



WORTH
THE Wait



SILKE CAMPION

Worth the Wait

Chapter One

Sarah Miller had regrets. No one reached full maturity without them, and she'd been a grown-up for quite a while.

Right now, her primary regret was not wearing a full filtration mask to keep the smell of stale sweat and old leather from seeping into her lungs.

She blinked, but refused to let something as simple as a gym that reeked worse than her son's high school era laundry hamper slow her down. With a smile plastered on her face, she stepped further into the harsh light that buzzed from overhead fluorescent bars.

By the time she'd taken a dozen steps inside, all other noise had stopped, except for the spitting drone of electricity.

There were men everywhere. The gym wasn't large, so there weren't very many of them, but the men mostly seemed very large, too, taking up an inordinate amount of square footage per person. A fenced-in ring dominated the center of the space, highlighted by a single spot and occupied by three of those large men. Staring at her.

One stepped forward, tugging on a t-shirt as he approached her. "Oh, hey, Mrs. Miller."

The familiar voice made her smile. "Hello, Riley. Good to see you."

"No trouble. How's Noah?"

"He's doing well." Sarah's son had gone to college with an ROTC scholarship and was now an active-duty Army officer, stationed in Germany. With his typical good luck, he'd ended up at a base in picturesque Bavaria, near one of the world's most prestigious ski areas. Sarah had told Riley Hayes about him during one of their chats at the VA. She volunteered there and the former Marine was a regular visitor to several of the men on the ward. Riley reminded her of her son, and talking about him made her not miss him so much.

"He sent me one of those 'I'm a badass' selfies you guys are so fond of taking. Too bad he was on a ski weekend with his buddies at Zugspitze and covered in snow. It kind of takes the ;rar, me tough

guy' out of it when they're carrying ski-poles instead of M-16s."

The young man's laughter rang out, a little harsh, but she didn't flinch. "Yeah, getting stationed at Garmisch is real tough, I'm sure."

"I appreciate you for letting me come here and ask questions. I brought a thank you gift." Sarah opened up the tote she was carrying and pulled out a covered tray of cookies. Technically, they were nutrition bars, packed with oatmeal, pecans and dried tart cherries, plus a healthy dose of molasses, honey and chocolate. But she didn't fool herself. They were definitely cookies. She sent her son a batch every month and made extra for the veterans at the hospital. The way these boys in the gym immediately surrounded her like hungry pups, she decided she could start baking for them, too.

Riley's eyes flickered over her shoulder and he cocked his head at what he saw, so she turned around to see what had drawn his attention away from the tray that had been lifted carefully out of her hands and was making its way through the ranks.

She adjusted her glasses and her eyes widened.

"Sarah?" His voice was a hoarse rasp, different than the last time she'd heard it nearly thirty years ago. The last time when he told her that he hoped she had a great life, but he wasn't going to be part of it.

Decades of wondering why she hadn't been worth waiting for flashed like a gasoline fire in her brain and her hand flew without conscious thought. The sharp sound of her palm meeting his cheek brought the already quiet gym to dead silence.

The bastard didn't even flinch, although his eyes flared bright and hard. A moment passed, and the horror of what she'd just done washed over her. She gasped as tears of shock and sorrow and outrage sprang to her eyes and he opened his arms.

"Sarah, come here."

She fell into his embrace by instinct. The logical part of her brain told her to hold back. He hadn't earned her touch, he didn't deserve her. But that part had always been tempered by the way her heart leapt at his nearness. Time disappeared as the warmth from all those years ago came rushing

back alongside the pain. “Oh Jim, I... I’m so sorry.”

“Pretty sure I earned that one, sweetheart. Did you hurt your hand?”

She sniffled and held it out for him to see, the palm red and beginning to swell.

“Poor kitten.” The sweet words didn’t match the harshness of his voice, but the underlying warmth soothed her as much as the gentle touch of his rough fingers as he cradled her hand in his.

“Let’s go back to my office and get some ice on it. Then you can tell me what the hell is going on in my gym, okay?”

“You all right, Mrs. Miller?” Riley’s voice was a dash of much-needed cold water.

Sarah pulled away from Jim’s embrace, the slight stiffening all she needed for him to drop his hands, leaving her oddly bereft.

“Yes, Riley. I’m fine. Jim and I knew each other a long time ago.” It was as much truth as she was willing to admit.

“Yeah, I figured.” He eyed the older man and drew a deep breath. “You need help?” The men standing behind him all shifted forward slightly.

Tears sprang again to Sarah’s eyes, this time with a rush of maternal affection. She glanced over at Jim, who stared back at his men with surprise on his face. Gently, she placed a hand on Jim’s forearm, and he covered her fingers with his own.

“It’s fine, honestly. I was startled, but I feel perfectly safe with Jim.” She stepped forward and grasped the younger man’s hand. “But I can’t tell you how much it means that you stood up for me. You’re a good man, Riley Hayes. Thank you.”

A wash of red crept up Riley’s neck at her words and she wanted nothing more than to hug him like he was her own son, but she resisted.

“Good job, Hayes. Good man.” Jim had stepped up next to her and his rough, quiet words carried weight. Riley nodded and relaxed.

Then Jim raised his voice and addressed all the men gathered around them. “I’m proud of all you sons-of-bitches. Now shower and clear your gear. I’m closing early tonight. Got a lot to catch up on

here.”

Sarah’s eyes widened and she choked down a laugh at the chorus of “Yes, Sarge” that came back.

The years had matured Jim Barnes from a wiry, lanky youth into a strong, broad-shouldered man with lines around his mouth and eyes and silver shot generously through his cropped, dark hair. His eyes were the same brilliant blue that had always held her attention, but they were no longer as clear and innocent as they had been the last time she’d seen him. Life had given them a harder, resolute gleam and she found them more arresting than ever.

He held her reddened palm in one hand while he slid the other around her, settling against the small of her back with gentle, but firm intent. Not low enough to disrespect her, but not so high that he threw her off balance. Jim had always known how to touch her and the heat of his hand through her thin blouse had her tamping down a shiver, her nipples peaking through the satin of her bra.

“Chilled, sweetheart?”

“No,” she murmured. “Thank you for asking.”

She didn’t want to look but stole a peek at his face anyway. His jaw flexed. “You know I hate it when you lie to me, Sarah.”

“Same goes, Jim.” The fire that had fueled her instinctive slap, retaliation for the easy way he’d discarded her, straightened her spine. This wasn’t the moment for her to give in. To forgive before he’d asked, if he even bothered asking.

Ushering her into his office, he closed the door behind them, then moved to lower and close the blinds on the large windows that looked out over the gym. The large fluorescent block overhead was off. Instead, a golden glow spilled from two freestanding lamps in the corners of the room, giving the room plenty of light but with a warmth the rest of the gym lacked.

He went to a small refrigerator beside his desk to retrieve a blue gel pack. He slipped it into a little sleeve with an elastic band around it, then held it so Sarah could slide her hand between the fabric and the wide, soft elastic.

“I’m going to ask again. Sarah, are you cold?” His eyes gleamed hot enough to make up for

whatever the temperature might be.

But she'd made it thirty years without his warmth. She perched at the edge of the battered couch that hulked against his office wall, then crossed her ankles and arranged her hands palm up on her lap so the ice pack touched only her hand, not her legs. She couldn't afford to give in.

"No, Jim. I'm not. I never lied to you. Not now, not then, and certainly not about something as insignificant as whether I'm lightly chilled. I wish I could say the same about you."

The ice in his eyes glinted once before he looked away. "Fuck. You never used to call me on my bullshit."

"I grew up."

In college, without Jim always at her side, Sarah perfected a look that she'd been told made men's balls shrivel up. Over the years, she'd modified it into a full-on mom glare that kept her kids on the straight and narrow. She didn't hesitate to drop her chin an inch and raise her right eyebrow over her glasses. It was just enough to get the message across to him now.

Fuck around and find out.

Chapter Two

Jim Barnes was not a man who daydreamed a lot but this meeting with Sarah was not going how he'd envisioned it in his fantasies.

For one thing, she wasn't naked, riding his dick like their lives depended on her orgasm.

She wasn't even looking at him like he hung the moon anymore. Instead, she was the picture of a perfect lady. He wanted the sweet fire of the woman who slapped him back, not this cool, collected duchess. There was a difference between realizing he'd fucked up and having the consequences of that fuck-up look at him like he was a bug under her shoe while his face stung from a slap he'd more than earned.

Shit.

"I'm sorry." The words felt like dirt in his mouth. He'd been brought up on the "never apologize, never explain" philosophy of manhood, but he'd learned along the way that pretending he was right all the time, even after he'd hurt people, just made him an arrogant shitbag. A divorced and very lonely arrogant shitbag with a lot of time on his hands to reflect on the damage he'd done.

Never let it be said that even a retired Army sergeant couldn't learn from his mistakes. So he said it again. "I fucked up and I'm sorry."

Sarah's gorgeous blue eyes widened almost comically and his embarrassment made him snappish. "What? Don't look so surprised. I know how to say the words."

"Don't you snarl at me, Jim Barnes," she shot back without a moment's hesitation. "I haven't done anything to deserve that."

Her fiery response reminded him so much of the spirit she'd had in high school that he couldn't hold back his grin. "Yes, ma'am."

His sweet teenage dream had become someone he'd "ma'am" in a second, and demand that everyone he encountered give her the same respect. She'd fucking well earned it.

The years had been kind to Sarah, lending her figure a generous softness that he wanted to

explore. She wore the curves well and he took his time looking her over from top to bottom.

Her hair dipped just below her shoulders with bouncing curls that were a little darker than he remembered. The red streaks gleaming in the light weren't exactly a color found in nature, but he liked the fun of it. Her glasses were subtly rimmed in the same color as those red streaks — not a screaming look-at-me color, just a reminder that she wouldn't be ignored. The lenses magnified the faint crinkles at the edges of her eyes and had more to do with a life of laughter than struggle. She wore a light touch of makeup with perfectly applied red lipstick that made him want to see how much kissing it would take to rub it off.

A dark blue cardigan decorated with polka dots skimmed over a soft green shirt with a slight v at the neck. That v teased him, made him want to trail his mouth down the line of her throat to the pronounced swell it skimmed. She'd tucked the shirt into slim jeans that outlined the curve of her waist and hips, thighs and calves until they ended above her trim ankles where she'd rolled them up into wide cuffs. The blue sandals she wore showed off her pedicure, her toes matching her ringless fingers, which matched that sexy lipstick.

She was pretty as a picture, a real grown-up lady who wore what suited her and made it fun. His Sarah had done all right. She hadn't suffered without him, wasn't worn down by the life she'd led, and he breathed out some of the worry he hadn't realized had been eating at him for decades.

She tried to tamp down the smile that played at the corners of her red lips at his response. That was her way, he recalled. Quick to flare up, she was just as quick to settle and move on. She heaved a sigh and he approved of how it made her sweater shift over tits that were far more generous than he remembered.

“So where do we go from here?” he asked, leaning against the edge of his desk. “What brings you to the gym?”

“Riley invited me.”

He blinked at the red haze burning away the edges of his vision. Although he was pretty sure cookie-baking Sarah looked at the young, fit men in his gym more as a mother figure than a cougar,

Jim was just as certain that every single one of those men had seen MILF written all over her delectable body. He took a few deep breaths to bring his jealousy under control, only to be confronted by that fucking raised eyebrow again.

“Really, Jim? I recognize that look on your face. You’re jealous. Don’t you think that’s a bit dog in the manger? You don’t want me, but you don’t want anyone else to have me, either?”

“I never said I didn’t want you, Sarah. Thirty years after making the worst decision of my life, I’ve never stopped wanting you.”

Her mouth dropped and he moved to stand in front of her as she held herself still. The light in her eyes was hunger and his blood surged in his veins. It had been too long. Something needed to give, some pressure needed to be let off the valve before he started making stupid decisions. So he bent down and tasted her.

A brief press of lips, a quick reminder that she was as warm and giving under him as he remembered. Then he stepped back, returning to lean against the desk. He swiped his tongue over his lower lip to see if he could catch a taste of her, sweet and delicious, and grinned.

“Your lipstick’s smudged.”

Instinctively, her un-iced hand went up to check, delicate fingers tracing around the edges. Then she straightened and narrowed her gaze on him. “No, it’s not. Do I look the kind of woman who wears lipstick that smudges?”

“No, you don’t, duchess. But I want to smudge it anyway.” He threw her a wink he knew would fluster her to put them on equal ground. He could admit that after a career in the Army, plus the extra sauce on the shitshow of his life — he was fucking flustered. “Tell me about your life. Career? Family?”

She fidgeted, pulling her hand out of the ice pack he’d strapped to her palm and straightening the edges of the fabric before she laid it aside on the arm of the couch.

“I’m fine. Reed passed about three years ago.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” He’d heard about her husband’s death when she moved back to town

only a couple of months before. The gossip mill was surprisingly kind. Reed Miller had been a decent man, a good lawyer, and his death from a sudden heart attack after a long career down in Durango hadn't exposed any hidden skeletons. Sarah's return to Hedby had been effortless as she slipped back into small-town life with barely a ripple.

"Your kids?" he prompted.

She smiled and he felt the love pouring out of her, filling the small office. "My son, Noah, graduated from West Point and he's stationed in Germany right now. He loves what he does and I still send him cookies every month. And my daughter, Kristen, is graduating with her Master's in Chemical Engineering in June and has already accepted a job in Texas."

"You're proud of them," he said without a hint of a question.

"I am."

"And you, Sarah? What do you do?" Jim crossed his arms and ignored the steady throb of his cock, primed to fuck the woman who'd blown a hole in his heart the moment she walked through his door.

"I'm an author."

It was the last thing he'd expected her to say until he remembered that she'd excelled in her English classes in high school. Actually, she'd excelled at almost everything, including leaving an indelible impression on his heart. "That's so you. I bet you're amazing at it."

She flushed, her cheeks pink, and her fingers twisted in her lap. "Thank you. I've been writing since the kids were little and it's worked out well."

"That's great to hear. What do you write?"

Sarah looked him straight in the eye, her chin up, and said, "I'm writing a series of romance novels and the heroes are all MMA fighters."

She waited for his reaction.

Nope. He was not going to be *that* asshole. Anyway, that shit was hard work and he was fucking proud of her.

“Then you’ve come to the right place.”

Chapter Three

Sarah couldn't hide her deep breath of relief at his response. She'd been the object of enough derision and leers that she rarely told people what she did unless she was among other writers. But she should have known that Jim would never put her down.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, duchess. So is it the writing that brings you to my gym?"

Thankful they weren't going to dwell on their past relationships, she brought her mind back to business. Difficult when all she wanted to do was press her lips to his again. Jim had surprised her with the brief kiss and she still felt the warm tingle where they'd touched.

High school memories assailed her of their then-innocent explorations. He'd encouraged her responses, the way she'd always reached for more of him, but they'd never gone so far as to remove any clothing. He'd always told her he wanted to wait until she was ready. But by the time she was mature enough to make the decision to give herself to him fully, he told her he was leaving without her.

Sarah had known better than to follow where she wasn't wanted.

It was better if they kept this professional, despite the intimacy of the small office.

"Yes. I met Riley when I was volunteering at the VA down in Denver and we got to talking. He said he and his buddies were starting a brewery here. One day he came in looking a little the worse for wear and said he'd been in an MMA bout over the weekend. The wheels started turning in my head, I started asking questions, and he invited me to come to the gym and take a look around."

"So you didn't know I owned the gym." His voice was flat and her brows furrowed at his tone.

"You didn't plan this."

Sarah shook her head, realizing that he was inexplicably hurt that she hadn't sought him out. But as she said, she'd never lied to him before and wasn't going to start now. "No, I didn't know. I don't think I would have come if I had."

“Goddamn, Sarah. When did you turn vicious?” His gaze had dropped to the floor, but she could hear his pain.

He was right and she flinched. “I’m sorry. I didn’t say it to be mean or vindictive. It’s just... this hurts me, too. Why would I deliberately set myself up for you to reject me again?”

The words needed to be said, like a wound that had festered for too long and needed lancing. The pain poured out of her, the anger, the bewildered grief. Reed’s death had hurt in a different way and though she missed him, it was a fading ache. But Jim’s decades-old abandonment was still raw underneath the scar she’d learned to hide just so she could move on with her life.

Jim’s face reflected her devastation and she was unprepared when he dropped to one knee in front of her.

“No. We’re not going to do this,” he said, his voice gritty with emotion. “We’re not going to keep making each other bleed inside, Sarah. We’re going to fix this shit right now. I hurt you back then. I was a fucking moron and I hurt the girl I loved because I stupidly thought that leaving you behind was for the best. I was wrong, and I’ll always be sorry for that.”

Stunned speechless, she peered into his eyes, the pain-filled windows of his soul.

“You did hurt me, Jim. A lot. I spent a long time feeling as if I wasn’t worth keeping, but I still had a good life. I had Reed and I had my kids. I wouldn’t trade them, despite the pain. So you’re right. We need to stop lashing out at each other and get past this, especially if I’m going to be able to work with Riley to get my research for this book.”

The mention of the other man’s name, she realized, was like tossing a match into a bucket of gasoline.

“Not a chance, duchess. You want to learn, you learn from me. Riley’s a good kid, but he can’t give you what I can.” His growl was feral, the rumble from his chest vibrating the couch as he leaned in, caging her with his arms. Her whole body shivered once, then relaxed, certain of her safety.

“And what’s that?” She taunted the wild animal inside him, amazed at her bravery.

“Fucking everything.”

This time when his lips touched hers, it was no quick, sweet, press. He took what he wanted, feasting at her mouth. His tongue pushed in and sucked at hers, a shocking, visceral caress that was echoed between her thighs.

Reed Miller had been a good man and she'd loved him dearly. He'd given her his faith, his heart, his life. He'd given her children and a home and the means to follow her dreams. But there had always been a part of her deep inside, a part that was passionate and wild and excessive in a way that Reed, who had never been comfortable with affection and touch, had never been able to understand.

That part of her belonged to Jim. He met her there, deep in her soul, and matched her fire. As if stars burned in her blood, she slammed her palms onto his chest and grabbed his t-shirt to yank him closer, clenching until she heard the fabric rip.

She gasped and stared up into his searing blue eyes, her heart pounding, a little afraid of how quickly she'd lost control. They both looked down at where she was still gripping his shirt, unable to let go.

A low growl sounded, a rumble that began under her fingers and traveled outward from the man kneeling before her.

"Keep going, duchess. I can take it."

Her fingers tightened on his shirt and she was lifting herself back up to him when a knock at the door froze them midway.

"Somebody's got a fucking death wish."

Sarah stifled a chuckle as he pushed to his feet and stalked to the door. His walk-away was one hell of a view she decided as she rearranged herself to perch again on the edge of the couch. Jim had bulked up in the best way since his youth and he still had an ass she could happily bounce a quarter off. She hadn't grabbed any love handles when she pulled at his t-shirt, either.

She couldn't say the same for herself, though. She'd lived a soft life and had put on quite a few pounds before Reed's passing. Since her return to Hedby she'd lost much of the weight, but still wasn't comfortable with her body. Two children and thirty years had moved things around and she

was never wearing a bikini in public again. No one needed to see that.

"What do you want, Riley?"

She let out an exasperated sigh that made both men turn to her as she rose and joined Jim at the door.

"Hello, Riley."

"Ma'am," he replied. "Just checking in to see if you're okay."

"How kind." He really was a good kid. "I'm fine. It's good to catch up with Jim. I'm sorry I wasn't able to ask you my questions about fighting today. Can we reschedule?"

Jim tucked an arm around her and pulled her close with a growl. "I can answer your questions."

Her smile stiffened and she responded without looking at him. "I'm sure you can, but I'd still like to hear from Riley's point of view."

The younger man looked between them and took a small step back. "Whenever you're ready, ma'am. If you don't see me here, then I'm either at the brewery or the VA."

"Thank you so much. Have a nice evening."

"And you, ma'am." He looked at Jim and grinned. "You too, Sarge."

"Smart ass," Jim grumbled in response. "Don't forget the outer door is stiff. Make sure it locks all the way behind you."

Riley grinned and jogged away as they watched. Right before he got to the door, Jim called out, "Thanks, kid."

The young man lifted a hand and left. The door thudded closed, clicked, then shook twice as Riley checked the lock.

They were alone.

Chapter Four

Jim turned and studied his duchess in the dim glow of the lamplight. As flattering as it was, he wanted to see more of her but she'd turned away to examine the pictures on his walls.

They were covered with images of him with his fighters, standing in front of the gym on the day he got the keys, and shadow boxes filled with memories of his Army career. He was proud of every one of those moments but they might not have happened if he'd chosen a different path all those years ago.

He'd left her behind to go to basic training because he'd known she needed more than to trail after him, moving post to post, waiting for him to come home from deployments and combat missions. He couldn't have put her through that, and now he wondered if he'd truly believed that she wasn't strong enough... or if he was the one who'd been afraid.

With the way she'd stood up to him tonight, he had to admit that he hadn't given her enough credit. She was right about the outcome, though. The decisions they'd made back then had shaped their lives and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

He walked up behind her and relished the freedom he had to put his arms around her waist. Taking a chance, he pressed himself forward and barely stifled a groan at the way his hard cock fit perfectly against her soft, cushioned ass.

The sound she made low in her throat was half the echo of his own desire and half irritation. Shit. What had he done now?

"You know," he said, bending to kiss her neck. "There was a time when I would have ignored that little hmm, pretending whatever shit-puddle I'd stepped in would just go away."

"But not now?"

"Not now. What's up, duchess?"

She turned in his arms but remained in his embrace, so he knew he hadn't fucked up too badly.

"Not a huge fan of being told who I can and can't talk to. I don't like being controlled."

"This might be a problem because I'm a man who really likes being in control." With deliberate intent, he walked her a step backward until her shoulders pressed against the wall. Then he slid his hand across her shoulder until it rested low on her throat. No pressure, just there. "In fact, it's something I require."

Her beautiful green eyes flew wide behind her glasses. "Oh. Wow. That's..."

She stuttered to a stop and he grinned, letting her see the darkness of his desire for her.

"You were just a sweet, innocent little thing before, Sarah, but I should probably ask how much experience you really have."

"I... we..." She fluttered her hand up to rest on his wrist, but she didn't try to move it away from her delicate neck. "Reed wasn't very... adventurous and I never asked for more."

Jim felt his grin turn predatory. "Because you didn't want it, or because you knew he'd say no?"

Her chin started to set in that stubborn line and he tightened his fingertips slightly. A reminder, not a threat. He'd cut his own hand off before he hurt this woman. "Truth, no holding back."

She held his gaze before taking a short breath and nodding. "I wanted more, but he didn't."

"Good girl, duchess."

"Why do you call me that?" She tilted her head just a little, mindful of his hold. "You used to call me sweetheart and kitten."

Jim leaned in to trail his nose up her throat, ending at the sensitive spot just behind her ear.

"You're not a little kitten anymore, but I remember how you used to purr when I touched you. I think you hid all that heat for so long you turned into a lady. A cool, collected duchess. That heat and those claws are still sharp, you just learned how to wait for your chance to use them."

He licked hard, tasting her clean, warm skin, and felt her quiver. "I'm sorry I was trying to control who you talk to," he continued. "I've never been jealous before, but I know you — remember you — well enough to trust you. But make no mistake. I will be in command. You will learn how to kneel and let all that fire out just for me."

She cried out as he bit down on her earlobe and sucked.

"Do you understand, duchess?"

Sarah's eyes opened, glazed with helpless heat, and his blood roared with triumph. She nodded, her fingers tightening on his wrist and pulling him tighter.

"Words, Sarah. Do you understand what I need from you? Submission. You can show the world the lady you are out there, but I like knowing that only I bring out your claws." He bit down on her ear again, absorbing her shudder. "And I'll never hit you. I may spank this sweet ass because I can't keep my hands off it, but any pain will be for pleasure. Are we clear?"

Her eyes had refocused as he spoke and he was glad she was thinking with clarity. The fog of lust was a great place to get lost, but he needed her to be lucid and certain before they started a relationship.

"I'm clear," she stated calmly. "I understand, as long as you understand that I managed my life, my family and my career for a very long time." She wasn't fighting him, but he could feel the tension in her muscles.

"Fuck, that's hot. Strong women who submit in the bedroom are my kryptonite."

He leaned in, but she was still too stiff against the wall. "What's wrong, Sarah?"

"I'm afraid."

This was important. Jim eased off and moved his hands to her shoulders. His thumbs trailed over the delicate bones and he doubled down on his oath never to leave any bruises on her that she didn't enjoy. "Thank you for telling me that. What are you afraid of, sweetheart?"

She threw him a quick, nervous smile and he settled in to wait for her answer.

"It's just... I've been in control so long, what if I can't submit?"

"Are you asking for my help, Sarah? Do you want me to teach you how to submit to me?"

She paused, then nodded. "Yes, I do. Teach me."

Jim was accustomed to having complete control of his body, but this woman wrecked him. Slick pre-cum seeped out of his cock and the sensation of it trickling down the side of his hard flesh tried to distract him into ripping off both their clothes and thrusting into her wet heat. He grappled with

instinct and won.

But there was no controlling the hungry smile he gave her or the primitive satisfaction he gained from watching her eyes turn wary.

"Try again, duchess. The right way, this time."

It took her a moment, but she figured it out. "Oh. Please. Please teach me."

"The rest of it?"

"Sir. Please teach me, Sir." There was sass in her eyes and her voice now and he loved it.

Remembered how it felt to love her.

"Perfect. You're already perfect, but I am really looking forward to these lessons."

Chapter Six

Sarah expected him to grab her shirt and start stripping her. God knew that's what she wanted. Instead Jim took her hand and led her out to the center of the darkened gym, into the ring where a single spotlight blazed down on them.

It wasn't exactly a ring like they used in boxing. She'd watched a few matches for research and knew that she'd just entered an eight-sided cage. Unlike boxing, MMA bouts were fought inside a fenced area so the competitors couldn't fall out and get injured unnecessarily. After watching the fights, she privately thought all their injuries were unnecessary. She didn't enjoy the bloodshed, but she was still impressed by the strength, skill, and athleticism of the fighters.

Hey, she might be old enough to be any of their moms, but she could still appreciate the eye-candy.

Speaking of eye-candy... Jim returned and closed the cage door, carrying several items over his arms.

"What are those?"

"Let's call it training equipment."

He'd been smiling since they first brought up his dominant tendencies and every time he bared his teeth, she got wetter and wetter. She'd never admitted to anyone how much she wanted this kind of exchange. The truth was, Sarah had become strong and independent because she'd had no choice.

Reed had been a good man, but not what anyone would call assertive. He hadn't needed to be with her, because they'd instinctively found an even keel and sailed on as equal partners. It sounded great in theory and it worked well in practice, but it meant that he wasn't interested in leading or taking control. He didn't want her submission, so she'd learned to work out her own issues so she could hold up her end of the marriage. She did home and family and writing while he worked in the office and came home to her every night. Simple and quiet.

Jim was the opposite in many ways. He'd cleared paths for her in high school so she could make

her way more easily and he'd never pushed her to give more than she was able -- whether it was access to her body, or giving too much of her energy to extracurriculars when she was already at her limit.

He'd watched out for her, he'd helped her make decisions. He'd led and she'd been happy to follow. Except the one time that tore them apart. Was she ready to let him lead her again, give her the strong support she'd missed all these years? Could she give up the control she'd learned and learn to lean on his strength when she needed it?

Was she ready to finally let herself be the opposite of simple and quiet?

She didn't know, but she desperately wanted to try.

He approached and she realized he was holding a variety of straps and ties.

"Jim?"

"Do you trust me, Sarah?"

Her heart thumped out the answer. "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

The air seemed thinner here in the cage and she struggled to catch her breath. "Yes, Sir. Why do you want me to call you Sir?"

"Because it's the first step to submitting. To letting go of all the burdens you carry and letting me carry them with you. It's just a little word, but it means a lot. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Sir."

His smile this time was softer. "Good girl, duchess."

She shivered.

"You said you weren't sure if you'd be able to submit. I believe you. It's hard to let go of old habits, so I'm going to help you by limiting your options, taking away some of your choices and your ability to control the situation."

Her fingers clenched into fists and she had to breathe deeply for a moment and deliberately relax.

"That. What you did right there? That was perfect. You tensed up, then made the choice to let go

of whatever you were afraid of. Good breathing technique, too. You do yoga?"

He saw her, and that, more than anything, finished tipping her over into trust.

"I've taken a few classes here and there."

"Awesome. We can do it together. Helps loosen up tight, worn out muscles and nothing else stretches out my back."

Sarah raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"Don't look so surprised. I'm not a total caveman. Hell, half the guys in my gym do some kind of yoga or tai chi. Pretty sure some of them have taken dance classes, too. Helps with flexibility."

"Wow. I was not expecting that. Definitely putting that into my books!"

He approached her with something that looked like a satin belt sash. "Oh, sweetheart. You're going to have a lot of good research material very, very soon."

She whimpered and nodded. "What do you need?"

"Just you, duchess. I've never needed anything but you."

He reached for a switch and they both looked up to watch a thick wire come down with a large microphone. The mike came off and he tied the middle of the sash to the cord, then made slipknots at the ends of the sash, leaving them dangling. He smirked. "Well, you and a few good knots."

Jim held out his hands and waited for her to put her fingers in his.

"Good girl," he murmured again. "How are your shoulders? Can you hold your hands over your head for a while?"

"Yes, Sir."

His eyes blazed at her response. God, she loved giving him that little gift, especially now that she knew how much it meant to him.

"Now, let's get you ready for your next lesson in submission."

Chapter Seven

Jim held her trust in the palm of his hand, and to him, that was everything. He'd hurt her once and now he'd been given the chance to redress his sins. He was going to give her absolutely everything she needed. The first gift? Teaching her that he was worthy of that faith.

Without a word, he began to undress her. He slipped the cardigan over her shoulders and tossed it to the side. The dark green shirt felt soft under his fingers, but it could never be as soft as his Sarah. He untucked it and lifted it over her head.

"Holy. Fucking. Titties."

She was shaking her hair back and the magnificent cleavage he uncovered shook with her. Sweet mama. If she'd had a figure like this in high school, he and half the school would have been too busy staring to graduate.

Sarah tried to cross her arms over the truly stupendous set of breasts that were on display before him, encased in pink satin that was decorated with pretty flowers, but he stopped her with his hands on her shoulders.

"No, no, duchess. Don't you hide these. Don't you ever hide these from me. Where the fuck did these come from?"

Little rosy splotches bloomed on her chest and she squirmed, giving him a show of jiggling, soft flesh. "I'm not a teenager anymore, Jim. I had two kids and I put on a little weight."

At her words, he yanked his gaze off her delectable rack and up to her blushing face. That wasn't modesty he heard. That was shame. And he wasn't having his gorgeous woman be ashamed of a single goddamn thing.

"No. Don't you do that, Sarah. Never do that." Jim leaned in until his forehead touched hers. "You're fucking perfect. You always have been and you always will be."

Tears turned her green eyes to glass, but she didn't let them fall. Instead, she pulled her shoulders back and stood straight as any soldier in formation.

"Damn, duchess. Look at you."

Jim stalked around her, surveying her body from every angle. Those curves fucking killed him and he was never going to let her think otherwise.

"You think I can't handle a woman with a little life behind her? That I need some teenaged sugarbaby hanging on me because she doesn't know any better? Not a chance, duchess. I can handle everything you give me. And Sarah?"

He'd completed his circuit and tipped a finger under her chin.

"Yes, Sir?"

"I mean for you to give me everything."

"Yes, Sir." The quiet power she put into those words rocked him to the core.

Jim skimmed his finger down her throat, past her bra, down to the button of her jeans. Briskly, he unsnapped, unzipped, and pushed them down, slipping her out of her sandals until she stood before him, barefoot, in nothing but pink panties and that pretty, flowered lingerie.

Her belly pooched a little, overlaid with thin silver lines from carrying children. Her shapely, thick thighs bore the same scars. Her hips were wide and cushioned, and her ass was more than enough to fill his hands.

Sarah's fingers tapped nervously against her hips. "Jim?"

"Fucking exquisite."

She took a deep breath and he was mesmerized by the lift of her tits encased in lace and satin.

"Show me."

With trembling hands, she reached back and unhooked the bra, letting the straps fall to her shoulders before she peeled off the fabric. Her pendulous breasts swayed, nipples tight and rosy brown. For a wild moment, he wished he'd been there when she nursed her children. Their children. But the thought passed and he surveyed the woman standing nearly naked before him.

He walked behind her and reached around to cup her tits in his palms. "Heavy. Warm. Soft. They feel good, duchess."

She leaned back against him and moaned. The sound switched to a sharp gasp when he flicked

her nipples with his thumbs. He took the hard nubs between his fingers and pressed, hard, not letting up as she arched into his grasp. With a twist, he let go and she keened out a high, thin cry.

"Good girl. I like hearing you, Sarah."

He showed his approval by dropping his hands to her hips and pulling back until his cock was nestled between her satin-covered ass cheeks. This time, he was the one who groaned as she wiggled against him.

"I like hearing you, too," she whispered. The sound was nearly lost in the empty gym. That little show of courage, the proof that she was stepping outside her comfort zone of her own volition, had him surging against her.

He took her chin in his hand and turned her face to his for the kiss he craved. Lips, tongues, teeth clashed as he fucked her mouth with his tongue, diving deep with desperation.

"Need you, duchess. Need to see you, need to touch you, need to fuck you."

She turned in his arms and yanked at his t-shirt until he raised his arms, helping her lift it over his head. The embers of heat in her gaze burst into flames as she returned the greedy smile he'd given her earlier. Her nails scraped his skin as she threaded her fingers through the hair on his chest, flicking over his nipples with the sharp edges.

He sucked in a breath and she laughed, low and hot, before she leaned in and sucked one between her perfect lips.

"Fuck yes, sweetheart," he ground out. "Just like that."

She bit down hard enough to make him feel the burn and he shuddered, close to losing control. Which was the opposite of what he'd set out to do when he led her into the cage.

"Finally letting the tiger out of the cage, are you, duchess?"

Sarah's eyes narrowed with a feline smile. "You're the one with the key."

"There are those claws again." Fuck, he loved when she got fiery. "Let's put them away for later. Raise your arms, Sarah."

Immediately, she put her arms in the air. Goddamn. She had nothing to fear about not knowing

how to obey orders. Instead, he realized that, given a chance, she'd absolutely try to top from the bottom, twisting him into knots until he gave her whatever she wanted.

Jim had enough experience with bratty submissives to stay on top of his willful duchess. She'd learn to accept his dominance if it took all night.

He slid the silk knots he'd made over her wrists and checked in with her. "The second this becomes uncomfortable or painful, let me know. The point is for you to enjoy this, not suffer through it. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

Standing back, he surveyed her. With her arms raised above her head, her heavy tits were lifted high, nipples now red and swollen, and he swooped down to suck one into his mouth. She lifted herself on her toes to push further into his caress, so he set his teeth gently and pulled away until she couldn't keep her balance.

"Have you ever heard of topping from the bottom, duchess?"

"No."

He popped her ass with his palm, enjoying the crack of sound that echoed through the room. She yelped and yanked down on the sash, only to discover that she couldn't rub away the sting.

"No, what?"

"No, Sir," she said with a little pout.

"Better. Topping from the bottom is when the submissive -- that's you," he emphasized, pinching the cheek he'd smacked. "When the bratty little sub tries to get her way by running a game on the dom. Playing and teasing until he loses control. Control that you promised to give over to me."

She'd watched him warily since the spank and now the gravity of his words sunk in. He waited her out.

"You're right, Jim--"

"Sir," he interrupted. It was vital that she learn this lesson. Giving up control would set her free, and he wanted her to shed the weight that was holding her down.

Sarah nodded. "You're right, Sir. I didn't... I didn't mean to."

"I know you didn't. That's why I'm here. To teach you, remember?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Then let's keep going."

Chapter Eight

Sarah's breast ached from where he'd stretched the nipple with his teeth. Her ass stung from where he'd spanked and pinched her. But those small hurts were forgotten when he skimmed out of his track pants and boxer briefs, and went to his knees in front of her.

"Jim? Sir?"

"Quiet, duchess. Let go." He slipped his fingers under the sides of her panties and tugged until they dropped to the floor with a sodden smack. That was embarrassing. She tightened her thighs.

He picked them up and ran his thumb over the gusset where her slick cream glistened under the spotlight. "Fucking soaked, sweetheart. Good girl, getting your pussy wet for me. Now split those thighs and let me see my pussy."

His coarse words shocked her, but instead of feeling affronted, she trembled.

Most importantly, she obeyed.

Sarah moved her feet to the sides and reveled in the sensation of his hands running up the backs of her thighs to cup her ass. A hint of discomfort at him being so up close and personal with her cellulite gave her a moment of pause before she remembered his words. Let it go.

Embracing her inner Elsa, she relaxed into his caress. Warm breath teased the short curls around her sex and she waited, her heart pounding, for his touch.

"So pretty, duchess." He leaned in and took another breath. "So warm. Perfect. You're just right. Look at me, pretty woman."

Sarah dropped her head, her neck tight with tension, and opened her eyes. He was watching her, his laser blue gaze burning hot.

"Watch me, Sarah, while I love you."

The words caught in her brain, then melted away as he pressed his lips to the perfect spot at the top of her slit and licked.

After that, she wasn't sure if her eyes were open or if she was just hallucinating his hungry

consumption of her... her pussy. Her cunt. Her wet heat, her womanly parts. All the words she'd ever used in writing sex scenes, but had never owned for herself. For her own body and her own pleasure.

Jim lifted his mouth, face gleaming with her juices, and stood to unhook her from the mike cord. He was strong and he smelled good, so she leaned over to lick his bicep when he reached over her head.

"You doin' okay, duchess?" he asked with a tender smile.

Sarah's head lolled and she grinned back. "Uh-huh."

"I'm going to let that go since you're deep in your happy place. Lay down, sweetheart." He guided her down onto the cool mat and arranged her to his satisfaction. Arms still over her head, hips canted up, knees raised and feet wide.

"Are you going to have sex with me now?" She felt drunk and she hadn't even orgasmed... no. She hadn't even come.

"Soon, baby. I haven't finished eating my dessert yet."

A memory surfaced of them watching a bizarre rock musical together during high school while they kissed and groped each other over their clothes on the couch in her basement, and she singsonged, "How can you have any pudding if you don't eat your meat?"

Jim paused, then snorted. She giggled. He chuckled. She snickered. And he completely lost it. She joined in, howling with laughter as they rolled on the mat.

Eventually, they settled with Jim propped on his elbows between her knees. "Really, Sarah? You're quoting Pink Floyd at me while I'm trying to tongue fuck you?"

"I can't help it. I think you broke my filter."

"Good. It needed breaking." He crawled up her body to loom over her intimately. "But you're the one who's going to be eating my meat."

This time when they stopped laughing, he was on his back lashing at her clit with his tongue while she sucked his cock. He tasted like home -- warm, salty, earthy and perfect. There was enough of him left outside her mouth that she could wrap one hand around the base of his hot, silky flesh and

pump while she worked to drive him to a climax.

He cheated. Jim wrapped his lips around her swollen bundle of nerves and drove two fingers into her soaking pussy, then rubbed at the spot that pulled all her attention away from his cock. She pushed against his hand, chanting "ohmygodohmygodohmygod" before the pressure inside her burst, explosion after explosion flooding her vision like the last hoorah of fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Her knees gave out and she slid off him, boneless and sated, her mind finally quiet.

"Roll over, sweetheart."

She tried to obey. She really did. He helped her, putting her back the way he'd laid her out when he released her from her bonds. The nip of his teeth at her breast roused her from the dream she was having where Jim Barnes was licking her nipple in the middle of an MMA fighting cage.

"You're real," she whispered.

"I am," he whispered back. "I'm also going to really fuck you now. For real."

"Oh good. That sounds amazing."

Jim chuckled. "I'm glad you approve."

He reached over to his pants to grab something, then held it away from his face as he peered at the little square of plastic. "Jesus. It's been a minute since I used one of these. Pretty sure it hasn't expired."

She'd laughed so much in the last hour her belly hurt, but it was a good pain.

The slide of his cock inside her was the opposite of pain. It was joy, it was delight, it was fulfillment. His weight above her, the slide of his lips over her neck as she arched beneath him, was perfection. Listening to his breathing change as he rocked against her, laying her hand over his heart to feel its quickening rhythm, was sublime. Looking into his eyes as he pulsed inside her, knowing that this was only the beginning, was completion.

Sarah wrapped her arms around him and let go of the last vestiges of the pain that had festered inside her. This was enough. This was where she needed to be.

He slipped out of her body and knelt between her legs, then smiled before turning serious. "This

means something, Sarah. I know it's fast, but I want to make this work. To make us work. I made a mistake and I missed the hell out of you, but the woman you became is spectacular."

Sarah pushed herself up until she sat in front of him, her gaze locked with this good, strong, capable man. Unashamed to be naked before him, her body perfect in his eyes.

"Jim, I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be. It wouldn't matter how dominant you are. You asked me to let go of control, but I'm still me, thinking clearly and making my own decisions." She took his hand, battered and scarred from years of fighting. "It seems like we're going fast, but I guess the foundation we built all those years ago is still solid, and the people we grew into made us solid, too, for all the pain and the disappointment and the waiting."

They fell silent, but she wasn't afraid of what he might say.

Jim reached out to cup her cheek in his hand. "Then I guess we'd better make the future worth the wait."

Author Notes

Yes, I quoted Pink Floyd in the middle of a sex scene. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Given their ages, they probably watched the movie, “The Wall,” together after renting it from an actual store. On VHS. The real question is, did they rewind the tape before returning it?