I detect what seems to be a slightly suspicious glance directed at Nick. His exasperated eye rolling confirms my suspicion. It never occurred to me that anyone would think he did this to me, the very idea is laughable, but I suppose Staff Nurse Laycock sees enough victims of domestic violence in these cubicles to set her antennae quivering. I want to set the record straight, but even with Nick's iPhone at my disposal communication is more than a little tricky right now. I settle for a brief nod in response to the question, but drop the iPhone into my lap to reach for Nick with my good hand. He takes it, and I squeeze, hoping the nurse will spot the gesture and interpret it correctly.

Her mouth flattens, and I daresay the jury is still out. It's progress, though.

I hiss sharply as Staff Nurse Laycock gently lifts my wrist. She's being careful but even so she presses on the bruising.

"I'm sorry. First things first, some pain relief. Then we need to X-ray this wrist, find out exactly what's going on here."

The mention of pain relief is the most encouraging thing I've heard since Nick told me he was on his way, and Staff Nurse Laycock is as good as her word. She bustles off, but soon comes back with a young and rather harassed-looking doctor in tow. He gives me a very cursory once-over and jots something on the top sheet of the notes attached to a clipboard on the end of my trolley. It seems that he authorises Staff Nurse Laycock to administer a suitable dose of pain relief, sufficient to make me feel more comfortable. The requisite drugs are quickly produced, two white capsules and a glass of water to swill them down. I take no persuading. The staff nurse leaves us to our own devices for a few minutes to give the drugs time to take effect before she tries to examine my wrist in any great detail.

Ten minutes later she reappears.

"Right, are you feeling a bit more comfortable now?"

I nod, realising that the painkiller has kicked in already and the searing pain in my wrist already fading to a dull throb.

“Good. I’ve ordered some X-rays for you, then the doctor will need to take a proper look. The X-ray department is along the corridor to the end, then turn right. I’ll find you a wheelchair.” At my startled expression she goes on to explain. “You’ve had a shock and you look a bit unsteady to me. It’ll make me feel better anyway if you weren’t hiking around the casualty department. So, a wheelchair then?” She nods in Nick’s direction. “You’ve brought a nice strapping bloke with you—he can show you around.”

Can’t he just? But I don’t bother to elaborate, just nod and wait for my wheelchair.

An hour later, the casualty doctor has confirmed that my X-rays show my wrist to be broken in two places. But she assures me they’re clean breaks and should heal nicely. In about six weeks’ time I’ll be good as new again. She goes on to explain that I’ll be in plaster during that time, but that I should soon feel a lot more comfortable. They’ll set my wrist here in the casualty department temporarily, and I’ll need to come back to the fracture clinic at the hospital in two days to have the temporary cast removed and a proper one put on. The first pot will be heavy and feel awkward, but the next one will be a lot lighter and I’ll be able to manage better by then. She must be able to read my concerns flitting across my face as I contemplate the prospect of six weeks with my wrist in plaster and pats my hand sympathetically.

“I realise this is a big deal to you. You need your hands, more than most of us perhaps. But you can fix this. And in the meantime you’ve a good excuse not to do any washing up. You’ll need to keep your plaster cast dry.”

Nick chuckles. “Freya’s not especially keen on washing up at the best of times. What about showering? Or taking a bath?”

The doctor nods. “Yes, showers are a problem, though some people manage by wrapping the cast in a plastic bag. A bath’s easier, though, you can just keep that hand out of the water.” She looks at me sternly. “You’ll need to be very careful getting in and out of the bath. Your balance will be all over the place until you get used to the uneven weight of the cast, and it’s very easy to slip. I don’t want to be seeing you back here with the other arm broken too.”

Me neither. I wonder if I can manage a whole six weeks without having a bath or a shower. Possibly, but I’ll need to invest in a crate or two of deodorant.

We’re shown into another cubicle, which the staff call the plaster room. Clearly this is where pots get put on. Nick squeezes my hand and we wait patiently while Staff Nurse Laycock assembles the gear she’ll need for putting my wrist in plaster, which seems to mostly consist of a plastic bucket half full of tepid water, some rolls of bandages and a huge plastic overall. She covers herself with the overall, settles me on a bed with a splash-proof cover on, places a towel over my clothes then gets started. It’s a messy business, but within a few minutes my wrist is encased in quick drying plaster.

bandages. Staff Nurse Laycock arranges my wrist carefully to make sure it's in exactly the right position before she loops the plaster around my thumb, effectively preventing any further movement in the joint. She finishes with a dry top cover then hands Nick a card with my appointment for the fracture clinic in two days' time.

And that's it, I'm sorted. At least for now. The effects of the painkillers are wearing off by the time we cross the car park back to my car, but my wrist feels sort of okay now that the pot is taking all the weight. I manage to get back into the passenger seat unaided, but Nick has to click my seatbelt in place.

As we pull away from the hospital I'm wondering how I'll get to the clinic for my new pot to be put on, as it's clear I won't be driving for a few weeks. I need to ask Nick to pre-book me a taxi. I'm too shattered to concentrate on typing the message into his phone just yet, though, so I settle back and rest my eyes again.

Chapter Two

When I wake up, it's to find us purring along the thickly wooded road leading from Newt Bridge down towards Cartmel. This is definitely not the quickest route from Barrow to Kendal. I glance across at Nick, frowning in puzzlement.

He doesn't even look at me, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. But he's aware I'm awake, and is clearly looking for some sort of explanation for this detour. "I thought you'd be better at mine for a few days at least. Maybe later, when you've got the lightweight plaster on, you'll be able to manage. Meanwhile, you need someone to look after you and I guess that's me. Any objections?"

Well, that explains the detour. Now he does look at me, and I see the steely glint of the Dom in his eyes. He expects me to obey him, even though we're not—what?—together anymore. And for my part I appreciate now that old habits die hard, and maybe not so old ones as well. I nod in acquiescence. Satisfied, Nick returns his attention to driving.

My last thought before I drift back to sleep is that at least I can have a bath now. Nick won't let me slip.

I waken again when the engine dies. This time we're outside Nick's bungalow, the Vanquish occupying its old position in his cobbled forecourt. Nick gets out first, coming around to open my door and help me to my feet. He drops my jacket across my shoulders then reaches in to grab my bag from the back seat before looping his arm around my waist. I'm surprised by the gesture, but come to the conclusion that it must be to make sure any last lingering effects of the pain relief don't cause me to make an exhibition of myself on his front doorstep.

Once inside, Nick directs me into the comfortable lounge and tells me to sit down on the couch. He does, and he comes around to slip my shoes off, and lifts my feet up too. Then he stands, looking down at me, very much the intimidating Dom.

"Right, Earl Grey, isn't it? And, you, you don't move until I get back."

Ah, bossy as ever. But not quite the Dom after all. I nod, and settle happily into the cushions. I could get to like this being looked after lark.

A few minutes later I'm sipping hot Earl Grey, my feet on Nick's lap as he idly massages my toes. Christ, he never did this before—it feels wonderful. Almost worth breaking my wrist for. He smiles at me and waits patiently until I finish my tea before taking the cup and setting it down on the floor. Then he shoves his iPhone into my hand instead.

"Right, so what were you doing standing on a chair? You *were* standing, I take it?" He's assuming his stern Dom tone again.

He pauses and I nod. So far so good.

“Right. And how did you come to fall off it?”

He releases my foot to point at the phone, the gesture meaning me to get on with my explanation. It's slow going, but eventually I manage to type in what happened, all about my ill-fated plan to wash my curtains, and my intention to get my flat cleaned.

He looks puzzled. “This domestic goddess stuff isn't your usual style, if you don't mind me saying so. And your flat still looks like you've had a visit from the drug squad. What brought all this on then?”

I was bored. I type the words laboriously, then hand the phone back to him.

He's not impressed. “Bored people read a good book or go shopping. In your case they make quilts or even swan off to Australia. Bored people don't wash curtains, not as a rule. And you definitely don't. Try again, Freya.”

I glare at him mutinously, but he's unmoved. He simply continues to massage my feet, and he waits. Eventually I'm the one who cracks. I know when I'm beat.

I was missing you. I've been pretty miserable.

He smiles at me, his eyes warm. “I've missed you too, Freya. It's good to see you again, though I'm sorry you're injured. Still, I'm glad you phoned me.”

I couldn't think of anyone else.

“Ah, I'm wounded. I was your last resort then. Still, I'll take what I can get.”

And his smile reaches his eyes as he continues to roll my feet in his hands, the firm strokes sending shivers up my legs. It's sensual but tender too, and I could sit here all day. The tension and fear of earlier in the day just melt away, I'm totally relaxed.

“So, you're to be my guest again, at least for a little while. I suppose I'd better get some fruit bought in. Any requests?” His eyes take on a warm glint as he carries on with his gentle teasing.

I shrug then shake my head.

“Right. I'll choose then. Tesco's online do bananas and such like. But I will need a list of things you need from your flat. I can nip round later and collect enough stuff to keep you going as you've turned up here in just what you stand up in. You know I much prefer you without knickers, but I expect you'll want some spares eventually. What if you get run over by a bus?”

I suspect I'm safe from the hazards of major road traffic accidents for the time being, but even so I hand over my keys then use Nick's phone to make a list of essentials for him to pick up for me. The

I curl up on his settee and fall asleep again.

* * * *

When I awaken it's dark outside and I'm alone in the lounge. The sound of a television is coming from somewhere, the low murmur of the voices rising and falling. It's a football commentary. I slide my feet off the couch and place them on the floor, using my good arm to steady myself as I slowly, experimentally, get to my feet. No dizziness, no almost fainting. I think the combined effects of shock and painkillers may have worn off. I wander off in search of the football, because there, I suspect, I will find Nick.

He's in the kitchen, casually lounging at the large oak table there. Some European football match is on the television, and as I watch from the doorway he seems to be dividing his attention between that and his laptop on the table in front of him. I can just make out the Tesco's logo on the screen so I assume he's buying bananas. He has his back to me, so my choices seem to be I either knock over the whistle. I settle for knocking, and he turns to face me.

"Hey, looking better. The sleep did you good. I hope you're not too hungry, though—earliest delivery slot I can get is tomorrow morning."

I shrug. To be honest, all I really want right now is tea. I head for the kettle, but he soon puts a stop to that.

"No way are you getting hold of a kettle of boiling water. At least not until you've practised using your right hand a bit. Sit down. I'll get it."

I do as I'm told—what else? And spot Nick's phone next to his laptop so I decide to make use of it. I'm getting quite good with my right hand now.

Thanks for being so kind. I didn't expect you to, not after everything.

He reads my note as he puts my cup in front of me and squeezes my shoulder reassuringly.

"It's no hardship, Freya. You're very easy on the eye. You brighten the place up, even with your broken wing. I just wish you weren't always so chatty."

I smile into my tea. It's really very nice to be back.

We spend the rest of the evening curled up together on Nick's sofa watching television, first through the end of the football, then Nick lets me flick through the channels until I find a re-run of *Dirty Dancin'*. The story's a bit dated now, perhaps it always was, but Patrick Swayze is just timeless. Eventually, despite having been nodding off most of the afternoon and evening, I'm yawning again.

"Time for bed, I think. I've made up the bed in the spare room for you."

I just stare at him in astonishment. I'd assumed, naturally...

“You’re not my trainee anymore, Freya. You’re not my anything. I don’t have the right to lay hand on you now, let alone fuck you. You don’t have to sleep with me.”

But I want to. Please.

I don’t protest, though, there’s no point. He’s being incredibly nice to me, looking after me, letting me stay here. Ordering healthy food for me. I really am grateful, but he made his position about our relationship clear two weeks ago, and foot massage or not it’s obvious nothing has fundamentally changed. I nod, manage a small smile, and head off to the spare room without doing anything unduly pathetic.

* * * *

I can’t sleep. I was tired earlier, when we were watching television. Now I’m wide awake, my mind racing, whirling with confused, haphazard thoughts. My head is a chaotic jumble of Queen Anne chairs, dirty curtains, plaster of Paris bandages, bananas and hot Earl Grey tea. My wrist is sore, but not so much that it’s that that’s keeping me awake. My biggest problem is the fact that Nick Hardison is sleeping just in the next room, and I’m stuck in here on my own. I don’t feel quite as alone as I do back in my apartment, but it’s not enough. I need to be with him, properly with him.

I reach out and switch on the bedside light. It’s after two in the morning—I’ve been lying here for over two hours, just churning over the day’s events in my head. And I keep coming back to the same place, the same core fact. No matter what he might have said to me, no matter how many times he tells me we don’t have a future together, when I needed him he came. No messing, no questions asked. He just came. That must mean something. And on that thought I slide out of bed and head for the door. The hallway is in darkness, but I remember there’s a light switch just outside my door. I fumble for it—the last thing I need is to trip up in the dark, break something else.

Nick drove back to my apartment while I was asleep on his sofa and brought me a couple of pairs of pyjamas, but I didn’t bother to put any on when I got ready for bed. I just stripped off my clothes and slid into bed naked. I don’t bother now as I make my way silently along the hallway to Nick’s bedroom door. I open it softly, and for long moments just stand in the doorway watching him sleep. I wonder if he’d notice if I were to creep in and snuggle up alongside him. I don’t even need to go under the duvet, and I could sneak back to the spare room before he wakes up.

“Are you looking for a nightdress?” Not asleep then. Nick’s low voice rumbles from the bed, and he props himself up on one elbow to watch me.

I shake my head and he continues to hold my gaze. It’s just like old times. Well, almost.

“Ah, right. The bathroom then?”

Again I shake my head.

He waits a moment, and I feel his eyes raking up and down my naked body, illuminated by the

light from the hallway. Maybe I should have pulled a nightshirt on. Maybe I'm being just too obvious. Too needy. Particularly as he can't fail to spot the waist chain still suspended around my hip. Eventually he breaks the silence, his voice soft now, "Are you looking for me, Freya?"

This time I nod. And wait by the door. Nick sits up and shuffles along to make room at his side. He folds back the duvet, and beckons me forward. "Come here, Freya."

I move forward, and he pats the empty bed alongside him. "Hop in then."

I don't need to be asked twice, and I scramble into his bed. Immediately Nick's arms are around me, my chilled body pulled up against his warm, hard one.

"Christ, girl, you're freezing." And he wraps himself around me, his chest against my back, his knees under mine. He pulls me close, one arm across my stomach the other across my breasts. I snuggle back against him, my bottom tucked into his groin. His cock is erect, I can feel it against my bum, and I'm gratified that my naked presence still has that effect on him, but he makes no move to take matters further. Instead, he just holds me close as his warmth seeps through to my bones. And for the last I can sleep.

Chapter Three

When I wake up I'm alone, though the bed is still warm on Nick's side so he can't have left that long ago. I try some experimental movements with my arm to find out how painful it is now, and I'm pleasantly surprised. It aches, and feels incredibly heavy under the weight of the plaster, but it's bearable. That sorted, I decide it's time to go looking for Nick.

I wriggle myself onto the edge of the bed and plant my feet on the floor. I feel distinctly shaky but quickly realise that it's hunger. I pretty much lived off a liquid diet of tea yesterday, and in fairness I've not been eating that well for the last couple of weeks. Now, I'm ravenous.

And still naked. As all my clothes are still in the spare room I borrow a T-shirt of Nick's from a neat pile in the bottom of his wardrobe. It's black with a vivid and horribly Gothic bat design on the front, and a list of tour dates on the back, a souvenir of Meat Loaf's *Back Into Hell* tour. I wonder if Nick was there, in Manchester maybe. I'll ask him. Meanwhile, the T-shirt comes almost to my knees so I'm decently covered as I make my way carefully along the hallway in search of sustenance and my host.

I find both in the kitchen. Nick turns as I appear in the doorway, his good morning smile dazzling.

"Morning, gorgeous. I was just about to bring you some tea in bed. Do you want it there or are you staying up?"

I point to the table and take a seat, and in moments there's a hot cup of my beloved, aromatic Earl Grey in front of me.

"Are you hungry? Tesco haven't delivered yet so we're low on supplies. I could probably find something, though."

I don't even need to nod. My stomach growls loudly at the mere mention of food, the sound echoing across the kitchen. Nick chuckles—his lovely, sexy laugh curling my toes—and opens the fridge door.

"Right. It's eggs then. An omelette, perhaps? We've three slices of bread, not counting the crusts, so you can have toast." He glances back at me expectantly.

I spot his phone, conveniently to hand as ever it seems, and open the note app.

Boiled eggs and toast would be nice. Soldiers.

"Soldiers! I haven't had boiled eggs and soldiers since I was nine." He fixes me with a most stern look. "You dare tell anyone and you won't sit down for a week, broken wrist or not. Right, ho

many minutes do I boil an egg for?"

I grab the phone again.

Would you really spank me? Four minutes. I'd like that very much.

He looks at me under his eyebrows as he reads. "You want me to spank you for four minutes? C
is this egg timing information?"

Eggs. I'm starving. But I'd like the spanking too, please.

He reads my note, and turns to me, his expression serious. "Things are different now, Freya. O
previous arrangement is over and I'm not sure how things stand between us now. You're not m
trainee anymore, and you're not my sub either. Right now, I'm not sure what you are. What I am sur
of, though, is that I'll be delighted to oblige you in the matter of the spanking. But before we get
that we need to talk, and soon. First, though, do I dump the eggs in boiling water or let it heat u
around them?"

I smile to myself as I write my reply.

Boiling.

The eggs turn out pretty good, and we both love dunking our toast soldiers into the soft yolks.
Tesco's are due in about an hour, so we decide to wait for them and plan a blow-out for lunch. As
finish my second cup of tea I reach for the phone again.

Can I have a bath please?

He smiles at me as he reads my request. "Yes, of course. You'll have to use the main bathroom
my en suite only has a shower. Will you need any help?"

I think so. I won't be able to wash my hair. And the doctor said I might slip.

He smiles. "Right. I'll go turn the taps on then and find you some towels."

A few minutes later I present myself in the bathroom to find the bath three-quarters full and
smelling fabulous, sort of spicy and lemony. It's a fresh scent, not at all girly but not overly masculin
either. Nick appears in the room behind me, a low stool from the bedroom in his hands.

"You can rest your arm on this, keep it out of the water. And it won't ache as much if it's

supported. How's it feeling today, by the way? Do you need any more painkillers? I keep some fairly strong stuff to hand."

Now he tells me. There was no talk of strong painkillers when he was caning and whipping me. Still, he's the very epitome of kindness and consideration now, when I need it, and I'm grateful. I shake my head to the medication, and make to pull the T-shirt off. It's awkward with just one arm, and Nick sees, steps forward to assist.

"Here. Let me help." He slips the shirt off, sliding it carefully down my injured arm. And to his credit he manages not to ogle me too openly as he offers me his hand to help me into the bath. I find that vaguely disappointing, but settle down to enjoy the glorious warmth of the scented water as Nick solicitously places my left arm on the stool.

The bath is a free-standing, claw foot type, and Nick is able to settle himself behind me on another low stool. The taps are by my feet.

"I found some shampoo you left behind. Conditioner too. Tip your head back and close your eyes so I can wet your hair, then let me do the rest."

Obedient as ever, I do as I'm told while he uses the shower attachment to spray water over my head. I lie perfectly still as he massages the creamy lather through my hair, using the shower again to rinse it, then repeats the whole process. Finally he finger combs the conditioner through, and I'm wondering how many other wannabe submissives he might have done this for. Not many, I suspect.

At last he asks me if I want to leave the conditioner to soak in for a while, rinse it out later, after I'm finished washing. I nod, but make no attempt to reach for the soap. Eventually Nick leans forward and his lips beside my ear.

"I've managed to keep my hands off you so far. That won't last much longer. And when I touch you, it won't be just about helping you in and out of the bath. You do understand that, don't you?"

These are the words I've been waiting for. My response—I arch my back to shove my breasts above the layer of soapy suds floating on the surface of the water, my wordless invitation as plain as I can make it.

He gets my message and leans in to nuzzle my neck as he trails the fingers of his left hand across my shoulder then down towards my breast. He uses his middle finger to make a circular pattern in the soapy water on the underside of the soft mound before slowly tracing the outline of my areola. I gasp and stiffen as the familiar tingle connects my breasts to my groin, then I relax as he takes my nipple in his fingers and caresses it lightly. His touch is all about arousal, almost a form of worship as he strokes my breasts reverentially. His right hand joins in the fun, and he presses my breasts together, the nipples now swollen and stiff, pebbling under his careful ministrations.

"How long is it since you had an orgasm, Freya?" His words are soft, murmured into my ear.

I shrug, although I know exactly how long. It was that morning, the horrible day he asked me to have sex with Dan and eventually ejected me from his house. That day, which started so beautifully—

you discount my failed attempt to master caning. That day that started with a lovely, erotic spanking then an intense orgasm, and ended in total disaster for me. So yes, I do remember. It might as well be tattooed onto the inside of my eyelids, the image is so vivid.

“By my reckoning it’s about two weeks. Unless you’ve been playing any games of your own while you’ve been away from here. Have you, Freya?”

Current Dom or not, I know I can’t evade a direct question from Nick. I shake my head.

“But you were at the club. No one there take your fancy? I know you had offers.”

Christ, he would. And if he’s been monitoring my movements he must know that I didn’t scenter with anyone. Still, I shake my head.

“What about a little DIY action at home? I know you’re a randy little slut, I can’t believe you’ve been going without for a fortnight.”

Well, I have. And even if I hadn’t I’m not sure that makes me a slut. But this conversation is getting beyond what I can manage with one hand or nods and shakes of my head. I try to sit up intending to get out of the bath, but his arm tightens around me.

“Stay there. I intend to end your little self-imposed famine now, Freya, if you want me to. Do you? Do you want me to make you come, my sexy little slut?”

I may not be his submissive, or so he says, but he’s giving a fair imitation of a Dom right now. I decide I must be a slut after all, and go with it. I nod as I relax back into his arms. He kisses my ear before reaching down with his left hand to slip it between my legs. He eases his way through my folds to find my entrance then circles slowly, his fingertip just inside my pussy. I turn my face towards him, subconsciously seeking his lips. He brushes his mouth over mine then deepens the kiss, plunging his tongue into my mouth at the same time as he thrusts two fingers deep into my cunt. I thrust my hips upwards out of the water to meet his hand, gyrating my body to increase the friction. He adds a third finger, and the motion of his hand quickens as he sets up an insistent rhythm.

For a moment I recall the ‘rules’ of our most recent such encounters, but surely none of them applies now. He said he’d make me come, and I’m taking him up on that offer. Now. It doesn’t take long before my pussy starts to clench around his fingers, and I reach up behind my head to tunnel my fingers through his hair. I’m writhing in the water, squeezing my inner muscles hard as I hurtle towards my climax. It hits me hard, and I jerk violently, knocking my sore arm in the process. I feel it hurts, but nothing’s going to derail this fabulous experience. I seem to have waited so long to feel his hands on me, in me again, as I shiver and tingle and soar through my orgasm.

As the tremors recede I sink back into the bath, before lying motionless at last but his hands are still on me. His fingers remain buried deep inside me, the other hand caressing my swollen nipples. He lifts his head, breaking the kiss at last, and I’m looking into his deep grey eyes. I smile, nervous suddenly. Have I done something wrong? I’m not certain of our ground rules anymore.

His answering smile dispels any concerns. “Christ, Freya, your orgasms are so fucking beautiful.”

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