FIRST CHAPTER

Robin's best friend John was always getting on her case about being an obsessive blogger. Today, she finally accepted he might have a point.

Three o'clock on a work day, and she should be writing a fundraising email. An important fundraising email. The kind of fundraising email that might mean an exciting new acquisition or the salary of a new staff member—or just the continued existence of her department. But instead, she typed the email blind, hands flying over the keys while her eyes stared at the next tab open in her browser window, the one that read *The Picky Submissive*.

God, she really shouldn't be doing this at work, but the frustration was unbearable. She was already taking some of it out by digging her heels into the floor. She couldn't *concentrate*. She needed to get it out of her system, that was all, before she turned the expensive library floor into wood chips.

With all the relief of someone lighting their first cigarette after an eighteen-hour flight, she hit Compose Post. Best to get straight to the point. No time for chitchat.

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Look, I don't have unreasonable standards. I don't expect
perfect punctuation. But if you want to control my "oargasms," I
can't take you seriously. Unless you're some kind of kinky
skipper, maybe start by controlling your spell-check first. If
you can't find your way to the edit menu, you'd better keep on
rowing.

Love,
The Picky Submissive
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She sighed with relief. Normally bad spelling didn't aggravate her so much, but bad spelling combined with a guy who was convinced he needed to micromanage her masturbation, even though she'd specified she wasn't looking for any kind of Total Power Exchange in her KinkLife.com account? What was even the point of writing a thorough and accurate profile about her wants, needs and limits if every guy with a username like Darth_Dominous121 was going to ignore the damn thing anyway?

She finished the post just in time for Julio to poke his head in her door. "I approved your letter," she told him, and smiled. "It looks great. I think we'll get lots of interest in donations for the new library annex." Flipping the switch to work mode? No problem.

"Thanks," said Julio. "Um, what do you know about fetish porn?"

"*What?*" She flicked her eyes to her screen to check for incriminating evidence. Julio wasn't close enough to read the written content of her blog, but some of the ads down the sidebar were

pretty risqué and definitely visible from a distance. But no, her monitor just showed the university log-in page.

"I don't know anything about fetish porn," Julio said plaintively. He was an older man and had worked in special collections much longer than her, although his terminal shyness meant he couldn't do her job as Head. "Postwar burlesque up to 1970s, I could maybe handle. But this? No. It's big. Oh God, it's big." He was breathing rapidly, holding on to the door as if he'd collapse.

"All right, all right. Calm down there, big fella." She swept a hand through her hair. "How big? What kind of big?"

"It's an Irina Mareau collection appraised at seven thousand, but there's no way it's worth that little."

The name sounded familiar. She rushed to pull up search tabs on archival collections and history sites. She lived for this. The adrenaline rush was as good as sex. Or maybe that was just something she told herself to feel better about—no. *Focus*. "So…she was modeling in the 1930s for racy photographs. Wow. Like Bettie Page, but earlier, and she never got really famous."

"Racy's an understatement, yes. It was thought all of her original photographs were destroyed in the 1950s by her and her husband at the height of the antiobscenity movement, leaving only a couple of incredibly poor-quality reproductions. Now it's come to light after she passed that her nephew inherited a box of her letters and photographs. Stuff that has never seen the light of day." Julio had slipped into his *Antiques Roadshow* announcer voice, and there was a gleam in his eyes that people outside of their field would probably call unholy.

"We could build a collection around it. The Subcultural Female Body Image? The Media Studies professors would jump on it." She rose to her feet, too full of nervous energy to stay still. Her stiletto hidden platform heels—the taupe color made them just conservative enough for work—gave her four extra inches and meant she didn't have to look up at Julio. "We're going to get this." She threw out her arm for a celebratory fist bump.

The light in Julio's eyes turned to panic. He staggered back a step, then pivoted and fled. "I'll email you the appraisal!" he called over his shoulder.

Robin sank back into her chair and rubbed her forehead. She really wanted to talk about this. But anyone she could talk to who'd understand the significance was a potential competitor, especially if they worked at one of the bigger universities like UCLA, or she'd have to swear them to uncomfortable secrecy, or…

John. He liked to make fun of her boring job, but Irina Mareau? Definitely not boring. Those few blurry photographs bore witness to the gorgeous, sinuous way Irina curved when she kneeled. Robin took a slow breath and pressed her thighs together, imagining the strain, recreating it.

Maybe John had heard of Irina Mareau.

She picked up the phone.

"A/V department." John pinned his phone to his shoulder with his ear as he swung the rickety cart into the elevator.

"I can help," shouted the new student assistant, and ran down the hall toward the elevator. John stabbed the close button while mouthing *thanks* and shaking his head.

"John! Hi!" Robin's voice on the other end of the line was sweet and breathy, which would be sexy as hell if it was anyone but her.

"Aren't you supposed to be working?" He hit his floor button. "Please tell me you're not calling me at work to tell me some nerdy little factoid that has nothing to do with me. Look, I'm sure this misprint science textbook from Texas that includes a chapter on evolution is very—"

"Irina Mareau," Robin said.

He whistled. When he was a teenager, he'd seen the classic image in an arty erotica book, and that very same night she'd figured prominently in his fantasies. Never mind that she was long dead—the aura of bygone glamour only added to the experience.

"Aren't you supposed to be working?" asked Robin. "Or do you have one hand down your pants now? You can get fired for that."

"I have *both* hands down my pants. That's the magic of Bluetooth. So you've got some kind of lead on an Irina Mareau collection?"

"Can you meet me at lunch?" She sounded so eager, like she was a champagne bottle about to pop.

"Sure." He was supposed to be recording some visiting professor lecturing on doomsday planetary collision hysteria in five minutes, but he'd figure some way out. "Meet you at the shack." He hung up.

The elevator door creaked open. The new assistant—Carol? Kari?—stood there, breathing heavily. She must have run up the stairs. "I just wanted to see if you needed any help."

She was cute, but way too young. Even if she didn't sort of work for him—he could get fired just for that, never mind the age difference—she'd be off-limits. But if it made her happy…

"Actually, you could record a lecture for me." *So maybe I'm not getting fired, but I'm still going to hell*.

"Thank you! I mean, sure! I've never used the camera before! Oh my God! This is awesome!"

"Okay, okay, okay. Just don't break anything."

This wasn't her area, but Robin could still see that the comps in the appraisal were ridiculous. She scribbled corrections in the margins in between sips of her tea.

"It's the A/V guy!"

The students at the table next to her were poking each other and trying not to stare. People tended to remember John. There weren't many built, six-foot-tall Asian men with full-sleeve tattoos and close-cropped hair ambling around campus in work shirts, black jeans and motorcycle boots.

Not even Berkeley was colorful enough to have an army of Johns.

"Hey, pixie." He took a seat across from her.

"Don't call me that." She hated that name. Hated any nickname or reference to her small stature, really. See also the "I Am Not Your Baby Doll" tag on her blog.

Thirty-two years old and her body was much the same as it was at fifteen. She didn't complain in public—*oh no I'm too thin and slender and delicate* sounded insufferable—and she *had* learned a few tricks. The hidden platform heels. Penciling depth to her eyebrows for a stronger, less *ingenue* look. They helped get her taken seriously at work, but the daddy-kink doms still swooped around her like moths to the flame, vultures to the roadkill, flies to the—damn, she was getting cynical.

"Aw…" John's brow crumpled. "Hey, don't be like that. I'm sorry."

"I know you're just—" She and John always teased each other, but now, for the first time, the problems with her sex life were spilling over into their friendship. "I'm on edge about something else."

"Is it the collection?" He leaned back in his seat and shifted his legs. The corner table had about as much room as an airplane seat, nowhere near John-sized, so she didn't blame him for the invasion. She shifted her knees out of the way, her calf glancing across the leather of his outstretched boot before she tucked both feet underneath her chair, trying to ignore how uncomfortable the position was.

"No. I'm excited about the collection. Apparently it's her nephew, who inherited a case of letters and photographs and negatives. He's not doing too well, healthwise—that's the grim side of our field, we deal with a lot of dying and desperate people—and he called in an antiques dealer for an appraisal. This guy had no idea what he was doing, or else he's a lowballing sleaze. One of the two. The nephew was so angry he threw the appraisal on the ground and walked away. This was at a public sale, and Julio happened to be there."

"That's some cloak-and-dagger shit. I'm impressed." The lazy smile he usually wore did seem more…appreciative. Sincere. When he put his arms on the table, she tried not to let the searing colors and writhing patterns on his right arm distract her.

She looked right in his eyes. "So this is really delicate and time-sensitive, and you can't tell anyone else. I have to get to him. I have to convince him that Saylor University Special Collections is where the collection needs to be. Sometimes it's not about money as much as legacy. Although the money's obviously a factor."

John nodded, but his eyes had glazed over again. Too much academic jargon. Not enough sexy scandal.

"The appraisal mentions something called insertion images," she added, keeping her voice cool and disaffected.

He blinked and sucked in a breath.

"And pearl rope bondage. Or maybe it was rope pearl bondage?" It was getting to be more of an effort staying cool than she'd imagined. Oh well. John would assume her excitement was

due to the rarity, not the special aspects of the collection. "And something about a silver circle—a napkin ring maybe?—held in her mouth in the same style as a modern-day, umm, let me check—" She'd always been good at pretending ignorance; it was a skill that came in handy when she found something valuable but vastly underpriced at a flea market or estate sale and didn't want to see that number go up. And now, apparently, when she didn't want to let her best friend know too much about her sexual proclivities.

"Ring gag. A 1930s ring gag."

Her face flared with heat, hearing him talk like that, so matter-of-factly. "So you know the right words." Wait, did she want him to answer that? What was that, an accusation? A question? Was she implying something? About John?

He nodded. And then he shook his head. Strange. John was hardly ever indecisive. He must have noticed her suspicious look and flashed his empty hands in a show of innocence. "What? I watch porn! I mean, that kind of stuff is practically mainstream now. No big deal. Everybody knows about it."

"Do they?" She drawled, regaining her footing at the sight of his…what was it, distress? Not embarrassment, surely. Not from the guy who'd crashed a spring break bikini contest by competing in a banana hammock and gotten the numbers of several legitimate entrants for his trouble.

"Well, not *you* apparently. But you could check the course listings for bondage studies." He snorted. "No, no, no, no need to look anything up, I got it. Kink 102, with a special presentation on, uh, ball gags, by the foremost authority in the world on adult novelties, Professor Dick Lickenstein, PhD—"

"Would you stop it? For your information, I'm planning on reading through *several* academic histories of sexual paraphernalia tonight. See, my job isn't boring at all. And where's the defensiveness coming from?" She gave him a sideways look. "Are you watching porn at work? Again?"

"That wasn't me! I told you, it was a student assistant who pulled up the tentacle penis thing. They're all sex-crazed maniacs, especially the anime fangirls. I've already asked my boss to put a web filter on the network."

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh." Robin nodded, crossing her half-asleep legs. She wished John would be more considerate about where he sprawled. On the other hand, it was nice to just be close to someone. Even John. *A warm body's a warm body*.

Ew. *Standards*.

"Seriously, I'm excited. I mean, I'm excited for you. About your career. And I would *love* to see more Irina Mareau pictures. She's an important cultural figure."

"Thanks." Even though she wouldn't say it, she was glad she'd come to see him. He was the one constant in her life after moving to the States and the only friend she'd really stayed in touch with since her undergrad. She trusted him not to air her dirty laundry or tell her any white lies.

Sure, he might bust her chops a bit, but at least he knew, too, when to scale it back, when he'd pushed her too hard or in the wrong way.

God, she could trust him with anything, really. Even…

"Okay, I'm starving. Let's get in line for some burgers, and then you can show me the appraisal." He put his hand on his heart, tipped his head and cast his eyes to the ceiling, posing like a trickster angel. "I won't tell a soul, cross my heart and stick a ring gag in my mouth."

She made a rude noise and kicked his shin.

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John enjoyed her company enough that he'd have walked her back to the library even if she *didn't* have a promised treasure trove of vintage dirty pictures. With insertion. And rope bondage. And ring gags. *Damn.*

Watching buttoned-up-real-fucking-life-naughty-librarian Robin discussing *that* had been quite the exercise in self-control. Worst part being, he didn't know whether the control he was exerting was to rein in the urge to embarrass her or launch himself across the table at her.

Not thinking about Carol-slash-Kari sexually was dead easy. But Robin, little don't-call-me-pixie Robin, didn't walk or talk like a teenager. He'd known her way back then, and she'd changed with the years, wrapped a silky grace around an iron core of determination. He'd erase that stupid nickname from his vocabulary, if it really bothered her that much.

When a rush of students exiting class forced them into single file and he fell in line behind her, his eyes immediately fell on the practiced womanly sway of her boyish hips as she navigated the halls in her sky-high heels. Other girls would teeter in shoes like that, taking silly mincing steps, but Robin strode around like they were cybernetic implants, enhancing rather than hobbling her.

A woman like her could be a wet dream playing up the gamine with ballet flats and baby doll dresses, but Robin seemed bound and determined to look like a six-foot-tall Swedish model, even if she was in the completely wrong body. Er, not that her androgynous figure was wrong, far (far, far) from it, more that she always seemed somewhat at odds with it. Those platform heels, for example—totally overcompensating.

Not that he would ever say so aloud.

She pivoted seamlessly and turned on him. He worried she'd caught him staring at her ass, but the look on her face was more wistful, preoccupied. "Have you ever done internet dating?" she asked.

"Yes?" he said, tentatively. He felt like he'd walked into a minefield. Sure, she'd talked to him about her ex-boyfriend, and he'd told her highly sanitized versions of his own exploits with women (and men)…not that he'd ever call *that* dating. If she was at the point of actually asking for his advice, though, she must be in pretty dire straits. No wonder she was on edge today.
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"Is it always this bad? Or is it only this bad for women? Or is it just me?" She sighed and looked away.

"Um… bad? How?" He had a quick thrill of fear for her safety, which he squashed. If she were in danger in any way, she wouldn't ask about it in such a roundabout fashion. Or at least he hoped so.

She grabbed him by the sleeve of his shirt and pulled him into a nearby lecture hall, recently emptied of roughly two hundred undergrads, if the garbage littering the desks and floor was any indication. She fell into one of the end row seats, and he was quick to sit beside her. Hell, it must be bad if she had to deliver the news sitting down. Or maybe her shoes were just hurting her feet.

"I thought with all the algorithms and the detailed profiles it would be a little bit more, I don't know, precise." She twisted her lip, as if she was genuinely perplexed by the fact that the world wasn't as neatly categorized as her collections. "I keep going on…dates, but it's always the wrong guy. I write down what I'm like and what I want and they don't *read* it, or they rewrite it in their brains somehow. If they can even fucking write. Half of them are just this side of illiterate. One guy spelled orgasm '*oar*gasm', if you can believe it. Like 'oar' that you row a boat with? But even among the ones who can spell—which is already a small pool—I have my profile set for casual encounters, and I've got guys wanting to sign contracts on the first date."

Contracts?

Robin continued, as if she hadn't even noticed her own bizarre wording. "Or they say they're buff and then they turn out to look like Kevin James. Or they want to buy me a boob job. Or—oh God—they want me to call them Daddy." She made an exaggerated gagging sound. Not the sexy kind of gagging sound, either—*oh hell no, Johnny Boy, do not go down that path now*.

"Well, have you considered just dating the old-fashioned way? You know, in person? Personally I think the internet gives you too much information about people. Like there are plenty of guys you'd probably click with on a first date, have a good time and you'd already be shacking up with him by the time you found out he couldn't spell orgasm. You know?"

"As you keep reminding me, I'm a boring librarian. The men I meet in person are all extremely old, extremely paunchy and extremely socially stunted. Great when you're tracking down rare Nazi books, not so much when you want to go dancing." She had a crooked smile on her face now, which heartened him a little. No, she wasn't desperately lonely, she was only going through a rough patch. She'd handle it like she always did, with humor and stubbornness, and she'd find someone. Someone right for her, who'd give her what she wanted *and* what she needed.

"You'll find someone," he said. "There's no way you won't. Shit, I can't really give you advice based on my own history, but I do know people who've had some of the same problems. Just take it slow, be safe, keep at it."

What a weak-sauce thing to say. Generic. None of his usual verve or flare. He might as well have said *attagirl* or *there's plenty of fish in the sea*.

Which she could use her oar*gasms to navigate, ha ha.*

The truth was, he didn't have any experience in this kind of thing. He didn't date, he *played*, and it was easy for him to find people who wanted to be played with. Even if he did do the normal movie-and-dinner dating thing, he wasn't sure he could really be objective enough about Robin to give her helpful advice. Especially not after she'd just dropped the word "contract" in casual dating conversation like it was a remotely normal thing to say. He tugged surreptitiously at his shirt collar.

"That's kind of cliché, but it still helps," she said, although he had a feeling it hadn't helped at all. "Thanks. I'd better go now, but I'll tell you as soon as I get any news on the collection." She stood to go, and so did he, and when she tossed her wavy blond hair over her shoulder a strand hit him on the neck, like a trailing fingertip grazing lightly over his skin.

"Anytime," he said. "Anytime at all."

END OF FIRST CHAPTER SAMPLE