

An excerpt from *Willing Victim*

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The nine bus rattled over the bridge as the sun disappeared beyond the buildings to the west. Laurel leaned against the window watching brick-lined blocks fly past between frequent stops. The robot voice announced Dorchester Street and she made her way to the front, thanked the driver and exited.

Until the moment her feet hit the sidewalk, ushered her out of the dry, cold fridge of the bus and into the sticky July heat, she hadn't been nervous. Now everything changed.

She was a short walk from that man, the one whose face she could only roughly conjure three days after their introduction. Her throat tightened and she knew if her nerves had kicked in before she boarded the bus she'd have never gotten this far.

*Too close to pussy out now.*

The city smelled tired and beat, as though it'd spent a long day toiling in the summer sun. She walked a couple blocks and found the address Flynn had given her, a bar with absolutely no pretense. It was one of those one-story brick buildings that could've easily been a real estate office or a laundromat or the sort of law firm that advertised with an 800 number. The sign over the door simply said "Bar". The picture window showcased beer signs and the backsides of the drinkers who were leaning on the inside sill. Laurel took a deep breath and wrapped her fist around the door handle, not pulling yet. *Darts Night, Tuesdays, Nickel Wings from 6 to—*

She didn't get to finish reading the flier before the door swung open at her. She stepped back as two laughing men in Sox caps exited, oblivious that they'd nearly knocked her down. They made a bee-line for the corner and dug packs of cigarettes from their back pockets. Laurel wasted a glare at them and yanked the door wide, greeted by near-deafening music.

The bar was steeped in a nasty fragrance that'd gone unnoticed before the smoking ban drove its camouflage outdoors—restroom base with fry grease overtones. The dark

space was filled close to capacity by bodies and loud, barking conversations. Laurel made her way around the venue, squeezing past a dozen sweatshirt-clad men, a few of whom gave her a cursory study. She didn't spot Flynn and bit her lip, feeling as if she'd made a mistake coming here. She threaded her way to the taps, dodging the gesticulations of beer-impassioned baseball enthusiasts.

The bar wasn't even made of real wood. Laurel leaned on the laminate and caught the eye of the bartender. He shouted over the music with the charm of a carnie.

"Help you, Red?"

"I'm looking for Flynn," she shouted back.

He leaned over the counter and pointed into the chaos. "Unmarked door past the men's room. Make sure you close it behind you."

"Thanks."

*Unmarked door?*

She stopped in the fluorescent-lit peace of the women's room to check her makeup and hair in the smoke-clouded mirror. None of the stall doors had working locks or toilet paper that wasn't trailing on the tile so she decided to skip a pit-stop until later, when she'd likely be drunk enough to lower her standards.

Beyond the restrooms was a short stretch of hallway with the promised plain door at the end. Laurel pushed it open, greeted by a new set of smells. She stepped onto a landing and pulled the door shut, started down a flight of metal steps toward an open threshold. She left the piss and grease behind, slipping into a headier cocktail of perspiration and something else, something medicinal.

The temperature rose even as she descended. The music faded, replaced by braying voices, weird sounds. Her mouth fell open as she turned a corner and entered an alternate reality.

What had been a basement at one point was now a boxing arena, its perimeter lit by dim red bulbs, bright white ones hanging above the ring. Far less crowded than the bar but still bustling with a few dozen people, mostly men. The fighters in the elevated square ring were carrying on a tired, shuffling dance, both looking exhausted, both dripping sweat. Laurel's fist tightened around her purse strap.

She jumped as a bell clanged. A pale, skinny teenager climbed up and over the

ropes, grabbed one of the men's wrists and thrust it into the air. The victory was met by jeers, not claps, the crowd clearly not impressed with the display.

Laurel felt displaced beyond belief, the pheromones drifting through the heady atmosphere pricking up her senses and doubling her nerves. She made a wide circle around the ring. Her heart thumped hard then froze.

The first thing she saw was Flynn's throat as he stretched his neck from side to side, tendons flashing, sweat slipping from his jaw to settle in the cradle at one end of his collarbone. He was bare to the waist, powerful muscles lit starkly by the white light, sultry by the red. He looked both lean and heavy, raw and bruised and tattooed and feral. Muscles ticced and jumped in his arms as he stripped cotton bandaging off his wrists.

Laurel had no clue how to approach him but another girl beat her to it. Flynn looked up from rewrapping his hands as the woman stepped close, holding out a red plastic cup. He accepted it with a couple words and drank, Adam's apple bobbing with his swallows.

The woman was slim, dressed in tight, dark jeans, tall boots, her long black ponytail falling halfway down her back.

Flynn set the cup on the ground beside a towel and crossed his arms over his chest. The woman put her fingertips to his forearms, stroking his skin as she said something and smiled. He nodded and reached out, cupping the back of her head, leaning in to plant a gruff kiss on her mouth. She smiled and licked her lips as they separated, gave him a little wave and walked off.

Laurel's heart beat somewhere between hummingbird and jackhammer. She aimed a final glance at Flynn, hating him and hating her body for wanting his so fiercely. She felt drunk from the atmosphere and her own chemical chaos as she strode to the corner where the woman was filling another red cup from a keg set on a folding table.

Laurel made a quick inventory of her clothes, carefully chosen that afternoon to appeal to the sort of man she'd guessed Flynn was—jeans and ballet flats and a tank top, her rumpled hair strategically styled to look as though she'd rolled out of bed at noon. *Idiot.* This chick made Laurel feel about as badass as a Brownie.

Nevertheless, she stepped forward, throat constricting anew. "Excuse me."

The woman straightened and smiled. "Hi. Beer?"

Laurel blinked. “Um, sure.”

She slid a cup off a tall stack beside the keg and filled it, handing it to Laurel.

“Thanks.”

“This your first time here?” the woman asked, friendly, as though they were meeting at a mutual friend’s baby shower. Her niceness made Laurel hate Flynn even more deeply.

“Do I look that out of place?”

The woman smiled again and nodded. “You do.”

“I didn’t know exactly what I was getting into when I agreed to come... What is this, exactly?” Laurel asked. “A fight club?”

“Yeah, I guess you’d call it that. It’s a gym by day, but it’s definitely not in the phone book. Every weekend it’s like open mic night for amateur fighters. And some not so amateur.” The woman’s eyes inventoried the room, hitting Flynn and a few other burly specimens.

“Do the people drinking upstairs know about it?” Laurel asked.

She shook her head. “Only the staff. I think that’s why they keep the music so fucking loud, to cover up the sounds of ass-kicking. And I bet the odd drunk wanders down here now and then, looking for the can, and gets a heck of a surprise.”

Laurel nodded, swallowed the lump still lodged in her throat. She couldn’t keep up the pretense of chit-chat any longer, not with this friendly woman. “Look, I’m sorry, this isn’t my business at all, but I thought you deserved to know.”

The woman’s brows rose over the lip of the cup as she took a sip. “Know what?”

“I met him the other day.” Laurel nodded to where Flynn leaned against the cinderblock wall, watching the match. “Flynn? He’s the one who invited me. We sort of flirted a little and I asked him out. I’m sorry. I didn’t know he had someone. He made it sound like he was single. I thought you should know.”

The woman laughed, the skin beside her dark eyes crinkling and placing her age around thirty-five. “You’re cute. Don’t worry though, Flynn’s not my boyfriend. Hell, I’m married.” She held up her hand, displaying a ring.

“Oh. Okay.”

“It’s fine—my husband knows.”

Laurel blinked, unsure what to do with any of this. So Flynn wasn't a shady asshole. Though he did apparently sleep with married women. *With the husband's consent*. That was something. Not enough to salvage Laurel's hopes for the evening, but something.

"Flynn and I just sort of...scratch each other's itches." She made a silly face. "Sorry if that's too much information. Anyhow, it's just casual."

Laurel smiled to hide her deepening discomfort. She drank her beer and both women turned to watch the fight.

At length, she found the balls to ask, "What kind of itch?" The warm buzz of the alcohol and the intoxicating, masculine smell of the place made their conversation feel somehow appropriate. Or nearly.

"Sorry, I'm Laurel, by the way."

The woman accepted the hand she put out. "Pam. And Flynn's just willing to go places with me that other guys won't. Sort of rough places. Well, really rough places. Places my husband's not willing to go, himself."

"Oh."

"Flynn's not afraid to be a bad person. In bed."

"I'll bet." Laurel watched him warming up, throwing punches at the air as his eyes followed the fight center stage. His abs and chest tightened with each invisible strike, making Laurel imagine him above her in bed, thrusting.

She didn't hate him anymore, nor her body's craving for his, but knowing he had a lover and a set of sexual proclivities she didn't share weighed the attraction down. He'd warned her, so no harm no foul. She decided if she wasn't destined to score a date tonight, she'd at least make the most of the trip and indulge in a little tourism, explore this strange, violent microcosm she'd stumbled into.

*Laurel down the cinderblock rabbit-hole.*

"Flynn looks like one of the bigger guys," she said. "Is he good?"

"Yeah, he is. So good he's probably bored."

She and Pam wandered closer to the ring to make room for the queue forming by the keg.

"Why do you think he does it then?" Laurel asked. "Money?"

Pam shrugged. “No money, except maybe a few shady bets in the corners. You’d have to know Flynn to get it. He likes hitting. He likes getting hit too, I think. He’s a bit of a thug,” she added with a fond smile.

“In and out of bed, it sounds like,” Laurel said. Not that it was necessarily a criticism.

Pam shrugged again. “What I told you, about him sexually... Don’t jump to condemn him. He’s actually really kind.”

Laurel frowned, not sure she was looking to get pushed around under the sheets, supposed kindness aside. She let herself process a hunk of disappointment, sad that her ridiculous yen for a fling with the man wasn’t going to pan out. So much for her brief foray into adventurousness.

“It doesn’t make him a bad person,” Pam said, seeming to study Laurel’s expression. “He gets off on being rough and domineering and cruel, but it’s not who he *is*.” Her eyes moved to the ring. “Just like me wanting to pretend a man is forcing me once in a while doesn’t mean I secretly think I deserve to get raped or that I’d ever in a million years *want* to be. It’s all about control—having it or giving it up. It’s really freeing, when it’s your thing.” Pam’s therapist-office tone made it clear she’d had to explain this to a few skeptics in her time.

Laurel took a couple sips, studying the man who made her body so antsy with curiosity, sad she couldn’t get on board with his kinks. Though thank goodness she hadn’t found out the hard way. “I’m afraid it’s not *my* thing.”

Pam licked her lips, mischievous. “You sure? Anybody can see how you look at him. There might be some tiny sliver of your animal self that’s just a little bit attracted to that. Our bodies home in on those things. You can’t always choose who turns your crank.”

“I don’t think I’d ever want to pretend I was being...forced. No offense to you, I mean. It just sounds really creepy.”

“No, it’s fine. My husband feels the same way you do. Though it’s not always that intense,” Pam added. “Sometimes just being bossed around is enough.”

A flare of collective noise filled the air as one of the boxers took a hard hook to the head.

“Think about it,” Pam said.

Laurel jolted as the bell rang and fighters fell back, limp and exhausted. The ref called a winner and the crowd cheered and booed its agreement or dissent.

“Flynn’s next,” Pam said. “Watch him and try to let yourself relax, and think about what it is you find so attractive about him.”

Laurel took him in again. She swallowed. “I’m going to grab another beer. Do you want one?”

“Yeah, I’d love that.”

Laurel returned with two fresh cups just as Flynn and another man climbed into the ring, donning their gloves and game faces, looking impossibly tall from where Laurel stood. Flynn wore low-slung track pants that showcased the sinful V of his hip muscles and tight expanse of his abdomen. She wanted to tug them down an inch, enough to expose the dark hair she imagined must be hiding just behind the waistband. His eyes were at once calculating and wild, and an image of his face in the throes of excitement flashed like a dirty movie across her mind—a meanness in that stare, a cruel sneer on his lips, a flare of his nostrils, a heaviness in his lids as he gave himself over to the dark things he craved. Her throat went dry as chalk.

Flynn’s opponent was a black guy, nearly as tall as him and maybe a dozen pounds bulkier.

“Corners,” the young ref said and the men tapped gloves before Flynn stepped to one side, facing away from Laurel. He had a fierce back, two strong muscles pinched together between his shoulder blades, his shoulders rounded swells above cut arms.

The bell clanged.

Not men anymore. Animals. Circling, anticipating, sizing each other up and sniffing for weaknesses. Laurel’s focus fogged up as she imagined those strong arms braced on either side of her ribs, tight, that powerful chest and stomach clenching with rough, selfish thrusts.

Pam nudged her with a playful elbow. “Still not curious?”

She kept her eyes on the fight, in awe of the cold look on Flynn’s face. “There’s something about it, I know. But it still scares me, the stuff you said he’s into.”

“I’m sure he’d let you watch.”

“Watch what?” Laurel asked, glancing sideways.

Pam shrugged. “Us. Me and him. Tonight, after the matches are over. I’m going home with him. You’re more than welcome to come and see what it’s all about.”

*Dear God.* She studied Pam’s face, so blasé considering what she’d just offered. “I don’t know. That sounds, like, *intensely* private and...intense.”

“You might be surprised how much easier it is to explore things with strangers.”

Laurel took a deep drink. “I’d feel like the weird, disapproving prude in the corner.”

Pam shrugged. “We could ignore you. And you could leave anytime you needed to. I know it sounds counterintuitive, but it’s a safe place to be. He knows what women need. He’s sensitive that way. He can tell like *that*—” she snapped her fingers “—when a woman’s not into it anymore. He can with me, anyhow. He knows before I do if a line’s about to get crossed.”

Laurel didn’t reply. Her attention was glued to the match, to Flynn. “Jesus,” she muttered a minute later. “His body is fucking astounding.”

“You want to *really* see that man working, think about what I said.”

A chance to watch that body, doing what it was surely designed to do...the temptation clenched Laurel’s pussy and stopped her breath.

Up in the ring, the violence escalated. Flynn and the black guy were trading jabs and blocks, seeming evenly matched. Laurel’s curiosity landed a hit of its own, knocking her fear to the mat momentarily.

“What’s it like?” she asked, keeping her voice low. “Are there handcuffs and ropes and that stuff? Like gags and blindfolds?”

“Sometimes he ties me down,” Pam said, “but not always. Sometimes he just holds me with his hands or pins me with his body. I don’t like blindfolds usually. I like watching him.” She smiled guiltily. “And he’s not really into all the accessories and things. Like, his apartment looks like an apartment, not a torture chamber.”

“How long have you two been lovers?”

“A few months.”

“When you first started...hanging out, I guess. Was it like instantly hot and mind-blowing?” Laurel asked. A scary-loud whack drew her eyes to the match. It looked as if



Flynn had just taken a hit to the ear. She glanced back at Pam. “Did you know right away that role-playing that sort of stuff was like, your thing?”

“Yeah. But we didn’t go nuts the very first time. When we started, it was mostly just rough sex. Then we moved to him holding me down, then him holding me and me struggling, and then, you know, further. It’s like a pool. There’s a shallow end. Or you can just sit by the side in a lounge chair and watch.”

Laurel turned to the action just as the black guy caught Flynn hard in the jaw, stunned him a moment and crowded him against the ropes, the top one dragging along Flynn’s upper back. The ref shouted and the black guy eased off. Flynn made it to standing, a red stripe branded across his shoulders from the friction, making Laurel wince.

The fight broke up between rounds, the men heading to opposite corners where they were handed cups of water. Or possibly beer. Laurel guessed a person would have to be drunk to volunteer for this kind of punishing exhibitionism.

Flynn fought differently the next time the bell clanged. He blocked twice as many strikes as before and landed more of his own—sharp, taunting punches designed to infuriate, not incapacitate. By the end of the three-minute round Flynn had taken only a swing to the neck and a couple ineffective jabs. The round wrapped and Pam jogged over to be the one who handed him his water. Laurel saw her touching his knee as he drank and offering a few encouraging-looking words before she returned to Laurel.

“Still enjoying yourself?”

“It *is* sort of...freakishly manly,” Laurel offered, swirling her beer in its cup. “I’ll give it that.”

The bell rang to start the final round and it went nothing like the first two. Flynn came out on the offensive and didn’t let up. His punches were loud, gloves on skin making this sound like what it was—fists pounding meat. The black guy landed a couple decent shots but Flynn didn’t seem to register them. He wailed on his opponent until a nasty right hook caught the guy in the jaw and landed him on the mat. He didn’t get up fast enough and the bell sounded, ending the fight after only a minute’s action.

The teenaged ref climbed up and over the ropes, one sneaker sliding on sweat. He righted himself as the black guy made it to kneeling. Flynn’s face was blank as the kid

thrust his fist into the air. He received somber applause, the sound of undeniable respect tempered by a dozen grudges.

He stripped off his gloves and climbed out of the ring, headed to his spot by the wall. A couple men clapped him on the back as he passed but he didn't seem to notice. The black guy clamored over the ropes with some difficulty and a friend helped him to the concrete floor. He walked to the other side of the basement, rattling a body-sized punching bag with a vicious swing, pissed to high heaven.

Laurel looked back at Flynn just as he looked to her. His eyes held hers a long moment, too significant for her to pretend she didn't understand the invitation.

She huffed out her fear and rounded the crowd to approach the victor. A nasty purple bruise ringed his eye and he was peppered with other little cuts and marks Laurel had missed in the dim lighting.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey yourself, sub shop girl. Took me a minute to remember why I recognized you." He stooped to grab a tube of ointment and squeezed a measure across his fingers, releasing a concentrated whiff of that medicinal smell that permeated the gym. Laurel watched his triceps twitch as he rubbed it into the long scrape branding the backs of his shoulders. Her skin flushed as she remembered how those arms had thrilled and frightened her when he'd been fighting.

"That was...something," Laurel concluded.

"Oh good." Flynn stretched his neck. "I always strive to be something."

"You okay?" she asked. "You've got blood on you."

"Mine or his?"

"I'm not sure. Plus this." She touched her fingers to the now greasy scrape along his back. His skin felt scalding hot and he didn't flinch.

"Just rope burn." He capped the tube and tossed it to the ground.

"And a black eye."

"That's from yesterday. See you been talkin' to Pam. She scare you off yet?"

"No, she said only nice things about you. She...she invited me along. For after the fight. To watch."

His face was impassive. "Did she then?"

“Yeah.”

“You lookin’ for me to second that invite?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Probably. Are you okay with that? If I wanted to?”

He thought for a long moment, unfocused eyes staring past Laurel’s face. “Up to her. But forgive me if I search you for hidden cameras if you decide to tag along.”

Laurel wasn’t sure if the remark was serious or not and chose to ignore it. “I don’t know what I’ll decide. It sounds really...personal.”

“It’s up to you girls,” he said and wiped his hand on a rag then ran it over his sweat-matted hair. “I’m just a willing body.”

“She made it sound like you’re more than that,” Laurel said, voice low.

“She makes me out like a saint sometimes. Patron-fuckin’-saint of the sadists. You can make up your own mind about it if you come along.”

“What time are you guys leaving?”

“I got one more fight coming up. We’ll probably head out in an hour, hour and a half.”

“Can I get you a beer or something?” Laurel asked. “Or is drinking during a fight a no-no?”

“I don’t drink, period,” Flynn said, “but you can find me a glass of water if you’re itching to be useful.”

She nodded and wandered away, found a water cooler and filled a plastic cup for him. She handed it over, wanting to do more...wanting to press a towel to his sweaty skin and clean his cuts and ice his bruises. She felt a strange desire to *care* for him, to apply feminine affection and counteract all the masculine damage. She stared at the black and gray tattoo that spanned his chest—broad, feathered wings bracketing a tall cross, or maybe a sword. Latin words in calligraphic letters hovered above it. *Quis ut Deus*.

Flynn swallowed the last of the water and looked down at her. “What goes on between me and her, it’s not pretty. If you can’t stand lookin’ at a little rope burn, you probably won’t enjoy yourself.”

“Do you hurt her?”

He made a gesture, something between a shrug and another neck stretch. “Neither me or her would say I do, but it’s rough.”

“From what she’s explained about it... I’m curious, I guess.” *And tipsy enough to admit it.*

“Curious is all well and good but I don’t know you. And neither does she. If you freak out and go screamin’ about it all over town or the fuckin’ internet, you could seriously fuck with the lives of two consenting adults. Three if you count her husband. You follow?”

“I’m not a psycho,” Laurel said.

“Good. I don’t have much of an upstanding reputation to protect, but Pam’s a decent girl. I’d be royally pissed if anybody ever messed her around.”

Laurel pursed her lips. “Are you threatening me?”

“I never threaten a woman unless she begs me to.” His smile came slow and sticky, dripping with put-on sweetness.

“Well, I promise I have no intention of outing anybody. Asking to come along for the ride isn’t something I’m all that eager to shout from the rooftops, you know.”

“You asking to come along then?” That smile again, more dangerous than his arms or knuckles or threats.

She nodded and swallowed, wondering what the hell she’d just signed up for.