



HIGHEST BIDDER CLUB

AUCTIONED
to my
BEST FRIEND

CASSI HART

Auctioned to my Best Friend

—
Highest Bidder Club

Cassi Hart

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Chapter 1

Caleb

Buzz. Buzz.

I roll over in my bed, and everything is still dark from the blackout curtains across my floor-to-ceiling windows. Slapping my hand around my bedside table, I finally locate the phone, which has almost vibrated itself onto the floor. It's daytime, but it's also my day off, which is something I rarely take and guard with my life when I do. Why the hell is someone interrupting the first good stretch of sleep I've gotten in months?

The tech business where I'm a partner is hectic, and I constantly have to work hard to prove myself since I'm not the majority shareholder yet. And I'm fine with that. I love everything to do with computers, despite looking like a cowboy who's just wandered in off the range. We've got a lull between contracts and I've taken a much deserved two days off to do nothing but sleep. Interrupting me is not a good idea, and now someone's about to be ripped a new asshole.

Or maybe I'll just ignore it, chuck the phone across the room, stick my head under my pillow and get back to that pleasurable dream I was having about Shana...

Damn it, Shana.

It comes back to me in a rush that she's not home right now and something might be wrong. Fully awake, I grab the phone. It's not Shana, but her older sister, our town's librarian.

She definitely wouldn't call unless she needed me. With my gut in knots, I bark a greeting.

"Do you have any idea what my damn fool sister is doing up in New York City?" she asks, the accent she usually makes a point to hide bursting out with worry.

Uh oh, looks like Shana's keeping secrets from her family again.

"Oh God, she didn't tell you?" I ask, rubbing my eyes and swinging my legs over the side of the bed. I need coffee for this.

"She told you?" Melanie shrieks. "And you're okay with it?"

"Mel, she's a talented singer. Everyone in town knows that. If she wants to use up all her tip money to fly to New York and audition for some big-time talent agency, then I support her."

It's mostly true. The part about Shana having the voice of an angel is spot on, anyway. And it's not that I don't support her, it's just that I'm not quite ready to leave Oklahoma yet. I need to be just a bit more successful before I can traipse all over the world while Shana chases her dreams. So yeah, technically I think it's great she's finally gotten brave enough to go audition in a city where she could really get her foot in the music world door. But I'm not going to give her up, and that is an issue.

"Oh my God," Melanie sighs, hard enough I can almost feel it through the phone. "Just wait."

She ends the call, and utterly confused, I get up to make some coffee to help me think straight. As I head to the kitchen, I press the first contact number in my phone, but it goes to voicemail. She better not be ignoring me. With a scowl, I start to text Shana, but then a string of messages comes through from her sister.

It takes my under-caffeinated brain a second to realize it's a long message chain between Shana and Melanie and I sit

at the bar to read it, forgetting all about my espresso machine on the other side of the kitchen.

“Oh, fuck,” I say out loud, staring blankly at the black granite countertop before rereading the texts. Because I couldn’t have understood them correctly the first time. No chance in hell. I focus on the last part of the argument.

Shana: The Black Door, just Google it.

Melanie: I don’t have to, you told me enough. Are you out of your mind? You can’t be serious. Get your ass home now. Right now.

Shana: Stop acting like I’m a toddler instead of a twenty-one-year-old. This is a great chance for me to afford an apartment in New York.

Melanie: YOU’RE GOING TO AUCTION OFF YOUR VIRGINITY???

Her sister sent several more screaming messages after that, both pleading and demanding for Shana to change her mind, but Shana had gone dark.

I call her a few more times, but all of my attempts go straight to voicemail. As sick as I feel, I can’t help but laugh, even though there’s no humor behind the ragged sound that comes out of me. Shana knows if she answers that I’ll demand she come home immediately.

I call Melanie back, who’s crying when she answers. “She still won’t pick up for me,” she sobs. “Did you have any luck? That awful auction is tonight.”

“Calm down,” I say, even though I’m anything but calm myself. My heart is hammering against my ribs and a need to smash something rises within me.

A burst of anger at Shana’s selfishness goes through me, doused just as quickly by worry. Her father recently had a heart attack, for God’s sake, and her mother took a leave of absence from her job to care for him. Melanie’s husband is in the National Guard and it’s just unlucky he’s on duty right now. I can only picture her trying to drag her toddler and five-year-old on this mission to knock some sense into her sister.

Promising to handle the situation, I hang up with Melanie, already heading for my bedroom to toss my clothing into an overnight bag. Not wanting to deal with parking, I call a taxi while I finish my hurried packing and run out the door just as I get the alert that it's arrived. I try not to take anything out on the driver, but it has to be clear to anyone I'm a mess.

After I book the first flight to New York, I get my coffee and stare at the bustle of people in the airport while I wait the interminable hour until it takes off. I can barely breathe, let alone think.

The woman I've been in love with since second grade honestly thinks she's going to auction off her virginity to the highest bidder? The very same virginity I planned to take whenever Shana came to her senses and recognized our love for one another?

Hell no.

We've known each other since we were too young to remember otherwise. Best friends, inseparable. From tossing rocks into the creek and then splashing in barefoot to see who could get across faster, to sneaking out in middle school to spy on the older kids and rambling on for hours about how much cooler we'd be when we finally made it to high school. I was at every talent show and church performance, clapping the loudest at the end of each song.

Hell, I'd offered to go along on this trip with her as moral support, and now I know why she was so adamant about needing to do it on her own. I loosen up my grip on the paper coffee cup so it doesn't explode and splash all over the place. My flight finally gets announced over the intercom and I rush to the gate; spending way too much money on the first-class ticket so I can be the first one on and off the plane.

Ever since I realized Shana was the woman I was going to marry; my nose has been to the grindstone. The best grades, the best college, powering through with no breaks so I could graduate in record time and get started earning money. And saving money. All for Shana.

There's no way I'm letting her go through with something so stupid. If she needs money to follow her dreams, that money will come from me. Shana is mine. It also kills me that being such a tightwad with money the last few years is probably what made her consider this. She knows how important it is to me to save, but she doesn't know it's all for her.

The taxi ride to Shana's hotel seems to take forever in the dense New York traffic. Since landing, I've called her repeatedly, but she still won't answer her phone. According to the messages from her sister, the auction takes place tonight, so I don't have much time to find her. I try not to look like a psycho in her hotel lobby, but the cheap place doesn't look like it has much security anyway. There's no answer at her door and with the amount of pounding and shouting I'm doing; I have to believe she's not in there.

I cannot afford to wait around the lobby for her to possibly show up, so I get back in a taxi and head to the exclusive club. It's completely nondescript; just another old stone building with a discreet, glossy black door set back from the immaculate sidewalk. A few other people pass me as I stand on the sidewalk staring at it; all of them dressed in expensive clothes with disapproving looks on their faces. Do they have any idea what goes on in this place?

Taking a deep breath, I step up to the door and give it a hard shove before rushing in; barely registering the bizarre decor as I race through the dark, empty club. With its old-fashioned, deep purple wallpaper and gold and brass everywhere, it looks like a speakeasy from a movie about prohibition.

Or a Wild West Bordello.

In the back, it's much better lit and I come to an open office where an older lady is tapping away at her computer keyboard. She looks up at me with a raised eyebrow as I lean through the door while trying to catch my breath.

"May I help you?" she asks, her fingers never pausing.

I step in, holding out a picture of Shana on my phone. Her long blonde hair and big smile while holding her karaoke prize makes me feel sentimental. She's so beautiful it makes me desperate to stop this.

"This girl came in here and signed some kind of contract to be in an auction." I spit the words like they're venom. "It's not my place to judge this establishment, or anything y'all do here, but there's no way she's getting up on any stage."

She stops typing and peers at the picture. I see recognition in her shrewd eyes and my stomach sinks. I was hoping Shana hadn't gone through with it, but it's obvious she's been here.

"You have no say in the matter," she says. "That woman is an adult who is free to make her own decisions." She gives me a sly smile. "You're welcome to come join in the bidding, though. The auction starts at ten tonight."

I sense a presence behind me and turn to see a giant guy standing in the hallway, his posture relaxed for now. At over six feet tall and someone who makes time to hit the gym regularly, I'm still stunned by the size of this guy. I can't help Shana if I'm in the hospital, so I leave without starting anything.

I sure intend to finish this, though, one way or another. Out on the street, I find a bench close enough to monitor the door and start frantically making calls, trying to free up money. I'm rich, but Oklahoma rich, not New York City rich. Once those assholes see Shana, things are going to pop off and the bids might grow beyond my reach.

My best bet is to grab her before she goes in, but if I can't, I need to be ready.

Chapter 2

Shana

Sitting in Central Park, I try to enjoy watching all the hustling people, but I'm a mess. I never should have told my sister about the auction. But I had a moment of regret after I went to that fancy club and signed the contract.

I learned about The Black Door from haunting money-making forums. I'm always trying to earn extra cash to fund my dream of living here, being able to get an agent and starting to go on auditions. But, I just know if I can get in front of enough people, they'll see my talent and drive and I'll eventually get that big break.

Ever since I was five years old and sang my first solo in church, I've wanted to be a performer. I remember that moment of pure terror that turned into the ultimate rush once the piano started playing and I let out the first notes. There was no stopping me after that.

I've done countless open mike nights, karaoke contests, pageants, and talent shows. There's no one in town to take lessons from, but I follow online videos to improve my breath control and practice during every single second of spare time. Which isn't much since I'm always hustling for part-time jobs in addition to my full-time job at the diner.

There just aren't any real opportunities back home to help me turn my talent into a career. The only place to actually sing nearby is at the local bar on weekends. It's not that I don't appreciate my friends and family's support, always showing

up to cheer me on and give whatever tips they can; I just want more. I have to at least give it a shot, and that means getting to a place where there are proper agents to help me get auditions. Even just being a backup vocalist would be enough of a start, and I believe in my talent.

But I can barely afford to live in my small Oklahoma town, let alone New York City. Until I saw that posting for The Black Door online, I was beginning to think it might never happen. I thought it was too good to be true, but after reading about the life-changing experiences of several girls, I was convinced.

One massive payout for a measly night of my life? I could finally stop borrowing gas money from my sister so I could drive up to Tulsa to perform open mike nights there. I could pay everyone back for their belief in me.

When I stood in Ms. Calloway's office and signed the contract, it seemed worth it, but then I started wondering if this was really the right thing for me. Well, too late now.

I sigh and take a sip of my overpriced, frothy caramel latte, too nervous to take a bite out of the street vendor hot dog. I can hardly afford these little luxuries, but I almost feel like this is my last meal.

"Oh, stop being silly," I say out loud.

The people passing on the jogging trail don't even glance at me for talking to myself. I love New York already. I can't wait to live here. If I go through with this, I can.

It's not like I'm giving up all my ideas of love and romance. I can still have that, right? And I have to have a first time, eventually. It would probably suck regardless of who it was with, so why not make a fortune at the same time? Once I'm a big, famous name in the music world, it will hardly matter.

It was plain foolish to expect my big sister Melanie to agree with me, but I hadn't expected her to go so ballistic about it. Then she had to tattle to Caleb, as if my oldest and best friend needed to know. My face stings at the betrayal. I

can't even turn my phone back on to distract myself with a game while I wait for the auction to start because he's already left me about three hundred voice messages. Not to mention the countless texts I don't want to deal with.

So, I won't look at them, I decide, nodding my head while staring at the dark screen. Who does he think he is, anyway? He's always been bossy, scaring away anyone who might want to take me out to a movie, acting like I belong to him. But the frustrating man refuses to claim me. *I wish he would.*

I force down every sweet thing he's ever done for me because it's easier to stay mad or else I'll go back to having second thoughts. Thinking about what my first time could be like if it was with *him* instead. It's a good thing he isn't here because Caleb would try to talk me out of it. According to the few messages I listened to before I shut off my phone, he'd be carrying me onto a plane like a sack of flour if he was here.

But he's safely back at home, so this is happening. I really do want to do this. And while twenty-one isn't old by normal standards, I should have a contract by now. The pop music world craves youth.

I shiver, thinking about who might be at the auction tonight. Those men also crave youth, and according to Ms. Calloway, inexperience. She assured me I'll make a killing, even after the club takes their percentage. That's what I need to think about—not how magical my first time could have been with Caleb—but what kind of apartment I'll be able to rent, the studio time I'll be able to afford. Costumes to wear to perform at all the bars in this amazing city. Professional vocal coaching and the freedom to go to endless auditions.

That'll be worth one night. Right?

I head back to my hotel to shower, then force myself to eat a light dinner before heading back to the club. I've gotten myself pretty hyped up, almost excited to get the ball rolling and have to skid to a stop and duck behind a tree just as I walk up to the club.

“Damn it,” I hiss.

Caleb's pacing back and forth on the sidewalk, just about ten feet from The Black Door's front entrance. I curse my big-mouthed sister and overbearing best friend. Just the sight of him, tall and broad-shouldered in a dark blue t-shirt that hugs all those muscles he's so proud of, makes me question my sanity. His brow is furrowed over his otherworldly blue eyes, and his black hair is messy, like he's been running his hands through it.

I know that look. He's pissed. And determined to stop me from making this leap. He won't think twice about throwing me over his shoulder and running away from the club. I wait for his back to be turned as he eats up the sidewalk with his long legs and I sneak down the alley to the back entrance Ms. Calloway instructed me to go to.

The muscular bouncer opens the door and ushers me inside, where I realize my heart is pounding. A part of me yearns to run to him, to beg him to take my virginity instead. But no, he's never flirted with me or let me know that my crush was reciprocated. I need this money if I want to become a singer, and I'm not going to let my feelings get in the way of my dreams.

As soon as I'm in the dressing room behind the stage, I take out my phone and turn it on to send him a text.

You're too late. Just go home.

Chapter 3

Caleb

While I wait, prowling back and forth, always making sure that damned black door is in my sight, I sell my pickup. My perfectly restored vintage truck, my baby, and the rare treat I allowed myself. My neighbor had been lusting over it since I got it and jumped on the chance to own it. At any other time, the good Lord himself wouldn't have been able to pry that title out of my hands, but this was Shana. I didn't even blink as he promised to get the payment into my bank that afternoon and I told him I'd have my assistant deliver the keys.

Next, I called a real estate agent to sell my house. She thought I was joking since I'd only closed on it six months before. It was an extravagant purchase for anyone, let alone a twenty-one-year-old. However, my business partner and I had just sold a patent on one of our computer chips, so I was flush with cash. And it was for our future. Shana's and mine.

When she agreed to help me choose the tile, cabinets, and paint colors for the new construction, she didn't realize the significance of her decision. She was designing her own home.

The agent says I'll take a loss, but I don't care. I need cash now, and the new neighborhood on the outskirts of our town is in high demand. As long as the money gets to my bank account before the auction starts, that's all that matters. I call every single person I know and beg for any amount they can give me, promising I'll pay them back. I take out advances on my credit cards.

My last call is to my business partner, and it is by far the most difficult of the day. He's tough as nails and I don't always like how he runs things—in fact, I rarely do. But partnering with him has helped me get ahead a lot quicker than if I took some corporate engineering job straight out of college.

He argues harder than the real estate agent when I ask him to buy me out, but I make him see I won't change my mind and he agrees to wire me the money. Later on, I can buy a new truck, a new house, and start a new business with the knowledge that's still in my head.

But first, I have to get Shana out of this damn predicament she's gotten herself into.

It's a huge amount now showing on my bank app screen. I can only hope it's enough, as I keep staking out the front of the club. It gets closer and closer to the auction time, and the club has been open for at least an hour with no sign of her.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I start to relax. Maybe she came to her senses.

Then I get a text from her and my blood boils.

You're too late. Just go home.

How the hell did she get past me? I look around, spotting an alley that's half hidden by neatly manicured trees, and race down it, only to be faced with the mountainous bouncer again. He shakes his head at me. Not a public entrance.

With a roar, I head back to the front and burst past the doorman, flinging the outrageous entry fee at him, grateful I have enough cash. I shove past the patrons that are already inside, all businessmen eagerly watching the stage. A dark-haired woman is proudly parading back and forth while the men all around me shout out numbers that make my head spin.

Am I too late?

I elbow my way past everyone and find the hallway leading to the back, where three bouncers block the path to the

stage. Putting my head down, I try to push past them, but end up being lifted and tossed outside into the alley.

Feeling sick, I stagger back to the entrance, demanding to be let back in. I have to get in there. I have to bid. An older man appears behind the doorman and the bouncers and gives me a once-over. He smirks at me and holds out his hand.

“I’m Nikol Antonov, the owner of this establishment,” he says. “Is there a problem?”

“I need to bid on one of the women up for auction,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and meeting his eye.

Antonov snickers and mutters something about not being sure I’ll be able to keep up.

“Try me,” I growl, trying to restrain myself from pounding him into the ground.

“Let him in,” he says, seeming amused. But I grit my teeth, knowing that he’s the only way I can get to Shana.

I get up close to the stage just as a curvy redhead flounces off, looking pleased with herself. The guy next to me has the nerve to nudge me with a feral grin.

“Supposedly there’s a virgin tonight,” he says, all but drooling. His eyes are hard on his lined face that looks like someone roughly carved it with a dull hatchet.

Yeah, there is, but he’ll rot in hell before he gets his hands on her. But I’m not so sure I can outbid all these much older men in their designer suits. I get up in the guy’s face, pulling back my lips in a snarl as I grab his crisp lapels.

“If you bid on the virgin, I will kill you. The virgin belongs to me.”

He laughs but sees I’m deadly serious. He furrows his brow in a scowl, jerks out of my grasp, and disappears back into the crowd. My heart is hammering when the announcer calls out that the virgin is coming out next.

I’m stunned to see my gorgeous girl flounce onto the stage, barely covered. I’ve always thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world, and it seems like a lot of the

men here agree with me as numbers start flying from every direction. For a moment, all I can do is stare at her in a nearly sheer white bra and panties, with lacy thigh-high stockings clinging to her smooth legs. I've seen her in her bathing suits, church dresses, dance recital costumes, sweatpants, and everything in between—but her lush body, barely concealed in all that lace, makes my cock go as hard as steel.

Shit, I need to bid.

I holler out a number to beat the most recent bid and her head swivels at the sound of my familiar voice. The horror on her face when she recognizes me in the crowd is hardly satisfying. Then it turns to anger, but I don't care how mad she is at me when this is over, because I know her. She'll regret this decision the second she's stuck in a room with one of these old perverts fighting over her. She might think this is what she wants, but I know her better than she knows herself.

The battle wages until I'm very close to being tapped out and it's finally down to me and another guy I can't pick out in the crowd since he's too far behind me. When it's my turn again, I throw out my top number. Every last penny to my name.

The voice behind me stays quiet, and Shana and I lock eyes. I can't tell what she's thinking, but all I feel is relief. Then the hatchet-faced man I threatened suddenly steps forward and raises the bid far beyond my reach. Seems like I may just need to kill him after all.

Under the bright stage lights, Shana looks at me with fear in her eyes. It seems like reality is just starting to hit her. She gives me a pleading look that nearly knocks me on my ass. The pain rips through me and I stagger beneath the blow.

I shake my head. It's too late, I lost her. Every last dollar I had wasn't enough.

Chapter 4

Shana

I head out onto the stage, amped up by the other girls' promises about the amount I'm about to make. The crowd is a blur as I shimmy across the stage, my confidence rising as all the men hoot and holler. When the bidding starts right away, I can't help but grin at the huge numbers already getting yelled out until I hear a much too familiar voice join in.

I search through the crowd, looking for that deep rumbling shout. When I finally spot Caleb standing right at the edge of the stage, looking more pissed off than I've ever seen, I'm immediately mortified that he's seeing me practically naked.

Bathing suits are one thing, but I'm in the skimpiest, sheer lingerie!

What does he think he's doing, bidding on me? My embarrassment turns to anger and I want to jump down and shake him. I want to make a quick fortune to secure my future, not make him go broke. This is exactly why I didn't take money from him to begin with.

Why does he look so damn good when he's angry?

He ignores my dirty look and keeps bidding, and soon it's down to him and someone old enough to be my grandfather. When it gets down to the wire, I'm kind of glad Caleb's winning. I shake my hips on the opposite side of the stage, trying to get someone else's attention, but it's down to the two of them now. Is my first time really going to be with someone forty years older than me?

Calm down, I tell myself. Who cares? I knew what might happen. The odds of getting someone young and hot were pretty slim. Even Ms. Calloway warned me of that when she went over the contract with me.

There's a moment of calm, with Caleb's bid being the last one. I'm hit with a sense of relief and excitement; maybe he really does want me. Excitement races through my body as I consider losing my virginity to my sexy best friend. Suddenly, a different man steps forward and throws out a number that forces a gasp from my lips. I won't be able to just stay here in New York for a few months. I can probably live here for years without worrying.

But I can't get too excited because although this guy isn't old, he looks mean. Like, vicious, with a sharp, turned down mouth and cruel, dead eyes that roam me like he's already paid up. He licks his lips and I get an awful feeling that he might just be more than I can handle.

It's just one night, but it's also my first time. I don't want to lose my virginity to this ruthless-looking old man who sees me as nothing more than an object. Reality hits me like a shovel in the face. Why didn't I think this through, or listen to my sister? Hell, why didn't I listen to Caleb?

Caleb! He's never let me down. I turn to him, silently pleading for him to make another bid, or at least scare off the mean-looking guy so the old grandpa can get back in the game. He gives me a slight shake of his head, agony written all over his face.

It's over.

I want to be sick right there on the stage, nearly unable to stand. My legs are shaking now that I know who I'm going home with for the night, and as I stumble back, my vision blurs with tears. This isn't his fault, it's mine. I squeeze my eyes shut as time seems to stop.

Then Caleb bellows out a number, doubling the last bid. Double! He turns away from me and gives the other man a deadly glare, all while clenching his big hands into fists. There are no more bids.

I hold my breath, waiting for the auction to be finalized, struggling not to pass out. One bouncer leads me off the stage to the back, where the winner will collect me, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

The winner. Caleb. My best friend, and secret crush, since as far back as I can remember.

He's waiting for me by the back door with pure rage on his face. It's more murderous than the one he gave the guy who tried to outbid him. This is my oldest friend, my lifelong best buddy, and for the first time, I'm afraid of him.

Chapter 5

Caleb

The sight of Shana getting escorted down the long hallway, all her luscious soft skin on display, almost makes me forget about how mad I am. She's perfect, which I've always known, but seeing her close up in that outrageous lingerie set makes all the blood in my body rush to my cock.

Until I'm jolted back to reality and remember what I just did. Then the anger comes back. Not even seeing the fear in her big brown eyes can make me return her tremulous smile as the bouncer hands her over to me. I take off my jacket and toss it over her shoulders; the sleeves devouring her hands completely and the edge falling almost to her knees. It will be enough to get her out of here, anyway. Ignoring her anxious attempt at a smile, I wordlessly lead her outside and toward the front of the building.

The rental car I had arranged for earlier in the day is waiting for us, and I realize again what I have done. Earlier in the day, I had paid for the car like it was no big deal, but now, I'll be lucky to be able to afford to fill it up with gas before I return it.

I find it in its parking space, glad it doesn't have a dozen tickets on it by now, and open the passenger side door for her. For a brief second, I think she'll make a run for it, and I'm pissed enough to hope she tries. I make a sharp sound in my throat.

Don't.

She gets in and yanks her seatbelt on as if she's the one who's been wronged.

"I didn't have time to check into a hotel, so we'll stay the night at yours and then we'll go home tomorrow," I tell her gruffly.

Her sharp intake of breath cuts through my anger. She's disappointed and stewes the entire ride back to her cheap hotel. That's fine. I knew she'd be mad at me, and I'm willing to put up with the silent treatment until she comes to her senses. I'm not looking for thanks, but not being treated like the enemy would be nice. It doesn't matter either way, as long as she's not going home with any of those creeps from the club.

Once we're in her dingy little room, she jerks her arm out of my grasp and stands on her tiptoes, getting so close I can smell the soap she last used. It's not her usual strawberry scent, but knowing she's practically nude under my jacket, I can't help but get aroused by her nearness.

Until she lets me have it with her patented Shana stubbornness.

"What were you thinking?" she snaps, her eyes flashing as she pushes me back toward the door. As if I'll be leaving. "This is my life and you have no right to interfere. How could you be so stupid, Caleb?"

Oh, she keeps going, but the nerve of her outburst makes me clamp my hand over her mouth. I back her up and press her against the wall. Her eyes flash even more and my jacket falls open to reveal that sexy lingerie I want to tear from her body.

"I literally own you right now," I growl at her. My cock rises, pressing against my jeans as the possibilities rush through my head.

Shana belongs to me—bought and paid for. I could yank her right up close to my rock-hard cock and grind it against all her soft, exposed flesh. Lean down and trace my tongue along the lines of that lacy bra. Slide my hand between her thighs to tease that virgin pussy I just bankrupted myself for. God, I

want to sink my fingers inside her, wipe that angry look off her face and replace it with ecstasy. Thinking about the sounds I want to make come out of her pursed lips nearly drives me to claim my prize.

Instead, I let her go, disgusted that I'm acting no better than those old men vying to fuck her. To steal what's mine.

She doesn't seem to realize how wild I am and makes no move to pull the jacket tight around her. I can see her nipples under the sheer lace, rosy, tight peaks I want to lick until she moans. I turn away, trying to catch my breath and calm my breathing before I lay her on the bed, spread those legs of hers and tear the scrap of panties away with my teeth.

"You shook your head. I thought the auction was over. How did you get so much money?" she asks.

That steals away a little of my nearly uncontrollable lust. Just a bit. "I stole it," I admit.

Saying it out loud hardly makes it seem more real. She gasps, but not the way I want her to.

"What? How?"

I turn back to her and laugh; the second time I've laughed today when nothing was funny. "I sold all my shares in the company to Leo," I tell her, sitting on the bed and running my fingers through my hair. "When he transferred the money to my account, I had all his bank info. It was only a few clicks to transfer more."

It couldn't have taken more than a few seconds, but standing there waiting for the announcer to call the end of the auction, I could barely get out my phone. I wasn't thinking, just reacting to the horror of having to let Shana go home with that freak. Or spending the rest of my life in prison for murder, which was actually the more likely outcome.

She's silent after my admission and when I look up, I can see she understands the magnitude of what I've done.

"Oh no," she says, her voice a strangled whisper as she sits down beside me.

My partner, Leo, is a ruthless bastard. I meant to ease my way out of the business to start my own company over the next year or two in a way that wouldn't put me on his shit list. I'm definitely on that list now, and if I live that long, I'll probably never do business again in the computer engineering field. He's just that powerful.

"Oh, yes," I say.

Shana cries and wraps her arms around me. "You shouldn't have," she says, but all her anger is gone. It's replaced with fear over my impending death. She pulls away, taking me by the shoulders. "I-I'll offer myself to him. And give him my percentage of the earnings." She snuffles and tears roll down her cheeks. "It's only forty percent, though."

She's so miserable. I hold back my groan at hearing that. A measly forty percent. Even offering it would be an insult. I shake my head. There is no way that I'll allow her to give herself as a repayment. Even though Leo's always looked Shana up and down like he wouldn't mind a crack at her, I'd never let that happen.

She puts her arm around me and nestles her head against my chest, apologizing as she tries to stop crying. With her warm body so close to me, I have no regrets at all. She's my life. My everything.

She's mine.

I tug her long hair back and wipe away her tears. "Never offer yourself up like that again," I demand. She bites her lip and nods, and I lean down to kiss her. It's meant to just be a peck on the cheek, to let her know everything will be fine, but she moves her head and our mouths collide.

Her lips part with a sigh and she doesn't pull away, even when my tongue slides between them. She pulls herself closer to me; the jacket falling open so her hot skin presses against my chest. It's clear as day how much I want her, with my cock pulsing so hard against my zipper I'm surprised it hasn't broken by now.

She clumsily slides her palm against my stiff bulge and my hand goes to her waist. Her skin is like satin and though I've touched her thousands of times before, it was never like this. I need her like I need air, and I push my hand under her bra to cup the full mound underneath.

She rubs harder against my cock and tugs at the button of my jeans, breaking our kiss to look down at what she's doing. My nostrils fill with the fresh scent of her shampoo as her hair brushes my cheek.

"I want this," she says, pushing me back and climbing on top.

As her smooth legs straddle either side of me, she gets my jeans open and pushes my boxers down. I worry for a moment that she might be doing this out of a sense of guilt, but when she rubs her little lace-covered pussy against my throbbing cock, I just don't care.

"I want this," she repeats, leaning down to kiss me.

There's no stopping. Not when I've wanted this for so long.

I run my fingers through her hair and pull her face closer to mine, sliding my tongue between her lips. Her soft moan makes me throb against her and I can feel her smiling as she writhes around on top of me. I'm not going to be able to take much more of this, so I clamp my hands firmly on her hips to keep her still.

"You're killing me, Shana," I say, dragging my lips from hers to kiss my way down her neck.

It only takes a quick, sharp tug to get her bra open and her ripe tits are within reach of my mouth. Before I taste her nipple, I lift her and flip her onto her back, ignoring her weak protest.

"But that feels so good."

"Just wait," I promise. "You'll like this even better."

I'm hungry for her and it makes me impatient as I drag my teeth across each nipple while she runs her fingers through

my hair. “Oh, I do like that,” she sighs.

I can’t help but chuckle as I keep kissing my way down her body, sliding my fingers down her sides. Her skin is smoother than satin, and I dig my fingers into her curves, inhaling her scent. Her hips rise when I reach her panties and get the urge to tear them off with my teeth.

I like the idea of teasing her until she begs. It would only serve her right, but then she pushes my head closer to her lacy mound and I can’t wait. Flinging the panties to the other side of the room, I push my tongue between her slick folds. Her yelp makes me smile up at her to see she’s wide-eyed and staring down at me as I lick her swollen clit.

Now her eyes slam shut and her head flops back onto the bed as I keep doing what I’ve wanted to do for a very long time. Her pussy is as delicious as I dreamed, and so, so fucking wet.

“Damn it, I love licking you,” I growl, before lapping at her core.

“I’m perfectly fine with it, too,” she says breathlessly, making me laugh. “I never- I never thought anything could feel so good,” she gasps, reaching for my hair again.

I slurp up her juices and spread her legs apart for further access. “I’m gonna eat your pussy all night long, little girl.”

Her legs tremble, then lock around my shoulders. “Caleb....” she moans.

The sweet sound of her pleasure gets louder and longer and her hips move almost feverishly. I push my tongue deep inside her, shaking with anticipation myself. Soon I’ll sink my cock into that tight little hole.

“Come for me,” I demand.

I find her clit again, and she rears up, clutching my hair and shouting out my name. I keep going, loving every second of driving her wild.

She tries to say something, but her breath comes in harsh pants and when I finally let up, she goes limp. I kiss the

inside of her leg, her stomach, her pert nipples, all the way back up to her mouth. She reaches for me and pulls my face for a kiss, not caring that her slick juices are still all over my lips.

“I didn’t know,” she says. “That was so good.”

“Oh, Shana, there’s more.”

Reaching between her slippery thighs, I nudge my finger inside her. My cock bounces, slapping against her side. Excitement shines from her eyes now that I’m getting down to business. She giggles and reaches for me.

A groan that’s so strong it’s almost embarrassing flies out of me when she grips my cock, working her hand up and down the shaft. She turns to me as she strokes, driving me wild as I work another finger into her impossibly tight cunt.

“You’re too big,” she says.

I grin, pushing deeper. “Stop with the flattery.”

She shakes her head, looking a bit worried now. “No, really. You’re huge, Caleb. How’s this going to work?”

“I’ll never hurt you,” I promise as I kiss her neck again. It’s clear she liked it the first time and all I want to do is please her. I like all of it, so whatever is her favorite is fine with me.

“I know,” she says, nudging me with her nose so I kiss her on the mouth. “But won’t it hurt you?”

I burst out laughing, kissing her swiftly when she looks offended. “It’s going to feel better than amazing. Don’t you worry about me,” I tell her, pushing deeper. “If I didn’t know everything about you, I’d find it hard to believe I’m going to be the first guy to put his cock deep inside your hot little pussy. You’re so damn beautiful, Shana.”

She shivers beneath me, her cheeks turning pink as if I’ve never complimented her before. Well, not like this, that’s for sure, with my fingers inside her and our mouths colliding.

“I need more of what you just did,” she says, suddenly more eager than ever. “I need you to—”

“Tell me,” I say. “I want to hear it.”

Now it’s my turn to straddle her, teasing her slit with the dripping tip of my cock. So close, so ready. Seeing her gorgeous body spread out beneath me, her legs locked around me as her hips rise and fall while I stroke her, has me about ready to pass out. I’m going to make her mine.

“I need you to fuck me, Caleb,” she pleads, reaching up to dig her fingernails into my shoulders.

It’s better than any dream, and I push a few inches inside her, clenching my teeth against the ecstasy and agony of finally claiming her pussy. She’s not just tight, she’s a vice around my cock as I push even deeper.

“Yes, I’m going to fuck you, little girl,” I tell her, leaning down to kiss her as I ram the final few inches home. “But this is so much more than that.”

Her arms lock around my shoulders and she nods into my neck, murmuring my name over and over as I give her a second to adjust. Finally, she cries out with an impatience that would make me laugh if I wasn’t so dizzy from the feel of her.

“Do it,” she demands, thrusting upward.

I want this to last forever, but when she begins moaning and thrashing her head again, there’s no way I can make her wait.

“I need to come inside you,” I tell her, ramming into her sweet pussy body much too hard. But she only grips me tighter and nods restlessly.

“Yes,” she says, out of breath. “Touch me again, please. Touch me while you fuck me, Caleb.”

I find her clit before the sentence is completely out of her mouth. Her already tight channel spasms around me and I hear both of us shouting as I release my seed inside her. And I keep going, keep roaring, until there’s no more strength in my arms and I collapse on top of her.

Chapter 6

Shana

I lay there panting, barely aware of anything but how amazing I feel. Holy crap. Shimmers of pleasure still course through my entire body as Caleb rolls off of me and then hugs me tight against him.

I never expected this. When I decided to sell my virginity to the highest bidder, I never imagined that I would end up with Caleb. My forever crush.

I'm shocked by how good it felt. Pure animal lust that strong has never hit me before, probably why I'm still a virgin at twenty-one. *Was* a virgin. I turn into his shoulder to hide my smile. He's going to be so smug now, probably until the end of our lives.

He rubs my shoulder and drops a kiss on my head. "How'd that go for you, Shana?" he asks.

His smooth, southern drawl flows over me like honey, and I can't help but feel a familiar excitement tingling in my belly. It's getting me fired up again. But how? This is Caleb. I never thought he felt this way about me.

Of course, I always recognized how hot he is. Women are always throwing themselves at him, practically getting into fights to get a chance at his attention. But he's my very best friend, and I never wanted him to think of me as one of those desperate girls.

It seems like I might be one of them now, after he took me to such soaring heights. My whole body still feels warm and gooey, and even as I remember the sounds I made; I can't

bring myself to feel embarrassed. I tip up my chin to sneak a peek at his face. His hand is still trailing idly up and down my arm, and my breasts are pressed against his firm chest.

His eyes are closed and his brow is slightly furrowed, the way he does when he's deep in thought. I study him long enough for him to be aware of my scrutiny, but he doesn't open his eyes. My euphoria begins to fade away.

Does he regret what he did to save me? How could he not? I certainly can't repay him for ruining his life. Maybe he's just feeling awkward and wishing he'd never let me throw myself at him in my extreme gratitude. Well, more than gratitude. I wanted the hell out of the man.

Should I tell him that? Or maybe I should just tell him we never have to speak of this again if that's what he wants. Things might never get back to normal, but I'd rather die than lose his friendship, so I'll do whatever it takes to keep things from getting too awkward.

Though, how can they be more awkward than they're fast becoming? I've never thought long silences between us could be so uncomfortable, but I need to say something, and fast.

Before I can think of what to say, his phone rings, giving me at least a brief reprieve. He reaches for it to see who's calling and sits up, giving me a stricken look. He silently holds it out—so I can see it's his partner—as if even speaking aloud right now would let Leo know where he's at.

“Don't answer it,” I plead, about to start demanding.

He rolls his eyes at me. “I can't hide forever, Shana.”

“Why not,” I say. “You're a genius with computers. I've never known something broken that you can't fix. We can take my auction winnings and go somewhere. Start over.”

As I blurt out my ridiculous plan, I realize I like the idea of it. The idea of it just being him and me.

Now he looks sad, and it hurts my chest, almost as much as when his father died when we were in tenth grade—

the only time I ever saw him cry. He looks very close to that again, and it's all because of me.

“You'd be fine with never seeing your nieces again? Or your parents or your sister? What about Tammy?” he asks, mentioning my other friend. But not my best friend. That's Caleb, and I've ruined his life.

“I don't care,” I say. “I'll find a way to get in touch with them, and Leo can't stay mad forever.”

He snickers, shaking his head as he reaches to push a strand of hair behind my ear. “Yes, he can, and he will if I don't face the music.” When I open my mouth to argue, he leans over and silences me with a kiss. “You say I can fix anything? This is the only way this gets fixed, Shana.”

He pulls away and his finger hovers over his phone, about to call Leo back. There's no more arguing with him, at least not now, but I snatch his phone out of his hand and chuck it across the room. It lands with a dull thud near the old, rusty luggage rack.

“What in the—”

I cut off his yelp by pressing my lips back to his, teasing them with my tongue in the way he did to drive me wild. Pushing him backward onto the bed, I clamor on top of him, rubbing against his already stiff cock. It makes my blood heat to know he wants me as much as I want him, and I plant my hands on his chest as I look down at him.

“We'll figure something out,” I say, closing my eyes as I wriggle my aching pussy against his big, hard cock. I want him again, so badly I can't think about anything else. “Just not now.”

“Fair enough,” he says, tossing me onto my back as if I'm little more than a rag doll.

I shove against his chest and duck down before he can pin me to the bed. “You tasted me,” I tell him. “Now it's my turn.”

More than anything I want a closeup inspection of his glorious cock, and when his eyes nearly roll back in his head

at my demand, it just drives me on. As much as I love what he does to me, and I definitely love it, I also want to please him.

A moment of shyness comes over me when my lips are inches away from that thick shaft, but I push it back when I see a bead of pre-cum on the velvety tip. My mouth waters and I flick out my tongue, tentatively licking it away. His groan and his fingers tightening in my hair tell me I'm off to a good start. I grip the base of the huge thing as I wrap my lips around him, taking his pulsing cock as deep into my mouth as I can. Slowly and carefully, I drag my teeth back up and his thigh muscles shake. He's loving this and so am I. Every last second.

"You like it, too," I say, sucking harder this time. Only half of his throbbing cock fits in my mouth, but I keep trying to gulp him down.

"Yes," he grits out. "Oh, hell, yes."

"I've never sucked any man's cock before," I say, before sliding my tongue in circles. "My mouth is a virgin too, Caleb."

His hand grips my hair almost painfully, but I love it. Love making him lose control. "God, Shana," he says. "You're going to kill me."

"Not until you come down my throat," I tell him boldly, shocking even myself. But I want it. I want everything he can give me.

He goes still as I take him deep in my mouth, and then he pulls me away. My mouth releases him with a pop before he flips me into my back again. He's between my legs, spreading them wide and, before I can blink, that big cock is pressed tightly in his fist as he pushes it inside me.

"Not when your pussy is right here, just begging for me to come inside you," he says. "Tell me how bad you want me to come inside your tight little hole, Shana."

I can feel that delicious sensation cresting again, ready to take me away so I can't think at all. I nod, struggling to

hang on as he pounds away, deep inside me, stretching and filling my pussy with his huge cock.

“That’s exactly what I want,” I gasp.

Just when I think he’ll split me in two, he reaches his hand between our bodies and finds my swollen, aching nub. He gives me the sweet relief seconds before he roars, slamming deep until he has nothing left to give. All I can do is hang on and enjoy the ride.

I keep my arms locked around his shoulders until he rolls to the side, taking me with him. His spent cock slides out of me, but I have a feeling it won’t be long before he fills me again. I’m already addicted to this. I just need a minute or two to catch my breath.

Slinging my leg over his hip, I rest my head on his chest, barely able to keep my eyes open. My whole body relaxes and I give into the sensation of floating on a cloud while he gently strokes my arm until I’m fast asleep.

Chapter 7

Caleb

I wake up to find that I'm not dreaming this time. I'm really in bed with Shana, her arm resting across my chest with her face next to mine on the pillow. For about thirty seconds, I'm in heaven.

Our surroundings and what led us to this place brings me back down to earth. Though I wouldn't change a thing, I still can't quite believe how badly I've screwed up my life. The moment she wakes up and remembers it all, she'll start worrying again, making crazy plans, or worse, crying because she thinks I'm going to be killed.

I grab my phone, trying not to focus too hard on the messages from Leo. I've already dodged too many of his calls and the longer I leave it, the worse things will get. I'm already in deep shit, but I honestly don't think he'll murder me. At least I hope not.

With a quiet sigh, I turn so I can watch Shana sleep. Her long dark lashes rest on her cheeks, and her blonde hair is in a wild tangle behind her. Her full lips are slack and slightly swollen from all my kisses. If I'm not mistaken, there's a bit of a smile on her face, even though she is in a deep sleep.

God, I'd love to stay in bed with her all day and keep pretending that nothing's wrong. Listen to her outlandish plans of running away to foreign lands together and hiding out like we're in some kind of mafia movie. I want a lot more of what we did together last night until we fell into an exhausted and sated sleep. I love that I've awakened her inner beast and that she so freely gave herself to me.

But I also know why she did it, and that reality hits even harder than the fact I have to call Leo. I want to pretend she's here in bed with me because she loves me, but I worry she was only thankful I saved her. And the longer I pretend that she's madly in love with me, the worse my heart is going to get smashed in the end.

I've been in love with Shana ever since she pushed Tommy Wilber for running away with her unicorn backpack in second grade. Maybe longer than that. There's not a moment of my life I don't remember her being a part of it, and I've always known she was mine. Just not like this. Not because she thinks she owes me.

I should have exercised self-control, kept being patient and working on her until she threw herself at me solely because she was wildly in love with me—not because I committed a major crime for her.

But how could I resist? It was asking way too much.

With another long look at her beautiful sleeping face, I ease myself out from under her arm. I pull my clothes on and take my phone out into the hall. With the resolve of a condemned man about to take his last walk on death row, I make the call to Leo.

“What the fuck?” he shouts.

I hold the phone away, waiting for his tirade to calm down a bit. He's every bit as furious as I imagined, maybe more. It takes a long time before I can try to explain.

“It was an emergency,” I say. The weak excuse only starts up a fresh avalanche of swearing and shouting. I try to interject whenever I can, promising I'll repay him. “You know I'm good for it,” I say. “However long it takes.”

Then he goes quiet for a long time. “You better not show your face until you can pay back every cent,” he finally says with a cold calm that's much more intimidating than the screaming. “And that better be soon, Caleb.”

I end the call, knowing that no amount of reasoning will sway him, and without cash in my hands, my promises are

empty. Slipping back into the room, I find Shana sitting up with the sheet wrapped tightly around her far too inviting curves, an anxious look on her face.

I shake my head and hold up my hand, not wanting to be bombarded with questions. My heart breaks thinking about how this all ends. I don't want it to end yet.

"We may as well go get something to eat," I say.

She keeps making worried noises, like she's dying to ask me what Leo said, but what I did was my own decision. I wouldn't change it and I won't have her feeling guilty on top of feeling beholden to me.

We take a taxi to Central Park because that's where she wants to go. After she checks her bank account at an ATM, she swallows hard, a blush rising up her neck. I peer over her shoulder. It's a huge amount, but only forty percent of what I bid. Not enough.

"We can have some fun today, can't we, Caleb?" she asks. Seeming to read my mind, she adds, "We can spare a little for that, right?"

It's both of our first times in New York City and I'm as intrigued as she is by the hustle and bustle, all the different shops, and the buildings almost as tall as the sky. I don't want to think about my ruined future. I just want to have a good time with my girl while she's still mine. Before things get too weird between us and our friendship collapses under the weight of it all.

"Sure we can," I say, pointing to an Italian bakery with a long line. "That place looks popular. You hungry?"

Her smile is worth everything. She rubs her stomach and leans close to me. "Starving," she says. "I feel like I ran ten miles and did a week's worth of workouts in one night." Her cheeks go bright red.

I can't help but lean over and give her a quick peck on the lips. That's it. The last one. "I could eat a whole roast pig," I say, pulling her into the bakery and getting in line.

We take our espressos and bag of cookies with us as we continue walking to the park, only stopping at a street vendor who is selling delicious smelling sausages. We find a bench and munch on our breakfast while we watch the people go by. Soon we're laughing as we make up stories about everyone. A young mother or nanny is probably really a Russian spy. The couple out jogging is on their way to a swinger's party.

"In the morning?" I ask.

"It's the city that never sleeps," she says with a shrug. "What do they think about us?"

"Newlyweds," I answer instantly. "You've got that glow of someone who's just had an amazing fuck."

She playfully swats my arm. "I knew you'd be smug about it."

"So, you admit it was amazing?" I can't help teasing her.

She gets up, ignoring the question, but her smile gives the answer away. "Let's go find a bridge to walk over, and then see about one of those boats to the Statue of Liberty."

Just like I couldn't resist her last night, I follow her all day, going along with every whim. It's the best day of my life, and we're worn out and slightly sunburned by the time we get back to the hotel room.

She takes a shower and I stretch out on the bed, trying not to let reality intrude. But without the distraction of running from one place to another, it does. It's time for the fantasy to come to an end. I close my eyes and let the sound of the shower relax me until it's my turn, using all my willpower not to join Shana in there.

She comes out wrapped in a towel and kneels beside me, reaching for my shirt. The feel of her palms on my belly makes my cock jerk and she blinks down at it, then gives me a shy, searching look. Her hands falter at my waistband, and I roll away and sit up.

She's only doing this out of misplaced obligation and I won't take advantage of her again. She's paid what she owed,

and I already feel bad enough for collecting.

“What’s wrong, Caleb?” she asks, wrapping her arms around her chest.

Her hair is wet and dripping down her arms. The towel barely covers the tops of her thighs. Every fiber of my being is straining toward her. Suppressing a groan, I get up and head to the door.

“I’m going down to the bar,” I say. Needing to get away, to get out before I grab her and devour her lush body.

With a frown, she holds her hand out. “Well, wait for me,” she says, then sticks out her lip. “Or just stay.”

“I’m not in the mood,” I lie. “Just hang out here. I’ll be up later.”

I turn away from the confusion in her eyes and storm out. If I stay even one second longer, I’ll be no better than those sleazy old guys at the auction.

Chapter 8

Shana

I watch the door slam shut behind Caleb and stand there dripping on the carpet, stunned. Why did he just leave like that when I was making it clear I wanted another night like the last one?

Maybe he didn't, though, and didn't want to hurt my feelings. We had such a great day, but we always have the most fun when we're together. This is different. He seemed to enjoy himself plenty last night, but then again, maybe he just did it so I wouldn't feel too guilty for making him rescue me.

I don't know how to feel. I can't get angry at him, because now more than ever, I know I'd have hated being with anyone other than him. Did I do something wrong? What if I just didn't stack up against the more experienced women I know he's been with? A couple times a month he has to go to California or Texas for business. Now that I think about all the beautiful women who've pounced on my man, I want to be sick.

Except, he's not really my man, is he? He's just Caleb, my best friend, and it seems like he might want to go back to that. Or, he could just be worried about what's waiting for him back home. He can try to hide it all he wants, but I know things are bad—really bad. And it's all my fault.

I get my pajamas on, too exhausted to chase him down to the bar, and I know him well enough to know that's not what he wants right now. And for some reason, it's extremely important to me to give him what he wants. And not just because I want to make things up to him.

Oh God, do I love Caleb?

Of course I do, always have. But this is different. Not just best friends love, but real love. That's why I got so excited about running away to start a whole new life with him. He's all I need to be happy. I could give everything up as long as he was around.

"He's always been enough," I say, staring in the mirror while I dab night cream on my face.

Caleb has always been there for me. This isn't the first time he's bailed me out of trouble; this is just the biggest mess I've ever gotten into. And like always, he was right there without being asked. Even when I yelled at him and told him I didn't need help, he stayed. And when I was wrong and really needed help, after all, he trashed his whole life for me. He's always been enough, and I was too silly to tell him.

Feeling sick, I curl up in bed to wait for him to return. More than anything, I want to tell him how I feel, but I fear he'll laugh in my face. I'm honestly lucky he still wants to be my friend after what I put him through, and maybe he's just putting up with me until I'm safely back home. The way he ran out of here tells me he's not interested in me romantically, and that makes my chest feel like his old pickup truck is parked on it. But the thought of losing him as a friend, not having him in my life anymore at all makes me want to tear off my skin.

That's not an option. I have to make things right.

I sit up like I've been struck with lightning, and I have been struck with a thought that might fix everything. I'm not a virgin anymore; but the other women at the club weren't, and they said they still made a killing. A few of them were regulars, saying they were saving up for mansions and exotic vacations.

Except the damn auction is only once a month and Caleb is so honest he won't put off facing Leo and trying to make things right for that long. Still, I have to try.

Jumping off the bed, I rummage through my luggage until I find the slinkiest club dress I brought with me. I toss it on, put on some makeup and head out to The Black Door to beg for a chance to make the money Caleb needs to repair his life. He *stole* for me and I can't let him face the consequences of my actions all alone. I have one chance to redeem myself with Caleb, save our friendship, and show him how much I love him.

As I sneak past the bar next to the lobby, I see Caleb sitting alone at a booth with his head in his hands. My steps slow, and my body yearns to go to him. He looks absolutely miserable, which only fuels me to keep going. I'm making the right decision. He's been sacrificing for me his whole life out of friendship and now I'm going to do the same, but this time, for love.

Chapter 9

Caleb

I barely take a few sips of the beer I order, and just sit in the bar for a while, arranging a flight home for us the next day. I recognize the songs playing as one's Shana has sung, and I decide it's time to confess, so I go back to the room only to find it shockingly empty.

Trying not to panic, I call her, but it goes to voicemail. Was she hungry and went looking for a snack? Why didn't she pop into the bar and let me know? Probably because I ran away from her like the room was on fire.

A second later, she sends me a text and I feel like I can breathe again...until I actually read it.

Don't worry, I'm going to make everything all right.

What does she mean by that? As far as I know, there's no way she can make anything all right unless she can come up with another enormous sum of money...

Oh, shit.

No, she can't possibly be going back to the club, can she? I race down to find the rental car gone from the hotel parking lot. After I'm done swearing, because of course, she stole the car to go put herself up for auction again; I hurry out to the street to hail a cab. She's going to end up killing me faster than Leo.

"Get me there the quickest way possible," I beg, giving the driver the address. Here I am begging again, all for Shana.

The feeling is so familiar when I burst through the signature black door and into the dark, sultry atmosphere of the club. I can barely stand still while the doorman runs my card for the entrance fee, and I'm grateful it works since I took a cash advance on it yesterday. I'm finally let in and make my way through the crowd and past the long, brass bar railing to get to the backstage area. There's currently a live band on stage, so I breathe a bit easier, but the heavy pressure around my chest won't loosen until I get eyes on her.

I sneak into the back hallway and find the office where I first talked to the woman about Shana. This time it's the man I met last night, Nikol Antonov, sitting in the chair. He seems to recognize me too and gives me a smirk.

"This is a private area," he says.

"I need to know when the next auction is," I tell him.

He laughs, asking if I'm going to be his best customer from now on, then lets me know they only have the auctions once a month. I stare at him, furious and defeated, not sure what to do next. But then, the woman from last night scoots past me, shooing me out of the office and slamming the door in my face. She seems excited about something and as the door closes; I hear her say words that make my ears perk up.

Since no one is in the hall to kick me out, I smash my ear against the door to try to hear more.

"We should go ahead with the special auction," the woman says. "She's gorgeous, and you saw how much she brought in last night."

"She was a virgin last night," Antonov says. "Isn't that man who was just in here the one who had the winning bid?"

Clarity washed over me. They have to be talking about Shana. She's here trying to get them to put on a special auction to get me out of my troubles with Leo. I hear Antonov finally agree and tell the woman to go make the announcement to the lucky crowd. I don't like this one bit.

I duck out of sight as she leaves the office and breezes toward the front of the club, then I head to the backstage

entrance. There's a room marked private and I swing it open.

"God damn it," I say, ducking in as fast as I can before any of the club's massive bouncers see me. Even though I've put two and two together, it's still shocking to see Shana standing there in an even skimpier lingerie set than last night. "I am sick to death of finding you practically naked in perverted private sex clubs."

Her eyes widen and her jaw drops, but before she can argue—as if she has any case to make for herself—we both hear the announcement from the front of the bar. A cheer rings out from the patrons and I stop thinking. It's time to act.

I grab her around the hips, fling her over my shoulder and rush toward the back exit. A surprised bouncer jumps in front of us, but I shoulder him out of the way. No one is taking my girl from me this time. We make it out the door just as I feel his hand swipe the edge of my sweatshirt.

"Caleb, stop. I have a contract," Shana shouts as she bounces against my shoulder.

"I give zero fucks, Shana," I roar at her, not slowing down until we're several blocks away and in an alley between two shops that are closed for the night.

My anger engulfs me as I slide her to the ground, so pissed I barely notice her soft, nearly naked body brush against me. Tugging off my sweatshirt, I yank it over her head, ordering her to put her arms in the sleeves.

She does what I say, and it's so big it's basically a dress on her, but it's better than having her exposed in those skimpy panties. Better for my sanity, too.

"What in the hell are you doing?" I demand, still seeing red. What if I'd stayed in the hotel bar longer?

"What the hell are *you* doing?" she repeats back to me, every bit as mad as I am. "Why are you screwing up my chance to make things right?"

"How is fucking another man making things right?" I growl, prowling toward her.

She lifts her chin stubbornly but her eyes sparkle with unshed tears. “I don’t want you to be broke because of me, or get your ass kicked because of me, or have to be on the run because of me. I won’t let you sacrifice anything else, so I was going to make up more of what you owe Leo.”

“Not that way you can’t,” I tell her.

She stamps her foot and glares at me. “Why does it even matter, anyway? You made sure my first time wasn’t awful. Why do you care who I’m with now?”

I blow out a breath through my nose like a bull and grip her shoulders. “Because you’re mine. And not just because I won the auction. You’ve always been mine, you always will be mine, and you’re never sleeping with anyone else. You get that? We’re going to be together forever; that’s how it’s going to be.”

She jerks away from me, bringing up her hand, so I brace for a slap, but instead, she flings her arms around my neck, pressing her lips to mine. All I can do is wrap my hands around her waist and pull her even closer. It’s like we’re fireworks, both ignited at the same time and with the same length fuse.

“I get it,” she gasps, kissing me with a ferocity that makes me turn her and press her against the alley wall.

“Good,” I tell her before ripping the flimsy panties right off of her. “Now spread your legs for me, little girl.”

“Anything,” she answers.

Her legs wrap around me as she clings to my shoulders and grinds against me. Swearing under my breath, I have to let her go long enough to get my jeans down, then thrust my fingers inside her.

“You’re already so fucking wet,” I say, closing my eyes and gritting my teeth. “Your body just craves me, doesn’t it, Shana?”

“Same as yours,” she says, sliding one hand down my chest to wrap around my cock. “You’re about to burst, aren’t you?”

“Not until I’m inside you.” Boxing her in against the wall, I claim her mouth with mine as I guide my eager cock to her slick opening.

She breaks free from my kiss, too flustered with need to do anything but let her head loll back against the wall. “Then get inside me,” she begs. “Get that big cock inside me right now.”

With a laugh that sounds insane, even to my own ears, I slam home, deep and hard. She wraps her arms tighter around my neck and her pussy clamps down, not seeming to notice or care she’s being pounded against a brick wall. In fact, she seems to revel in it, which only drives me wilder. I completely forget where we are or even who we are. All I can do is feel.

The second my fingers slide over her clit; she bites down hard on my shoulder to stifle her cries. A moment later, I shoot my seed inside her, stunned at the intensity of what she makes me feel. She is everything. There’s nothing and no one else. Only Shana.

Chapter 10

Shana

His powerful, take-charge attitude made me so wild I barely heard any of what he said. It should have been enough that he found me and rescued me once again. But I need to hear the words again, need to know I didn't imagine them because that's what I wanted to hear.

Still leaning against the building, both of us panting for breath after that earth-shattering quickie, Caleb steps away and pulls his big sweatshirt down over my body. He looks around, seeming stunned to see where we ended up.

"We should go before the cops show up," he says.

I pull him back to me. "First, tell me what you said before," I urge. "The reason you didn't want me to do the second auction."

He smiles gently down at me in the dim light of the streetlamps. We're in an alley, for goodness' sake, and I still couldn't be happier. He's so perfect. How did it take me so long to figure it out?

With his smile growing wider, he tips up my chin. "I said you're never going to be with any other man. Not for money and not for free. You better get used to it because I'm going to marry you so you don't get any ideas."

There's a question in his eyes now. Despite his strong words, he looks a bit worried. "I won't get any ideas," I say, trying to hide my own grin. Okay, it turns out I can be happier.

His brow furrows. "What's that? Are you agreeing to marry me?"

“Did you really ask?”

His scowl can't hide the light in his eyes. He knows I'm teasing. He knows me better than anyone else in the world. “If you'd come to your senses sooner, you'd be marrying a rich man. Now you're going to have to get used to being poor until I rebuild my fortune.”

A flutter goes through my heart, making it hard to catch a breath, but in the best possible way. “I'm already used to being poor,” I say. “And I don't care if you never make another dime. When did you realize you loved me?” I ask, suddenly feeling my cheeks heat. “I mean, if you actually do.”

He gives me a searing kiss before leaning back to shake his head at me. “I've always loved you. I've known I was going to marry you since we were eight. I love you enough for the both of us.”

His eyes are eager, and I can tell he's yearning to hear me say it back, but also not daring to hope. My sweet, handsome, perfect best friend has loved me that long? I feel like I should get some kind of medical examination for not realizing sooner. Well, I know now.

Tangling my fingers in his hair, I give him a kiss that rivals the one he just gave me. “I love you too, Caleb. I always have, but now I really know what it means. We're going to figure this all out, together.”

He whoops, then looks around with wide eyes. “We need to get the hell out of here before someone calls in a drunk and disorderly involving a half-clothed woman and the happiest man alive.”

Chapter 11

Caleb

Shana talks me into staying in New York for two more nights and we have a great time, but in the end, we have to go home. As romantic as she makes it sound, I can't live my life on the run. When my woman isn't on the line, I'm a shrewd businessman and I'm excellent at what I do. If I want to run my own company one day and not have to constantly look over my shoulder, I cannot afford to disappear. I don't want the theft to taint our future.

Once we're back home, Shana insists on going with me to meet Leo, positive he won't beat the shit out of me if she's around. Turns out she's right and I get to live, which is good, because I've got a hell of a lot to keep living for.

We give him Shana's winnings from the auction and I sign a contract to repay the rest by working for him for minimum wage instead of being a partner. It's a huge financial loss for me, but it's all worth it to have a life with Shana. He knows he's getting a great deal, just like he knows how sorry I am. Leo stared Shana straight in the eye and made her promise not to put me through something like that again, and she meekly promised to be a good girl from here on out. Gruff old Leo actually seemed happy for us once he finished chewing me out.

Between my sorry new wages and Shana's job at the diner, we're able to rent a garage apartment. It's a far cry from my custom home, but we don't mind since we never want to be apart for long. The only thing we argue about in the last

few weeks, since we've been back from our New York adventure, is the wedding.

Shana tries to pretend she doesn't care about a big flower-filled party and a fancy princess dress, but I know her. She does. As much as to officially make her mine, I want her to have everything her heart desires. So, I put my foot down about waiting until we have enough money to do it up right.

Everything is going great, or so I think, but after a few more weeks, Shana starts acting cagy and finally admits she's got a surprise for me at the local bar. I've been working my ass off, not just for Leo, but doing other jobs I find online. My goal is to pay off the debt sooner, and I'm exhausted, so the idea of a late night doesn't excite me. But she's adamant that all I have to do is show up at a certain time and enjoy a beer, so I agree.

On the night of the surprise, I get there early, wondering what's going on. It's months away from my birthday and I can't figure out what else might have her so excited. As soon as I settle in, I see an enormous banner with Shana's name on it over the small stage, and my heart sinks. As the time draws closer, the bar fills with people who greet me as they swarm toward the stage.

The lights dim and the owner's voice rings out over the loudspeaker.

"All right, everybody, we're about to get started. If you like what you see, be sure to give generously."

Now my heart doesn't just sink, it begins to thunder in my chest, and I'm about to tear the place apart. What in the hell is she doing? Not again, and in our own hometown?

Music starts and she comes out wearing painted-on jeans and a flowy white top with fringe on the sleeves, an outfit I've seen plenty of times when she performs. She welcomes the crowd, looking over their heads as she sings. She sounds like an angel, as usual, and she's absolutely glowing. Her eyes crinkle cheerfully when I wave at her from my seat at the bar.

At the end of her set, the crowd hoots and hollers as they surge toward the stage. Everyone here loves her almost as much as I do, and I realize they're tossing cash into a big, empty paint bucket. I make my way closer to see that it's labeled with our names surrounded by a heart.

I catch her glance as she's thanking everyone and telling them she'll be back next week, then she grabs the pail and heads backstage. Utterly confused, I follow her, finding her grinning as she counts out all the bills our friends and neighbors stuffed in the bucket. There are plenty of ones and fives, but lots of bigger bills, too.

"It's our wedding fund," she says happily. "I set it all up, and we just have to give ten percent to Rudy for letting me use the stage."

"He's lucky to have you sing," I say. "The place was packed tonight." She looks so proud. I take her in my arms, pushing all the cash back into the bucket for now. "I love you so much," I tell her.

"I love you, too, Caleb." She beams at me and goes in for a kiss, but I hold back, smiling at her.

"This is what you should have done in the first place if you wanted to make some money," I say, sternly but fully teasing her. Then I go completely serious. "That's the only type of stage I want to see you on again."

Her kiss is all the agreement I need.

Epilogue

Shana

Five years later

It's the quiet part of the late afternoon, when I haul out our wedding album to look at it while our two-year-old daughter naps. I can't believe it's already our fifth wedding anniversary.

Memories flood me as I settle into an armchair and leaf through the heavy pages. We had such a good time that day, and the party after is still one for the record books. It didn't matter that everything was on sale or that my sister and I did all the flowers ourselves. My nieces' flower girl dresses were their Easter dresses from that year and all of us nearly passed out, blowing up balloons for the reception hall.

As I turn another page, smiling at how handsome Caleb looked in the rented tuxedo, my eyes fall to the massive diamond ring on my finger. He gave it to me three years ago on our anniversary and it doesn't just signify our love, but how hard he worked to pay off our debt. When we finally paid it off, he struck out on his own and made a killing. Between that and my somewhat brief time on tour as a singer, we've made a comfortable life here.

I hold up my hand, entranced as the flawless rock catches the sunlight streaming through the window. I love it and am proud of his success, but I still get up and go into our bedroom and take my original engagement ring out of my jewelry box. It's a thin gold band with barely a chip of a diamond, paling when compared to the sparkler I wear now. But the flimsy little ring still gives me a thrill. Caleb loved me

enough to scrape together his meager earnings for it back then, even after I told him I didn't need one.

Looking at the wedding album and my old ring makes me think of our tiny garage apartment. We had such good times there and made so many wonderful memories. I honestly wouldn't mind still being back there.

There's a scuffle on the baby monitor, then a wail, and I hurry down the long, marble hallway to Chrissie's nursery. She stands in her custom crib and tosses her blanket over the side as she reaches her arms out to me. I kiss her downy head as she snuggles up under my chin, but only for a second before she squirms away, pointing to the door.

Our daughter is going through a phase where all she wants is her daddy, so I check the hand-painted fairy clock on her wall.

"Okay," I say. "We can go get Daddy."

Chrissie settles down as I carry her outside, past the pool, to the guesthouse that Caleb turned into a home office last year so he can have more time with us. The fragrance of the rose bushes in our garden fills my nose, and I can't help but smile at my earlier musings.

Okay, this is a lot better than the garage apartment, as long as we're all together.

Caleb seems surprised that it's time to quit work for the day already. He always gets wrapped up in the company business, continuing to add to our vast fortune. He just as easily snaps into family man mode, stretching out his back as he stands, then reaching for Chrissie.

"Are you singing at the club tonight?" he asks, giving me a kiss.

Opening the club was a dream come true for me. I get to sing and perform whenever I want, while still staying close to my family. But right now, I frown. He knows darn well I'm not performing at the club tonight. Or, at least, he'd better. His grin melts my heart as his blue eyes meet mine.

“I know it’s our anniversary,” he says, pleased with his joke.

We hang around in the yard, taking turns rolling a big pink ball to Chrissie until my sister arrives to take her for a sleepover with her cousins. Caleb’s eyes darken as he watches their car leave our driveway. A rare night all to ourselves.

“What do you have planned?” he asks, slipping his arm around me.

“Well,” I say, leading him upstairs to our room. “I hope you aren’t too disappointed.” I turn on some music and melt against him. We sway in each other’s arms as I look up at him. “We’ve been so busy ever since we opened the club, and I’m performing there most nights, so I thought we could just stay in tonight.”

He pulls me close and I can feel his hard length pressing against my belly. He smiles and whirls me in a circle to the music.

“It’s perfect,” he says, leaning down to kiss me. “You’re perfect.”

I don’t get into our usual cheesy argument about who’s more perfect, and just let my eyes drift shut as his tongue slides between my lips. I draw him nearer to our giant bed, eager to get our anniversary party for two started. He chuckles as he begins to pull my blouse out of my skirt, then tugs at the edge of my bra.

He whispers that he loves me, something I never tire of hearing, and his hand covers my breast. I lean back, still holding onto his shoulders, so he can nuzzle my neck while he brings my nipple to a taut peak under my bra.

“Get it off,” I say. “All my clothes.”

A moment later, he pops the buttons on my top and slides it down my arms. I shake my head at him, not really caring about the blouse. That’s what tailors are for, and the one I go to has lots of practice sewing on buttons.

While kissing me so deeply, he has to hold me up to keep me from swooning backward, Caleb expertly unhooks

my bra, capturing my breasts in his warm hands. I open my eyes to see him looking down at me reverently.

“You just keep getting prettier,” he says in that drawl that sends lust coursing through me.

“And you’re still the hottest man I know,” I tell him.

He shrugs off the compliment and picks me up, sweeping me onto the bed. “I know we have all the time in the world with Chrissie at your sister’s, but I need to be inside you now, Shana.”

“There’s no reason we can’t do this a dozen times tonight,” I assure him. “If you’re up for it.”

He smirks at me, accepting the challenge. When he’s laid out beside me, his impatience seems to recede as he studies my face for a long time. I take in every dark shade of blue in his eyes, the way his lashes tangle at the outer edges because they’re so long. Everything about him fascinates me, and time hasn’t dulled that at all.

“I never get tired of looking at you,” he says, mirroring my thoughts. His hand glides down my body to push my skirt up, his fingers teasing me through my panties. “Let’s get started on the first round, shall we?”

At my nod, he yanks my panties down, his fingers sinking into my soaking, slippery folds. I sigh as he makes a hungry sound. “That’s what you do to me,” I tell him.

His thumb strokes my clit, back and forth as he pushes deeper. “Spread your legs wider, little girl,” he orders.

The old nickname makes me shiver and roll toward him, dragging him on top of me. I’m the impatient one now. I wrap my legs around his hips, moaning when I feel his stiff rod pulse against my pussy. Sometimes we’re wild, sometimes we’re fast and furious, and sometimes, like now, all we need is to look into each other’s eyes and it’s enough.

As soon as his thick length is buried deep inside me, his gaze locks with mine, causing me to tumble over the edge.

“How?” I cry out as the first orgasm rocks me and I have to dig my fingers into his back. “How do you do this to me every single time?”

And I ask myself how I got so lucky to have Caleb, not just as my husband, but still my best friend. The man who sacrificed everything for me.

He’s not too far behind me, and finds my clit with his magical fingers, forcing me to come again as he fills me with a shout. We hang onto each other, his face pressed into my shoulder as his movements slow and our breath returns to normal.

“I should ask you how,” he gasps as we lie here limp for several long minutes. “How do you always feel so damn good?”

Overwhelmed with love, I grab his face and kiss him hard. “Thank you,” I say.

His face clouds with confusion. “What for? I haven’t even given you your gift yet.”

“You know what for,” I say. “For being my first and only and best and—”

“Okay, I get it,” he laughs. “Now tell me what you really want, because you never butter me up this hard unless you’re scheming.”

I lightly tap his nose, but he’s right. I have been scheming a little. “Well, I had a great idea for the nightclub,” I say, drawing out the suspense until his eyebrows practically meet his hairline. “A monthly auction.”

His brows slam back down and he pushes up, looking like he might need CPR if I don’t stop teasing.

“For music memorabilia,” I hurry to tell him. “There’s a gigantic market for it and we can take part of the proceeds and donate the money to the county music festival. What do you think?”

His mouth curls up in a smile as he shakes his head at me. “I think you’re going to end up giving me a heart attack

for sure, but baby, I don't want to go any other way."

~The End

Up Next...



April

I never wanted this. I never dreamed of selling off my V-Card to the highest bidder, but my uncle is forcing me to. The only thing that matters to me is keeping my sister safe, so I'll do what I need to. His dark threats have brought me to this moment, this auction.

And I just hope someone can rescue me.

Michael

This job was never meant to last so long. Working at The Black Door takes a little piece of my soul each night. Each auction leaves me filled with regrets, but I do what I have to. Or I did until a beauty walked in with bruises all over her body and the saddest eyes. Her cruel uncle has brought her here, but there is no way I can let this happen. I can't sit back, allowing her to be sold against her will. Not on my watch.

I'll do anything, spend any amount to save her...I just hope it'll be enough.

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Alice

I saw something I shouldn't have, and my life is in danger.

The police won't listen, and I have no choice but to seek help at Benedetti's, a bar known for its criminal clientele. But I'm barely inside the door before a dark eyed devil drags me back out and demands to know why I'm there. I shouldn't trust him, but I don't have a choice when he's the only one willing to help me.

Too late, I learn who he really is, and now I'm left to wonder... when this is all over, will he save my life only to break my heart?

About the Author

Cassi lives to write brazen OTT, insta-love, short stories, about possessive alphas and the women they love. Stories that will leave you satisfied, and maybe blushing a little. Cassi loves pedicures, being pampered in any way possible, her darling golden Princess, amazing coffee, and traveling too anywhere warm.



Cassi  *H*  *nt*