

## Chapter Ten

### Shifcha Isha - The Slave Wife

When I first heard from Alma I was sure she must be faking it. Back then, JBDSM, the website for Jewish kinksters, had been up and running for some time, and there were two hundred or so members networking globally. New people joined the group every week. Some wrote short autobiographical notes introducing themselves to the group, while others entered stealthily and lurked on the sidelines contributing nothing. There were no rules about writing in or contributing to discussions, but I encouraged people to come out of their shell and write in, at least to say, ‘Hello, I’m here because I belong here’.

I recalled most vividly a discussion I had with a couple of Hasidic queers back in the 1980s. They were an out-of-the-closet pair long before it was fashionable or safe. This is what they told me. “We can both imagine never having sex again for the rest of our lives. But having to go back into the closet and hide our identities is unthinkable. If we were prevented from meeting and hanging out with others like us we’d be suicidal within a month.”

Alma, when she joined JBDSM, didn’t hesitate a moment but jumped straight into the discussions, and her distinctive voice could be heard over most of the others. She was caustic and brassy, opinionated and extreme, and it was that very extreme quality in all her writing, which made me suspect her of being a fake. Take any group of people, ask them the right questions and you will end up with a statistical chart describing a neat bell-curve mapping their levels of kinkiness. I doubt it matters what group of people you choose. Kinkiness is just a measure of the creativity in the world of human sexual response, as infinite as the Creator is infinite. But people on the ends of the bell curve are in very small and statistically insignificant minorities. These are people who don’t fit into the normal classification of ‘normal’. In other epochs and different places they are labeled variously as mad or holy, and locked away in cloisters or banished into exile. But the likelihood of your actually bumping into anyone who fits this description is small. So Alma was either a freak or a fake. How else do you explain someone deriving sexual gratification solely from being physically or emotionally abused, humiliated and mistreated?

She argues that it is all a matter of degree; that ‘it’s all relative’. But if I maintain a modicum of perspective around sado-masochism it gets harder and harder to go along with the axiom ‘it’s all relative’, especially when things slide into the extremes. If you are like me you’re probably ready to accept that some men and some women enjoy having their nipples pinched, squeezed or twisted. No big deal. It hurts moderately but some people like it. Who would argue that anyone going in for nipple pain is a freak? Not me. What about nipple torture, or is the use of the word torture even appropriate in a context where both participants know what they’re doing, if what they do is safe, sane and consensual? What if the pincher or twister isn’t using her fingers, what if she’s using a pair of pliers, what if they draw blood and screams? And what if the screamer still doesn’t get satisfaction until the nipples are shredded, requiring weeks of medical treatment?

How open-minded does a person like me need to be before my brains fall out altogether? Am I allowed to say, 'Enough, I can't approve of your practice, it's too, too extreme,' or does everyone have the right to decide for himself when enough is enough and expect me to agree?

Alma raised all these concerns in her first week as a member of JBDSM. She introduced herself and posted pictures of her buttocks after a session with her 'Master Gus'. They were bruised, contused and suffused. My immediate reaction was to delete the pictures and bounce the member out of the group for being disruptive or unruly. There are always people who join groups because they want to act out the disruptive behaviors they were not allowed to indulge as children. Other people just like to shout and confront and throw hurtful words around in chat-rooms and in forums online because they can, without acknowledging how much hurt a few words can cause.

Alma, though, proved to be the genuine article, she wasn't pretending or simulating or provoking merely to irritate. She was looking to discover whether there were other Jews who think the way she does. After corresponding with her a while via Email, we started talking on the telephone.

I thought Chainik might be of assistance to her, but this is what he said to me on resigning from the Alma Fan Club and Dating Agency. "Rebbele, I've been out with the girl on a couple of dates. You know how I've often been referred to as someone who burns the candle at both ends, yeah? Well, this is someone who utterly shakes my confidence in myself in that department. I feel like I'm a wet blanket or a warm plate of ice cream, I'm a cracked light bulb, whatever. I can't keep up with her, I never could, obviously, it goes without saying, this is a woman quite out of my league. Please don't encourage me to befriend her anymore, or take her under my wing, or show her the ropes, or anything. Thank you, but No Thank You. I know you have your Mitzvah cases and your special red-light lookout-for-this-one-specials, but I'm not up for it."

He shook his head emphatically as he spoke, to stress his renunciation of the mentor role in this instance.

"But I was relying on you, Chainik, for it. Someone has to watch out for the girl. She's in danger of being hurt. I don't have to tell you. She is into a whole mishmash of insane and unsafe and I don't know what else practices."

Chainik merely shook his head again and took his leave, which is how I came to break a rule about separating JBDSM from my private life and invited Alma into my home and family.

She arrived half an hour before Shabbes, carrying an overnight bag, with a bunch of flowers for my wife and small gifts for the little ones, and wasted not a moment in making herself useful. Actually, to be accurate, she made herself indispensable. She helped Shulamis finish dressing the kids for Shabbes. She laid the table and washed dishes after the children's supper, after breakfast in the morning and again after lunch in the afternoon. I'd

introduced her as someone who came to me for help in moving to town, who was looking for Orthodox Jewish families to invite her to Shabbes Dinner, to help her make friends and connections; all true, of course, but not quite honest.

After dinner that Friday night, Shulamis asked me how come Alma had contacted me in the first place? I told her the story from the beginning, filling in the details of Alma's peculiar circumstances and her joining JBDSM.

"She's a very cheerful young woman," my wife remarked. "It's nice to have someone like that around the house. The local girls who come for Shabbes are usually so broody and withdrawn you'd think they've completely forgotten how to be happy. Mind you, Alma's a little older than they are. What is she now, twenty-four, twenty-five years old? We should help her find a Shidduch, Ooshie. Make it your job to find her someone."

Easier said than done. We settled into a routine. Alma came for Shabbes at least once a month and helped with babysitting on a regular basis. She learned more and more about her Jewish roots, and about life as a Jew. As with everything she tackles, she allowed it to absorb her, and approached Judaism with wonder and delight. One weekend she announced she was moving to Jerusalem to study in a women's seminary. She was giving up all her non-Jewish boyfriends and acquaintances, and, she told me privately, saying goodbye to her non-Jewish BDSM master. She was going to give up smoking for good and lose 60lbs in Israel while studying Torah and learning about living life as a Jewish Woman.

I tried taking her aside to talk her out of it. "Alma, you're in a good school, you're almost finished with your Bachelors degree. You have issues around your sexual behaviors, major issues that haven't been addressed. You're in therapy twice a week. Take it easy. Don't make big changes and life-altering decisions like this. Judaism will wait. It'll still be here when you're ready for it. Don't rush."

"I want the chance to marry and have a large family like you have, Rabbi," she retorted. "Would you deny me that? I want the beauty and security of the frum lifestyle, the learning and the shul-going and the festivals and the close knit family ties. I want a home that revolves around the kitchen and the yeshiva and Torah. What's wrong with that?"

"Have you forgotten how we came to meet in the first place?" I asked her, incredulously. "Hello S&M? Anyone there?"

That week I received a phone call from a stranger, asking me to meet with him at my convenience. The chief impression he made on me when he arrived at my door I was of neatness and efficiency. He introduced himself as Gus and I realized I was talking with Alma's master. Once he opened up about his relationship to her I began to see why he was her master. He was frugal with words but very concise and his speech was somewhat clipped. Nonetheless he conveyed his meaning effortlessly.

"She's a young woman given to extremes, is Alma, extremes in all areas. She needs someone who knows enough and cares enough to make sure she's safe, or else she'll get into trouble."

We talked about her at length, and I was struck by the similarity of our conclusions. For Alma, searching for Judaism and striking out in a new direction without first having dealt with issues surrounding her sexuality was asking for trouble.

“But here’s the rub,” Gus confided. “The way your Judaism is set up, as soon as a person says they want to embrace it, they’re told they can manage the rest of life without looking back. Alma gets that message from all the rabbis she talks to except you. Now, I don’t know anything about Judaism, but I know Alma, and so I know they’re all dead wrong.”

I had to agree with him unreservedly. I tried talking her out of rushing off to Israel, but Alma is a very willful woman when she gets the bit between her teeth, and there was no stopping her. She took leave from school, cashed in her CD, said goodbye to her parents and siblings and went to Israel for the ride of her life. And that’s when her phone calls began in earnest.

“Hi, Rabbi Schreiber,” this breathless message was left on my answering machine. “Everything is so amazing in Jerusalem!!! The lecturers here in the seminary are so amazing. I’m sitting here talking away with the other girls in my dorm, it’s 2:00am, we’ve been chattering away for hours. Today I went to see the local Shadchan woman who does most of the Shiduchin for girls here in Miklat Seminary, she was sooo helpful, and she said she would interview me properly before trying to set me up with dates. I’m amazed at how friendly all the rabbis are here and how approachable.”

She called Shulamis occasionally, to chat and to bring her up to date on the progress she was making. It was impossible for me to share my qualms with anyone, I was afraid to come across as a pessimist about her chances for success, but I knew it could not work. I called Chainik.

“She calls me from her dormitory about twice a week,” he told me. “She’s a very lonely young woman. I listen, I sympathize but I am not available to her. Sometimes she wants to know if I’ll marry her when she gets back to the States? She wants a ready-made frum lifestyle. She wants a kazillion kids and a husband who can beat her to a bloody pulp when she needs it. I’m sorry, I told her, I’m not available.”

I called Pesach. “She calls me or Bassie at least once or twice a week,” he said. “But I don’t have the time or patience for her. She blew it when she was here.”

“I didn’t know you knew her,” I remarked. “When did you two meet, what do you mean she blew it?”

“Listen, Reb Ooshie, please listen carefully,” he informed. “She’s been in touch with virtually every single eligible male from the JBDSM list, and not a few ineligible ones too. We invited her over once to come and meet us, and maybe play, but she abused the invitation. She tried seducing me away from the family in a very inappropriate manner. When Bassie pointed out to her what she was doing, Alma asked if she could join our family here and move in. But this is not a health club for people to make applications to

join, Rabbi. She calls now, on the phone from Jerusalem in the middle of the night, but there's nothing we can do for her. We listen. We say soothing, encouraging things and then we hang up and forget about her, because it's really not our problem."

I called others, in town and out, but the response was virtually the same everywhere. Alma is very compulsive, she does not take no for an answer and believes that she can make things happen by force of will alone, which is a fine way to get along if you are a god, but lacks humility, probity and subtlety if you are somewhat human.

Alma began going out on dates in Jerusalem with the usual list of suspects; youngish men in similar circumstances, who were in Israel to attend yeshivas with parallel agendas to the Miklat Seminary where Alma studied. No great catastrophes resulted from her forays into the world of Shiduchin - matchmaking. No one died. But from Alama's viewpoint of it served only to exacerbate her sense of being a freak, and so she experienced it as an unmitigated disaster. She discovered that youngish Jewish men, whether from the USA or another democratic country, couldn't take her in hand if they tried. They are not trained to exert control over their women. Even after she discussed her needs and specific qualifications with Shadchans in the most explicit and appropriate language possible, they kept on hooking her up with wimps.

"Rabbi," she complained bitterly to me. "I keep on telling them that I need a strong man, someone who knows how to lead and be the head of the family, someone in charge. And they keep on setting me up with like, these milquetoast guys."

"Where did you learn the word milquetoast?" I asked, momentarily diverted.

"Caspar Milquetoast from the comic strip," she replied. "I did a course in American popular comic lit., last year. Anyway I say this to the Shadchan, like, why are you setting me up with these wet noodles? And they all say the same thing. American men are like that. But you know, rabbi I can't marry someone if they can't, like, handle me, it won't last. You know what I need. Can't you help?"

She tried another tack. This time it was dating Sefardi men. Israeli Jews originally from Morocco, Algiers, Turkey and the Levant, who traced their ancestry back to the pre-expulsion Spanish Jews of the fifteenth century. Her logic was that as their culture is much more patriarchal and predominantly male-driven she would be more likely to find a man who would bowl her over and conquer her. But that led to nothing when she discovered they were no more dominant than the Ashkenazi men, merely more abusive and less sensitive. She tried trolling websites haunted by Iranians and Yemenis, poor girl. I received a number of very strangely worded and piteously pleading letters from overwrought young Muslims in those countries, asking me for advice on how to become Jewish quickly so they could fit Alma's specifications and marry her forthwith. She was using me as a sounding board, to sort out and pick through her weekly catch of possible mates.

"Rabbi," she complained afresh, "These are really sick dudes, you know, these Sefardi guys. They think they're still back in the dark ages. It's like, they pretend to say in a gruff voice, 'I am the boss, woman, and you do what I say.' What a bunch of weaklings. Not one

of them has, like, any real culture or breeding, they're kind of backward and slow and. I'm coming back to the United States soon, and you have to promise me you're going to help me find a husband."

Apparently she tried other avenues too. "Check out this dude on ALT," she called excitedly one morning to urge me. "His handle is Shomerguy."

ALT.com advertises itself as the World's Largest BDSM & Alternative Lifestyle Personals. People, apparently a lot of people, three million of them have personal profiles posted there, including a comprehensive list of their kinks and peculiarities. Membership is free of charge, but the ability to browse through all the personals and cull them using advanced database searches costs money. Alma was a paid up member and often scanned the database for men who listed their religion as Jewish. There are hundreds of men and women who list their faith as Jewish on ALT.com. I wouldn't hazard a guess at how many thousands are Jewish but don't list it. Her excitement at encountering Shomerguy grew to a fever pitch when she discovered that the Hebrew word, Shomer in his handle referred to the fact he was Shomer-Shabbes or Sabbath observant; in other words, an Orthodox Jew. She spoke to him on the phone. They met. She fell in love. He took her home to his apartment and gave her the time of her life. And if it was not exactly the time of her entire life, it certainly felt that way in the moment, she said. Naturally, she bonded with him in an instantaneous paroxysm of lust. It has a tendency to take her that way. She called me in the morning, from the phone booth outside his apartment, before going back to the seminary for classes, deliriously happy. They were soul mates for sure, for sure.

Less than a week later she called me broken hearted. "He's a Cohen," she said flatly. "A fukken Cohen, and he never said a thing about it. He's crazy if he thinks I'm going to marry a Cohen. No way."

"Alma," I said. "Steady on there. You were so happy a week ago, what happened?"

"Nothing happened," she replied. "We just got to talking about his family and all that from South Africa. And it turns out they're Cohens." I said 'Shit, why didn't you say anything about it earlier.' And d'you know what, rabbi, he didn't even know he can't marry me. He's in this Yeshiva see, and he's sort of going through the same process as me. His parents, they're like these Conservative Jews and he didn't even know that I am not kosher for him to marry."

"Hang on, hang on," I counseled her. "For all you know his parents aren't kosher Cohens either. Maybe he's not a real Cohen and you can marry him after all. Give me his name and his local rabbi's name in South Africa, I'll make some inquiries, you never know."

But she would not hear of it. Hard on the heels of Zadok the Cohen came Eugene the Swede, a blond and surly barman in a Tel-Aviv nightclub whose charms I could never fathom properly, but who could, apparently, do it for Alma.

"Oh my God," she swore. "He's the most intoxicating man I ever dreamed of. He was so thorough in seeing to me. He takes such care, pays so much attention to detail."

“He’s not Jewish, I gather?” I asked.

“No he isn’t, and it’s a shame because we’re such an incredible match,” she added.

It’s pretty telling when you realize the one she’s referring to, her current perfect boyfriend, is not merely a Gentile, he’s fifty-eight years old; her senior by a mere thirty years, give or take a few. But what’s thirty years between soul mates, heh? The day before she left Israel she met another likely candidate on ALT, a Mr. Saadia Gaon. He had the added cache of a first class, commuting lifestyle, alternating between his apartment in Manhattan and his beachside house on the coast near Haifa. He chauffeured her to the airport in his limousine and saw her romantically hustled, film-star-like through security at Ben Gurion Airport and into her gratuitously upgraded first class seat. She called me again from the telephone in her seat during the flight to JFK. He was so romantic, Sefardi and gracious, but hard and stern and manly and powerful. He was her ideal.

I sighed, wished her well and called Shulamis to tell her we were expecting a guest to dinner on Friday night.

Alma completed her Bachelor’s and found a job. She brought to her work all the enthusiasm, flair and zest she brought to each of her endeavors, complete and total immersion. Her employers were astonished at her productivity and offered to finance her further education in the field of medical technology; she was going for her Masters degree. She bought a car, rented an apartment in the Orthodox Jewish neighborhood and became a familiar sight on the way to Shul, in her super-frum and mega-modest clothing, with its below the knee skirts and past the elbow sleeves. The 60lbs were indeed gone and the smoking habit was kicked for sure. The only thing missing from the picture was the spouse, the kids, the communal acceptance – and, of course, the sanity.

Mr. Right never called, and nor did Mr. Saadia Gaon either from Israel or from Manhattan. Eugene the Swede was deported from Tel Aviv, even more disappointed than Alma. He’d been banking on the hope she could secure him a residency permit to stay there. He assumed, incorrectly as it happens, that Alma was in Israel to stay and become a citizen, and now he was back in Stockholm to face charges, poor man; and she remained bereft. When Shulamis urged me, yet again, to try finding a Shiduch for Alma I didn’t even attempt to explain the difficulties. I couldn’t, I didn’t understand them myself. Alma rejoined JBDSM under a new alias and took up her particular style of sharing again, but her posts had an edge, a shrill quality, not previously noticeable. Kinky Shiduchin did not uncover a single candidate or even entice a single respondent, our database was still much too small. We decided to cast broader and more aggressive availability signals to the world at large in the hope of catching the attention of the rare individual who matched Alma’s profile. This is what we cooked up and posted in JBDSM and wherever kinky Jews congregated online:

**The Sale and Settlement of the slave woman known as SHIFCHA-ISHA.**

**The slave, an orthodox, Jewish woman in her mid twenties, of Sefardi origin, without children or encumbrance will be available for viewing from August 15th.**

**Properly trained and with a natural proclivity for abject slavery, SHIFCHA-ISHA has been preparing herself to a life of submission and slavery for some considerable time. Her training and mentoring has been in formal Leather surroundings with emphasis on discipline, compliance, correction, humility, forbearance, patience and obedience. Her demeanor is bright, friendly, quick-witted, humorous and engaging. She is well educated, and thoughtful, and has graduated with a Bachelors of Science. With extreme masochistic tendencies and high tolerance for both pain and humiliation, she is comfortable in most confrontive and demanding situations.**

To say the advert attracted an outrageous response is inaccurate, although it attracted outrageous people, and outraged many Jews who were uncomfortable with the thought that not all their neighbors play nice. It failed to attract anyone remotely resembling Alma's criteria. We examined the results and tried to learn from our mistakes. The first and most glaring was so obvious we were embarrassed at not having thought of it in advance; who defines Orthodox Jewish? And here I learned one of the most crucial lessons in publishing, any sort of publishing. Whatever is not put in plain words, will be deliberately or accidentally misconstrued. It's as simple as that. Forget subtle, forget droll or wry or sarcastic, or as Chainik is fond of saying, eschew obfuscatory pedagogy. Keep it simple. We rewrote the ad specifying the prerequisite that any prospective husband/master be Shomer Shabbes. Eight of the ten men who responded eagerly had no clue at all what a Shomer Shabbes is.

"Try me, tell me what a Shomer Shabbes is," one hopeful candidate implored. "Perhaps I am one but don't know it." Like the man who, upon being asked whether he plays piano, replies, "I don't know, perhaps I do, I've never tried."

One respondent, a man in his thirties from Washington, DC sounded pretty good on paper until Alma said, "What, Issachar from Washington, you guys kidding? I dated him ages ago. He's an asshole. He's still married to his previous wife in Atlanta, refuses to give her a religious divorce, owes like a king's ransom in child support and has two convictions for DWI with his kids in the car."

"None of that bothered you though, Alma, did it? Tell me the truth, why is he not the one for you?" By this time I was coming to know Alma quite well, I flattered myself I could fairly predict her train of thought.

"Bag Breff," she croaked, holding her nose with one hand and waving the other in front of her face. I shrugged in dismay.

"Ever kissed a cigarette smoker?" I asked. She had the grace to blush and appear chastened.

"D'you think I'm evil, Rabbi?" she asked me casually, one evening. We'd just finished disqualifying and discarding the day's catch, writing 'thanks, but no thanks' letters to all those who'd responded to the newly revised and republished advertisement, even to the obvious bottom feeders.

“What makes you ask that question?”

“Well, you know, it’s been two years now that we’ve been talking, you and I, since I joined JBDSM, and frankly, that’s longer than any of my relationships ever lasted ‘til now, so you probably know me as well as anyone, besides my old master Gus. I’ve been meaning to ask you this question for a while now. Is it possible that I can’t find anyone because God is punishing me for being evil?”

“What have you done that’s evil?” I asked.

“I had two abortions before I was twenty years old,” she said sadly. “People think you get over it, but not all women get over it. I killed the life in me, that’s evil. I was too young at the time to know what choices to make that would have resulted in a different outcome. That’s why I choose to live my life as an orthodox Jewish woman now. I want my children to have like clear values and proper boundaries, so they know how to choose.”

“How come you didn’t have good boundaries?” I asked her.

“I was sexually active by the time I was seven years old,” she said, by way of explanation.

“Older sibling?” I asked.

“Siblings plural, neighbor’s kids, and it went on over a long period of time, years and years. I didn’t grow up with a sense it was wrong, it was pleasure, it was fun, Hey! And then I got pregnant, and then my parents blamed me instead of my older brother. It was horrible how they treated me.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think you’re evil, and I don’t think you’re being punished.”

“Thanks,” she said, relieved, smiling at me with a grin that went from ear to ear. “It’s hard to like believe in yourself sometimes, isn’t it? But hey, tomorrow’s another day, let’s see what tomorrow brings in the mail.”

But tomorrow never came, not for Shifcha-Isha the Slave-Wife. Chainik’s Big Broch hit the fan before we collected another set of responses. We shut down JBDSM, Kinky Shiduchin and all related websites without a moment’s notice. The actual text of the Shifcha-Isha advert became grist for the mill grinding us to death, entered into the Internet record as evidence of our malignancy and concupiscence, of our advocacy of violence against women, of our promotion of child abuse, torture, incest, slavery and God only knows what else.

Alma was struggling to stay on her diet. The pounds seemed to appear out of nowhere and clung to her frame with a fierce and unnatural tenacity. We chuckled about it. The clicking of a cigarette lighter during one of our phone conversations alerted me to the fact that her grim and depressive smoking habit had reasserted itself. We didn’t laugh about that one so

much. Then came the rabbinical questions. Under what circumstances could she reapply to her old master, Gus?

“What is it you need from him?” I inquired.

“Sometimes the noise in my head is so loud it feels like I’m going to explode. I’m itching and antsy and compulsive as all gettout! One pack of cigarettes won’t do it. A second does no better for me. I lay awake at night on the phone to men, to my old lovers, to Eugene in prison outside Stockholm, to Zadok the Cohen in Johannesburg, to Chainik when he condescends to spare me the time of day, I get two hours sleep and then I’m taking a shower and rushing out of the house to go to work. I’m not eating properly. I make it back home exhausted, but I’m on the phone, an hour later, chatting compulsively. There’s only one thing in the world can switch it all off. Gus has those keys, rabbi, it’s been three years now since I went to him for the things he can give me. You want to know what he does?”

I nodded.

“He makes me beg. He takes me through stages of pain. First it’s light, till I get like a buzz going, then he starts concentrating on a particular spot or muscle or action and it hurts, it really hurts. You see, at a certain point he looks into my soul and gets me to beg him for it. It’s the most humiliating and cruel thing in the world that he does. He sees what I’m hiding from myself, what it is I don’t want to admit to, what I would do anything to keep from owning, and he uses my turned-onness to break me down to admit it. He doesn’t stop until I admit it, till I’m like begging for it, even if it’s the most humiliating thing possible in my body. So, when I’m crying and talking and being honest without being able to hold anything back and when he’s hurting me to the nth degree everything becomes clear, crystal clear. It grows silent in my head. All the endorphins come rushing out of my brain to make me feel like I’m flying and floating and there’s nothing but peace and harmony and joy in my world.

“The feeling may last for days, weeks even. We’ve been talking about getting together, but he said I should talk to you first and get it straight in my mind, what it is I want and don’t want from him. He’ll respect my boundaries, no problem, but he won’t help me establish them. To him this is all so much rubbish. But I said I don’t want any sexual touching of any kind, at all or whatsoever”

I didn’t say, ‘And to you, Alma, what is it to you? What happened to all the promises you made yourself before going to Israel and changing your whole life? How did you end up back here?’ Because I knew all the answers in advance, I knew them all off by heart, and I knew them all from things she’d told me and discussions we’d had back, years ago, when she first joined JBDSM. They were the reason I’d tried talking her out of changing her whole life and moving to Israel.

“Swear to me,” I said as earnestly as I could. “Swear to me here and now that you will never again go in for breath-play. Promise me that when you get into that headspace where your body calls for it, you’ll remember this promise you’re making to me now and say no to yourself.”

“OK, OK” she said solemnly. “No breath-play, I swear.”

“Go get your medicine from Gus,” I told her. The trouble with breath-play is that no one has figured out how either suffocation or strangulation can be done in a way that doesn’t put the recipient at risk of cardiac arrest, and there’s of no reliable way to determine when a cardiac arrest has become imminent. Alma was addicted to it, so it was only a question of when, not whether she would revert to her old practices. Addictions are like that, that’s why they’re called addictions. But I know Gus won’t let her go down that road, not because she told me so, but because Gus loves her as much as anyone can love another person, as he has done since first meeting her. I trust him to watch she comes to no harm in his dungeon.