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CLUB RISQUÉ  
COLLECTION

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POPPY FLYNN



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Poppy Flynn  
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Fool's Desire  
CLUB RISQUÉ BOOK 1

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## Prologue

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**T**he lights were muted but for the spotlight that picked her out on the raised dais in the lavish but cavernous arena. Either side of the stage, giant screens showed outrageous close ups from strategically placed cameras. The muted buzz of spectators lounging in deep comfortable chairs or kneeling on thick luxurious rugs teased the atmosphere with a provocative vibe. Energy hissed through the air.

Thwack! The blunt ended fronds of the soft suede flogger skittered against the taut skin of her softly rounded buttocks. The air displaced again, this time a prickling on the backs of her tanned thighs as they swiftly bloomed a dusky pink under repeated, expertly placed blows.

Daisy's unruly mop of dirty blonde corkscrew curls dampened as sweat and desire slickened her petite, curvy body and her breath hitched. The flogger rained across her sensitised skin, but not a single, audible sound passed her lips. Arms and legs unbound as her torso stretched across the plush spanking bench, she remained statue still, concentrating her mind to allow her body to absorb the blows

without so much as a flinch because that was what Joel required. That was how he had trained her.

Her stomach clenched as he changed direction and landed the flogger's strands at the apex of her spread legs, causing her reddened thighs to quiver and her bare pussy to gush as the tiny pinpricks of pain morphed into ribbons of pleasure.

Despite her libertine surroundings and the licentious audience in the dimly lit Club Risqué, Daisy did not view Joel as her Dom nor see herself as his submissive. He was simply her boyfriend. She loved him beyond measure, and she would do anything for him. She did do anything for him; she did this for him and she strived to be as perfect as she possibly could because it made him happy.

As Daisy began to float in what she privately referred to as her 'happy place', she was dimly aware of the change of sensation. The deeply massaging fronds of the flogger were replaced by the sharper, pinpointed strike of the crop. Slap, slap, slap, slap...the noise rang rhythmically in Daisy's altered state of consciousness as if from a distance. Joel maintained a steady but swift pace across her increasingly sensitive behind as he played out a pattern of rosy splashes, branding her smooth skin, up and down, side to side, never overlapping.

Daisy could feel a prickle of need spreading up her spine, a sultry perspiration blooming at the back her neck, a treacherous warmth mushrooming in her abdomen as Joel aimed the crop between her legs and skilfully targeted her clitoris. Slap, slap, slap, slap, Daisy gritted her teeth and screwed up her eyes as she fought to internalise all of her raging lust and desire in a desperate battle to stay as still and as quiet as Joel always demanded while her clit hardened and peeked from behind its protective hood and each smart of pain transmuted into an insidious pleasure that threatened to over-

whelm her senses as her body begged for the forbidden release.

Joel carefully gauged Daisy's reactions while she was so obviously in the state of total immersion referred to in BDSM circles as subspace. A ripple of pride slid through his mind that he could get her to this special place that required absolute trust in him to look after her when she wasn't completely capable of consciously looking after herself. He and his friends were known at the club as the 'baby Doms' because of their age, so it boosted both his ego and his libido that Daisy presented so beautifully for the audience of enthusiastic voyeurs, avid lifestylers and cynical veterans.

Joel altered the sweep of his lashes to intensify Daisy's desire in anticipation of their scene's finale. He knew she was close to coming; her steady breaths had become erratic and her shoulders quaked as she silently panted in her effort to control her natural urges to move, to scream, to drown in the satisfaction of the orgasm she was denying herself at his tacit demand.

Such a good girl. As her first lover, he had molded her into his ideal, strapping down every inch of her body as he fucked her again and again while she was forcibly immobilised so that he trained her not to move, gagging her ruthlessly to stop her from screaming while he introduced her to the pleasure/pain of impact play and taught her silence as he spanked and flogged her. Mercilessly withholding her gratification as he used orgasm denial to educate her into suppressing her instinctive reactions until his control was absolute, until his dominance was inescapable. Until her submission was complete.

Now, after eighteen months, surrendering to him was second nature to her.

He discarded the crop and stroked a hand down her clammy flank, admiring the small, temporary welts that



decorated her curvy ass, the kisses from his crop. His cock hardened painfully as he acknowledged her complete subjugation to his dominance and he unlaced his leathers, eager to take his reward.

"Come for me!" Joel growled, seizing her hips firmly as he plunged inside her wet heat in a single, unwavering thrust. He held himself still as her body went rigid and she started to milk his cock with the powerful contractions of her deferred orgasm. Closing his eyes and firming his jaw against the instinctive craving to immediately empty himself inside her tight clasp, Joel determinedly shunned instant gratification in favour of enduring fulfilment. He centred himself and initiated a slowly building cadence guaranteed to trigger the spark of arousal in Daisy all over again. Increasing the driving tempo, Joel grasped Daisy's hair as he leaned over her back, angling her head so that he could sink his teeth lightly into one of Daisy's primary erogenous zones, where her neck met her shoulder.

"Again!" he demanded between nips as he reached around and palmed her heavy breasts, pausing briefly to torture her pebbled nipples, pinching and twisting the dusky peaks until he felt her tell-tale quiver of quickening excitement. Joel raised up again, sucking in a harsh breath and resuming an unrelenting, pounding rhythm until Daisy silently shattered around him once again and he finally allowed his own gloriously liberated release.

Daisy sagged limply; her limbs and head felt leaden, her eyes too heavy to open as she revelled in the exquisite sensations of complete erotic fulfilment and sublime satiation. She smiled softly as Joel scooped her up gently in his strong arms and wrapped a soft blanket around her before he carried her to snuggle up with him on one of the luxurious brocade sofas in a dimly lit, semi-private corner of the exclusive club where

his family's wealth bought him privileged membership despite his youth.

In her intoxicated post-euphoric haze, Daisy was barely aware of the hushed voices of Joel's friends, Jake, Eric and Logan, murmuring in the background as she calmed her ragged breathing and struggled to regain her equilibrium.

Waving his friends away as he concentrated on providing aftercare and recovering his own composure after the heady scene and intense responses, Joel allowed his mind to drift through the highlights of their spectacle. Vividly recalling the specific elements of Daisy's unquestioning submission as she had lain there, unbound and ungagged yet completely still and silent, bound only by his will and her desire to please him.

For Joel, it was that supreme display of surrender that was the ultimate aphrodisiac. That was what turned him on—absolute control.

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Daisy Kidde hitched up her full, calf length skirt and stretched out her bared limbs as she lounged on the grass under the welcome shade of a huge, leafy oak tree on the campus grounds and soaked up the sunshine that poured between the foliage. Leaning back on her arms, a multitude of bangles slipped down to her wrists with a tinkling jangle. She raised her lightly freckled and habitually makeup free face towards the filtered sunbeams and let out a satisfied sigh. She always felt great in the days following a scene with Joel, as if it cleansed away all her tension and restlessness and left her feeling tranquil and refreshed.

A contented smile pulled at her full lips as she chatted idly with the girlfriend she had bonded with during their first week at University.

Charlotte Chapman tossed an acorn lightly at Daisy. Cracking an eye open as it bounced lightly off her shoulder, Daisy's smile broadened as she caught her roommate rolling her eyes. The pair of them were as different as chalk and cheese. Charlotte, coming from a strict and soberly religious background, which had helped shape her timid and cautious character and studying journalism in a determined bid to help people find the buried truths behind the surface gloss, and Daisy, the polar opposite, carefree, impulsive and full of joie de vivre, embracing her artistic temperament with dedication and gusto.

"You've been off at that kinky club with Joel again, haven't you?" Charlotte demanded, shaking her head. "I can always tell when you've had one of your perverted interludes with him!"

"Perverted interludes?" Daisy choked on the laughter that bubbled at her friend's frank prissiness. Charlotte pursed her lips and eyed Daisy over the top of her sunglasses. "Well, I can never understand why you let him come near you with all those whips and chains and stuff!"

"There are no 'whips and chains' involved, Cha-Cha." Daisy grinned, settling onto her back and folding her hands behind her head.

"Semantics!" Charlotte asserted, launching another acorn assault. "You know what I mean!" It was an old argument between them. "It's just not right! Surely, you don't buy into all that nine and a half weeks hype?" she huffed, "All it does is provide justification for arrogant jerks like Joel and Jake to order girls about and pull off all kinds of deviant stunts and twist it into seeming *normal*..." Charlotte wiggled her fingers at the word with air quotes "...and all so they can get their rocks off at your expense...you're allowing Joel to corrupt you."

Daisy raised her eyebrows as she glanced over at her

friend. "Safe, sane and consensual," she quoted the tenet of Club Risque's fundamental philosophy. "Nothing happens that I don't agree to," she reminded. "And I can stop things with a single word...not that I've ever had to," she pointed out. "Joel knows my limits; he takes care of me."

"Hmph!" Charlotte snorted. "You really believe that? You really think he's not just taking advantage of your willing nature?"

"Seriously?" Daisy frowned. "How can you think that? Do I seem unhappy? Are my grades slipping? Am I stressed?" she demanded.

"No, no and no." Charlotte sighed.

"So, what am I, then, what exactly do you mean when you say you know I've been to the club with Joel?"

"You're like you are now," Charlotte replied. "All chilled and serene."

Daisy sent her friend a baffled look as she idly twirled her long wooden beads "And this is bad...how?"

Charlotte didn't answer, just shook her head sharply in defeat, sending her long dark hair rippling down her back.

Casting a sidelong look, Daisy giggled cheekily, showing off her single dimple. "You're just frustrated 'cos you fancy the pants off of Jake and you're not brave enough to dip your toe into the kink. Repressed and sexually unfulfilled!" she pronounced with her best therapist impersonation. "What you need is a good seeing to!"

Daisy sprang to her feet, grinning at Charlotte's bemused expression. "I've got to get to my afternoon class," she announced as she grabbed her bag. "We're having a demonstration of some cutting-edge pottery glazing techniques, and I want to get a good seat," she confided as she launched her sandwich wrapper into a nearby bin, pumping the air with her fist when the improvised ball achieved its target. "Score!" Daisy whooped merrily, bouncing on the balls of her feet

and sending her shoulder length curls bobbing gaily around her head. Her trademark ribbon fluttered at her temple, today's was tied in a sunny yellow bow with trailing ends. It matched the trim on her scooped neck peasant blouse which hung negligently off one shoulder. Her delighted laughter bubbled in typical joyful abandon.

Setting off, Daisy waved cheerily over her shoulder. "See you later," she called happily, and Charlotte watched as Daisy bounded off energetically, oblivious to the admiring glances and smiles she drew from those around her at the spirited exhilaration and unguarded enthusiasm for life that radiated from her.

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Somewhere in the distance, a clock chimed the hour as Daisy made her way down into the basement of the grandiose Victorian house on the outskirts of the university campus that Joel Blackwood shared with his cousin, Jake Blackwood, and their family friend, Eric Oliver.

Daisy mentally counted off the seven chimes and checked it against her wristwatch, wondering whether it was that which was out by five or six minutes or the impressive grandfather clock that graced the formal dining room. Probably her watch, she thought, giving it an absent tap.

This whole house, as well as its occupants, were all from old money. Joel's father was CEO of their family business, a multi-billion conglomerate with its fingers in all kinds of pies. Joel was being groomed to take over the position in the future, but Daisy had never been interested in trying to get her head around whatever it was they did.

The tight-lipped housekeeper had let her in with a vaguely disapproving look, which Daisy automatically shrugged off.

Why on earth the woman always felt the need to judge her was beyond Daisy and she never let it bother her, although she admitted to being vaguely curious as to why Mrs. Myrtle always looked at her so disparagingly, as if she was some layer of filth that was being trodden onto the marble floors. People were people as far as Daisy was concerned, rich or poor, black or white, clever or not; they all ate and slept and hurt and bled and laughed and loved. Everyone was equal in Daisy's mind; some might be more beautiful, others cleverer, some worked harder, others had more compassion, but everyone had something that made them unique.

Daisy was her own person; she tried never to be judgemental and she certainly kept any such thoughts to herself. She was confident in her appearance and her character. She tried hard to be nice to people and she was always unfailingly polite, regardless. People could take her or leave her. Daisy had always rationalised that if anyone wanted to demean her, then she certainly didn't need them in her life. She didn't get into it with them; she was never rude; she simply distanced herself accordingly, and if that wasn't possible, then she was aloof but respectful.

Maybe Mrs. Myrtle knew about Daisy and Joel's kinky sex life and didn't approve. Daisy understood that some people had extremely adverse opinions of the lifestyle. Poor Jake was still mired deeply in the hostile and critical publicity caused when his ex-girlfriend turned out to be a reporter looking for dirt on the eminent Blackwood family to further her career.

Daisy pursed her lips and frowned; what was between her and Joel didn't affect anyone else and it was certainly nobody else's business. She wondered what it was that made others imagine they had any kind of right to comment or interfere with the personal quirks of private individuals when those

practices were through mutual consent and reciprocal respect.

The basement area was spacious and clear of the antiques and lavish furnishings that characterised the rest of the house. It had been fashioned into a gym, and Daisy often thought that Joel and Jake seemed more at home down here than in the rest of the place which was a little formal and stuffy for her taste, despite her admiration for the artistic creations of past generations.

Eric was a different matter entirely. She'd tried hard to be positive about him since he was Joel's friend, but Daisy was a little ashamed that she'd always thought him to be somewhat conceited and rather intimidating. And not just because he had gotten fresh with her and majorly overstepped the line one time and things had gotten a bit nasty.

Daisy still shuddered at the memory. She often watched him preening in the ostentatious surroundings as he'd showed some new conquest around, lavishing his girls with champagne and jewellery while they simpered and fawned around him but always looked far more calculating behind his back.

Daisy had consciously squelched her negative sentiments towards Eric and tried to be a good friend, tentatively reaching out to him and gently suggesting that maybe the girls he picked up were more than a little too interested in his money. Eric had looked down his nose at her in disdain and sneered that he could buy whatever he desired, even women—classy women from prestigious backgrounds who were obviously beyond her comprehension.

Daisy had absorbed the spiteful taunt wordlessly; they weren't the first or even the worst he had thrown at her, but privately, the thought flittered through her mind that he would never be able to buy love and that, obviously, he and

the women he chose to hang out with deserved each other! She'd kept her distance from both ever since.

Heading in the direction Mrs. Myrtle had brusquely indicated, Daisy hitched up her floral peasant skirt as she descended the stairs, her ballet flats silent on the concrete steps. Joel wasn't expecting her this evening and probably hadn't heard the doorbell down here, but her extracurricular Alternative Arts class had been cancelled since the tutor had been taken ill, so she'd decided to surprise him.

Hearing voices as she approached the door at the bottom of the steps, she wondered if she'd made the right decision. Joel clearly had guests. She could hear more people than just the three housemates and their close friend, Logan Thornton, maybe half a dozen or more. Daisy shrugged. She was here now so she might as well say hello, at least.

The door stood ajar, and as she approached from the dimly lit stairwell, Daisy could see several men she recognised from Club Risqué in the bright room beyond. They were older, well, maybe not that much older than Joel, who, at twenty-three, had taken a couple of years out to work in different branches of the family business before he finished University. Still, they seemed a lot older than her own nineteen years and she hesitated briefly, a flush blooming on her cheeks as it occurred to her that all these men had seen her naked and in compromising positions. She wasn't exactly embarrassed—it was just that she'd never met any of them in a social situation before, with the exception of Eric, whom she considered more of a voyeur than a Dom and whom she generally avoided, and Jake and Logan, who judiciously never acknowledged it.

Daisy shook her head, took a deep breath, and stepped forward to push the door all the way open, only to pause once again as she heard her own name mentioned.

Frowning and tipping her head to the side, Daisy recog-



nised Eric's nasal voice.

"Jeez, Joel, when are you going to get rid of ditsy Daisy and find yourself a real woman; one that you won't be embarrassed to take home to meet your parents?"

Daisy recoiled, pulling her hand back from the door as if it might burn her and her eyes automatically flew to Joel, even as her mother's voice skittered through her mind, telling her that eavesdroppers never heard anything good about themselves.

Joel's profile was directly in Daisy's line of sight. He glanced at Eric but didn't appear annoyed at Eric's tirade; he didn't defend her, just tipped up his beer bottle and took a swig as he lounged comfortably on one of the casual sofas that dotted the edges of the room. Daisy frowned, confused at his reaction, even as the cold fingers of icy dread began clutching at her stomach.

"Damn dizzy blonde," Eric continued. "You can't even have a decent conversation with the stupid bimbo!" He shook his head. "Have you heard her droning on about all that fucking idiotic arty farty crap?" he demanded belligerently.

Daisy pressed her hand against her chest, biting her lip against an insidious pain that felt remarkably like betrayal. She considered some of these men her friends, close friends. And yet there they sat, completely non-committal, listening with careless disinterest while somebody flayed her character and intelligence as if she were of no more importance than a vague acquaintance.

Another man laughed from his perch on one of the exercise bikes and waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "I don't think it's her scintillating conversation that he's interested in."

"She's got a nice spankable ass," came another male voice outside her sphere of vision.

Daisy stiffened as the icy feeling in her stomach morphed into nausea at the way they were casually objectifying her

like she wasn't a living, breathing person with feelings that might be battered and bruised by the cavalier comments and offhand remarks they carelessly threw into the conversation.

"Spanking's about all that fucking fat arse is good for," Eric mocked derisively. "No wonder you always fuck her from behind over a spanking bench. At least you don't have to be reminded of how short she is or look at all that 'afro' hair. She has freckles!" he declared as if it were some kind of unthinkable indiscretion. "And she wears a bow like a ten-year-old, for Christ's sake! Kidde by name, kid by nature!"

Daisy sucked in a breath at his vitriol, mutely rooted to the spot as a trembling began deep in the core of her body while some distant part of her mind whispered that Joel did always seem to make love to her from behind. But she couldn't dwell on the fleeting thought as yet another voice contributed to her verbal torment.

"What about Anita Howard? Didn't you take her out to dinner a few times recently?"

Daisy felt a stabbing pain close to her heart as she thought of the woman she'd often noticed flirting with Joel. Secure in her relationship, she'd never felt threatened by the undeniably beautiful girl; Joel had never seemed to reciprocate.

"Mm-mm," someone else declared with obvious appreciation of Anita. "Tall, svelte and gorgeous. Didn't she accompany you and your family to that charity function last week? You lucky bastard!"

Heartsick and disillusioned, Daisy shuddered as she felt something inside her break as Joel just grinned and saluted with his beer bottle. "She is a knockout!" While Jake, a man she considered one of her closest friends, frowned and shook his head at his cousin but said nothing.

Feeling suddenly lightheaded, Daisy leaned on the door for support and it swung open, drawing the gaze of each

man in the room. She felt the blood drain from her face like a physical force and her hands trembled as goose bumps raced up her arms and shivered at the back of her neck as the weight of their scrutiny swept over her, leaving her sick to the pit of her stomach. The last thing she wanted to do was face these men and their nonchalant disrespect.

"Oh God! Talk of the devil. It's 'kiddie' time, everyone." Eric narrowed his gaze at Joel. "Maybe you've got more kink than we know about? Fancy yourself as one of those 'daddy' Doms who wants to spank his 'little girl'. You should be careful, though, any younger and you might just find yourself on the wrong side of legal, although I guess she does a good job of dressing the part." Eric sneered nastily, but Daisy's dazed mind narrowed its focus on Joel and blessedly she blanked out everyone else in the room.

Tears welled in her big brown eyes as Joel looked over in surprise, then let out an audible breath and rolled his eyes, intensifying the throbbing ache of her anguish. She was taken aback by the angry eyes he turned on her and Daisy heard the low keening moan and was vaguely aware that the noise had come from herself as she tried to back away.

"Can it, Eric." Daisy vaguely heard Logan's rebuke as Jake moved towards her, a look of devastated concern on his handsome face. He reached out just as she felt her knees turn to water. Daisy dipped slightly but unconsciously evaded his grasp, gritting her teeth and bracing her legs against the weakness as her defensive instincts took over and she turned and fled, a cacophony of muddled voices echoing up the stairwell behind her and taunting in her wake.

"Well, that sucked the fun out of our evening."

"That's one way to get rid of her."

"Let her go."

"There's no point talking to her until she's calmed down."

"Is Anita interested in the club?"

Daisy sucked in wheezing breaths as she tried to regain her equilibrium against the pain that threatened to rob her of everything—even as she yearned for Joel to come after her, to cradle her in his arms and whisper soothing words, to shroud her in his love and make everything better. Who'd have guessed that something as ephemeral as mere words could cause a hurt that felt so very physical, some disconnected part of her brain observed hysterically.

"Daisy!" Jake shouted as he raced up the steps behind her. He grasped her arm just as she got to the front door, but Daisy shook him off forcefully.

"Wait!" he panted, looking desperately back at the basement stairs as she fumbled with the latch, but there was no sign of Joel. Clearly, he didn't care enough to even check if she was okay. He had seen the agony of pain etched on her face, observed the tears that trembled on her lashes, the shaking which had threatened to floor her. He'd heard the anguished cry of torment that she thought might have been wrenched from her very soul and still not been moved to ensure any part of her welfare.

"Just let me go!" Daisy's faint voice broke entirely as she finally mastered the catch and flung back the door, not bothering to close it or even look back as she rushed out into the street oblivious to the angry honk of horns as she ran, blindly, into the road, dodging traffic in a desperate bid to get away, even though she knew it was impossible to outrun these particular demons. She just had to get out of there before she fell apart and completely humiliated herself by sinking into a blubbling mess of unfettered, chaotic emotions and poured out her anguish in the middle of the street. Pulling determination around her like a mantle, Daisy concentrated solely on regulating her erratic breathing and putting one foot in front of the other as she made her way back to the relative security of her hall of residence without shattering.

Charlotte wasn't in when she got back to their shared dorm room, and for that, Daisy breathed a sigh of relief. She needed a little time alone to get herself together and order her thoughts. She sat motionless on the bed staring at nothing and clutching at the side of the mattress for support. She felt as if her entire being had splintered into hundreds of minute pieces and that the tiniest movement would see her fragment.

Daisy Kidde had led a charmed life; she had a loving family with an ample income. Despite her father's death, there were no childhood traumas in her life because he'd died before she was born and her mother had remarried when she was still a tot, to a man who had brought her up as his own. She was popular, pretty and clever. She had never been bullied or teased, she had never suffered from any crisis of confidence, and she was always optimistic and up-beat. Now she felt like she'd had the proverbial rug pulled out from under her feet, and she was at a loss at how to process it all.

Raw emotions washed over her in tumultuous waves, battering her suddenly fragile ego and saturating her with an unfamiliar vulnerability. Daisy felt like she was drowning, unable to think coherently or pinpoint her spiralling feelings. Pain, humiliation, rage, embarrassment, shock, distress, shame, grief, indignation, helplessness, misery—an uncontrollable, whirling mass of reaction. Too many to follow but one all-encompassing reality. Daisy hurt like she had never hurt before. Hurt in a way that was beyond her comprehension; emotionally, mentally. In her hyper-sensitive state, it even felt like her bones ached with her torment and Daisy didn't know how to deal with it. She had no personal criteria for comparison. She was too overcome even to cry.

She didn't know how long she sat there in a complete stupor; it felt like a lifetime. Eventually, Daisy's protective inertia abated enough for her to start the process of painfully

examining her memory of the devastating scene she had encountered in Joel's basement. Each excruciating recollection felt like probing at an aching tooth—poke too hard and a shard of agony shot through you.

Did Joel and all his friends really view her as some sort of dizzy blonde bimbo with nothing meaningful to contribute? Did they all consider her childish? Involuntarily, Daisy's hand strayed to today's lilac bow in her hair. She rubbed the satin absently between her fingers before dropping her hand as she unconsciously rubbed at the arctic chill that suddenly skittered down her arms.

Why hadn't Joel made any effort to defend her? Did she really mean that little to him? Daisy loved him with all her heart. In her mind, she had seen their future—wedding, home, children—she had naively thought Joel felt the same, but as she reviewed their eighteen-month relationship, she started to wonder if all she had been to him was just a convenient piece of ass he could mould to fit his kink. Eric's malice rang in her ears, *'No wonder you always take her from behind...'* Humiliation flooded Daisy's soul and she dragged in a noisy, fractured breath as the vice around her chest tightened painfully. She didn't want to go there, but she couldn't deny the truth in his words. If they had sex in any other position, Joel always blindfolded her. The only exception had been when she had given him the gift of her virginity. Daisy bit her lip until a droplet of blood seeped onto her tongue, but she was impervious to the pain as she took that precious memory and wrapped it up, mentally tucking it away into a secret corner of her mind where it couldn't be tarnished by the ugliness of what had transpired, keeping it safe while all her other senses deadened and her eyes stared sightlessly into the spiralling vortex of her confusion and heartache. Did Joel think she was fat, like Eric obviously did? Daisy was undeniably curvy and would never be stick thin, but she'd never

considered herself overweight. Could Joel not bear to look at her? Did he simply view her as just a temporary submissive?

Anita Howard, Joel had taken her out to dinner. More than once. He'd never mentioned that to Daisy. Why would he keep it a secret unless he had something to hide? He never took Daisy out to dinner. Not unless you counted the burger bar on campus. Daisy suspected that Joel hadn't taken Anita to the burger bar. He thought Anita was 'a knockout'. Joel hadn't said anything positive about Daisy. Not in conversation, not in her defence. Did he not want to be seen with Daisy socially? Did he think she wasn't good enough for him? Was he embarrassed by her? Was that why Mrs. Myrtle always looked down at her. Did the housekeeper think she wasn't good enough for Joel? He had taken Anita Howard to his fancy charity dinner with his family. Daisy remembered that night. She had naively imagined that he might invite her to go with him; she had secretly looked forward to dressing up and meeting his parents. But Joel had persuaded her that it was a boring formality that he would have to endure and that he planned to cut out as soon as possible. He had convinced her that she wouldn't enjoy it. Yeah, pretty hard to explain another woman with your girlfriend present.

For one hysterical moment, Daisy wondered exactly which one of them would have been viewed as the other woman. She had a sick feeling that it may well have been her.

Had Joel just been biding his time all along, waiting until he found some elegant, sophisticated woman with a more influential background than her own? Sowing his wild oats and getting the kink out of his system until the time came for him to settle down respectably?

The damning thoughts reeled faster and faster through Daisy's tortured mind, each notion trampling her self-esteem, each judgement chipping away at her confidence.

He hadn't come after her. He hadn't bothered to call to see if she was all right. He hadn't been interested in making sure she had arrived home safely, heedless of the state she was in. Despite everything, Daisy's battered heart still tried to deny it, but Joel's actions damned him...the answer to all her questions must be a distinct and soul shattering *yes!*

Gradually, Daisy's vacant gaze adjusted and she finally became aware of Charlotte shaking her shoulder and shouting her name in alarm while she simultaneously tried searching her tote bag for her phone.

Finally focussing, Daisy blinked at her friend.

"Oh, thank the goddesses!" Charlotte exclaimed. "I thought you were having some kind of seizure. I've been trying to get your attention for ages. What the heck is going on? Are you all right?"

The stream of questions highlighted Charlotte's panic as her friend started to pat and squeeze her arms, as if looking for injuries.

The torrent of human concern jolted Daisy's fragile composure and her precarious façade started to crumble. Suddenly, huge, gulping sobs were torn from deep inside her as she struggled to disclose the details of her humiliation to Charlotte. Tears raced down her cheeks and neck and into her collar as the dam finally broke. Daisy garbled and hiccupped the torrent of words that suddenly spewed forth while Charlotte sat beside her on the tiny bed, arms wrapped solidly around her as she rocked them both and stroked her hair, murmuring soothing platitudes and quietly allowing Daisy to get the entire, incoherent jumble out of her system.

As Daisy eventually calmed, one certainty had developed with crystal clarity. The heartache and humiliation were simply too much for her to bear.

She couldn't stay here!