

Excerpt: Enslave Me Sweetly

As if the man had been standing behind the entrance, guarding it, the thick metal doors slid open. He strode stealthily inside, not emitting a single noise: not the swish of clothing, the plod of footsteps, or the rhythm of breathing. He was as human as Michael, but where my boss was lean, this man was solid muscle. Where Michael was average height, this man was tall. Where Michael was aging, this man was all vitality.

He stopped at the foot of my bed. The scent of pine soap and sheer maleness wafted from him. He wasn't near enough to touch, but I could feel the warmth of his skin, beckoning me, lulling me. That warmth, that scent. . . I recognized them. A moment passed, and I sucked in oxygen.

He was the one who had carried me. *He* was the one who had given me sugar water last night. *He* was the one who had stripped away my clothing. My stomach knotted at the thought of his hands on me, undressing me, seeing my naked flesh. A shiver of awareness fired down my spine.

His lips were soft and lush, as pink as flower petals. The rest of his features, however, were granite hard, boasting deliciously rough planes and harsh angles. Cheekbones carved from stone. A nose sculpted from steel. Black eyebrows slashed over his eyes, eyes so blue they could only have been created from ice chips, regarding the world with an I've-seen-it-all acerbity. Right now those eyes bore down at me, into me.

He wore a tight black T-shirt, the same inky color as his chopped hair, and form-fitting jeans. Simply standing there, he exuded a masculine intensity that shouted I'll fuck you or kill you -- take your pick.

Vulnerability crept insidious fingers through me. I felt exposed; it didn't matter that I was completely covered. I was lying in a bed; I was injured. And he knew what I looked like naked. More than that, I was not operating at full strength and probably resembled a sick tabby kitten, mussed and disheveled.

I forced a cool façade, hoping I exuded regal composure. I didn't know this man, and I didn't want him seeing me as anything less than controlled.

"Have you ever killed anyone, Sparkie?" I asked, hoping to put him on the defensive.

Not a glimmer of emotion lit his features. He remained in place, silent, unconcerned. Distant.

With a conscious effort, I tore my gaze from him and attempted to ignore his very existence. "I don't need or want a partner," I told Michael.

"Tough," he said, his expression hard.

"I work alone," I said again, my tone colder than ever before. I was surprised ice chips didn't form from my exhalations.

"Not anymore," he replied again.

"I will not -- "

"Your protests will change nothing, Eden. I want you to work with Lucius, and so you will. That's an order."

"He'll get in my way."

"He knows what he's doing."

"I doubt that. Men like him are all brawn and no brain. How can I do my job if I have to watch his back too?"

The man finally deigned to speak.

"Listen, *Cookie*," he said, his voice rough, low, as if his vocal cords had once been damaged. "The day I need you to save my ass is the day I'll find myself a new job. Maybe cloning flowers. Maybe walking robotic dogs. I'll decide when the time comes. Until then, you take care of yourself and I'll take care of me."

With that, he exited the room as quickly and silently as he'd entered.

The moment the door snickered shut, I pinned Michael with a fierce stare. "Did he just call me cookie?"

Michael's lips twitched, and amusement turned his hazel eyes green. "You deserved it after that 'all brawn and no brain' crack."

"How can you expect me to work with that man?"

"Consider it penance for your sins."

"I'll tell you one more time, Michael. I don't need a partner."

Something deep and dark flashed across his features. "You'll work with him or you'll work for another agency. Understand?"

Put like that I couldn't refuse, and I nodded stiffly. My hands fisted at my sides, but resolve slowly moved through me. "Can he do anything besides look pretty?"

"I guess you'll just have to wait and find out."

"That's very comforting, Michael. Very comforting." I knew Michael, knew when he was turning stubborn. He was a regular jackass right now. Anything I learned about Lucius, I'd have to learn on my own.

He sighed. "If you're on edge with him, you're less likely to make mistakes."

How wonderful to hand out little gems of wisdom at a time like this. Thanks. For nothing. "Any other bits of ingenious ramblings you want to toss my way before I kick you out and get some rest?"

"Yeah. I want you operating at full capacity in three days. Otherwise, I'll let Lucius have the mission all to himself."

He left me alone then. With his parting words, he had sealed my fate. I'd be back in fighting shape within *two* days and not a moment more. Whether it was feminine pride or simple arrogance, I would not let Lucius have this mission for himself.

I still had something to prove. More now than ever.

I would not be a failure. Not again.

"Cookie, my ass," I muttered.