

## Chapter 2

Katsuya kept the small folded slip of paper in the pocket of his briefcase, although he didn't need it. He had unfolded it and read the string of digits in his mind so many times that he had it memorized. Somehow, looking at the paper and the numbers pulled him into another debate with himself. Usually, it would end with the paper being folded in half again and tucked back into the small pocket.

This time, it didn't.

He looked at his trembling fingers with an odd curiosity as he tapped the numbers onto the smooth screen of his cell phone. He hesitated for a few moments before he willed himself to press the send button, then took a few deep breaths while he listened to the ring resonate through the earpiece.

He didn't know who it was that answered the phone, but he was certain it wasn't M. An assistant, perhaps. A man with a soothing voice simply told him M would return his message soon. A conversation that lasted all of twenty-four seconds, the screen read, when he finally hung up. He felt a mixture of stupidity and annoyance as he looked at the slip of paper again before he threw it in the trash can next to his desk.

That afternoon, a courier left an envelope with the desk sergeant while he was with a client. Inside, handwritten neatly in black ink, was a card with the address of the New York Palace Hotel and an appointment two hours from when it was delivered. A private room in the Tavern on 51 was reserved for their meeting.

A familiar sensation washed over him as Katsuya walked into the small room and M made eye contact with him. Katsuya offered him a curt nod after M acknowledged him with the slightest smile.

M was in an expensive, fitted dark suit with a red silk tie, his blond hair brushed back and gathered in a gold band. Although he looked considerably less intimidating in formal wear, he still had a predatory gaze and knowing smile.

“Thank you for seeing me,” Katsuya said, sliding a chair out from the table and sitting down.

The slightest shrug answered him.

A primly dressed, elderly waiter let himself in, wheeling a silver service cart in front of him. He said nothing and didn't look at M or Katsuya as he poured fresh coffee from a pristine white coffee pot with gold trim into matching cups. He centered a small jar of cream and a bowl of sugar lumps between the two men, then told them to have a good day and left, leaving the service cart with the coffee pot behind. M was the first to take his cup and drink from it.

“Does David know you are here?”

Katsuya pulled his cup to him and drank. He couldn't help but smile at M's question. “Do you think I would be in a relationship with someone from whom I would have to ask permission for anything?”

M laughed.

“He is aware that you've sent me a collar,” Katsuya continued. “He doesn't know I've contacted you or about this meeting.”

“And so,” M said, setting down his cup and leaning back. “He must have warned you about me.”

“He did.”

There was a moment of silence. The men stared at each other for a few moments, sizing each other up.

“What would you like to discuss?” M asked finally, picking up his cup once more.

“Although you don’t entertain ‘curiosity’, I am still curious,” Katsuya said. “Why did you send me the collar?”

“My reasons are obvious,” M said. “Unlike yours.” He placed his cup back on its saucer and sat up straighter in his seat. The cordial smile disappeared from his face. “I don’t like to waste my time. I would like for you to answer my questions if I ask them.”

“You are a stranger to me. What makes you think I will give you my secrets?”

“For the same reason you are here. If you were sincerely offended by my gesture, you would have brought the collar back to me and returned it, perhaps even with David waiting by the doorway as you did so.”

Katsuya’s fingers traced the rim of his cup over and over again as he contemplated his answer.

“You want to know what it is like to give unconditional surrender to someone who will take it completely. Someone who will do it not out of love for you – because love itself is still a condition, correct?”

Katsuya couldn’t help but smile at M’s words.

“I’ve met hundreds like you,” M said. “The same pretty outside with a ruined inside.”

“Looking for someone like you to hollow out the rot?” Katsuya asked.

“No,” M said. “Looking for someone like David to stop the hairline fractures from breaking you in half.”

Katsuya’s smile never left. He was thoroughly intrigued, although he thought he should have been offended. He took another sip of his coffee. It was still hot and burnt his tongue as he drank it.

“So what is it that you want from me?” Katsuya asked. “Hurt me and see what I look like when I am in pain? To hear what I might sound like when I beg?”

M laughed. "Pain is a trigger," he said. "When it is applied just right...you can change a person."

"Do you want to change me?"

The question hung between them. It wasn't answered.

M pushed his chair back and stood. He straightened his suit, carefully pulling his sleeves straight and brushing the wrinkles from his lap. Meticulous. He stepped around his chair and circled the table, stopping short a few feet from Katsuya's side and looking down at him.

"We can talk later," M said, as he extended his hand. Katsuya looked at it and the two elaborate rings that adorned his middle and ring fingers. The design of the one on his middle finger was identical to the one carved into the box the collar had come in. "Before I invest any more of my time on...*this*, I need to know how committed you are to your – we'll just call it 'curiosity' for lack of a better term for the time being."

Katsuya's throat went dry suddenly, and he couldn't make himself move for a few moments. His hand trembled when he raised it to take M's. There was an odd sense of both fear and excitement coursing through him as M's hand closed around his – power in the way the warmth of M's palm curled around his fingers.

Katsuya waited in the lobby as M had instructed. Occasionally, he looked at the cell phone he had taken out of his pocket. David hadn't been in the office since seven that morning. Mike had told him he was processing a multiple homicide on the west side. Pangs of guilt came to him, thinking of David while he sat on a plush leather sofa – waiting for the man David had emphatically warned him to stay away from.

*I am such a bastard...why am I doing this...?*

The questions came, and although they stirred terrible emotions in him, he couldn't make himself get up and leave. He berated himself internally until M returned and gestured for him to follow. Clutching his phone, he did so, only two steps behind all the way to a private elevator located behind a set of doors M opened with a key card.

“Once we get to the room,” M said when the elevator door opened, “you are not allowed to turn back.”

Katsuya only nodded and walked into the glass and marble elevator. M slid the key card into the panel and pressed the top button. He had taken the master suite tucked away on the top floor of the hotel.

“There will be no safe word,” M continued, keeping his eyes on gold paneling. “I decide when you are allowed to stop. Understand?”

He looked over at Katsuya, no warmth in his face, his habitual smile long gone. For a moment Katsuya thought he looked monstrous. Something that had crawled out from under his bed.

“Is this a test?”

“You can call it what you like,” M said, and held out his hand. “As I’ve said, I don’t like to waste time. Give me your phone.”

Katsuya hesitated and didn’t move. The elevator had slowed to a stop. Even as the doors opened, Katsuya still held onto his phone.

“I have to be the only one you call out to,” M said softly. “You have to trust me implicitly. If you can’t bring yourself to relinquish your only connection to David...to the outside world while we are here...then we’ll take the elevator back down now. We will then part ways and never cross paths again.”

The moment lasted long enough for the elevator doors to close again, but it didn’t move. Enclosed in the small space, Katsuya felt the weight of M’s words, and it was almost against his will that he held his phone up and placed it in M’s hand.

“Good boy,” M said, rewarding him with the slightest smile. He pressed the button to open the elevator doors again, and this time, as if preventing Katsuya from rethinking his decision, he took him by the hand and tugged him along -- as he had done in their first meeting; but this time, it was different. M’s grip was loose, holding his hand only to guide him.

It wasn't until they entered the suite and M clicked on a light that illuminated the vastness and elegance of the room that Katsuya finally spoke.

“Why aren't we there? At your house?”

M shrugged off his jacket.

“I don't need to be at a particular place with particular things to do what I do,” he said.

“I need to know...before we start...,” Katsuya said, watching M hang up his jacket. He trailed off.

“If sex is part of this process?” M said it for him.

M unclipped his cufflink covers, and as he unbuttoned his shirt cuffs, he walked toward a chair by a panoramic window. He left his silver cufflinks on a small glass end table before he settled into the leather armchair.

“I won't have sex with you,” Katsuya said.

M only smiled. “Strip,” he said. That one word was absolute and crippling. Katsuya found himself uncertain again – questioning why he was there and what he wanted. He wasn't aware that he was slowly clenching and unclenching his fists.

“You didn't answer my question,” Katsuya said.

M leaned on one of the armrests and laced one leg over the other. “This is the one and only pass I will give you since this is your first time,” he finally said. “After I answer you, you will know your place even if learning it will be the most difficult thing you ever do.”

There was a pause. The silence between them was tangible, excruciating.

“None of this is about sex as you've known it,” M said. “If I fuck you, it's about ownership. It's about me owning you and you not only allowing it, but needing it like you need air. It's not about love. It's not

about anything you instinctively want to put a name to. Just as, when I hurt you or give you pleasure – it has no other interpretation but what I want you to feel.”

The words were stunningly concise, but at the same time difficult for Katsuya to comprehend. He let them rip through his very being, like some kind of drug that he had never taken before. His mind was still somewhere else, even as M told him again to strip and he started to undress.

His movements were mechanical and the silence was unbearable. The rustle of his clothing as it was removed and fell to the floor in an unkempt pile at his feet, was the only interruption in the quiet. As more clothing came off, baring his skin to the subtle chill of the air conditioning, he came to realize he was shaking with fright. The kind of fear he didn't know how to control.

“Come here,” M said, his voice soft. Gentle.

His legs moved on their own even before Katsuya registered the command; step by step, until he found himself an arm's reach away from M.

M uncrossed his legs and gestured for Katsuya to kneel. He complied. The discomfort of his knees bearing his weight on the polished marble floor was emphasized by his trembling.

M leaned over, cupping Katsuya's face in his hands. The warmth in them was calming. M held him, thumbs stroking his cheekbones right below his eyes, over and over again.

“From this point on, you will not speak,” M said. “Not until I end this and give you permission.”

Katsuya let out a sigh between parted lips. His focus was on M's bright blue eyes, the way they were an odd contrast to the rest of him. Though M wore a veneer of indifference and spoke coldly and cryptically, Katsuya thought he saw a kind of affection in his eyes that reminded him of David.



The thought of David made him flinch and M saw it. The hand that held his face tightened. “No one exists in this world, in this moment in time, except for you and me,” he said. “Trust me and I will give you everything you want. I promise you.”

Katsuya gave him the slightest nod.

After a few moments, M slowly removed his hand. He stood, bringing Katsuya up to his feet with him. He walked him out of the living room and toward the bedroom.

The light clicked on. The room was illuminated brilliantly, exhibiting a kind of extravagance that bordered on gaudiness. It was outfitted with a four-poster bed accented with expensive embroidery. The wood was stained dark cherry, complimenting the forest green and gold duvet that matched the drapery tied back with tassels on either side of the bed. There was a Jacuzzi nestled against the wall where a view of the city unfolded beautifully below, a tall wall unit stood, also in dark



cherry, with intricate designs carved into its double doors. That was probably where the television and other electronics were tucked away.

Katsuya was instructed to hold onto both posts at the foot of the bed. M left, disappearing into one of the connected rooms. He emerged minutes later with two lengths of ties that he had slipped off bathrobes.

Katsuya found himself shaking again, as M wound one end of a silk and cotton blend tie around one of his wrists. He couldn't even watch as knots were made swiftly and the other end of the tie was secured to the top of the post. His arm was pulled up tight and high – to the point that Katsuya had to balance on the ball of his foot. The other wrist was tied to the other post and pulled up the same way. When M backed away, Katsuya could feel his calves tighten and his body starting to grow taut in the unusual position.

M ran a hand along his backside, then followed the contour of his spine from the base of his neck down to his tailbone.

“Do you want a gag?”

The question was a frightening one, but Katsuya took a deep swallow of air and shook his head.

“Good boy,” M said. He stroked Katsuya's back once more before stepping away.

Katsuya heard the slightest sound of a belt buckle tinkling. He took in more breaths, trying to calm himself as his throat started to close and knots in his belly started to form and tighten. He didn't have a lot of time to prepare himself before the first hard slash of pain came.

It cut at an angle into the center of his back. He could feel it distinctly. Another came, and this time he could hear the leather whistle through the air. The sharp pain felt like a knife, leaving a terrible burning after. He didn't know if he screamed. All he knew was the pain and how it was slowly hollowing him out, with only fire left behind.

He twisted, wringing his hands, desperately trying to free himself from the knots around his wrists. The sliver of leather on the belt found its mark each time, layering the pain until he thought he was about to go

unconscious. He only knew the whipping had stopped when he couldn't hear it anymore.

M's warm hand was cold against his back, fingers deliberate as they traced the thick welts interlaced with a few lines of red where the belt had broken the skin.

"You didn't beg," M said, giving Katsuya a kiss against his temple. "I'm very proud of you."

Katsuya was panting and although he couldn't be certain, he thought he had been crying.

"A little more," M murmured into his ear, "and I'll give you a reward."

The words were metallic and sounded far away. They didn't make a lot of sense, but when the pain came again it was worse -- and that was all he could register.

The belt cut into the backs of his thighs. M was striking harder and faster in a steady pace that made the whipping sounds echo as one long crack. Again and again he struck, until the sounds ceased to have any meaning for Katsuya and the pain was all he knew. There was nothing else.

Katsuya's eyes flickered open when another sensation came at last -- the warmth of M's body pressing against him from behind, enveloping him. A hand cupped his chin, turning his head until he was looking into the blue eyes again. There was something else in the eyes this time, something almost...predatory. Insane.

M pressed his mouth over his, tongue licking against his. It might have been instinct that made Katsuya return the kiss. M's clothing was harsh against his raw skin but he wanted M's warmth, even if it hurt. As quickly as it came, M pulled away again.

"Endure it a little longer," M told him.

The belt came back down again. This time, Katsuya tried to make himself focus on the sensation, the pain itself as it cut into his back and

into his thighs – the way it was unbearable but his body took it. His instinct to pull at the restraints was also gone, perhaps he had learned on a subconscious level that it didn't matter. That nothing he did mattered.

He counted fifteen. Then it stopped. M threw the belt he had been using on the bed, just a few feet away. Katsuya studied it in mindless fascination as M undid the knots around his wrists and from around the posts.

With the restraints gone and his body no longer pulled taut, he sank down to his knees. He wasn't certain why, but he sat on the floor and sobbed. Oddly, he didn't feel ridiculous. He didn't care.

“On the bed,” M said firmly.

Katsuya wiped his damp cheeks with the heels of his hands and looked up at M. Without a word, he gathered his legs beneath him and put what strength he had into standing up. He then sat down on the edge of the bed, the belt beside his hand.

“Are you crying from pain?” M asked, picking the belt back up. He folded it in half. He appeared amused as he asked the question. “You may answer me.”

“No,” Katsuya said, and nothing more.

M leaned in and kissed him again. This time, it was quick and on the mouth. “You're doing very well,” he said, and pressed the folded belt against Katsuya's lower lip.

Katsuya blinked, uncertain if he should answer.

“You look absolutely beautiful like this...,” M said, licking a trail along the slope of Katsuya's cheek with the tip of his tongue. “Naked. Hurt. Open.”

He pressed his mouth over Katsuya's again, and this time, the kiss went deep. His tongue moved slowly, caressing, as he lay Katsuya back on the bed. The silk duvet was cool against his back and it felt good. It felt better as M laced one leg over him, straddling him, knees pinning his hips.

When the kiss broke, Katsuya found himself breathless with a need he couldn't find a way to verbalize. The emptiness that had been filled with pain and fire inside him had ebbed. He wanted something, anything, to refill it again. He didn't even care what the cost was. He opened his mouth to speak, but M pressed a finger to his lips and shushed him.

He fastened Katsuya's wrists to the two posts at the head of the bed and when he finished, he knelt over Katsuya again. "Soon," he whispered, understanding the unsaid words. He gave Katsuya another smile before he straightened and raised the folded belt again.

This time he moved slowly enough for Katsuya to watch it come down and strike across his belly. He swallowed the scream that was nearly ripped out of him, but another strike came, this time across his chest. He screamed this time, his torso lifting off the bed. M tightened his knees against Katsuya's hips, not allowing him to roll to the side to hide from the coming blows; and they rained down, one after another, until the pale skin that was once smooth started to darken with thick welts and bruises.

"Please...", was all Katsuya was able to say, after the screaming had made his voice hoarse.

His body was still taut, recoiling from the whipping that had stopped when M moved his knees to the inside of his thighs – nudging them open. Sobs racked his entire being.

"Calm...", M murmured into his mouth. "Focus on me. Just me."

Through the haze that came and went with the tears that flowed from his eyes, Katsuya only nodded and stared straight ahead.

"Good...good boy...", M said, brushing the sweat-damp locks of hair from Katsuya's eyes and forehead. "You are doing very well."

M wound his arms around him, gathering him into warmth that Katsuya didn't know he wanted desperately, the kind that he didn't quite feel, even as David held him. Gentle fingers raked through his hair, stroking him as he cried.

Although he had never before realized it, Katsuya saw then that he was lonely. No matter who he was with, even when he was with the people he loved and who loved him...he was lonely. This was the emptiness inside him that for some reason he had guarded fiercely like some treasure; except that it wasn't something valuable, it was something that hurt. Something that hurt so much worse than the intense bouts of pain he had just experienced.

Then there was no more sobbing, just tears, a steady rivulet flowing from the corners of his eyes as he stared at M's shirt where his tears had stained it.

"Take as much from me as you need," M said in a whisper. "I'll give you whatever you need for as long as you want."

Katsuya only nodded numbly.

Everything hurt. That was the only thought Katsuya had when he woke. He remembered everything at once but he could do nothing but let the memories roll through his mind as he tried to gather enough will to overcome the pain. It was like being thrown into a choppy sea and he could barely swim.

He finally made himself roll over onto his back, but then instantly regretted it. Although the cotton sheets were soft, their touch still stung. He let out a moan and a curse. Then he smelled a cigarette. The scent wafted into the bedroom, following footsteps that stopped at his bedside.

M looked amused as he took another pull from his half-smoked cigarette. "I usually don't stay for the afterglow," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed and blowing out a stream of smoke, "but I didn't bring an attendant to do it for me."

Katsuya pulled himself up, ignoring the sharp pain that flared. Now, out of the moment, he didn't want to speak to M lying down. He sat up gingerly against the headboard and gathered the duvet around him.

“I can’t say I know what to do next,” Katsuya said. “Is it always like...this?”

M laughed. “No,” he said, “I can do much worse.”

“Was this what you wanted to do to me the first time we met?”

“David would not have allowed it,” M said, discarding the remains of his cigarette into a tray. “It would not have mattered if you did.”

“But you would have done something like this if he hadn't been in the room?”

“I have curiosities,” M said, standing up. “Even if I don’t entertain the curiosities of others.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out Katsuya’s phone. “You have the room for another day if you elect to stay and recover.” He held out the cell, “but perhaps you should see David soon.”

Katsuya took the phone. Looking at the screen, he realized he had been in the suite with M for nearly seven hours and had five missed calls, and a string of texts. It was nearly three A.M.

“If he hasn’t already combed through the hospitals and morgues,” M said. He bent down and gave Katsuya a kiss on his forehead. “Come see me when you want to continue.”

“What did you see?” Katsuya asked.

M tilted his head, amused. “I saw what I expected,” he said, and straightened.

Katsuya pulled up his knees carefully and wound his arms around them.

“It wasn’t weakness,” M said simply and walked out the door.

Katsuya watched him go, tracking his footsteps as he collected his things and left. Then he was alone again. The suite that had been impressively big, now felt massive.

He lay back down on the bed, grimacing at the sharp pain that came with his every move. He looked at the glow of the phone. The last missed call was only half an hour ago. He felt bad as he contemplated what to say. What could he say that would spare David anger and disappointment...? He still didn't know, even as he pressed the call back button.

"Where are you?" David's voice asked, answering after only two rings.

"I'm sorry," Katsuya said. In that moment, he wished David was with him as much as he didn't want him to see him. Not then.

There was a pause at the other end. Katsuya knew David was contemplating whether he should push for details. There had been restrained frustration in his voice.

"Mike told me you've been out since seven," Katsuya said. "Please get some rest. I'm very sorry I worried you."

"You really okay? You don't sound it."

Katsuya clenched the phone tighter. The hollow spot inside him...was there again. "I am okay," he said. "Just very tired."

A few more moments of silence, filled by the slightest sounds of static before David told him good night and hung up. Katsuya looked at the phone until the screen darkened.

"I'm sorry David...."