

## Chapter 1 - A New Life

Veronica was twenty-three when she made the decision to leave Mark for good. Five months ago, when she moved into his condominium, excited about their future together, she had pictured romantic things like ski vacations and hot tubs, and tending tiny tomato plants together on their tiny patio. Perhaps they would make salsa. Her imaginings had not extended to include much beyond that small dwelling, but she had been hopeful about the life they would create together.

Hopeful was the last word anyone would have used to describe Veronica's disposition the February morning she sat in her small hatchback trying to start it, watching the ice crystals grow over her frozen windshield. The car would not start. The car was old, and Veronica was tired. She had bags under her eyes. Mark had asked her to leave her car outside for the night rather than in the underground parking, so that his friends could use her parking spot the night before. It had been hockey night. Mark and his friends had spent the night watching sports on television, shouting at the TV screen and slopping beer on the carpet, while Veronica tried to study in her room for her test the next day. And now it was morning and her car wouldn't start. She was going to be late for her university class. And as she sat in the frozen car listening to the frozen starter wheezing and coughing, she knew she was leaving. As soon as she could get someone to jump start her car, she was going to drive away from Mark, and away from this life, and start over again.

It wasn't that he was a bad guy. It wasn't that he was mean, or unloving, or anything specific she could put her finger on. He just wasn't what she had imagined. He was adolescent. When she had pictured her romantic life, she had never imagined a man who acted like a teenager, needed someone to balance his check book for him, ate potato chips for dinner, or would leave her to start her car in the cold while he slept off a hangover. He just wasn't what she really wanted, and that was all she knew.

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Two months later Veronica was settled in her studio apartment. She had sold her car, and learned how to navigate her way to school on the bus. She wasn't going to let the break-up stand in the way of her dream of finishing her degree in Psychology. In fact, in spite of all the pressures and changes in her life she hadn't missed a single day of class. She was proud of herself. "We're doing just fine, aren't we Fig Newton?" she asked the ginger cat who purred loudly in response. Another change. Mark hadn't liked animals. Sometimes Veronica was lonely but she was certain she had made the right decision. And maybe, in time, she would find a partner more suitable to her inner desires—if only she could pinpoint exactly what those were.

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In the third month of her single life, Veronica came across an advertisement in the university paper that drew her eye. What was a "munch"? A local pub, within walking distance of her apartment, was holding an event in a week, and the advertisement was compelling. It said: *no-pressure social gathering for those interested in BDSM, and new people very welcome!* Of course, she could never bring herself to attend such a social gathering.

Veronica was curious. She looked up 'BDSM' online at the university library and was instantly fascinated. Bondage. It wasn't the first time Veronica had pictured her hands tied behind her back, just wondering, imagining what that would feel like. Domination/Discipline. Her heartbeat picked up a little as she said the words to herself. What would it mean to be dominated?

To be disciplined? She was a young woman who was very accustomed to being in control of herself, her decisions, her life. To be dominated was hard to imagine. And yet something about the mental picture made her feel tingly. Sadism. Masochism. As she read the words on the computer screen, she felt goose bumps rise on the back of her neck. Someone walked by in her peripheral vision and she clicked the window on her computer screen closed. She couldn't think about this anymore in such a public place.

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And so it was with what could best be described as terror that Veronica dressed herself the following Saturday night and prepared herself to attend her first munch. She had not been able to stop thinking about BDSM since she first looked it up, and the tingles wouldn't go away. She had no idea what to wear. Should she try to look sexy? Or would that encourage the wrong type of attention? What if someone tried to proposition her? She steeled her will. This was only about gathering information, she told herself. This was only about learning about something new. She just wanted to expand her horizons and understand more of what BDSM was all about. Maybe she could find out why she was so compelled, so drawn to the advertisement she had read in the paper.

She took in her reflection in the mirror and felt pleased with what she saw. Her ash blonde hair looked shiny as it brushed against the middle of her back. But should she tie it up? She shook her head, as Fig Newton eyed her small frame in the mirror. He reached out a paw to bat at her earring. No, her hair was fine as it was. She wanted to be comfortable. Her blue eyes reflected her nervousness, and the spray of tiny freckles across her nose was barely visible in this light. She wanted to look worldly and confident, but she had to admit the jeans and polka-dotted t-shirt made her look more like a child than a competent woman.

She looked in her closet for what must have been the tenth time that evening and could come up with nothing better. She took a deep breath and told herself, yet again, that it didn't matter what she looked like. She wasn't going to meet someone. She was only going to learn about something new that had captured her interest. She didn't need to make an impression. And good thing too, she told herself, taking in her reflection one last time before leaving the apartment. She looked more like a twelve-year old girl than a university student nearly finished her undergraduate degree.

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Veronica applied another coat of lip gloss, took a final deep breath, and stepped inside the pub, telling herself she could pretend to have wandered into the private room by mistake if she was uncomfortable. She reminded herself she was in a public place and no one could kidnap her. She felt herself shaking slightly and wondered if she should have a couple of drinks first before heading into the private room that was dedicated for the attendees of the munch.

"You lost, honey?" asked a woman, and laughed, before Veronica could make up her mind about the drink.

"Umm," she said as she felt herself blush. Yes, she absolutely was lost, but should she say so to this stranger? She looked more closely at the woman who smiled warmly at Veronica and winked. Her eyes crinkled up at the corners and Veronica was immediately reminded of her aunt who had taken care of her for much of her childhood. She had the same dark wavy hair, the same smoky laugh.

"You're looking for the munch group, aren't you?" the woman said. "You look scared. Come in with me. I'll introduce you around. Don't be nervous." The woman laughed again, a warm, husky laugh that enveloped Veronica and made her feel safe. "I'm Marley," she said, and shook Veronica's hand while placing her other hand on her shoulder. The woman was tiny, barely five

feet, and Veronica felt tall next to her, an unusual feeling for a girl who was only 5'3" herself. She felt comfortable with Marley, and smiled to herself at the irony of finding a woman, instead of a man, to introduce her to the world of BDSM.

"I'm Veronica," she said, smiling shyly. "I'm new, um, I don't know anyone. I just came to get some information, and..." Veronica trailed off, not sure how to explain herself. She wasn't sure herself, exactly, why she had come.

"It's great to have new people!" said Marley, with enthusiasm, pulling Veronica through the growing crowd. "Come, I'll introduce you to everyone." She slipped her arm through a man's arm as he stood talking to a group of people. He leaned in as she introduced him. "Veronica, my husband, Shane. Shane, Veronica."

Veronica smiled politely and extended her hand. Shane's hand was enormous and hers completely disappeared inside it. He squeezed her hand gently and then leaned even closer. "So happy to have you here with us, little Veronica," he said, and she felt a strange blush rise in her cheeks at the diminutive.

"Nice to meet you, Shane," Veronica said, and Marley beamed, clearly proud of her handsome husband.

Veronica was unsure of what to say or do next, but Marley was obviously in her element playing hostess to her new young friend, and helped Veronica find a seat at a big table in the middle of the room. She made introductions again, and Veronica found herself surrounded by people who seemed far more normal than she had imagined these people would be. What had she pictured? People all decked out in leather and chains, perhaps, carrying whips and wearing ball gags. She smothered a small smile at the mental picture as a sweet grandfatherly-looking man leaned in to ask her if wanted a menu. She shook her head and smiled at him. "No thank you, I'm fine," she said. Still too nervous to eat although that feeling was slowly beginning to subside.

Marley reached across the table and touched her arm. She looked up. "Veronica," Marley said, "I want to introduce you to someone else. A friend of mine."

Veronica nodded and stood up to follow Marley as she led her to another, quieter corner of the pub. Marley put her arm around a man who was standing near the bar. "Andrew, there you are," she said, smiling at him. "I want you to meet Veronica." Veronica reached out to shake Andrew's proffered hand, and was startled by his deep brown eyes that looked straight into hers.