

Masters of the Order 4: Harmony

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Chapter One

*I've blown it all on cures for pain
I'm supposed to repent for mistakes I've made
Words spoken, promises broken
Welcome to my masquerade*

—Judas, "Behind My Eyes"

Present

What's in a kiss?

The feathered touch of fingertips that says, *I care*. The whisper of lips that swirls and rises into a scream. The spark of connection that eclipses the loneliness with an intimate promise.

Teo leaned in, barely, but it was indication enough. Her arms came around his neck, and he pulled her against him. He flattened his hands against her back, and she went up onto the tips of her toes, rising to his call. Then he closed his mouth on hers. Gently, softly, the kiss built. Planting its seeds in the fertile soil of her mind. Taking on a voice to whisper its empty promise. And soon, too soon, she was kissing him with the same abandon he gave to her. He clung to her more tightly, knotting his hands in her hair, trying to hide behind the press of his mouth on hers, the answer he would never say out loud.

What's in a kiss?

An illusion. An unattainable ideal. A betrayal.

Teo broke the seal of his lips and caught her eye. Holding her in the warmth of his embrace as if he never wanted to let go, he said, "You are beautiful to me," and used his voice to leave a lingering melody for her to carry with her.

Unlocking her hands from around his neck, he turned and walked away.

“Hey. Where are you going? Hey!” she called to his back.

“This is where you get off the ride, luv,” Maurice cut in.

“What? I’m with him. Let me by.”

Teo heard the flicker of panic in her voice as Maurice blocked her path. The same way Maurice blocked all his one-night lovers’ paths.

Realization poisoned her tone. “Get out of my way.”

“Fun and games are over, morning glory.”

Morning glory. Maurice’s idea of sarcasm. Did he have to be so damn harsh?

Of course he did. Maurice cleaned up the messes, held things together, and kept the money train rolling. That was a band manager’s job, and Maurice was very good at his job.

“Screw you, douche bag,” she yelled, and her heels clicked on the marble tile.

Maurice grunted. “Come on. Let’s get you a taxi. It’s time to go home.”

“Teo? Teo, please,” she cried out. “I love you. I worship you.”

Teo ran a full hand over his scalp to push away the black waves and thought, But she doesn’t even know me. None of them do.

“Let me come with you. You can’t leave me. You can’t!” she begged with ugly desperation.

Teo flipped open his sunglasses and snapped them into place. Then he hit the brass frame to get the revolving door moving before he heard any more. He knew what came next. Ugly desperation becomes simply ugly.

Keeping his head down to avoid the cameras, he slid into the back of the limo. These high-priced taxis were always the same. Same black cabin. Same smell of fake luxury. Same tinted windows to shield him from the hysteria that surrounded him. He imagined he would be riding in one just like this on his trip to hell.

A conscience did not make him any less a demon.

Redemption did not come from leaving a woman, or more often a girl, with a tender kiss.

Meaningless words of praise did not erase the pain of shattered illusion.

Warm eyes did not mask the gaze of a stranger.

The car eased into motion, moving away from another anonymous hotel in another unknown city. Leaving another forgotten lover behind in a lobby with a stranger to tell her that what she thought was in Teo's kiss was nothing more than a betrayal.

* * * *

Edmund stood, the air heavy around him, and buttoned his suit jacket.

"You look lovely, Eva."

When he extended his arm, Eva moved in to kiss his hand. It was difficult to decipher Edmund's mood, but nothing about the man was haphazard. The rare compliment meant something.

Something bad.

"Thank you, Edmund," she said without moving her lips away from his knuckles. "For the compliment and for tonight."

He rolled his wrist to stroke her face with the tips of his fingers, and his subtle irritation prickled her skin. A tap on the chin gave her permission to rise.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked in a smooth, low tone. Edmund's voice never rose above a soft timbre.

Powerful men do not yell to be heard.

"No thank you, Edmund."

He wasn't "Sir" or "Mr. Dupuis" to her like he was to the rest of humanity. He was Edmund. Always Edmund. Said at the end of each sentence, no matter how small.

Eva poured his Scotch into Riedel crystal. Lagavulin 30-year-old single malt. One and one-half ounces. Three drops of water. No more, no less.

“So sophisticated tonight,” he said.

She fought to control her expression while she handed Edmund his drink. “For your pleasure, Edmund.” If it had been for her pleasure, she would be wearing Docs and a vintage T-shirt. For Edmund, she wore heels and champagne silk.

Even wrapped in couture, Eva felt every bit the imposter in Edmund’s presence. The man carried an innate sophistication bred from generations of wealth. His dark hair was slicked straight back to accentuate the aristocratic planes of his perfect face. He had full lips and graying temples. Look anywhere other than his eyes and you’d see the face of an angel.

“So she says,” Edmund purred around a sip and caught her eye.

One glance said it all. Edmund had seen right through her. She hadn’t chosen her outfit to please him, rather to impress his guest. But a lie, no matter how small, earned a consequence, and Edmund’s consequences were never small.

Eva had been his companion for almost four years. A power exchange. No more, no less. Edmund wasn’t as bad a Dom as his reputation implied, but she wouldn’t necessarily say he was a good one either. He was...lucrative. But the risk, although calculated, was becoming too high. Edmund wanted to renew their contract. She’d said no. At first, he seemed to accept her decision, but lately things had gotten pretty intense. Men like Edmund Dupuis do not lose, and Eva was beginning to understand that Edmund viewed her departure as a defeat.

Still, he retained some kindness. Tonight they were dining with an “old school chum,” who also happened to be the poetry editor of the largest publishing house in London. The opportunity to meet a man like that was unheard of for an unknown writer with barely a degree. Without Edmund, her résumé wouldn’t have made it past the secretary. But launching her career as a writer would gain her independence from

him. Something she desperately wanted; something he did not. Perhaps that explained his dark mood. Then again, Edmund didn't need a reason to be dark.

Eva sensed his agitation while they headed down the wide hallway of Edmund's Manhattan brownstone to the dining room. His guest had already been escorted to the appointed spot; Edmund enjoyed making an entrance.

"Before we go in, I have one improvement to make. Take off the dress."

Her mouth fell open. "But I'm—"

"Dining naked tonight," he finished for her. His eyes flashed with thinly masked satisfaction. "Oh, darling. Don't look so surprised. Although I must admit seeing those plump lips part like that is quite tempting." He ran the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip. "You have the most sinful lips, Eva."

Eva held his stare. She would not give Edmund this victory, any more than she would give him a taste of her lips. "I thought—" she began.

"Of course you did. Pride is a sin, Eva. Especially for someone like you. Now take off the dress," he said, exerting his control. His complete control.

Eva fixed her eyes on the floor. She had been too proud to anticipate this twist. Thought tonight was an introduction to a new career. She'd been wrong. So wrong. Her ambition let her forget the cruelty of the man who orchestrated this little meet and greet. Edmund enjoyed humiliating her, and he was a master at it.

But not for much longer. Her liberation came soon. Debts paid. Terms satisfied. Control denied.

Edmund reached for her face, forcing the motion his words requested. "Chin up, darling. I'm sure Alfred will enjoy savoring your assets while he dines. Use all that nasty pride and present yourself properly."

Her anger rose. "You're not going to humiliate me into changing my mind. I'm still leaving you, Edmund. As soon as our contract is up, I will leave you."

“But alas, our contract is not up.” He accentuated the *P* to mock her. When she didn’t move, he added, “Or say no. Little word, big price tag.”

Eva was free to leave Edmund at any time, of course, but at a cost. Edmund had paid for her degree and everything else, from the stilettos on her feet to the bristles on her toothbrush. If she left before graduation, a debt arose; if not, it died with the other obligations of their contract. She pressed her lips together, removed the dress, and handed it to him.

“Much better, darling, but since you’re being such a brat today, I think we should add a little something. Alfred is a man of words. He’ll enjoy it.”

Edmund pulled the Montblanc pen from his pocket and wrote “Whore” across her bare chest. The tip pressed into her skin. Eva winced.

“Oh, how sad. She thought Alfred would be interested in *her* words.” With the sharpest of laughs, Edmund said, “Always remember, Eva darling. You are a whore, my whore until our contract ends, and you will never be anything more.” He leaned in, once and again, and pressed his lips over each ugly letter.

People called Edmund a gentleman. Said he was distinguished, accomplished, and shrewd, and he was all those things. But the projection was a farce. Behind the camouflage of custom-made suits and softly spoken words lay a devil, and she’d made her Faustian pact without illusion about the real man behind the veil of decorum.

Standing outside the dining room, Eva clung to her pride. She was not a whore. She would honor their agreement, earn what she’d taken from Edmund, and allow the dark game to get darker because it was no longer a game.

It was a countdown.

When Edmund placed his cold hands on her naked shoulders and presented her to the man in the dining room, she didn’t feel pride. She felt shame.

And that’s exactly what Edmund wanted.

* * * *

“Who brought the surfboard?” Teo asked, taking it all in.

Shea hauled back a bucket and doused him. “I did. The Slip’N Slide was Nati’s idea.”

“I had no doubt.” He chuckled and mopped both palms over his face.

His bandmates were crazy. Seriously nuts.

The elevator doors closed over the sound of “Well I never!” and “Is that who I think it is?”

Several blonde beach bunnies bounced his way. Before Teo knew it, his leather jacket hit the carpet, a beer landed in his hand, and he was dragged around the corner.

Yup, a Slip’N Slide. Orange plastic, Nati wrapped in a few naked friends, and water. Lots of water.

Hotel management was gonna be pissed. Anything else new?

At least this time it was only water. Nati’s taste for women—naked, coated, and in bunches—had led to some pretty messy scenes. Teo never did figure out how Nati got a mud pit into the MGM Grand. Then again, it was Vegas. And Nati. The guy was out there.

Tonight the band had a reason to celebrate. Thirty US shows in the bag, a brief hiatus in New York, then *konnichiwa*. So long. Three punk kids from a crap Spanish neighborhood head off to Asia. Teo still couldn’t wrap his mind around the whole “internationally famous” gig. Two sold-out stadium shows in Tokyo alone. Mind-blowing.

People were everywhere. Some he knew; others he didn’t, but that was always the case. No matter what city Judas played, there was always a crowd.

And a party.

This one, an obvious homage to Southern California. Surfboards, Beach Boys music, and a little paper umbrella in every plastic cup. Otherwise, Teo wouldn’t know he was in San Diego. The only glimpse of any city they visited came through tinted

windows on the way to a stadium or arena that was as generic as the last one they'd played.

Fame made the world insane, but this was his life now, and it sure as hell beat the one he had a few years back. Broke, fresh out of rehab, with a lousy reputation and a stalled music career. Nati and Shea stood by him after he went under. His bandmates always stood by him. But while he was there, Judas stood still. No new songs. No public appearances. Nothing but a needle in a dirty room and a broken heart.

No, not broken. Shattered.

By some miracle, Teo had managed to drag himself off the scrap heap and restart the band's career. People who experience the shit he had carried a lot of pain, and even though pain sucked, it made a great songwriting partner. The skyrocketing success of Judas's first CD seemed to say the world agreed. Now everybody wanted a piece. No more begging for gigs in washed-out clubs. No more trolling record companies. No more slammed doors. No more drugs. They'd hit the mother lode.

As for his heart? Still shattered.

But the pace of fame distracted him. Up at dawn, morning radio interview, meeting with record management, sound-check, concert, and now this. He was grateful for the whirlwind. Hell, he was grateful to be alive.

"Life's a beach," Teo yelled as his gaze zeroed in on his party favor for tonight's wet-and-wild. Her bikini top hit the floor. He downed his beer, threw his arms straight out at the sides, and skidded down the Slip'N Slide on his belly.

A beach?

Yeah, something like that.

* * * *

"I meant what I said about introducing you to the Order when your contract with Edmund is up, Eva," Jerard said while she undressed.

"Thanks, Jerard, but I don't think the Order is for me."

“Why not? You’re a lovely person, and you’re leaving Edmund, not the lifestyle. Look at that sexy ass, *mon jouet*. You’re a prize. Introducing you to my brothers will make me a hero.” He winked at her.

“What couples in the Order have is real. I’m not real.”

“I’m not a couple, and I’m in the Order.”

“But you’re looking for something real.”

Cue the universal guy scowl. The one every woman recognizes. The one that says, *Don’t get attached*.

“I’m not looking for love either, so stop giving me the evil eye,” Eva said. “And you will be someday. Someone like you deserves something real.”

Jerard didn’t want a commitment, only a playmate. Hence the pet name: *mon jouet*. My toy. That’s what Eva was to Jerard. Edmund went to Connecticut on Fridays to visit his father and gave her to Jerard while he was away.

Edmund adored Jerard’s work. Everyone in New York did. Jerard was the gem of the NYC art community, not to mention its kink community. There wasn’t a sub in the city who wouldn’t fall at his feet. That’s why he accepted Edmund’s gift. Eva would fall at Jerard’s feet, of course, but she would never fall.

But that didn’t stop her from caring. Jerard was kind and funny and French! Ooh, là, là, the man was sinfully French. Dusky hair fell over one of the ever-present scarves that wound around his neck. Tailored clothes clung to his hot bod. Leather and silver jewelry provided the perfect edge. Add a pair of brown eyes that could melt the soul, and the man was deliciously, effortlessly, and innately sexual. Jerard’s brand of sex appeal was insane. Edmund had commissioned Jerard to paint her, said he wanted a keepsake of their time together, but Jerard was the one who belonged in a painting.

After she undressed, Jerard took her clothing and twirled a finger through the air. Eva spun around, raising both hands to shake out the loose waves of her dark hair in a sexy tease while she displayed herself. Rubbing the beard that framed his jaw, he flashed a lusty, purely male grin that let her know her confidence, and her obedience,

held its own brand of sexy. Forget painting him, they should just tack Jerard to a museum wall and let the world ogle.

“I still want you to think about my offer. You shouldn’t be alone, Eva.”

“A few scenes and now you’re my father,” she grumbled, as if the magnificent artist in the SoHo gallery with her was anything like the scumbag who passed for her father.

“Your fuck buddy,” Jerard corrected, “and I care about what happens to you and your sexy ass.” He slapped her bare bottom to get her moving toward the dais.

Jerard might be a good man, but he was also a good Dom. Sassing him would mean not sitting on her sexy ass for a week. Christ, Jerard’s favorite color was pink, or as he said, *rose*. Different language, same meaning. *Owy, ow, ow, ow!*

But even painful sounds better in French.

“And my top, but only when Edmund says so,” she sang, reminding him that she was his as a gift and nothing more.

Eva settled into position with a sigh. Four days until Friday.

Jerard ran his gaze over her body. His eyes heated as they trailed away from her face, down the curve of her back, and over the mound of her bottom.

Her Frenchman was an ass man. A *rose* ass man.

“You’re turning me on just looking at me, Jerard.”

“Ditto,” he said around a laugh, then lifted his brush. “But don’t worry, Eva. I know the rules. I’m not looking for more. Just trying to make you horny.”

She wiggled her sexy ass and raised it higher.

“Do not tempt me with that. It’s only Monday.” He wagged a finger and stared at her backside. When she arched her back a little more, he got all prickly. “Stop fidgeting, or I’ll—”

“Spank me,” she chirped, not bothering to hide her desire for him to do just that.

“Deny you.”

She and Jerard were allowed to scene only once a week, and he would deny her? Why were all Doms prickly? Must be in their secret rulebook. Then again, girls like her enjoyed playing by the rules.

But breaking a few was fun too.

Pink-ass man. Pink-ass girl. What of it?

“You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

Horrors. He would. The man may not be her Master, but he was a master at getting her off. Like ten times every time they played. Time to be a good girl. Eva pressed her lips tight and froze.

They fell into a comfortable silence. Only the sound of her breath and the paintbrush scratching the canvas. Her position wasn’t hard to hold—flat on her belly with arms folded under a face turned outward—but Jerard insisted she be still, as in zero fidgeting. That would have been fine if these sessions lasted for fifteen minutes, but Jerard was tireless. Eva wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but her shoulders ached. If she moved her neck, it might snap.

“Too much?” Jerard asked, as if he knew she was hurting.

“I’m fine. You don’t have to stop.”

He put down his brush and walked toward her. That was the difference between Jerard and Edmund. If Edmund knew she was hurting, he would have smiled and stayed put.

Being naked and subject to Jerard’s artist’s scrutiny was a turn-on; the back massage he always gave afterward was like ambrosia in a bottle. Eva moaned when his talented hands swept her hair aside and began to rub her neck.

“How long until it’s finished?” she asked, feeling a pang of sadness at knowing her portrait was almost complete. She really liked spending time with Jerard.

“Oh, I think I can drag it out until your contract with Edmund ends.”

And that was exactly what Eva wanted to hear. Being near Jerard made her feel safe.

“You’re doing it again,” Jerard said.

“What?”

“Frowning. If you want to talk, I’ll listen. I really do care about you.”

“I know.” She wasn’t about to tell Jerard what was going on with Edmund, so she skirted around the truth. “I was just thinking about leaving Edmund. I’ve been with him for a long time. Being on my own again kind of scares me.”

A dismissive hand waved through the air. “Mon jouet is scared? I find that hard to believe. Companion to the infamous Edmund Dupuis, and she’s scared. *Pas possible.*” Impossible.

Eva wanted to be mad, but Jerard had a point. And really great hands.

Truly, super hands.

“Then again, my whiskey-drinking man-killer is afraid of something as simple as a kiss.”

“I like bourbon, and men find me attractive. So what? Fruity is for wimps, and the boobage is all a girl needs to attract a guy. And I’m not afraid of anything,” she insisted, her pride bruised.

Jerard crouched next to the dais. Challenge lit his eyes. “Prove it.” He leaned in and held his lips a hair’s breadth from hers.

She inhaled and practically tasted his scent. Sandalwood cologne, spearmint breath, and sin.

“It’s not fear, Jerard. It’s...”

“It’s?” His tongue ran over his bottom lip in invitation.

Feeling the double shot of lust and friendship tempted Eva, honestly tempted her, to close the gap between them. Since entering the lifestyle, she’d never actually been friends with any of her lovers. Didn’t even know many of their names, and the idea of

intimacy that was actually intimate held a certain appeal. But Eva DelZotto had learned the hard way not to rely on anyone but herself.

She turned her face into her folded arms. “Everyone always yammers on and on with the romantic drivel about swapping spit. Kissing sucks. What’s in a kiss anyway?”

Jerard’s hand pushed on her shoulder to roll her onto her side and ran over the cinch of her waist to hold her there.

“A promise, Eva. That’s what’s in a kiss.”

Looking into those soulful eyes, she could almost believe that a man could mean something so romantic.

Almost.

“Well then, the old saying is true: promises are made to be broken.”

Jerard held her gaze and said, “He broke his promise to you; didn’t he?”

Eva fought to keep her face neutral. How did Jerard know that? It wasn’t as if she’d told him what was hidden in her heart.

There was a count of silence, and then Jerard rolled his eyes. “Yes, Eva. That was your prompt to tell me about your mystery man.”

She played dumb. “You mean Edmund?”

“You don’t love Edmund, and you never will. We both know that. It’s just you and I here. Talk to me.”

“Trying to be my dad again, are you?”

Jerard leaned back, the playfulness gone from his eyes. “Trying to be your friend,” he said with a sharp note of reprimand. “Believe me when I tell you that I know what it feels like to love someone you can’t have. It hurts like nothing else can hurt. It breaks your heart and blows through it like a cold wind.”

The words conjured a seismic wave of pity and vulnerability. Eva didn’t know whether to hug Jerard or slap him. She settled on lying to him.

“What makes you think I—”

“Don’t bother to lie, Eva. I’ve known for a while now. When we’re together, you close your eyes and go away. You go to him.”

She had to admit there’d been times with Jerard when she’d felt the same thing.

“Is that why you’re not with someone? Because you love someone else?”

“It’s that and”—his head fell forward on a heavy breath—“I’m an addict.”

The slap of bitter experience hit her.

“But you stopped, right? Please, tell me you stopped.”

“I did, with the help of an angel.” Jerard tapped the stunning tattoo of an angel on his left arm. “Without her, I would have died.”

“Is she the woman you can’t have?”

“No, this isn’t her. I love her, but she’s only a friend.”

The sadness in Jerard’s voice said the lady tattooed on his arm was a lot more than a friend, but if Eva didn’t want Jerard to poke her sleeping demon, she wasn’t about to poke his.

“That’s why I’m pushing you about the Order. You’re leaving Edmund. I know you’re not going to someone else. I don’t want you to be alone.”

“I’ve always been alone.”

“Not always.”

The cold wind blew hard against the wall around her heart.

“As your friend, I would be honored if you would trust me enough to tell me what happened.”

Something in the humble way Jerard said the words put a crack in the wall. Eva closed her eyes and went back.

Back to *him*.

She smelled cypress and wintery air. The sky above was black, as black as his eyes, and filled with snow. The wind was bitter cold, yet his long fingers on her tear-stained

cheeks blazed with warmth. His lips were soft and full of promise. He cupped her face and drew her into a kiss.

Her first true kiss.

Eva couldn't hold back the words. "He kissed my lips, and the world around me ceased to exist. He became my world. He said our spirits were joined before we were born and would be forever. He said he would be the last man to kiss my lips."

The memory shifted. Sweat and cigarette smoke. A concrete hallway filled with stark light and strangers, their hungry stares fixed, their talons at the ready. His eyes were vacant and red. He cupped her face and drew her into a kiss.

Her last kiss.

The crack exploded into a gaping hole, and the cold wind iced her broken heart. Jerard moved to sit next to her on the dais and gathered her into his arms. She clung to him as if he could protect her, from the past, from the present, from everything she hid, while the tears, a copious rush of fat tears, drenched his shirt.

When there were no more tears to cry, Eva punctuated her pity party by saying, "I loved him so much."

"You *love* him so much," Jerard corrected.

Every defense—and Eva DelZotto had earned more than her fair share—shot sky-high.

She shoved Jerard away and wiped her traitorous tears. "No, I don't. He's a liar. He's never coming back. Even if he tried, I wouldn't let him."

Jerard ignored her outburst and responded with the practiced calm of a Dom handling a hysterical sub. "You have a choice to make," he said with quiet authority. "You can let the bitterness destroy you, or you can carry on with the hope that maybe someday, a little warmth will find its way back into your heart."

Eva was suddenly pissed. No one touched her emotions. Jerard may be a friend, her only friend in New York, but even he could not break through those barriers. He was a man, and men destroy the women who let them.

She leaped to her feet and glared. "Oh, I'll carry on, all right. Don't let a few tears fool you, Jerard. I've been on my own since I was seventeen. I know better than anyone how to carry on."

The lie made the cold wind howl, and tendrils of icy pain licked at the scabs of her buried wounds.

"And when you leave Edmund?"

"Enough."

Eva had no idea what she would do after Edmund. No plans. No goal. Nothing but a degree and a heart that refused to heal.

She snapped a lid over the seeping insecurity and pulled out her streetwise bitch. "Are you saying I need a man to survive?"

God help Jerard if he said yes.

"Everyone needs someone. We all make bad choices, but now you can choose something better."

"Something better? Hah! As if I made a bad choice in Edmund. As if I was looking for love. You don't know me at all, Jerard."

"I know you better than you think."

The utter confidence in his voice made her wince.

"Then you know why I'm with Edmund."

"Non, but I'd like you to tell me."

Eva went on, aware that Jerard was drawing out her secrets and not caring. "I come from nothing, and I learned the hard way that no one takes care of someone like me. So I take care of myself. When I got to New York, everyone warned me to stay the hell away from Edmund Dupuis. Said he broke women, and he would break me too,

but I knew he couldn't. You can't break someone who's already broken. I went after Edmund, and I got him. We made a deal. I gave him one limit and made one demand. No kissing on the lips and tuition. In exchange, he got me. I may be Edmund's whore, but it was my choice, and I will not regret it."

"You're not a whore, Eva."

Jerard's sympathy burned like acid.

"Don't you dare look at me like that. You think I feel guilty? Well, I don't have that luxury. I needed a roof over my head and an education so I wouldn't have to rely on another man to keep it there. Edmund gave me that. Like tossing a penny into a guitar case for that rich bastard. Poor little Eva, on the other hand, has paid a king's ransom for what I've let Edmund take from me. So I'll carry on all right. I'll take my hoity-toity education from that godforsaken man, and I'll carry my sexy ass right on."

With that, she turned her sexy ass on Jerard, grabbed her clothes, and marched out.

* * * *

"Hey, Gagne. Get your beret over here and give me some love," Teo shouted as he burst into the SoHo gallery and laughed when Jerard dropped his palette.

"Zut." Damn. "You scared the crap out of me, Teo." Jerard bent to wipe the splattered paint.

"If you want to kiss my boots first, I won't stop you."

"*Dans tes rêves, connard.*" In your dreams, asshole. With a hard snap of his fingers, Jerard pointed across the room. "Hand me that can of mineral spirits so I can clean this up before it ruins Darion's floor."

At the mention of Darion's name, Teo darted into action, grabbed the can and a clean cloth, and started wiping the paint off the hardwood. You don't mess around with Darion LeClair, even by accident. The owner of the gallery and the highest Master in the Order was better left on one's good side.

“If you’re gonna call me an asshole, drop the French,” Teo teased, then returned the compliment. “It sounds like you’re flirting, *pendejo*.”

Jerard waved a dismissive hand through the air. “Everything sounds sexy in French.” Then he pressed his forefinger to his chin like he was contemplating world peace. “Pendejo. Connard. Same meaning, but the French sounds so much better. Even the Spanish sounds better spoken with a French accent.” Jerard kissed him on both cheeks to rub in the whole French thing. “Missed you, connard.”

Teo rolled his eyes to mask the warm fuzzy. “Missed you too, *pendejo*.”

The last few months had been great, in a way. A record contract, a number-one hit, and a tour. After years of bumbling around and fucking up, it was a miracle he’d survived, let alone hit it big. He wanted to give the world his music. It was the only thing he had to offer. But the complete and utter depravity of being famous shook him. Without his friends, he would have come unglued.

And Jerard was more than a friend. He was a soul mate. Both artists. Both recovering addicts. Both kinkster fools with a lousy sense of humor. Jerard knew the man behind the rock star. No boot kissing; only unfettered friendship and support. Nothing like the sycophants who surrounded them both.

“How was the first leg of the tour? You survive it without getting the clap?” Jerard asked.

“Medical tests come back in a week.”

“For God’s sake, Teo. A little pussy is fine, but—”

“A lot of pussy is fine. I’m gonna fuck my way into an early grave.”

Jerard gave him a poisonous look.

Before the mother hen began the lecture, Teo said, “I’m joking. Condoms every time. My lawyer says I should invest my money. Maybe I’ll buy stock in Trojan.”

“Connard,” Jerard cursed him again.

“You? Any clapping in New York?”

“Non.”

“Now who’s joking, monsieur hot-shit *artiste*? You’re chick candy, and New York is chock-full of fluffy, little, kinky chicks. What are you doing, batting them away with a stick?”

With the words, Teo’s thoughts turned serious. Another thing he and Jerard shared: love for a woman they couldn’t have, and that kind of pain toyed with the inner-addict.

“You tight, man?”

Jerard nodded. “There’s one lady, but she belongs to Edmund Dupuis.”

Teo raised his eyebrows.

“You know Edmund?”

“I know *of* him. Darion will freak if he hears you’re hanging out with the likes of him. So why are you?”

“The likes of him is the king of kink in New York, the high-end variety anyway. He runs a private club. Lets me play with his sub. No strings.”

“That expression doesn’t look like no strings to me. I know you’ve still got a thing for Juli, but could this woman be—”

Jerard flipped up his hand. “Stop talking. She’s not the one for me. You, maybe,” he said with a full-on, snotty scan that could only be described as French. “On second thought, non.”

“I think I should be insulted.”

“She likes whiskey and combat boots, writes poetry. Some idiot broke his promise to her, fucked up a lovely sub, and left her cynical and unprotected.” Jerard caught Teo’s smirk and added, “She’s a gift. That’s it.”

“Don’t bullshit a bullshitter, Jerard.”

Jerard huffed a laugh. “All right, she’s a very nice gift with stormy eyes and a killer ass. The lady is cool, street-savvy, but she’s only a friend.”

“Your whiskey girl sounds more like stupid to have gotten mixed up with Dupuis.”

“She’s had a tough go of it.”

“Haven’t we all.”

“*Trop de vérité*,” Jerard muttered. Too much truth. “Darion’s not wrong about Edmund. There’s a screw loose there. I’ll borrow his sub and play in his club, but the only thing I’ll take from that man is a lesson on what I never want to become.” He pointed to a painting in the far corner. “That’s her.”

Stormy eyes. Killer ass. Cool. Savvy.

Teo slipped a mask over his emotions to hide them from Jerard as his heart leaped into his mouth.

Eva!

Chapter Two

Heartache, headache, head trip, snow
Stealing secrets
Nobody knows
Eyeliners, Green Day, cigarette lies
Sweet salvation
Welcomed demise

—Judas, “The Girl Between”

Past

Teo followed the girl out of the room.

No. He didn't follow. He was drawn.

She moved fast and smooth like a cat, her long hair a swishing tail as she prowled along the breezeway between the annex and the church.

Between. That was her vibe. She didn't fit with the group she'd just abandoned, and she didn't fit in that church either. The girl was between.

A very vulnerable place to be.

He caught up with her on the church steps; damp air thwarted her escape. She was beating the crap out of a defenseless paper matchbook.

He flicked his Zippo. “Light?”

She leaned in and cupped his hand, her touch surprising. And warm. Somehow he expected her to be cold. “Thanks.”

“What's your sin?”

“Hit a guy,” she said, and a puff of smoke escaped her lips.

Pretty lips. Plump. Inviting. Dangerous on a girl her age. Given where they were, she couldn't be more than seventeen. The other girls in the room looked like girls; this girl looked like a woman.

It wasn't the body. No boobs filled out her faded Green Day T-shirt. No curves in her black tube skirt or the long, skinny legs that ended in a pair of purple patent-leather Doc Martens. It was the eyes. Stormy, coated in gobs of black eyeliner yet somehow vulnerable. This girl had seen too much life in her seventeen or less years. Teo couldn't stop staring.

"How about you?"

"Too many sins to name. You really hit a guy, huh?" he asked with a glance at the hand cradling her cigarette. Delicate, almost elegant—not the hand of a fighter.

Her long, thin fingers raised it to her lips, and her stormy eyes crashed into him. "The man disrespected me, but a girl with a bad history against the word of a business owner. Guess who wins that fight? The little wifey made sure of it, stupid bitch." She sucked an angry drag and exhaled her cynicism. "So here I am, *repenting*. How silly of me to think blowing the boss wasn't part of my job."

"Well played, sinner. Bad history?" Teo asked as he lit up.

"He's not the first guy I've hit." She gave him a shrug and turned to leave. "It's been real."

"That's cold, babe."

She paused. "Meaning?"

He held up his cigarette. "Walking out on a smoke with a friend."

"We're not friends."

"Not yet." He took a deep drag so the glowing tip of his cigarette would light his features.

Her plump lips tilted up while her stormy eyes checked him out. A quick flash in them signaled attraction before she turned and walked away.

Hang on a *that's-never-happened-before* second.

"Where you running to?"

"Somewhere. Not here," she said without turning back or breaking her stride.

He trotted down the steps next to her. "Didn't mean to scare you, babe."

That stopped her. Dead in her tracks.

"Don't flatter yourself, *babe*."

He rocked back on his heels. "She's got nowhere to go, and her boots can't get her there quick enough. Sure looks scared to me." Cue the smug smile.

She didn't smile back.

"At least tell me your name. I'm Teodor."

"If I tell you my name, are you going to hypnotize me with your red cloak and pierce me with your big sword, matador?"

A cynic with a sultry stare, the girl did a good sexy, but the come-on was a cover. Teo recognized another tortured soul, and storming out on tonight's meeting would do this one no good. He swallowed the urge to talk dirty with a kid.

"Look, you know how this goes. If you leave, you'll get into more trouble, and you don't look like you need it."

"And the matador cares because?" This time her stormy eyes lingered a bit longer.

And this time his smile wasn't innocent. "I like to play with my food."

Shit, wrong words. Teo ran a full hand through his hair. Wrong move, but the ladies loved the hair, and yeah, he wasn't keen on rejection.

"Seriously, Deacon Rey is my brother. Augustin's a good man. You can trust him." Most of the kids his brother tried to save with these counseling sessions didn't have the ears to hear him, but the meetings kept the police at bay. At least for a while. Augustin was a man of God, not the streets. For the ones who mistook that as a weakness, Teo was his muscle. He'd dragged many a runner back to his brother. "I help Augustin out sometimes. In exchange, he lets me and the band practice in the church annex."

“That’s your gig? Music?”

“Yeah.”

Ah, Stormy was curious. Hadn’t met a girl yet who wasn’t. He flashed his rock-star smile, the suggestive grin that was humble and arrogant and never failed.

Until now.

“Like I said, matador; it’s been real. I’m out of here.”

He laid a hand on her shoulder. “I can’t let you leave, babe. You think you’re tough, but you’re not tough enough for jail. Trust me. I’ve been there.”

She glanced at his hand, then at him. “As if you can stop me.” There was snap in her voice now. No sex, definitely snap.

“Try me.”

She spun on her chunky heels, ready to march into the rain, and he grabbed her.

The slap hit his cheek faster than lightning.

For a split second, Teo was pissed. Then he was impressed. Only one way to handle that kind of fire. He slapped her back.

Her jaw dropped with her quick intake of breath. Her nostrils flared. Storm clouds swirled in her eyes, but she didn’t cower.

He raised an eyebrow and a smile. “I’m bigger. I’ll win.”

Her hand twitched, but she restrained her violent impulses. A pity. He would have liked the excuse to tumble her over his shoulder when she took another swing at his jaw and pay her back with a palm to the ass.

Something of his deviant mind must have shown on his face. He barely caught the next swing.

This girl was a wild one.

Squeezing her wrist with enough force to threaten, he said, “You trying to turn me on, babe? ’Cause if you are, it’s working.”

The flicker of shock made her look more her age; the dip of her bottom lip did not. Most men would want to kiss that pouty lip. Teo wanted to bite it.

Holding her wrist high, he leaned into her space, daring her to challenge him, and eyed her cheek. It was pink from his slap. He knew he was about to get himself into trouble, but...

"I'll make you a deal. You like music. If you go back, I'll let you stick around after the meeting and listen to my band practice."

She yanked her arm away.

"I'll take that as a yes." He hauled her up and over his shoulder, giving her bottom a good hard smack for the one she'd landed on his face.

"What the fuck? Put me down."

He smacked her again—just for giggles—and his wild one sunk her teeth into his waist.

"No can do, babe," Teo said around a laugh. "First you're talking with Jesus; then you're meeting Judas."

* * * *

Plunk. Eva's ass stung when it hit the cold metal. So did her ego at being manhandled in front of a group of grinning idiots.

Well, the guys were grinning. The girls were gaping at her brute. He dropped into the folding chair next to hers, and the clank of the chain dangling over his back pocket cut through the stunned silence.

The deacon cleared his throat. "Thanks, brother. Shall we continue now?"

Teodor's dark eyes fixed on her from beneath swags of darker hair. The look screamed, *Run. I dare you.*

"Well, fine," Eva huffed and folded her arms over her nonexistent boobs.

She'd sit here until the meeting ended; then she was a gone girl. The thought almost made her break down. She was a gone girl all right. So keen on running yet

nowhere to go. Why she'd even bothered to show up tonight was beyond her. Attending court-mandated counseling wouldn't keep the police off the tail of a runaway. That is if Daddy Dearest even bothered to call the police. At least the room was heated. Three days on the streets, and she felt as if the cold would never leave her bones.

"You've got our full attention," said the matador with a smug nod.

As the psychobabble started up again, Eva stared at the matador's hands. Everything about him put out a *don't-fuck-with-me* vibe—the loose posture, the irreverent swagger, the constant furrow of his brow—but his hands were different. Graceful, lithe, with long fingers. The hands of a musician. Short nails and calloused fingertips told her he played the guitar.

Had to be the guitar, didn't it? Once, just once, couldn't the stars align in her favor, or did the Fates get off on mocking her? As much as Eva wanted to, she couldn't hate him now. The scream of guitar strings raised a finger to the shitty world and released the pressure. It was the only thing that made her feel like she wasn't alone.

Those hands slapped you.

A thought that would repulse any sane woman sent a very different feeling through Eva's body. When Teodor hit her face, it wasn't hard enough to damage, but it was hard enough to twist her insides into knots. When he spanked her backside, the coil wound so tight, she thought she'd peed her panties. But as soon as her ass hit the chair...ah. That secret cream was only hers when she was alone with her imagination and her finger.

Her gaze drifted up. Thick strands of Teodor's hair hid a profile so faultless, it was tragic. A square jaw covered in a perfect shading of stubble, wide lips set in a permanent pucker, lashes so long they curved. Matador was beautiful in a dangerous way, yet somehow, sitting next to him made her feel safe.

That was perhaps the most dangerous thing about him. Trust a guy? Not happening, but there was no denying the intrigue. Matador was the stuff of fantasies, and every girl in the room seemed to agree. More eyes rested on him than the deacon.

The shot of jealousy came from nowhere.

The corner of Teodor's mouth tilted up as if he'd caught a whiff of her green-eyed monster.

Eva shifted in her chair, arching her back, and ran a hand through her damp hair. She knew exactly how to hold a guy's attention. She didn't want him, but none of these bitches could have him either.

Selfish? Who the hell cares?

Matador didn't turn his head, but his tongue swiped across his bottom lip before his perfect teeth snagged it.

Something in Eva's mind conjured an image of white teeth on pink skin. Her reaction wasn't normal, but of course, she wasn't normal, or so she'd been told by the dipshit who passed for the school counselor.

* * * *

"Hurting ourselves is aberrant, and we're not going to do that anymore, are we, dear?"

The mouth said dear; the eyes said freak.

"Of course not, ma'am." Eva smirked across the desk and sank back into her chair. "Unless I'm angry or horny, and I'm always angry or horny."

When she spread her legs, the bitch stared for a few seconds too long.

So which one of them was the freak?

* * * *

Eva was so lost in the memory that she didn't realize she was staring at the matador's mouth until he feigned a cough to cover an obscene chuckle.

Yeah, Teodor was a freak too. The good kind.

When the meeting was over, Teodor didn't get up. He sat back, thumbs hooked in his jeans pockets, knees spread, cool eyes assessing her while the rest of the group scurried like rats from a sinking ship.

"You were so anxious to leave earlier, Eva. Aren't you heading out?" the deacon asked, snapping her attention away from...his brother.

She could see the resemblance. At least the physical one. Otherwise, the two men couldn't be more different. Augustin Rey was older, with a decidedly conservative vibe to match the plain clothes and short hair. His face was handsome but mild. It didn't command attention. There was no sexual heat in his posture or his voice.

"Nope," the matador said around a devil of a smile. "Eva"—he accentuated the name she hadn't shared—"is sticking around to meet the boys."

The words, or maybe the tone of voice, got Augustin's attention. She'd been wrong about his face. It wasn't mild now. It was filled with command. Eva couldn't look away as he spoke to his brother. "She's seventeen, Teo."

Damn it. Why did Deacon Rey have to bring up her age? Seventeen sounded so young and naive, and Eva DelZotto was anything but young and naive.

"I'm not a pervert, Augustin. She's just gonna listen to the music, so don't get your collar in a twist."

"Teodor said I could stay if I came back to the meeting."

Argh. She sounded like a wimpy kid.

Teodor's head swiveled to catch her eye. "That's right. Teodor gave Eva permission to stay, but only if she promises to be a good little seventeen-year-old girl." His voice was a song, a dirty song.

Eva swallowed hard. When God dealt the sex-appeal cards, Teodor got a royal flush.

"She's my ward." Augustin huffed.

“Oh, come on, Augustin. It’s just rehearsal.”

“Fine. She can stay, but only if you swear to walk her home.”

“Done.”

“And get her there before midnight.”

“No worries, brother. I’ll make sure Cinderella gets home, glass slipper intact.”

Eva grumbled at the sappy princess comparison. As if the metro stop she’d slept in for the past three nights were a castle.

Augustin nodded, and Teodor held out his hand. “Come along, princess. Your pumpkin awaits.”

* * * *

“Who’s your friend, Teo?”

The question was innocent enough, but coming out of Nati’s mouth, it sounded pornographic.

“This is Eva, and she’s seventeen,” Teo warned, as if her age would make any difference to his slut for a drummer.

“Yeah, Nati. Back off,” Shea snapped, then rolled his hips and shoulders like a lounge lizard to position himself, front and center, in Eva’s space. “Hi, baby doll. I’m Shea.”

Teo should have known better than to believe Shea would behave. Shea never behaved. He leaned in and kissed Eva right on the lips before Teo could yank her away.

“Will you two cut it the fuck out? The girl wants to listen to some music, not deal with the sleazy come-on.”

“Actually, I’m good with the sleaze,” Eva purred in a husky voice that was anything but seventeen.

“Oh no, you don’t, Cinderella.” Teo gave her a warning glare, and Eva smiled, just for him. Not a shy smile. Not a seventeen-year-old smile. The smile of a cat licking cream from its paw. “You sit over there and stop fucking smiling.”

Teo couldn’t believe his anger. He certainly didn’t fall into the prude category. His virginity had gone bye-bye long before he hit the big One-Six. Since then...the only word that came to mind was man-whore. And he shouldn’t be snapping at his friends when he’d pulled the same Rico Suave routine on Eva. But that was before he knew she was seventeen.

Like eighteen is much better, man-whore.

His bandmates were good people, but they’d all grown accustomed to the “musician effect.” Women fell at their feet, legs spread. All kinds of women. All ages. All sizes. All colors. Sing a few bars, and land in a playground of pussy. No strings. No attachments. No worries. Everybody happy.

But there was something about Eva that felt different.

When he dragged on that cigarette so she could see his face, it was like the light on the tip traveled across the space between them, connecting them with a burning cord. Stupid thought, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were connected. He wasn’t sure how or why, but they were. While he figured it out, no one was hitting on her. Not even him. His protective instincts were in overdrive. The only other woman who’d ever made him feel this caveman was his little sister.

But Eva was not his sister. She was nothing like Isabella.

He saw it. It was only a flash, but a kindred soul recognizes its own kind. When he slapped her, Eva didn’t wince or cry or even pull away. Her nostrils flared, and it wasn’t anger that triggered the reaction. It was lust.

Dangerous. Too fucking dangerous.

He may be a man-whore, but the part of him that shared Eva’s taste for the taboo would never again see the light of day. The things he wanted, the kinky things he

imagined, were so far over his Catholic moral line, it terrified him. He may be a sinner, but he couldn't live with being *that* kind of sinner.

Why was all this bubbling up now? He'd kept his urges down for months. One slap opened the floodgates?

No. It wasn't the slap. It was Eva.

Teo had lost control and slapped a woman during sex twice. Both times, he'd met a stonewall of horrified rejection. Just like Augustin said he would. Kink was all over the Internet, but in real life? Maybe it was cool for a guy like Nati, who had no shame in talking about the depraved shit he wanted and no guilt in doing it. For Teo, kink was a leap too far.

But Eva wasn't horrified by what he did. Her reaction invited more. Begged for it. He heard Nati's voice in his head. "*All you need, man, is the right kind of lady.*"

Was Eva the right kind of lady?

God, when she bit him, he'd nearly thrown her down on the stone steps and...

Teo shook off his imagination. His goddamned kinky imagination. "Let's play."

Music was the only thing that soothed the savage beast. Hokey expression, but when the cliché fits... He may be into pussy galore, but it had to be vanilla. Anything else... He simply couldn't handle the guilt.

The music began to play, and the riot in his mind quieted.

* * * *

Want to know what happens next

<http://www.loose-id.com/masters-of-the-order-harmony.html>