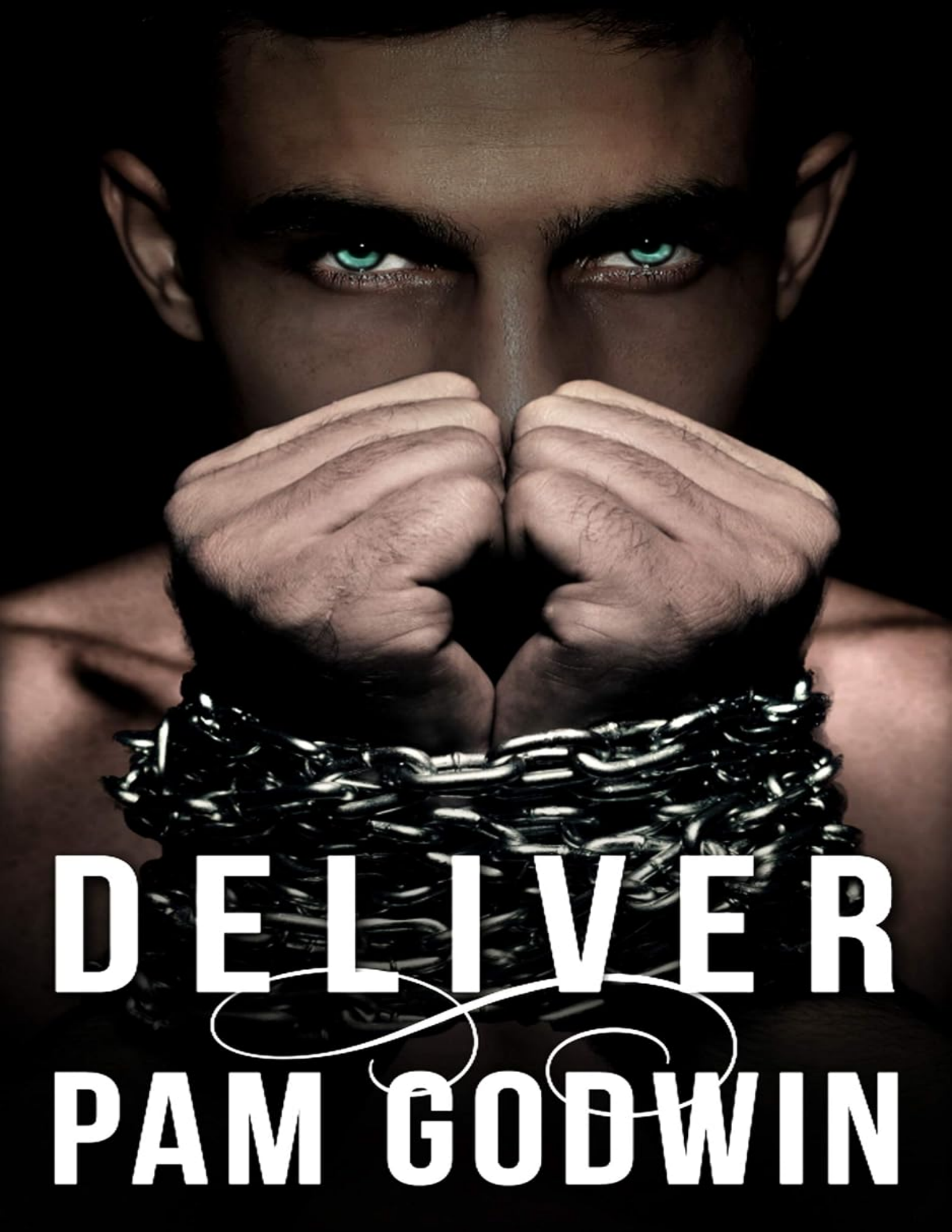




DELIVER

PAM GODWIN

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by

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For my husband, my freedom, my warm spark to hold forever.

CHAPTER 1



Tonight was the night. Nervousness might have been a natural response in her position, but bending to it wouldn't change a damned thing. Liv sucked in hard. A lungful of smoke pushed past her unsteady smile and tumbled into a halfhearted cloud against the glare of stadium lights. Force of will pinned her bowed lips in place.

Another drag. Exhale. She stretched her neck and rotated her shoulders.

Whistles and cheers roared from the stands. Green and gold banners rippled to the stomp of thousands of feet on metal bleachers. Wedged between a trash barrel and a concrete wall, she smashed the cigarette on the *No Smoking* sign bolted to the railing at her hip.

To blend in as a Baylor University Bears fan, she wore a green t-shirt and dark jeans. Her alcove was field level, out of the path of foot traffic, and the best vantage to observe her mark. The boy. A goddamned saint. He likely hadn't known a night similar to the one he was about to have. Her stomach quivered in a war of dread and anticipation.

The scoreboard counted down the final five minutes of the game. *Le Male* aftershave wafted from the nearby huddle of guys. The scent of store-bought pheromones mingled with their sweaty excitement and the nachos clutched in their hands. Smelled like fucking team spirit. Right now she hated Nirvana and everything musical expression had once meant to her.

She shouldn't begrudge the college boys their thrills. To be fair, a number of them, with their athletic frames and juvenile energy, could have been her next delivery. But she'd already chosen. A fucking holier-than-thou virgin boy.

The tone of cheers exploded in volume and urgency, drawing her attention to the field. Green jerseys descended upon the turf, cleats kicking up mud, the rush of testosterone led by number fifty-four, the Bears' star linebacker.

He jogged to midfield in long-legged strides, the seams of his sleeves straining to contain his biceps. She leaned over the railing, eyes glued to his gait. Self-assured and powered by trained muscles, he covered the field like he owned it. Given the whoops of his fans, he did.

His helmet, rib protectors, and shoulder pads concealed his pale green eyes and black hair while enhancing all six-foot-two inches and two hundred and twenty pounds of masculinity and sexual innocence that met the *client's* conditions. But she knew everything about the twenty-one year old. She had been watching Joshua Carter for weeks.

Daily surveillance had put her in the woods surrounding his parents' farm at five every morning, stalking the campus halls during his classes and football practices until four, and back in the cotton fields until dusk.

In his four-year college career as a linebacker, he had caught a record twenty-three interceptions. As a trained sex slave, he would catch seven digits in an offshore account.

While his predictable schedule made him an easy capture, his notoriety on the team magnified the risk. But it was the raw beauty in his seductive eyes and honed physique that passed a whisper between her ears, the kind that couldn't be unheard once acknowledged. He was the one.

A stolen password gave her access to his university records. As the only child of poor farmers, he would've needed every bit of financial aid offered had he not received a football scholarship. His scholarship essay supported his pursuit in earning a degree in Religion, stating it would *equip him with the tenet and fortitude to effectively fill a professional ministry role.*

His righteousness chafed her heathen ass, but it avowed his virginity. Not an easy find these days, especially not in one so potently masculine and easy on the eyes. Which was why she'd sought this particular job on Baylor's Christian-centric campus rather than her usual hunting grounds in the slums of Brownsville and Killeen. Besides, he would forget all about his godly endeavors by day two in chains. Just like all the others.

The visiting crowd moaned. Their quarterback lay on his back, the football wobbling beside his grass-stained helmet. Beside him, number fifty-four stretched out a hand to help the guy to his feet.

"A terrific defensive play by number fifty-four, the Bears." The announcer's enthusiasm reverberated above the hoots of Bears fans. "Results in a sack."

Anticipation twitched her shoulders. She came to watch him steal the spotlight. He didn't know it would be the last game in his career, but she would remember the high points for him. She would remind him of his glory right before she peeled it away and rebuilt him into the sum of the buyer's requirements.

Sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds were her forte. Not too young to make her stomach roll with pedophilic queasiness and not too old to resist her methods. Though, with enough time, she could find the chink no matter the age. The buyer for this job demanded a boy in his twenties, virtuous in his relations with women, and a body disciplined to accept and please a man.

Number fifty-four sprinted to the defensive line, quadriceps flexing against his compression pants. As he bent at the waist, the spandex stretched over jock strap lines and the glorious divide of his ass.

Payday was in sight. She lit another cigarette and curved her lips through the exhale.

“If beautiful smiles could kill,” said an unfamiliar voice behind her, “you’d be a spear through the heart.”

The lame pick up line sent her molars slamming together. If she looked, she’d find a smirk that needed practice. If she gazed deeper, she’d find an entitled college kid, one who didn’t appreciate his family-funded education. No mind-reading required. Seven years and seven captured slaves had taught her how to detect weakness in a voice and smell the waste in its words.

She brushed a length of hair forward, using the thick curls to cover the left half of her face and the four-inch scar there. It was her permanent reminder, not that she needed one. Her insides were gutted.

With deliberate slowness, she turned her head and confronted the annoyance.

Stiffly crooked lips and nervously blinking eyes belied the confidence he was attempting to exude. Hands fidgeting in the pockets of his jeans, feet a shoulder-width apart, the kid was no older than eighteen, at least six years her junior, and in need of a lesson on stranger danger.

She tiptoed her gaze down his puffing chest and paused on the bulge below his longhorn buckle. With a muffled sigh, she reminded herself she was there for a job. That didn't include informing some douche drip that her smile was especially dangerous when wrapped around a cock. She flicked her eyes to his and shed the smile.

"Oh, come on. I'm writing a paper on the life of Moses." He licked his lips. "Let me demonstrate how to part the sea with my staff." His gaze slid to her metaphoric sea.

The fact he wasn't choking on his own douchery was a prick to the nerves. He didn't know she tied people up and fucked them with rubber dicks for a living. With a grab and twist of his nuts, she could humiliate him. But she couldn't draw that kind of attention. She curled her fingers around the railing and shaped her expression into a mask of cruel arrogance.

Whatever he saw in her gaze pinched his face. He shuffled backward with deflated shoulders. Pathetic. If she had thirty minutes and an empty classroom, she'd show him things more painful than a bruised ego.

She turned back to the game and scanned the field.

Number fifty-four sprinted past the five-yard line, leapt to intercept a long pass, and caught the ball mid-turn.

“Interception,” the announcer yelled as the crowd jumped up, their cheers as wild as the beat of her heart. One second remained on the clock.

She wanted to clap with the fans, but knowing it was his last victory crushed her celebratory spirit. Truth was, she didn’t have a viable reason for being there. She couldn’t exactly snatch him out of the crowd. But after weeks of watching him on the field, his games had become something to anticipate.

The ambience of the cheering crowd, the camaraderie of friends enjoying a favorite pastime, and the view of athletic boys showing off in tight pants nourished her longing for the youth that had been stolen from her. Seven years ago, she was the innocent girl who stood before the crowd singing the National Anthem at her high school’s football games.

The memory fluttered in her belly and dulled her awareness. She snapped her spine straight. Fuck, she was losing track of time.

Lighting another cigarette, she blew her sentimentality into the night sky and slipped out of her recess. Striding up the stairs toward the parking lot,

she twisted to catch a glimpse of number fifty-four running off the field.

Cheerleaders enveloped him on the sideline, hopping and mewling for his attention. He tugged off the helmet and rubbed a hand over his face, his complexion gilded so exquisitely by the Texas sun. He glanced at the scoreboard above her head. If she were watching through her binoculars, she would've been staring into the unusual glow of his innocent sea green eyes. The ones she was about to change forever.

“Excuse me, ma’am?”

What the unholy fuck now? She pivoted and met the narrowed glare of a middle-aged man. Dressed head-to-toe in Baylor swag, he was probably some overzealous alumni reliving the *glory days*.

He waved a flabby arm. “This is a smoke-free property.”

She raised the cigarette, inhaled, and released a plume of *fuck you* into his scrunching face.

A dramatic cough accompanied another flap of his arm. “The university has strict guidelines—”

“Are you the smoke police?”

A fury of red bloomed from his buttoned collar to his blotted cheeks. “You can’t do that here.”

Bet his virgin ass clenched as he said that. She shifted to move past him, irritation skittering across her skin.

He stretched an arm out to block her. “What’s your name, young lady?”

Before she did something that would get her hauled off in handcuffs, she blew him a smoke-ringed kiss, pushed around his arm, and wove into the exodus of spectators.

Past the cooling charcoal grills and trash-littered tailgates, her ten minute stroll took her to the edge of the parking lot. In the farthest corner, beneath a broken street lamp, she circled a nondescript sedan. No one loitered. No witnesses to connect her to the car. She tapped on the passenger window.

The locks released and the door swung open.

“How many times did you get hit on?” Van Quiso’s timbre bordered on growly.

On a good night, calm reason eclipsed his jealousy. She struggled to remember a good night. “Wouldn’t you love to know?” She winked at him, dropped into the seat, and shut the door. Despite the consequences, she got off on tormenting him. A desperate and pathetic attempt at revenge.

A toothpick protruded from the opening of his charcoal hoodie where his mouth was, probing the air in restless circles. “You smell like sex.”

“I banged three linebackers during halftime.” She buckled her seat belt.

“Your sarcasm is juvenile.”

“So is your suspicious resentment.” The stench of his possessiveness saturated her skin and bled into her veins. The more he took her, consensual or not, the farther she followed him, down, down, down into his twisted reality. She rubbed her arms and focused on the empty lot. “The boy is here.”

He leaned back and stretched a leg along the floorboard. “The kid’s never missed a class or a practice, let alone a game.”

“It’s flu season, Van. People get sick.” At least, that was the argument she’d given him to get one last chance to see the boy play.

The toothpick bobbed and stilled. He fingered the keys where they dangled from the ignition and lowered his hand. "Look at me."

Tension crept through her limbs. She itched to reach over and start the car. The confined space, in the dark, with him, had her crawling out of her skin with reminders of what he'd done to her, what he continued to do to her. His cock stretching her ass, his whip burning across her back, his fist in her face, the tenderness of his lips kissing her wounds.

She pushed her shoulders back, pulled out her phone, and checked the time. "The coach should be finished with his post-game speech. The boy will be showered and headed out soon. We need to go."

"Look. At. Me."

The heat in his command cracked her shell of bravado, tightening the muscles in her face. Only two people in her isolated world had a stronger strike than hers, and Van knew he was one. His breath sawed in and out with enough vehemence to sharpen his teeth as he watched her, poaching her air, waiting.

Avoiding his stare was a means of gaining distance, but ignoring him only delayed the inescapable. She made her face relax and looked at him straight in the eyes.

He stared right back, the toothpick jogging low in her periphery. It could've been the press of shadows in the car, but meeting his gaze was like straining to see into the reaches of the moonless night. Maybe something terrible lurked in there, something malicious enough to end her life in unspeakable ways. Maybe it was her imagination.

The rotating toothpick froze, caught between his molars as he spread his lips into a grin. His hooded sweatshirt hid his high-and-tight cut of brown hair and sharp features and struggled to contain his mountain of muscles. The severe angles of his face added to his dangerous beauty. An unsuspecting glance in his direction promised a double-glance, usually followed by a prayer to God that he didn't catch the admiring look and use it to his advantage.

He seemed to embrace the mold of a convicted criminal, but he had never been convicted. And despite the prayers to ward him off, his sexy smile could coerce a virgin girl's thighs into a spread-eagle sigh.

But that girl no longer existed.

A timeworn ache awoke in her chest. She masked it under a steady breath and let her eyelids half-droop in a display of boredom.

He slid back his hood to his hairline just behind the comma-shaped laceration that connected the outer edge of his eye to the crook of his mouth.

Even in the dark, the deep red gash stood out, a threatening brand against the perfect symmetry of his features.

His hand lifted to her cheek, smoothing her hair away. She held herself immobile as he traced the scar that mirrored his. When he stared at it, did he ever regret the events that led to their matching punishments?

“You’re sleeping in my bed tonight.” The touch of his fingers and the command in his tone jabbed like a knife.

She leaned back, throat dry, and forced her eyes to remain on his. “I have a job to do. If I fail, you’ll be digging my body out of the backyard to fuck it.”

The skin around his scar strained. “He doesn’t bury bodies back there.”

“Yet.”

He plucked the toothpick from his mouth and pointed it at her. His lips parted to speak and a gust of frustration grooved his face. He knew if she didn’t meet their deadlines her threat was a dead-on promise.

Whatever he was going to say was abandoned as he dropped his brow to hers and pressed the seam of his lips to her bottom one. She fought a shiver.

This bond wasn't romantic. It was unwanted, sad, and it thrived on her fear of him.

The slide of his tongue along her inner lip hitched her breath. He wouldn't fuck her here and sabotage the mission, but he always made time to fuck *with* her. To speed it along, she remained pliable in her stillness.

With a disappointed sigh, he returned the toothpick to his mouth and started the car. "Let's go get your boy."

CHAPTER 2



Liv wanted to be anywhere but in that car, on her way to uproot another life, facing the next ten weeks behind a whip and a mask. She trained them. She delivered them. And after?

They were dead to her. They had to be. Sometimes, it was the lies she told herself that kept her going. Believing anything else made her a danger to the captives she sold.

She pressed her fingertips against the window. If only she could find the strength to end her own life.

The suburban conveniences of Waco, Texas, swept by in the form of drive-throughs, water towers, and churches of every denomination. As Van drove toward the outskirts of town, the scenery transformed. The wide-open freedom of the crop fields, cut by a swath of tarmac and hangars beneath the moonlight, haunted her vision.

Memories took shape, a tapestry of the private airport in Austin where Mom instructed skydiving courses, the adjacent corn field and its maze of childhood adventures, and the acres of paved airstrip where local teens roller-bladed until dusk.

Until one of the kids was taken.

The old sore in her chest opened. Her exhale erupted in a choke, and she feigned a cough.

Van's hand swung into view and collided with her throat, squeezing. Oh God, her mind wasn't on the job, and he had the unnerving ability to mark every fucking move of her body.

She tried to draw air, an empty effort against the vise of his fingers on her windpipe. His *I-control-your-thoughts* conditioning was a technique that once worked on her, and experience taught her the best reaction was no reaction.

Lips pinned in silence, she sought out her defense, a song, any song, and grabbed hold of "Gods and Monsters" by *Lana Del Rey*. Saturating her thoughts with the lamenting chorus, she sang in her head. The rippling effects numbed her heart—and her throat beneath his fingers. Singing was her tonic, the only trace of self she had left.