

MASTER *of* O

a novel by ERNEST GREENE

This excerpt contains the Foreword and first chapter of Master of O. To buy the entire book, go to MasterOfO.com or Stockroom.com.

Writers who want copies for review or interview opportunities with Ernest Greene may contact [Daedalus Publishing](http://DaedalusPublishing.com).



PRAISE FOR MASTER OF O

Sexy, decadent, powerful and fun — exactly what you want in a date and in a book!

Margaret Cho

Author, *The One I Want*

For me, reading *Master of O* evoked old feelings and also stirred new ones. The story has the quality of lived experience, elegantly yet explicitly capturing the way a certain elite likes to play. Modern erotica seems to have recently piqued the interest of the mainstream, but *Master of O* keeps its promises!

Dita Von Teese

Author, *Your Beauty Mark*

This is *The Story of O* for the new millennium. Brash, crass, terribly hip and framed in decadence and a fierce, in-your-face passion for fetish. An epic saga of desire so powerful it consumes the hearts and minds so elegantly hidden beneath designer names, fantastic settings and couture kink.

Laura Antoniou

Author, *The Marketplace*

In *Master of O*, Ernest Greene expertly manages a deft balancing act of sacred and profane. If you are looking for a wickedly debauched romp, you will not be disappointed. But look out — it is the truly thoughtful and profound narrative of transformation that will sneak up from behind and hold you captive!

Jillian Lauren

**New York Times Bestselling Author,
*Some Girls: My Life in a Harem***

Ernest Greene's long, loving riff on the most significant sexy book of all time is the real deal — gripping and pervy, knowing and witty, sexy and moving. If *The Story of O* played out today, here's what the other side of that classic tale would look like: brainy and literate, scarily observant of the details of the kinky LA good life, where exotic furs are faux, whips are Jay Marston, flight attendants wear translucent blue latex, and the power-trappings of masculine dress finally get the fetish stylist they deserve. Read it for the dead smart vocabulary and cryptic Jethro Tull reference, or read it for the hot, hot characters and the searing sex — but read it!

Carol Queen, PHD

Author, *The Leather Daddy & The Femme*

and co-founder of The Center for Sex & Culture

Ernest Greene's *Master of O* masters the reality of life in a dominant/submissive relationship. Written from the inside of the BDSM culture, *Master of O* is infused with hot sex, laced with pleasure and desire, sadism and masochism and sprinkled liberally with some fictional mystery dust. The delicious result takes the reader into the minds of both dominants and submissives in a way only someone with intimate knowledge of the real world of BDSM can accomplish. Other books are fiction with a dose of fictional BDSM. This is the real thing with a small smattering of fiction. I highly recommend this book to anyone who isn't satisfied with fifty shades of anything and wants to get the full 100%!

Ricci Joy Levy

Exec. Dir., Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance

Ernest Greene was put on earth to write *Master of O*. Reading this erotic noir is like rediscovering Mickey Spillane and the entire oeuvre of Grove Press in one sitting. Greene insightfully captures the psychic mysteries of S&M longing in this super-hip and trenchant thriller. His characters are superbly drawn and aching sexual. *Master of O* is an astonishing novel. Why haven't we heard of Greene before this? He is a master storyteller.

Mel Gordon

Author, *Voluptuous Panic:*

The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my loving, forbearing wife Marie without whose constant support and encouragement this book could never have been written.

FOREWORD

I read *Story of O* for the first time when I was still in my teens. I didn't know much then but one thing I already knew was that my sexuality wasn't emerging in the same way as that of those around me. I don't believe I ever had a sexual fantasy that wasn't fundamentally sadistic and in which I had power over my partner. I also don't remember one in which these factors were influenced by my feelings toward the object of my desires. There was no anger or hostility behind them, just a natural instinct toward cruelty and possession. That those I might cruelly possess would welcome such a thing was more or less a given.

To say that the book was a revelation is to understate its impact. For the first time I saw on paper vivid descriptions of my own fever dreams of conquest and surrender. Whatever critical things I might have to say about Pauline Réage, who I've come to know under two additional names as a result of informal scholarship, I give her unwavering credit for her grasp of visual detail and her ability to create believable characters in exotic circumstances. It was a very hot, very compelling read.

And yet, when I was done with it, I threw my Grove Press paperback against the wall in frustration. I'm not going to spoil the ending for those who still haven't read the original (which they should do right now before bothering with the rest of my ramblings here) but I think it fair to say that after a tremendously dramatic first two acts, it sort of comes apart. I

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was exasperated by the lack of any resolution that made sense in light of what had come before. I don't mean a happy ending, an unhappy ending or any ending of a particular sort. I'm just talking about an ending of some kind after having had such powerful emotions stirred by the experience of reading O's story. Where was the catharsis? Even Sade got Justine off-stage by having her struck by lightning, a fairly clumsy *deus ex machina* but incontestably consistent with the anti-moralistic dystopia in which his narrative was set.

Later I would come to understand the circumstances under which *Histoire d'O* was written and the author's reticence about seeing it in print at all, much less investing the effort necessary to conclude it in some way that would satisfy teenage boys living in Denver, Colorado twenty years later.

She'd written it as a somewhat sardonic gift for a lover with whom she didn't share the experiences or the interests packed into the book's few but powerful pages and never imagined it would see the light of day, much less become a significant influence on late twentieth-century fiction and remain in print continuously for six decades. We have every reason to believe from her late-life interviews as Ann Desclos that she felt as charitably toward O as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle felt toward Sherlock Holmes – not very. Like Conan Doyle, she wanted her best-known invention to go away and quit distracting readers from her more important work.

But O wouldn't lie down for that. There were things almost beyond imagining that she would do to please those to whom she'd surrendered herself but there were things she would not do for them, for those who fell wildly in love with her in their dreams or even for the mortal woman who created her, and quietly unveiling all her mysteries before fading into obscurity was not one of them.

I felt at the time that there was another story that had been left untold, a further suspicion validated by the writer's own later reflections. She had glimpsed a whole world but

didn't care to enter it and tantalized us with her extrapolations from what she'd casually observed. I never understood why O, who was unstintingly depicted as a voracious, conscienceless sexual predator prior to her first encounter with René, gave it all up for a young man who seemed little more than a cipher – shallow, capricious and altogether unworthy of such devotion.

O's submission to Sir Stephan was somehow a bit more comprehensible, even though she felt none of the affection for him she ostensibly maintained for René. This makes sense only if you discard Jean Paulhan's completely risible contention that the physical and psychological pleasures of masochistic sexual slavery had nothing whatever to do with O's limitless obedience to two entirely different men.

Subsequent experience of my own suggests that Paulhan was lying in the service of having his lover's book taken seriously as literature rather than dismissed as pornography. This was disingenuous on his part and dishonest on hers. Whatever she didn't know about real BDSM people, Réage-Aury-Desclos understood the plain logic that no one ever took a second whipping out of love. For someone who seeks only to suffer and serve, O is suspiciously orgasmic under circumstances inconsistent with romantic martyrdom.

Even back then, a virgin myself, I got it that someone was telling a real whopper here. If I hadn't read Paulhan's whining yet defiant apologia first and then seen the story arc run over by a bus that could have been driven by Michael O'Donahue at the end I might not have reacted with such exasperation. But as the whole thing was presented, I found it an infuriating tease, as if the writer knew a whole lot more but didn't care to expose it or herself to the accusations that it would surely bring.

In this she set the precedent for mainstream writers who take on the subject of BDSM to this day with a disclaimer to the effect that none of their understanding is derived from their personal histories. If that were true, why would we find

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any of what they have to say credible in the slightest? They aren't recounting voyages to distant planets no one else has ever visited. They're telling us about people they know a bit but whose company they don't care to be seen as keeping.

Well that's just bullshit, and Desclos finally owned it, at least a little, toward the end by admitting that the characters were people she'd observed in passing and that secret sexual cabals were not all that uncommon among the band of mystical intellectuals with whom she traveled, particularly in her earlier life.

She was, in fact, bisexual and had a long and passionate affair with the English socialist Edith Thomas. Prior to WWII she had been part of a circle of rightist intellectuals with an inchoate nostalgia for feudalism. After the war, in which she had fought for The Resistance, she kept faster company among models and actresses as well as her fellow members of The French Academy. Her publisher, Jacques Pauvert, was a friend of Paulhan and also a bit of a showman who had ginned up a *succès de scandale* by publishing Sade, something Sade had attempted himself with much less salubrious results. O, we discover, was short for Ondine, an acquaintance known for her heavy drinking and affinity for violent men. While the novel is no *roman à clef*, my hunch that it was grounded in some measure of reality and that we were only being spoon-fed parts of that reality appears to have some foundation in fact.

My job, my calling in life, was to explore those foundations in fact in the most personal way possible, to "fix" the story by living it openly and giving myself to it completely, hoping to return with more complete and reliable information. I could not be O any more than Desclos could have been. I'm neither female nor submissive. The former was obvious to everyone and the latter was obvious to me. But I could be O's master. I could hardly do a worse job of it than the ones she'd been given to and there was no other life possible for me in any case. I

had about as much chance of being vanilla as Liberace had of being straight. It just wasn't happening.

Fortunately, as I would learn, kinky people have radar for each other somewhat similar to "gaydar." A girl a year ahead of me in school – a cheerleader with seemingly no reason whatsoever to take an interest in a singularly unpopular brainiac – initiated me into the life I would live from then on by suggesting that I tie her up with scarves and spank her with a belt before we had conventional intercourse the first time. How much more do you need to know about me than that I found this not the least bit peculiar and threw myself into all aspects of it, including the fucking, without hesitation? That proved to be the schematic on which virtually all my subsequent relationships right up to the present have been constructed.

While I don't think that's the case for everyone who engages in this kind of sex from time to time, I think it's orientational in the way that being gay is orientational to those of us for whom the alternative would be celibacy rather than convention. I've been the dominant partner in BDSM relationships virtually exclusively for over forty years and I suppose there's little point in wishing I could be something else at this late date. It's a good thing I'm not.

There are some very fucked up things about my life, but my sexuality isn't one of them. I believe kink, like gay, is at least partially heritable and there are other members of my family in at least four generations who seem to carry a sort of "marker" for this kind of sexuality. I can see it clearly in some and not the least in others. And they can see it in me. If you get around to reading the rest of this book, you'll find that family dynamic very much at work, as I'm pretty sure it was at work in René and Stephan.

Alas, the novel's author didn't like those guys much and wasn't very interested in them. It could be argued she didn't like O either, but at least found her artistically engaging.

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What got to me when I read the book, what gets to me whenever I see heterosexual dominant men portrayed in books and on film, is how simplistically they're designed and how utterly inexplicable their appeal to the fabulous women they invariably attract. There must be something about them – about us – that some very powerful women find so compelling they're eager to be bound, lashed, ass-fucked, passed around among friends, branded and pierced in order to fulfill their wishes. Reading about them or seeing them on the screen we wouldn't have a clue where that appeal might lie. How in the world do Mickey Rourke and James Spader hook up with Kim Basinger and Maggie Gyllenhaal? Yes, they're successful men with all the outward trappings, but these things alone hardly explain their attractiveness, especially when they're otherwise so difficult to like.

Once again, the problem lies with the observer. The writers who invent these characters are nothing like them and can't see them as anything more than damaged products of catastrophic childhoods, the kind of shallow psychiatric motivation against which aspiring writers are wisely cautioned in Creative Writing classes. Because straight men rarely speak honestly with one another about the specifics of their sexual habits, those who are not kinky could well be having drinks with a beautiful and fascinating woman's master and have no clue about it. That cluelessness is a dead zone in which only toxic stereotypes can flourish.

I've spent a fair amount of time among other sexually dominant men and the most I can tell you about them with any degree of assurance is that they were in no way like their fictional counterparts and, more importantly, in no way like one another outside of their sexual proclivities. One of the hard lessons I've learned in my decades of being out and living among those with whom I could be is that we are not all brothers and do not all see who we are and what we do in the same way, much less in the way that outsiders see us.

We have no special claim to authority over those who submit to us and are guilty of no specific sin in accepting their submission. They're all different and so are we. Some of us are caring and sensitive as are some of the women with whom we're compatible. Some of us are selfish and conscienceless, as are some of them. We're pretty much human in all the usual ways and human in one particular way peculiar to our kind. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. Indeed, I've stuck to it throughout my entire career in writing and in filming and I'm not likely to let go of it now.

I first came to Los Angeles under the thin cover of pursuing a career in mainstream screenwriting. I had a bit of early success and plenty of false encouragement but that didn't really matter because it was only a façade to begin with. I really came out here to find others with whom I shared that specific human peculiarity and devoted myself to it with an enthusiasm that, applied to writing screenplays, might have made me a lot of money, the one thing I regret about the course I ultimately chose.

I made one attempt to write a comedy about Bettie Page set at the height of her career, with which I'd become familiar while working on a piece about her for *Rolling Stone*. While everyone who read it had nice things to say about it, I was told in no uncertain terms that it would not get made (which it might have been a few years later, as someone else's version did end up in production with disastrous results). I took that as an invitation to pursue other kinds of employment if this was the material that interested me.

Thankfully, being a pervert is much less of a disadvantage to a pornographer. Let me say right now that it's not entirely helpful even in that endeavor. Porn producers aren't as different from mainstream producers as either would like to believe. Both are surprisingly conventional when it comes to sex overall and are content to let the sausage making be carried on by others far from the golf courses the producers frequent.

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I've never pretended to be normal and thus have never been a welcome presence in the executive suites (such as they are) of porn barons. They prefer to keep me on the set making what I make which they can sell at a considerable profit without having to spend much time in my company. God forbid that someone who got into porn because he wanted to express certain ideas about sex should ever be in charge of anything when it's understood the occupation is a cynical dodge to turn a few bucks off the shameful needs of the hoopes. A sincere pornographer is a reproachful reminder of the underlying energies that propel the whole enterprise. It's best to keep them at barge-pole distance.

Nevertheless, in pornography my mission was not to be thwarted. If this were the only medium in which I would be permitted to express myself on the subject of sexual sadomasochism I would accept it for that purpose no matter who ended up taking the profits.

If I found *Story of O's* portrayal of BDSM overall and dominant men in particular disappointing, the porn equivalent would prove enraging by comparison. My first kink-porn gig was as a bondage rigger, a position not yet officially recognized on the end credits of XXX vids, for Marilyn Chambers' last feature before her first retirement in 1984. And what a gig it was. Marilyn proved charming and cooperative, relaxing while I crawled all over her petite, next-to-naked chassis as I tied her to a bed. I got paid a hundred bucks for this and, looking back, think it may have been my best hire as a crew hog.

Subsequently signing on with what was then the biggest producer of "specialty bondage videos" in the same capacity, I soon discovered that porn's ideas about any kind of unconventional sexuality were no less ugly and inaccurate than those of the mainstream entertainment business of the time.

"Bondage videos," for those lucky enough never to have seen one from the era, existed in an alternate universe where there were no men, no directly sexual activity and a whole lot

of pissed off women who tied each other up and beat on each other for no apparent reason. Neither dominant nor submissive players were coached to show any pleasure in what they did. The dominant women barked and scolded. The submissive women begged and whimpered. Eventually some contrived plot twist reversed their positions so that the barkers now begged and the beggars now barked.

It was an ugly, brainless and completely inaccurate conception of the real world in which I spent my off hours learning and loving and living among the fascinatingly diverse crowd that made up the non-commercial BDSM scene back in the day. We were few in number at the time, Madonna having not yet made corsets and spanking trendy, and most of us would not have been considered conventionally attractive in the way the younger kinksters I meet now tend to be. But we brought great enthusiasm to what we did, practiced it with meticulous care for the safety and pleasure of our partners and, unlike the preposterous melodramas shot in the cheesy studios where I worked, understood that the purpose of it all was sexual satisfaction in equal measure for everyone involved.

It took me seven years of tendonitis-inducing rope work on concrete floors before I finally got behind a camera. When I did, I sighted it on gunning down every rotten cliché I'd helped the no-talent hacks who I'd worked for foist on the public. The formula for my videos was simple: Hire appealing women with some affinity for bondage, get them naked, tie them down with their legs spread and have other appealing naked women get them off by whatever means. It may not have been a particularly sophisticated approach, but people liked it and I sold a lot of Mylar.

Eventually I found employment with bigger production companies capable of supplying bigger budgets and open to new approaches. By then BDSM was an expanding blip on the cultural radar screen and the long-held belief (founded on nothing in any state or federal law) that showing penetra-

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tive sex with bondage would result in certain prosecution had faded away. Not surprisingly, Larry Flynt helped me debunk that myth by making me editor of his new kink-sex magazine, *Taboo*, and giving me latitude to publish explicit images of BDSM sex in a form recognizable to those actually engaged in it personally.

All of this led up to the day when I finally got my shot at “fixing” *The Trouble with O*. I was funded to make an ambitious X-rated feature based on the original novel. Unlike the drearily literal 1975 soft-core version, my picture would be set in a modern-day Los Angeles where, by then, a vibrant leather community had kicked its way out of the closet and partied openly in a wide variety of venues frequented by an oddly charming mix of off-beat characters. Within that community people made no secret of the physical satisfaction they derived from sexual power play and neither did the casts in my “O” pictures, including the three different female performers who played the title role in the different segments of the trilogy I shot.

I also made a point of scripting the dominant male players to be appealing and sympathetic, two things that could not fairly be said of the men in the novel, or in much of any other depiction of BDSM I’d read or seen anywhere.

There are certainly lots of undesirable dominant men out in the world. I’d met quite a few over the years and I continue to encounter them, try though I might to avoid it. Fortunately, there were and are charming, funny, skillful and self-aware men who enjoyed being on top. There were and are women who derive great erotic satisfaction from submission and sensation play and by no means are they all mental cases practicing DIY psychotherapy to work through traumatic and abusive childhoods.

In fact, I had learned over time that kinky people were neither more nor less fucked up than vanilla people. They were sexually oriented in an unconventional way but were of-

ten otherwise quite conventional with quite conventional vices and virtues, joys and sorrows, strengths and deficits.

And while more and more women emerged from the shadows to speak and write the truths of their lives as enthusiastic submissives, the men who provided the particular kind of intimacy they enjoyed remained largely silent and invisible. Submissive women, it turned out, were much better able to make the case for the legitimacy of their sexual orientations than dominant men. Women were more assertive about claiming their desires and defending them from ignorant criticism, I suspect, because feminism had opened a larger dialog about female sexuality for which there was no analog among men.

Thus, while O got her say, and a chance to defend herself from strident critics who saw her as a destructive projection of the worst kind of misogyny, Stephan and René remained voiceless clichés, presumed to be motivated by that very misogyny to which submissive women were accused of catering.

While I've met my share and then some of gender essentialist imbeciles (genders notwithstanding) and I'm not about to deny that abusive and exploitative relationships are neither more nor less common among kinky people than among vanilla people, I reject the whole notion that their failings result from their kinks, or vice versa. It's easy to overstretch the comparisons between being sadomasochistic and being gay, but spend enough time amid either crowd and you'll hear it said that the one thing about their lives that isn't fucked up is their sexuality.

I get why dominant straight guys have bad reputations. All complaints to the contrary dismissed as deserved, most of them are victims of the worst kind of character assassination, the kind originating within. I'm made very uncomfortable by the politics of some dom guys. One great thing lost from back when our numbers were few and diversity was the only thing that made it possible to get together a quorum for a good party was the social irrelevance of gender, which carried absolutely

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no behavioral expectations whatsoever. That's no longer the case, which is one reason why gay and straight leather people no longer party together as they once did. It's not the fact that there are more straight people around than there used to be but rather the cultural baggage they bring with them.

No, women are not all naturally submissive. No, masculinity is not essentially dominant. No, there has been no cultural deviation from the immutable laws of nature that has emasculated men and forced women into shouldering responsibilities for which they aren't constructed. And there's no such planet as Gor. That's all just preposterous and I don't blame anyone for finding it offensive. I might if they don't. I don't believe that "real" masters won't recognize there's such a thing as domestic abuse and sexual predation in their midst. Such foolishness mostly originates online among self-styled experts who know even less about the realities of BDSM than Anne Desclos did.

The Internet invited a huge number of people to this party all at once and a certain percentage of them simply don't belong here. I'm sure I'll be accused of the dreaded "One Twue Way-ism" for writing that and I'll know immediately why I don't care what comes after that accusation. There is no one true way but there are many false ways and they're not hard to spot.

One thing I did not set out to write was a polemic in support of dominant men. I just wanted to rescue a couple of particularly misunderstood ones who happen to be the most familiar pair of their kind in all of Western literature from their enchantment as malevolent specters. I wanted to do something for René and Stephan and for all the women who ever wanted what was good in them and were left grieving over their lack of any other substance.

One thing little noted but quite acute about Anne Desclos' original writing was her observation of a certain class of bourgeois perveratti that emerged in the post-war Paris where

she lived and worked. Once a center of high culture devastated by the humiliations of a war that's still a very touchy subject among French people, the Paris of 1956, like modern Los Angeles, found a new identity for itself as a purveyor of popular culture – particularly fashion and film – instead. This made it, like L.A., a natural venue for self-reinvention.

It's no accident that O is a fashion photographer who seduces models and that the men in her life are shady entrepreneurs whose exact occupations are never revealed. As we know, the author wasn't unfamiliar with this type of person. O viewed them all somewhat snobbishly (if you doubt me I suggest re-reading the description of Jacqueline's family in the novel) and would undoubtedly have felt the same for their latter-day counterparts here.

A similar class has long existed in this city, where money and power buy all sorts of sybaritic pleasures and shame is in short supply. We read in the tabs quite frequently about the mishaps befalling them and their hapless partners. There's some *schadenfreude* about that in a place where most people work very hard and don't get much, but overall we tolerate this class because they employ us and in some way we hope, without justification, to join them. Then others can look scornfully upon our excesses while we indulge ourselves without remorse. We should be so lucky.

Nevertheless, BDSM is no more immune to the attentions of that class than any other source of enjoyment and though they may not show up at big fetish events (well, actually some of them do but everybody's dressed in a way that makes them invisible to celeb spotters), they do have a parallel if more exclusive BDSM circle of their own. When it came time for my re-thinking of the source material, it was in that milieu where it fit most naturally. If we're dealing in wish fulfillment here, why limit those wishes to the exclusively sexual? Why not address the way in which certain objects become fetishized the way that some lives become fetishistic?

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O's inventor certainly didn't back away from that question. Another hint to the dark comedy of manners underlying the poison-pen love letter *Story of O* is generally thought to be its casually subversive mentions of objects and locations that absolutely identify the players' place in the social matrix of Paris circa 1954. An Hermès scarf, mentioned by name, has the same meaning now that it had then. It's totemic and iconic and wouldn't it be nice if we could afford one?

Unlike Ms. Desclos, however, I'm a crass pornographer and I'm no subtler in my rendering of economics than in my depiction of sex. I deal with class discord quite bluntly in these pages and I'm sure that will be the source of plenty of annoyance among those who don't get invited to CMNF parties in Pasadena mansions. Everyone else can enjoy the cocktail of *noir* and glam I've mixed up here guiltlessly. Someday I'll write a gritty book about what it was really like to be a leather person in the Reagan era but this isn't it.

Nor is this book programmatic in any way. One of the sadder things about *Story of O* is the extent to which it's become an ideal of sorts, a blueprint even, for a certain kind of master/slave relationship to which real people in the real world aspire. Again, a close reading of the text, which is honest enough to show us the beauty of such a life, reveals an unsparing vision of its cold-bloodedness. Is that really a thing any of us would want? We might like to visit Roissy for a few days, but live there? I suppose some would but most of us rather like the vibrant, zany mash-up of marginal sub-cultures we've got now and would find the lives of O, René and Stephan pretty drab by comparison.

I also expect to take some heat over the un-PC lack of discussion concerning consent, negotiation and other critical ethical matters where BDSM IRL is concerned. I don't in the slightest mean to dismiss the importance of these things. I've just created a slightly altered universe in which they're already understood by all in order to spare us some exposition

that would have to come at the expense of a fun story. There are other, better tutorial works out there for those in search of such details. I've given many workshops and written many serious instructive pieces about the moral mechanics of BDSM and I will do that too again one day, just not this day. In the meantime, don't try this at home, folks.

All I'm offering here is a luxury vacation with some fellow travelers a bit more congenial than the characters who inspired them. These are the polished, pampered companions with whom we will get down and dirty for a few hundred pages of a modern fairy tale. If it's a good one, it will expose us to some truths about human nature the way the best fairy tales do. But it won't be our story and it won't give us any instructions or demand of us any new way of doing what we already do.

What I've written is a modern, noir-inflected L.A. story about a couple of jolly, sadistic lads who get much luckier than they deserve with an extraordinarily beautiful and accomplished woman who needs a certain thing that they're uniquely adept at providing. She sees them as they are as clearly as she sees through the lens of her camera and can enjoy them at a certain focal length. I'd suggest readers of this fat brick of a book do the same. It means to be honest about certain matters usually cloaked in deceptive rhetoric by discussing them in surroundings that remind us constantly of how deceptive appearances can be.

I have no greater purpose than to speak frankly about the kind of sex I know best, as I have been doing for three decades now. This time I'm doing it in words instead of pictures but ... well ... you'll know what I mean. Give these people a chance. You might find things about them to appreciate. I know I did.

CHAPTER ONE

Everything in the enormous hotel bar was bright and blonde: the gleaming veneers of the square, modern furnishings, the pin-spots studding the ceiling, the leather upholstery on the stool where Steven Diamond was parked with his shoulders squared – even the bartender, golden hair spilling down the back of her snug, black uniform jacket. The bar crowned a glass and steel tower so high stray wisps of marine layer drifted by the vast expanse of surrounding windows. The sun had almost dropped into the sub-coastal murk and the streetlights of downtown Los Angeles had begun blinking on far, far below.

Alone at the end of a pale, varnished expanse of wood as long as a bowling lane, Steven surveyed his city in the quiet before the corner office crowd would rush in to drink away the day's frustrations.

Steven had none. The deposition had gone well. As usual, he'd scheduled it for the end of the day when both the prosecutor and the material witness were eager to get home. It might have cost Steven a billable hour, but he was not one to roll the meter. With the retainers he commanded, there was no need.

But then there had been the call from Ray. Ray, Ray, Ray. While his work was as free of frustrations as only that of an extremely competent mercenary can be, his personal life had some stubborn complications. At one time he had resented his younger half-brother fiercely, not only for the easier road he'd traveled, but also for the delight he'd brought their moth-

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er through what seemed to Steven fairly modest accomplishments. But though he didn't share Ray's last name — Vincenzo — Ray was all that remained of Steven's bloodline.

Like most confidence men, confidence was the one thing Ray lacked, having never been tested in the world without Steven to pluck him out of its tiger pits and dry wells. He couldn't help trying to convince others, hoping to convince himself.

Earlier today, he'd been typically insistent on the phone. He had something wonderful for Steven. He couldn't describe it. Steven had to see for himself. In the first three minutes Steven added up three good reasons to be suspicious. Ray's wonderful discoveries had often turned out to be expensive in unexpected ways. Some were worth it.

Curiosity alone, inspired by the excitement in Ray's voice, would have gotten him to the end of that bar. If Ray ended up bringing Steven a problem, he'd just solve it like all the others.

From the paneled offices of Bunker Hill to the marble corridors of City Hall to the sweaty, institutional-green antechambers of the Stanley Mosk Courthouse to Men's Central off Santa Fe, Steven knew every back room where a fix could be put in. If ever a city could appreciate a resourceful criminal attorney, this was it. No one worked the system's levers more smoothly. For those who could afford him, he was the best legal mechanic in town. And for those who couldn't, he was occasionally inclined to do a bit of fixing anyway. Sometimes an owed favor was as bankable as a fat cashier's check.

Morgan, the tall, lean, part-time actress who brought him his club soda with a twist was one of those for whom he had put in a *pro bono* fix. It was just a simple DUI with no priors and a good bartender in a place frequented by Steven's clients and competitors was useful.

Like so many, Morgan had come out here for the movies and made a few, her athletic frame strategically draped with scraps of animal skins. On camera, she'd usually died heroically, but even the stunt players agreed she probably could

have eviscerated most them without spilling a drink. A trim and tanned forty, she still did some theater now and then but had stopped going to open calls.

“You think Sheriff Delgado will resign?” she asked, setting Steven’s drink dead center on the black napkin. Steven swirled the ice cubes and took a swig.

“I think they’ll describe it as wanting to spend more time with his family.”

Steven’s voice was the smooth baritone of a radio announcer selling something expensive. He’d polished it over many hours persuading judges and juries to believe the patently ridiculous. On the West Side, they gossiped about film stars. Down here the inside talk was politics.

“Even if the grand jury doesn’t indict the S.O.B.?” Morgan had hung onto her tough-girl delivery as well as her taut physique. Steven liked that about her. She was a pretty good saber fencer too, a legacy of her reign as sword-and-sandal queen. The two of them occasionally clanged steel.

“He’s been dead meat since they term-limited the Supes. The new board may not like the way he runs the department, but they’ll miss him when he’s gone. Delgado may be crooked as an ant-eater’s nose, but he takes care of those who take care of him.”

Morgan glanced toward the door where Julian, the thin, elegant host, greeted a young couple.

“I think your party has arrived,” she said.

“I hope it turns into a party. Anything involving my brother is suspect.”

“Let me know how it turns out.”

Morgan turned to the barback just as Julian led the couple to Steven. Steven stood to greet them, exchanging a back-thumping embrace with the younger man in the blue leather jacket. Steven wasn’t just taller than Ray. The vast span of his back and his tree trunk legs made him seem of an altogether more massive species.

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Ray had always been a rather delicate boy, but with his hipster goatee and his expensive, skinny, blue-tinted shades he remained conveniently ageless. He may not have been a rock star, but he knew how to play one on TV.

Julian started to pull a stack of menus from under his arm.

“Would you like to be seated now, or have a drink first, Mr. Diamond?”

“We’ll take the drink, but just one.”

Julian flashed his professional smile as he pulled out the two adjacent barstools.

“I’ll hold you to that Mr. Diamond. We’re slammed from 8:30 on.”

“I have a feeling this will be an early dinner.”

Turning from Ray, Steven looked at his younger brother’s companion for the first time. In a city full of beautiful women, most in some kind of trouble, Steven had met many but never lost his appreciation for the truly exceptional few. He’d seen a picture or two of this one in *Forbidden*, Ray’s magazine, but there was much that pictures did not convey: her surprisingly small stature and formal bearing, the dark luster of her shoulder-length bobbed hair; the yielding warmth of her brown eyes emphasized by luxuriant, expertly-applied theatrical lashes; the extravagant fullness of her slightly-parted lips (lacquered a subtly wicked red). A black jet choker accentuated the slender grace of her neck. She stayed out of the sun: her complexion fair, almost porcelain. She couldn’t have been much over thirty.

A short silk-satin jacket, closed at the neck with lingerie hooks, fell straight from breasts all the more ample on her petite frame. The top of a full, corset-waisted circle-skirt rose barely to the hem of the jacket. Where her skirt ended just below her knees, Steven noted the black, seamed stockings; the patent pumps with very high, slender heels and the red soles that every woman in L.A. coveted. Elbow-length leather gloves

with buttoned wrists and turned back cuffs were rather retro and a bit wicked also. She carried a small deco clutch beaded in silver and black.

If this was Ray's surprise, it was one of his best. If Dodger Stadium were filled with young women in big hats, sunglasses, and black trench coats, Steven could stand on the pitcher's mound and know with absolute certainty which would come down and kneel in front of him. The straightness of O's spine and her quiet, deferential manner, among other subtle cues, suggested she'd be the one.

Ray took her by the gloved hand and brought her forward.

"Steven, this is O. O, my brother Steven."

Ray placed O's hand in Steven's. Her squeeze was firm, but fleeting. Steven's look was long, leisurely and appraising.

"Your brother's told me a lot about you," O said, glancing just once into his eyes. Her voice was soft, a bit deeper than expected, but her enunciation quite clear.

"He's told me absolutely nothing about you," Steven replied. "What is O short for?"

Ray laughed. "Even I don't know."

"How refreshing. Someone who can keep a secret. If more people did that, I'd be out of business. A pleasure to meet you, O."

Steven held onto O's long, slender, gloved hand as he helped her onto the adjoining barstool. How effortlessly she swept the skirt aside with her free hand so it fell around her when she sat down, revealing nothing in the smooth movement. She did take in a short, sharp breath when her backside made contact with the leather seat. Not much under that skirt, Steven surmised. And under the draped blouse, perhaps a hint of hardware, though he couldn't be sure.

Steven waved Morgan over. She actually blinked and looked twice at O, a major display of interest for one accustomed to seeing some of the world's most tempting arm-candy.

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“What can I bring you fine-looking folks?” she asked cheerfully, cocking an eyebrow at Steven.

Steven tilted his head toward his brother. “He’ll have a G and T, Bombay Sapphire.” He turned his attention to O. “For you?”

O seemed tentative, almost hesitant. She glanced over at Ray. “May I get a Campari and soda?”

Ray pondered a beat, as if pronouncing on something important. Steven knew gestures of authority were far more common than authority itself.

“Why not?”

Morgan’s other eyebrow went up. “And you, Mr. Diamond?”

“What do I usually have here, and do I like it?”

“Right then. Campari and soda, Bombay Sapphire gin and tonic and a Stella with a glass.” She turned back toward the bottles.

“They know you pretty well at this place,” Ray said with a laugh.

“I prefer taking my mysterious encounters on friendly turf. If you can’t afford one, I can buy you a tie.”

Steven reached across O to tug on the open collar of Ray’s dark blue shirt. Ray’s face exploded into the bright, boyish smile no one ever tired of seeing.

“Unlike lawyers, magazine publishers are not required to cinch their necks with remnants of ancient heraldry.” Ray turned to O. “Steven became a lawyer so he’d have an excuse to dress up every day.”

O took a photographer’s inventory of significant details. Steven’s flamboyant style provided plenty of those, anchored by a bespoke double-breasted black wool-crepe suit with important roped shoulders. It was accented with a black-silk rose stick-pinned through the left lapel, a rather daring red shirt, a black tie embroidered in red with the “Death or Glory” skull-and-bones motto of the British 17th/21st Lancers, a black

pocket square with rolled red edges and mirror-polished, wing-tip paddock boots O was sure had come off the benches at John Lobb. He was, without a doubt the most elegant man she'd seen on this coast. And he wasn't even gay. No gay man had ever looked at her the way Steven did.

Though she knew Steven and Ray were only half siblings, she had expected at least a superficial resemblance. There was no hint at all of Ray's even features in Steven's hard mug. His was a fighter's face, all weathered angles and small scars. His close-cropped hair had gone almost entirely white, his merry blue eyes hooded by up-angled brows. He had a dreadnought of a chin and a grin so dazzlingly white and even, she half-wondered if he concealed a second row of teeth behind it. He looked to be somewhere north of fifty, but his lightness of movement belonged to a much younger man.

"Actually," she said, "He looks like a friendly devil."

"And so I am," Steven said, raising the glass Morgan had just filled for him.

"To friendly devils and beautiful women in black," he said. The three of them clinked crystal. Steven's hands were strong, immaculately manicured, a silver signet ring with a plain, black onyx shield instead of a cipher on the third finger of his right. On his left wrist he wore a big moon-phase watch with so many complications O wondered how anyone could actually tell time with it.

O was a bit too careful in her movements. Steven suspected he frightened her at least a bit. It was a common reaction among certain women and not necessarily unpleasant for either party. He imagined she felt it right where she liked to and had to restrain herself from rubbing her bare thighs together under the skirt. Steven mercifully suggested they take a table.

It was right next to one of the giant panes through which the tower's looming height was more apparent. It looked down on the machinery-cluttered roofs of other very tall structures

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nearby in which lights had also begun to come on. Dusk was a swift affair in the L.A. basin and darkness closed in fast.

That O sat up very straight, heels planted firmly on the floor, knees slightly parted so the full skirt fell between her thighs, did not escape Steven's notice as Julian drifted a black napkin over her lap. O's lips remained slightly parted as well. Someone whether herself or another, had gone to a lot of trouble training this woman to broadcast the right signals.

Steven waved off the wine list, pulled a slender leather envelope from an inside pocket and put on a pair of large, perfectly round, black-rimmed spectacles. With O seated between them, menu unopened, Steven and Ray caught up on each other's respective enterprises while surveying the narrow strips of cream-colored paper between the leather covers.

O remained silent. Her mouth had gone parched and she was afraid to call attention to her dilated pupils. She took a sip through the red straw of her aperitif.

"What's good here?" Ray asked.

"The lack of music," Steven replied. "But I'll probably have the salmon tartar and the lobster ravioli."

Ray laughed.

"What, no *Wagyu* filet?"

Steven was a dedicated carnivore who drank beer, smoked cigars, kept late hours and still had a BP of one hundred over sixty-five and a resting pulse of fifty-eight.

"Next time. You have it and I'll take a bite. What does O like?"

Talking about her in the third person raised the curtain for the act to follow. Any session – and this situation had all the hallmarks of one in the making – begins at first meeting. How it goes after depends greatly on the opening moves.

Glancing over at O, her elegant, gloved hands folded on the white tablecloth, Steven already looked toward dessert. It wasn't just O's beauty that stirred interest somewhere further south than his stomach. Her muted theatricality seemed

full of promise. All Steven knew about O was that she was the star photographer for Ray's magazine; or rather, the magazine with Ray's name on the masthead and Steven's signature on the articles of incorporation.

"My guess would be the *frisée* salad and the Dungeness crab cakes," Ray suggested.

Steven smiled at O, flashing those predator's teeth. "Was he right?"

She shrugged, causing a mild disturbance under the black satin jacket. "Ray always orders for me. It's a luxury, not having to decide something once in a while."

"Every time she looks through the viewfinder she has to make a choice," Ray explained. "Fortunately, she makes most of them right."

The waiter, a tall, young man with an affable manner no doubt cultivated for auditions, was next to the table as soon as the men's menus touched the linen.

"Good to have you back, Mr. Diamond," he said, certainly sounding sincere.

"Nice to be back."

"Until the craziness starts," the waiter said in a stage whisper.

"You'll get us out in time I'm sure," Steven replied, proceeding to rattle off their selections, which the waiter repeated, withdrawing after a quick bow.

Ray told O that Steven knew everyone in town.

"Only the important people," Steven said. "Parking valets, waiters, executive assistants, sales associates, you know, the ones with the real power."

They all laughed. O's laugh was light and musical and, Steven suspected, not often heard. He could do with more of it.

Latin kitchen messengers wearing black aprons brought over small cups of mushroom consommé and big, flaky pop-

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overs to keep them busy until the first course. Ray juggled one of the hot popovers onto O's bread plate.

"You've got to try these. They're evil."

He tore one apart, buttered a section and offered it to her. O unbuttoned her gloves and slid them off, neither hurrying nor making a burlesque act of it, and draped them over the arm of her chair. She took Ray's offering whole, with no affected delicacy. For the first time, Steven saw the silver shackle ring on O's hand. He'd seen many versions of the standard door-knocker design, but this was the most elegant – clean and simple, big enough to catch the watchful eye but not out of proportion to O's slender fingers. O's nails were short and perfectly buffed a medium pink as carefully chosen as everything she wore.

The ring was definitive. O was someone's slave. Ray undoubtedly thought she was his, but Steven had doubts.

"Definitely evil," she pronounced, neatly dismantling the pastry, allotting half a pat of butter to each side.

"She can eat anything and never gain an ounce, just like you," Ray told Steven.

"Shooting burns a lot of calories." O swallowed a second bite.

"I've seen your work," Steven said. "You go for the strenuous angles."

"She's got a lot more stamina than I do," Ray interjected. "And she's not afraid of getting messy."

"I just look like I would be," O said. There was that laugh again.

Steven fixed his cool, blue sharpshooter's gaze directly on O's face. "More importantly, you understand the content. It shows in every frame."

O shifted uncomfortably in her seat. This conversation was no longer about photography.

The rest of dinner was occupied with the current state of the magazine business, which was hurting, and criminal prac-

tice, which wasn't. No one seemed to be hurrying through the meal, but the air was heavy with expectation. All agreed, or rather the men decided, to take a nightcap at Steven's place, which was nearby. Steven called for the check. Ray made a feint toward his inside jacket pocket. Steven stopped him cold with an upraised hand.

"Your money's no good here," Steven said, taking out a long, silver-edged wallet and an ornate black-resin fountain pen as big as a cigar and encircled with silver Art Nouveau scrollwork. Steven barely glanced at the check before tossing a black charge card into the folder. The slip came back in about ten seconds and he signed off on it with a flamboyant flourish. Lawyers signed their names to lots of things. Steven wanted his clients to feel they got their money's worth of his trademark purple ink.

Collecting O's vintage fur shoulder wrap and exchanging farewell handshakes with Julian, Steven, O and Ray shouldered through the grumbling throng waiting to be seated, O safely between them. They rode the heart-stopping glass elevator down forty floors to the garage. Steven presented his claim check and a crisp twenty, exchanging a few jolly words in fluent Spanish with the valet captain. Steven had meant what he said regarding whom it really counted to know well – those left alone with either one's food or one's car.

O stood at the curb, Steven and Ray a few steps behind, studying her carefully. Even the roomy circle skirt couldn't entirely obscure O's high, hard handful of an ass.

Ray elbowed Steven, grinning.

"Just your kind of view," he said quietly.

"Quite scenic."

Steven's mind wandered back to a weekend in a double suite at Principe di Savoia in Milan with a couple of splendid French whores they'd picked up at a café in The Galleria after a surprisingly unexceptional performance at La Scala. Choosing partners for the first round, Ray had made both girls bend

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over in front of Steven to spur a quick decision. They had all been laughing back then. Tonight's engagement, Steven suspected, would be no laughing matter.

Steven's car was parked right up front and when the runner kicked it over, the high-pitched whine of the turbocharger whistled through the tiled cavern. The sedan was the only one of its kind, a two-tone black-over-silver Jaguar of an older body style with a strong retro feeling. But there was nothing retro under the sheet metal. It was one of a handful of street-modified S-Type-R racing models that had been imported to the U.S. and it was terrifyingly fast. Ray's anthracite-gray BMW came right up behind it. O started toward its passenger door, but Ray blocked her way.

"I want you to ride with Steven."

It wasn't a suggestion. O did not hesitate, going straight to the passenger side of the Jaguar and waited for Steven to assist her by her gloved hand into the low, body-contoured leather seat. She got her skirt under her with just a flash of a stockinged leg that would have raised the dead.

Steven slid in behind the wheel and popped the shift lever into gear. The dashboard lit up red around clusters of old-fashioned white-faced gauges. The burl wood and stitched leather cockpit still smelled like it had just rolled off the showroom floor. O sat still and straight, knees and lips never touching.

Steven slid back the cover of the glass moon roof as they eased out into the street.

"Look up," he said. "It's almost like being in Manhattan." O gazed upward at the glistening office towers forming a canyon around them, baring her tender throat in the process.

"It's a lovely view," she agreed. "But it's not Manhattan."

Steven sighed. No it wasn't. Were it not for Ray, he might be practicing there instead. Though both Steven and Ray had grown up entirely in California, Steven had lived all over the world. He'd moved back to Los Angeles after their mother died, only to be reminded daily why he left in the first place.

The car was tight and silent except for the high note of the turbo. It didn't ride like a luxury car; the tightly sprung suspension translated the bumps and dips of L.A.'s neglected streets up through the frame. O looked over at Steven's chiseled features.

How must it feel to be so comfortable in one's body? Again, O experienced that strange hot-and-cold feeling deep down. Ray had hurt her, and seen her hurt, many times, but she wasn't scared of him. In some way, he was a boy, and boys had never frightened O. Boys were easy. This elegant monster was most definitely not a boy. Beyond that, she wasn't sure what he was.

"Ray's very happy since you've been together," Steven said. O hesitated to talk about Ray, even with his brother. Especially with his brother.

"He's told you that?"

"He doesn't have to. He's an expert at looking like he's having a good time, but I used to watch him stare out the window on rainy days, back when we still had them here, and wonder what was bothering him."

"Did you ever find out?"

She clearly expected a more complete answer than he was prepared to give.

"Yes. But I haven't seen him like that since you came along."

Crossing Figueroa, skyscrapers gave way to low, grimy commercial buildings with signs in Spanish, bright lights pouring from open doorways. Knots of dark-skinned people clustered under the street-lamps and around the big boxes and tents on the dirty sidewalks here and there.

"Welcome to the nicer part of Skid Row," Steven said, aware of O staring out the window. "They've cleaned it up a lot. Most of the dealers have moved over to Sixth Street."

"You know this area rather well, Mr. Diamond," O said, a bit archly.

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“It’s convenient to the places I visit my clients. I can be at The Federal Detention Center in seven minutes.”

“Quick service.”

“Not if you’re sitting in the Federal Detention Center.”

The dingy gray landscape of *taquerías* and murder motels gave way to the patchy greenery of MacArthur Park. The dirty lake in the park’s panhandle reflected the lights from a tall square building, buttressed in concrete X-frames, at the far end. It still looked like the Late International-Style office tower it had once been. When Steven pulled up to the massive steel gate of the parking structure they caught the headlights of Ray’s car behind them in the mirror. Ray had his stereo turned up so loud they could both hear it.

Ray was in high spirits. Since The Plan first came into his mind, he’d thought of little else, working through the fine points, making all the arrangements, carefully rehearsing his lines in the mirror at home during O’s stay in Pasadena. Now it would all play out just as he intended. Ray never stopped expecting his endless procession of schemes to do so, no matter how rarely that happened.

The steel-mesh gate rattled open and the cars descended the spiral ramp into a cavernous automotive museum. The floor was covered in spotless black-and-white flagging. Rows of overhead fluorescent lights popped on as they passed a sensor to reveal the most lavish garage O had ever seen, complete with a hydraulic lift, walls of diamond-plate cabinets, a huge chromed air compressor and an immaculate, shining Facom box filled with their coveted mechanic’s toolset. Steven parked at the end of a row of exotic, ruinously expensive, spotlessly shiny vehicles. Ray pulled in next to him, speakers still booming through his open windows.

Getting out, O had a quick look at the other cars, ranging from a meticulously restored Auburn boat-tail speedster to a Mercedes SUV. In between, she inventoried a Mercedes gull-wing coupe, a new Morgan Plus Four in British racing green,

and a totally anonymous blacked-out Lincoln Town Car. The fleet's flagship was a spectacular Rolls fitted with suicide doors and a brushed aluminum hood. She didn't have to ask to know they were all Steven's. All but the Morgan were black.

The lobby was as austere as the exterior, its spare furnishings carefully chosen to match the architecture. A bulky, shaven-headed black man in a blue blazer looked up from the tiny TV on his desk as they entered.

"Evening Mr. Diamond, Mr. Vincenzo," the security guard said with a nod.

"Quiet shift, Mr. Ambrose?" Steven replied with the bur-nished amiability he showed toward the city's human infrastructure.

"Dead as heaven on a Saturday night."

"Just how we like it."

O had already formed a mental picture of what she'd see when the elevator opened on the top floor and it was entirely inaccurate. She'd spent a lot of time in the homes of the rich and influential, finding most bland and impersonal. What she saw when she entered was anything but.

Steven certainly had The Big Guy's view. Through sweeping windows twelve feet high, O took in the night cityscape from the glittering skyline of downtown, across the park to the few remaining terra cotta façades of the old hotels, and all along the backdrop of Silver Lake hillsides to the distant brilliance of The Griffith Park Observatory. This was how Steven saw the world – from above.

Massive sliding doors led to a broad deck outside of the building. On one corner of the deck, a massive pair of Israeli Defense Forces binoculars had been mounted on a pier so Steven could have a closer look at whatever. He used them a lot during the summer to watch the mating and fledging of a pair of red-tailed hawks and their offspring. The birds nested in the neo-Babylonian effigies that ringed the roofline of the once-grand, now derelict hostelry directly across the park from him.

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The interior was vast to be sure, and grandly eccentric. Steven slowly powered up the overhanging low-voltage lamps on the cables draped overhead. They were supplemented by a pair of tall torchères with wide chrome heads which flanked a massive silver-painted leather sofa with a built-in chaise at one end. The three of them could easily have slept on the thing head-to-foot.

The walls were finished in matte faux aluminum and every piece of furniture, from the impressive row of tall bookshelves covering the far wall to the sides of the black-felted pool table not far from the open kitchen, was faced in some kind of metal. Even the long dining table had a steel top surrounded by aluminum Emeco chairs. The sealed concrete flooring, however, was greatly warmed by the biggest Tibetan dragon rug O had ever seen – black with the huge mythical beast hooked in red and green.

Three big-screen monitors were bolted into one wall, but otherwise there was framed artwork everywhere, floor to ceiling, most of it shockingly unsuitable for public viewing. Clearly, access to Steven's private quarters was tightly controlled.

"Welcome to my brother's cabin in the sky," Ray said.

"Look around," Steven said. "I'll pour us a real drink."

He flashed a grin at O's obvious wonderment as she made her way around the huge space, checking out the large-scale aircraft models strung on monofilament from the cement I-beams of the ceiling, the rows of foreign military hats under glass domes atop the bookshelves, the case of erotic netsuke, the drawings and paintings – lewd, cruel and exquisite beyond anything she'd ever seen in person. She stopped with a small gasp in front of a John Willie watercolor of a tall redhead whipping a near-naked brunette tied to a tree.

"It's real," Steven said. "There are only about a dozen in circulation. The dealer wept when he let it go."

"Steven collects all kinds of things," Ray sighed, settling in on the couch. "He had to take the whole top floor to hold

them all. Then he had to buy the whole building to keep everyone away from them.”

On a shiny hook next to the watercolor hung the most exquisite riding crop O had ever seen. Its heavy sterling handle was fitted with a large ring at the top and a smaller one down at the ferule where the tightly-woven leather shaft attached, as if it were intended to be worn like a sword. The leather tapered cleanly, then flared into a broad head. O shuddered at the sight of it, wanting to touch it, or be touched by it, but not daring to ask permission for either.

“It’s a Betony Vernon,” Steven said. “Like your ring.”

Steven missed nothing. Though she’d painstakingly assembled herself to the exacting specifications Ray had laid out, she wondered if there was some detail she’d omitted. She was relieved when the conversation shifted back to the construction of Steven’s quarters.

“I drew the floor plan and did most of the build-out myself,” Steven said, pouring amber streams from a black cut-crystal decanter (ornamented with the same skull and bones woven through Steven’s tie) into three matching black highball glasses. “Working with my hands relaxes me.”

Beneath all his external polish, Steven was nothing if not physical. He could have been just as happy, maybe happier, as a painter or sculptor, but somebody in the family had to make a living.

“I find it hard to picture you bringing clients here,” O said, taking her glass from the black leather tray, her gaze still fixed on the whip.

“He keeps a vanilla office for them,” Ray reassured her. “He doesn’t want them distracted while he’s explaining his fee structure.”

Ray patted the silver cushion next to him. O came over and sat down, her straight spine never touching the back of the couch, her heels planted firmly on the rug a few inches apart, her lips still slightly ajar.

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Again, Steven noticed the precision of O's protocol. Ray was fairly haphazard at training partners. When not directly involved in something sexual, he wasn't terribly strict with them. As a disciplinarian, he was less indulgent than inattentive.

But O was always tightly focused. It was in her pictures. It was in her whole demeanor. She didn't even take off her wrap or gloves until Steven requested it. She kept the deco clutch nearby. The more Steven saw of O and Ray together, the less likely a pairing they made.

"I don't worry much about my public image," Steven said, putting the tray on the floor before settling deep into a matching metallic-leather club chair and resting his glossy boots on the ottoman. "When you see me on TV, I'm usually dragging some gangster through the perp walk with his coat over his face. No one expects me to be a Boy Scout."

"And you find that convenient," O concluded for him.

"Not as convenient as what I do," Ray said, swirling his glass.

"I suppose not," Steven conceded. "The bar association takes a dim view of having sex with one's professional contacts."

"In my business, it's considered suspicious if you don't. O, would you mind preparing something for us? It's in the black box on the table."

Ray pointed to a richly lacquered humidor inlaid with gold medallions on a nearby glass table. O opened it to reveal stacks of pungent Cohibas, mostly *figurados* and *splendidos*, and took out a Mylar bag. Closing the lid, she spotted a narrow, oblong silver tray next to the humidor with an engraved rolling box and a steel grinder at either end. O extracted a perfect, spicy, sticky bud from the bag, took the lid off the grinder and tossed it in. Twisting the lid three times, she tapped its shredded contents onto the wooden surface inside the rolling box, scooped them into a paper, and formed a perfect joint.

Both men watched as she licked the gummed edge with the pointed, pink tip of her tongue. Twirling one end, she snipped the other with a pair of cigar scissors from the tray. Bringing the finished joint over to Ray, O dropped to her knees so smoothly her circle skirt spread out around her like a halo. Ray passed the joint deferentially to his big brother, who fired it with an enormous engine-turned lift-arm lighter that flared in front of his face for just an instant. He was sure he caught O glancing over at him in the fleeting illumination as the spicy, green cloud spiraled upward. O gracefully folded her hands behind her in silence. Inhaling deeply first, Steven slipped Ray the burning reefer. Ray took a long drag, coughing it back out almost immediately

“Man, I don’t know where you get this stuff,” he rasped. “It goes straight to the medulla.”

“Okay Ray,” Steven said, white plumes boiling out through his nostrils. “Why are we here?”

“I was starting to wonder if you’d ever get to that one, counselor.”

Ray looked back and forth between them, face lit up, rubbing his hands. “This was so meant to happen,” he said gleefully.

Ray looked down into O’s averted eyes. His satisfied grin went momentarily slack, as if he’d just heard last call when he was about to order another round. He took her face in his hands and turned it up toward him, leaning over to kiss her hard and long. She gave herself to it, keeping her crossed wrists behind her back. Her breasts rose and fell a bit more rapidly under the shiny jacket, again showing a hint of concealed hardware, but she remained otherwise perfectly still until he withdrew and told her to turn around. She pivoted gracefully, folding her legs under her and lifting her hair in the back without being told.

Ray unhooked O’s jet choker, kissed the nape of her neck. Opening O’s handbag, he dropped her necklace inside, bring-

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ing out a slender, white gold collar with a ring on the front and a small locking latch to the back. Circling her throat with the metal band, he secured it with a quiet click. O came smoothly back around to face them again, her posture as before.

This was the unmistakable signal. O, or at least her body, would soon be at Steven's disposal, as he expected. Ray confirmed the expectation with crude practicality.

"Her test report is in the bag if you want to look," Ray said matter-of-factly. "They gave her a full panel at The Mansion before I brought her home."

"I'll take your word for it. Want to see mine?"

"Already have. You're in The Mansion's database, remember?"

"You always were a snoopy little shit. I assume you told her about the vasectomy as well."

"No worries. She had her tubes tied last year. Like I said, it was *baschert*."

They both laughed, getting O's attention, adrift since the collar went on. The first few minutes were always like that; she'd be fine once she was naked. Then they wouldn't just be *talking* about her as an object. She would *be* one.

Steven leaned forward for a closer look. Ray took the joint while Steven hooked a finger through the ring on O's collar, lifting her eyes to his.

"She's quite a prize," he said evenly.

"You have no idea," Ray replied in a hoarse whisper, contrails billowing from the corners of his mouth. He reached around to hold the joint in front of O, but she shook her head just enough to toss her hair.

"No thank you, Sir."

He passed it on to Steven, who continued to lean forward as they smoked, studying O's face.

"How long was she up at The Mansion?"

Ray guessed it had been about a month.

"She probably taught them more than they taught her."

Ray laughed.

“No doubt. O is the best slave I’ve ever had. She’s the best slave any Master ever had.”

O looked down at the floor now, her spine stiffening uncomfortably. It was her job to please and that of her Masters to judge.

“Evidently she hasn’t been trained to properly take a compliment.”

“Thank you, Sir,” O whispered.

O was acutely aware of her accessibility under the skirt. She had assumed they would use her together. The prospect was the opposite of frightening, and yet the fear was there, as it had been since she first set eyes on Steven. She didn’t doubt that Steven could make her cry and scream in ways good and bad, but the fear this knowledge inspired was just a familiar, juicy tingle.

The weed taking effect, Steven’s eyelids dropped a bit, reducing his gaze to a narrow, penetrating gleam.

Ray shifted uncomfortably on the couch.

“She’s the first one I’ve been with that I thought might be good enough for you.”

Steven leaned back, taking a sip of the blonde whisky in the black glass.

“You’re awfully generous. What, precisely, do you have in mind?”

“Suppose you had something you loved but knew should rightly belong to someone else,” Ray asked, standing to circle O. “Something too perfect to own just for yourself. I think I have something here we might enjoy in common for a long time to come.”

“Sort of like a timeshare?” Steven suggested with half a laugh.

“More like transferring the deed.”

They both looked down at O, and she composed her face to conceal the rising turmoil within. The room suddenly felt

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very hot. O, whose demure bearing was entirely false, unhooked her blouse with trembling fingers, revealing the closely spaced, perfectly convex inner curves of her breasts above the corset-top of the skirt.

“You’ve got my attention,” Steven said.

“There’s still something you need and I have it,” Ray said flatly. “And that’s not right, after all you’ve given me.”

Contemplating Ray’s implications, Steven raised an eyebrow.

“If I wanted a slave, don’t you think I’d have one? Playmates are lower maintenance.”

Ray shook his head ruefully.

“You’ll want this one.”

“What if she doesn’t want me?”

Steven squatted face-to-face with O, tugging up his wide trouser cuffs as if intending to stay a while.

“What about it O? Do you want me?”

O looked long and hard at Steven’s weathered features.

“Yes,” she said at last. “I do... Sir.”

“I might take yes for an answer,” Steven said, standing back up. “Once I know the exact terms of the offer.”

“She’ll be yours whenever you please,” Ray told him. “She has a house in Los Feliz, so she’s not far away. You’ll have the keys and a special cell phone number. For whatever purpose, when you call or come over, she’ll offer herself. In between, she’ll still be mine, but O has to understand that’s not a real distinction. Whatever I have, I owe to you.”

Steven sat on the arm of the couch facing O, who continued to kneel, frozen in place, relieved that the protocols she’d learned did not require her to move unless ordered. She wasn’t sure she could have.

“Our mother was married twice,” Steven explained. “She had me with Husband Number One. Times were tough then. She was an aspiring opera singer and my father thought he might make it as a writer, at least until he was blacklisted. He

was eventually rehabilitated, but it took too long. She left him and married Ray's father, who was younger and seemed to have better prospects."

"Our mother wasn't really cut out for motherhood. Steven's taken care of me most of my life."

"Cleaned up after him, to be more precise."

O couldn't stop herself from looking up. What did she see in Ray's face? Bitterness? Disappointment? She wasn't sure, but it was not a look she'd seen before or wanted to again.

"It's true," Ray conceded. "I've got a knack for finding trouble, and Steven's always been there to drag me out of it. He's the main backer of *Forbidden*. Whatever belongs to me I owe to him."

O looked over at Steven, amused.

"Then you already own me, or at least the part of me that shoots for the magazine."

"We're talking about other parts now," Ray said, harshness creeping into his voice. He nudged her in the ribs with the toe of an alligator boot.

"Present yourself."

Languidly, O leaned forward until her breasts touched the floor. She swept the skirt up, composing it across her back, then stretched her arms out in front of her and touched her forehead to the floor. Her pelvis was rotated up, her knees apart. As Steven had assumed, the smoky Wolford stay-ups were all she wore underneath the full skirt and old-fashioned tulle petticoat. His eyes lingered on what he was meant to see.

It was, he had to admit, a lovely view. O's muscular backside, like her breasts, was all the more obvious for her delicate frame, as were her hemispherical hips. Her thighs were perfectly smooth above the triple velvet bands at the tops of her luxury stockings, emphasizing the triangular space between her thighs. This was a feature Steven always appreciated in women. O's legs were long for someone of such diminutive proportions, and well-defined beneath the seamed nylons.

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Photography, like fencing, was as much in the legs as in the hands.

O opened wider to show more. She was completely bare, front to back. Her plump, pink girly bits were perfectly symmetrical, with just enough padding to assure a comfortable ride.

“Did you ever see such lovely dimples?” Ray asked.

He pressed down on the small of O’s back, rotating her pelvis even further upward. “Reach back and show him the rest,” he said.

O took a firm grip on each buttock and parted them. O’s puckered rosebud looked almost virginal, but after a stay at The Mansion that was impossible.

“You like getting it back there, don’t you?” Ray asked, reading Steven’s mind.

“Yes, Sir. I do.”

“She’s quite perverse,” Ray continued. “Maybe even enough for you.”

Unbidden, O turned on her knees, lowered her head and kissed the top of each of Steven’s boots lightly before settling back onto her heels.

“Very nice,” Steven said, “but I think I’d rather continue this discussion with us all standing up, if you don’t mind.”

O rose nimbly between them, smoothing her skirt before lacing her fingers behind her neck like a prisoner. She looked down at her high heels automatically, but Steven casually scooped a strong, smooth hand under her hair. The back of her skull felt like a bird’s in his grip. He made her meet both their gazes.

“Was any of this negotiated in advance?”

She suspected this was the voice Steven used in court. “Not specifically, Sir.”

Ray laid out his general compact with O; under its terms, she served anyone he wished.

Steven pressed, cross-examining. "I assume that confers very limited use-rights."

"It's usually a one-time thing," Ray said with a shrug.

"They don't get the house key or the secret cell phone number, I don't imagine, or the privilege of summoning O whenever they sprout boners."

O stifled a laugh. Steven went so easily from prince of the city to coarse commoner and back.

"Why are you fucking with me?" Ray demanded, clearly annoyed. "I'm trying to do something nice for you."

"Nice, yes. But for me or for yourself? My questions go to motive. And in any case, I think O gets a vote on such a broad mandate."

She looked back and forth between them, moving as much as Steven's grip allowed. Disappointment edged with scorn crept into her voice.

"You're really not asking me for a decision, are you?"

"I'm sure it would be easier for all of us if I simply embraced my good fortune, but there's something I need first."

Why could Steven never let anything just happen?

"I've said she's yours for the taking. What more do you need?" Ray said.

"Express and specific consent."

"O's perfectly capable of walking out at any time. Neither of us would try to stop her."

Steven's laughter startled them.

"I doubt we could if we tried. But consent is more than just the absence of 'no.' It's an expression of mutual intent."

Ray scowled at his brother.

"Spoken like a true lawyer."

Steven released his hold on the back of O's head.

"You don't know anything about me," he told her in a warning tone. "You have no idea what submitting to me would be like. We've spent less than three hours together and your

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Master is offering me full possession of you. Doesn't that raise some concerns?"

"It frightens the shit out of me, Sir."

The signs were there: the wide-open pupils, the heaving chest, the slight trembling of the knees.

"I suppose that's part of the appeal. But you might be quite surprised and, perhaps, unprepared for what serving me really means."

"I have few hard limits," O said. "I'm sure you'd respect them."

O felt challenged in a way she didn't like, and Steven could see as much.

"That's never the problem. The arrangement my brother proposes carries obligations beyond the merely physical. The surrender I require is absolute and unsentimental. You love Ray, right?"

O's lashes fluttered down.

"Of course."

"But you don't love me. Can you give me everything you give him anyway? Please don't answer without thinking."

O thought hard, but not long. She felt a tenderness for Ray she couldn't imagine this tempered-steel paladin would ever inspire. Most men found her submission so compelling they would do anything to secure it, making them all ultimately unsuitable to her own desires. This one might be different.

O had to be wanted, not needed, and there was absolutely nothing needy about Steven. The gradual erosion of boundaries between O and Ray had required him to farm her out to an institution where she could be at the beck and call of strangers, and it was strangers she craved. A wave of profound sadness swept through her at the realization that Ray would never be a stranger to her again.

Could Steven be the stranger who would always want her but never need her? She'd seen Ray cry more than once and

awkwardly attempted to comfort him. She couldn't imagine Steven in need of comforting.

She looked up at him, jaw set, eyes implacably determined.

"I want to do this thing. I consent to it without reservation. A person cannot give away what he doesn't own. If I refuse I was never Ray's slave and everything between us was a lie."

The men exchanged a look of surprise. "I told you she was different from the others," Ray said, a touch triumphantly. He pulled a red, woven-silk monkey's-fist key shackle from his pocket and handed it to Steven. There were only two keys on it – one small, wrought like a piece of jewelry, the other a conventional brass door key. "The little one is for her collar. The other goes to her house."

Steven stood there a long moment. It was so silent the air seemed to have gone out of the room. They couldn't know what he was thinking and he wasn't about to tell them.

There had been many attempts and many failures, starting with his marriage to Marie, to integrate his desires with his affections. Sooner or later, everything had hit the wall, sometimes shatteringly hard. He stared at the keys in his open hand until Ray reached over and closed it around them.

"Please, Steven. We all want it. Let it happen."

"When have I ever said no to you?" Steven replied, with a shrug of resignation.

Steven turned his friendly devil smile on O.

"And how could I say no to you?"

Ray's face lit up as he threw his arms around Steven.

"You won't regret this."

Steven made no reply. He was quite sure he would, though not yet how.

Ray pulled O close with an intensity she'd never felt from him before.

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“I love you so,” he said. Then he kissed her – long, hard and deep – before pushing her away to arm’s length.

“I’m outta here. You’ll stay. I’ll be waiting at your place when he’s done with you.”

With a final, traditionally fraternal embrace for Steven, Ray turned and walked out the wide steel front door, his steps receding toward the elevator. They could hear him singing to himself out in the hall until the elevator bell dinged.

For an instant, O considered chasing after the man she knew, with all his weaknesses, to avoid the man whose strengths were the most obvious things about him. But O did not flee. She was alone with the Minotaur in his labyrinth, the way she had sometimes fantasized as a girl. Cold in the gut, nevertheless, she could not turn her back on this fabulous beast.

Steven looked into the dark pools of O’s yearning eyes and decided on the spot to let the beast off its leash.