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## Chapter 1

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Lily Ortega drummed her fingers on the table in front of her. It was a rainy day, a not-so-very-good bad day as far as days went, but that's what one got when dealing with Monday. The day was infamous for glum and crummy starts to the week though Lily supposed that probably had more to do with the beginning of the workweek than with a broken heart.

She bit her lip at the thought—a broken heart.

"It's not broken," she whispered to herself, willing nonexistent strength into her voice. She took the coffee cup in front of her into her hands and nodded as she repeated, "It's not broken."

This time, her voice was a little steadier despite the dull ache that throbbed in her chest at her words. Lily's Monday was off to a less than stellar start due to one simple fact: her Daddy, *or ahem*, almost Daddy Dom had dropped her faster than...than...Lily swallowed hard and shook her head when she couldn't quite finish the thought, other than to say that it was *faster than fast*.

She raised the cup to her lips and took a sip of the hot coffee, the burn of it enough to snap her out of her thoughts. She took another quick sip with a wince. Her tongue would be burnt; there was no way around it, but at least the sting of it was enough to ground her out of her spiral.

Dating wasn't easy. It was even less so as a Little. Lily sucked in another breath and fiddled with her cup again, thoughts of the past hour flooding her mind's-eye. She cringed and leaned back in her chair, recalling the events of the previous hour.

*I am breaking up with you officially. I cannot give you what you need.*

*Sorry about all the shit going wrong.*

She snorted, her hand automatically going to her jacket pocket to pull out her cell phone. Lily needed that single text message off her phone, that one awful and oddly formal text message that signaled the end of three months of what Lily had hoped would be the start of her forever.

But instead of forever, she had been handed a dud. A disappearing Daddy Dom who had vanished when things had gotten rough in her personal life. It was what Lily liked to think of as a "season for a reason" and that season was incredibly rough, and the reason was undoubtedly unknown and as mysterious to Lily as the secrets of the universe were.

In general, Lily was a go-getter, ambitious, outgoing, focused as hell, or she had been once upon a time. Somewhere in all the rush and constant go-go-go of New York, Lily had lost touch with herself. Her confidence had been the first to go then her drive for doing better; next, she had simply forgotten the why for anything and everything, and that included her reason for making music.

The melodies she had always heard, the notes she thought in constantly had vanished along with her will to take the stage.

It had been months since she'd had the courage to play in front of anyone other than her own reflection. She swallowed hard thinking of the Dom who had given her the measure of peace she had needed to calm her nerves and perform. She had gone to a local BDSM club intent on finding a release. Lily had always been pulled toward the kink community, and the allure of falling into another world, allowing herself to be someone else if even for a little while, was too much for her to ignore.

The night all those months ago had gone splendidly, so much

so that she had gone in search of a more permanent solution. And that had brought her right into the hands of Trent, her last Dom, a fair weather encounter at best. She had known it from the start but had pushed on with a single minded resolve despite her intuition telling her that she was forcing it, that he was not the steady hand she needed, that her confidence and peace was not to be found in this man's clumsy hands.

She pursed her lips thinking of their almost relationship. It was all so half-formed despite her formal agreement to rules, hard limits and doing her due diligence of communication. It all hadn't taken root even with what should have been a solid foundation for a healthy dynamic.

Trent hadn't been one to be patient. He wanted intimacy and trust from the beginning, and Lily hadn't felt right giving it so freely. Not with him. It just hadn't felt right. She played with her phone and sighed. She hadn't been wrong in her estimation of the Dom. She knew it wasn't her or the seemingly endless parade of problems that were determined to land on her head that had pushed the Dom away. He'd asked her to lean on him and so she had, except that when she'd needed a caring and guiding hand the most, he hadn't hesitated in vanishing.

This was a problem with him. Not her. She knew that.

But even so, it hurt. Stung like a slap. She couldn't let it set her back, not when she had looked for a Daddy to help her confidence and anxiety. She wouldn't come out of this worse for wear. She owed it to herself to be strong again, even if she was going to have to find her footing on her own. Lily took another sip of her coffee and fidgeted in her seat. She knew a way she could gain some semblance of herself again.

### *Performing*

A performance would give her the boost she needed to actually see through the other list of obstacles that needed attention. A performance and a list. She nodded at herself, reaching for her bag and snagging the spiral she wrote her lyrics in. She'd had a meeting planned with her ex Dom to problem solve, actually for

this very day, but instead, she would plan it on her own. Monday would not come and go with her in the same position. She would not—could not—allow it, even if she was not truly strong. She would act the part.

She sighed and began to scribble out a list of things she knew needed attention, things she could accomplish and would find a sense of purpose and confidence in completing. She had hoped for a steadying hand while going about getting herself back on track, but she could manage it.

She knew it.

*New apartment.*

It was no secret that her living situation was less than desirable. She was in a walk-up in Queens, which would be fine, if not for two of her three roommates being comprised of drunks. And that was on the best of days, with the two of them frequently mixing drugs into the mix.

*Find a new job.*

Her hours at the diner where she waited tables were not paying what they once had, and the clientele had taken a nose-dive as of late. The manager, Donny, was prone to mood swings, but those had at least evened out. And yes, she didn't live in the safest area of the city, but with the diner around the corner, she had always felt more than comfortable, but lately, something had changed in the area, leaving her on the receiving end of unwanted attention.

*Sleep.*

That was self-explanatory. She needed regular sleep, and she needed it now. Though she supposed this matter was tied up in her living situation as it was hard to sleep with her roommates' constant partying. Her thoughts strayed to Ashley, the roommate who did not party and was, as far as Lily knew, a perfect roommate.

She hadn't seen Ashley around their apartment lately, and she wondered if the other girl had found somewhere else to go. If she had, she would have a lead for Lily on where she could

find a drama-free and safe place to live. Lily twirled her pen between her fingers for a second before she added *'talk to Ashley'* to her list.

She sat back and nodded at the list. She could do this, but even she knew the list was woefully remiss on the basics of self-care, but that could wait for another time. Even making the list was more than enough for Lily, but even so, she forced herself to open her phone's web browser and tap out the web address for a venue she used to frequent.

The Burgundy.

She might not be able to get a new job in an afternoon, but she could book a spot at Burgundy's open mic night. A few clicks and a calendar site later, Lily had a slot for 10 pm that night. It wasn't a great time, but it was something; plus, she could make it and her dinner shift at the diner with just enough time to make a stop at her apartment for a dress change. She didn't think the audience would vibe much with her diner uniform, and if she were going to do this, then she would need to fake the confidence she didn't quite feel.

That meant full hair and makeup, plus her best stage outfit, which was comprised of a sheer, low cut dress. She hadn't touched the garb in months, other than to shove it to the back of her closet in her pursuit of something more plain, more discreet, less enticing. But covered up and nondescript clothing was not what Lily needed if she was going to command the attention of an audience that would more or less have tired of hopefuls with nothing but raw music talent.

Open mic night was brutal for its audience and lacking in its musical talent. Before her hiatus from the stage, Lily had been able to fill the club on her own name and had done well bouncing between clubs in the borough. She hadn't really needed the diner job in those days. It had just been a quick way to make cash when she was taking time off to work on her next song set list, but then, she'd lost her confidence, the words of her songs choking in her throat while her fingers missed the keys of her

newest melody. Her fingers tightened on the pen in her hand and she shook her head.

"None of that," she told herself, refusing to allow the dark thoughts to pull her under. Not today.

Not on Monday. She had things to do. An almost Dom to forget. A life to set to rights and she could do it on her own because she was strong in her own way. Littles were strong, even when they were on their own, even when their Daddies were woefully missing. Lily was a Little, but she was mighty for it. Her softness, the gentle way that she moved through the world, was not a weakness because, for all the difficulties presented by the world, she still dared to be soft, to be gentle, to be Little.

And that was a precious thing. She would not waste it on a Dom who wasn't worthy of such a gift, and that meant that her heart was most definitely *not broken*. Lily's gift was that she could continue to be soft, and she would not part with what made her Little even if it had been treated carelessly by someone else.

She was a Little, and that meant she was far stronger than she knew. Lily just hoped she didn't have to find out exactly how stern the stuff she was made from was.