

Peter

PUMPKINED

Out



Jenni Bara and AJ Ranney Writing As

KACIE WEST

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 Created with Vellum

*To everyone who has ever felt like they
couldn't just be themselves.*

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

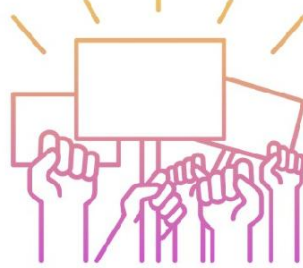
[Epilogue](#)

[Also By Kacie West](#)

[A Note From The Authors](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Authors](#)



Pete

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN ‘STRIKE’?”

On the other side of my desk, the president of operations raised his gray eyebrows and pursed his lips, reminding me of Uncle Gio. Alan Beria was one of just a handful of originals left from when Gio started All Out Brewing.

“Strike, as in no one will be delivering our beer.” Alan folded his arms across his chest, tucking the folder stamped with the All Out logo surrounded by hops flowers under his right elbow. He was still an asset to the brewery, but damn, this old man was a pain in my ass. Although Gio had mentored me for years, I wasn’t my uncle, so things had changed when I’d taken the helm. Alan glared at the phone in my hand, his dark eyes full of annoyance.

Oh hell, Owen was still on the line. I didn’t have time to deal with my best friend’s woman drama right now. He’d made his bed, and now he’d have to lie in it.

“Later, dick.” I slammed the phone down without waiting for his response. Owen wouldn’t care. He and Danny, my college roommates, were used to it. My best friends never expected nice. Unlike when I was forced to play the politically correct CEO of All Out, with friends, I was just me.

“Sorry, no matter what I say, Mr. Beria just barges in.” Alice, my first line of defense when uninvited guests showed up, wrung her hands from the doorway. Behind thick glasses, her eyes flicked between us.

In my office, the rule was *no appointment, no meeting*. As much as I wished it did, that didn’t apply to Alan, though.

Uncle Gio's best friend was still entitled to some perks, even two years after Gio's death.

"It's fine." I waved her off.

The older woman nodded and closed the thick double door behind her, leaving us alone in my office.

A lot had changed in the twenty-five years that All Out Brewing had existed, but not much had been altered in this office since Gio moved the company's headquarters from the brewing warehouses in Long Island to midtown. For years, I'd watched and learned from my uncle, right here in this office. I'd sat where Alan sat now as my uncle explained the ins and outs of the industry. Studying the books on the shelves that lined one wall, surveying the city skyline through the massive windows behind the desk. It felt like home, so even though the space was a little outdated, I didn't want to change it, even now that I'd taken over the company.

The leather of the chair creaked as I stood. I propped one hip on the desk and scanned the skyline. It didn't matter what time of day it was; the streets were always hopping. People were constantly hurrying in and out of stores, restaurants, and bars. Bars that would be unable to serve our line of the best local craft brews if we didn't stop this strike from happening. What had once been a small startup was now one of the East Coast's largest brands, pumping out anywhere from fifteen to twenty unique beers each season.

"So the drivers are really doing this?" I spun back to Alan. "Can we replace them all?" There were a million people in this city. How hard could it be to find some schmuck to deliver beer?

Alan let out a long sigh and dropped his shoulders. "I warned you this was a possibility. We've been in contract negotiations for a month."

Exactly. The drivers were being unreasonable—more pay, less work; it was what everyone wanted these days. But a company didn't grow by wasting money.

Alan tossed the folder onto my desk. The manila lid flapped as it bounced on the dark wood. “They’ve been working without a contract, and you’ve been refusing to budge on their demands. This was inevitable.” Rubbing his hand over his neatly trimmed salt and pepper beard, he glared down at the envelope. “That’s twenty-five temporary replacements. Pick eighteen for tomorrow, otherwise we’ll need to cancel orders.”

“Like hell we’ll cancel anything.” I opened the folder and flipped through a couple of candidates, then tossed the stack back on the desk. “Have Alice call them. The first eighteen that confirm get the job. How hard is it to drop off beer?”

Alan crossed his arms over his slight beer gut. “Maybe avoid leading with that tomorrow.”

Cocking a brow, I stood to my full six-foot height and looked down at him.

“They’re willing to sit down at nine a.m.,” he said. “Consider giving a little so we can get these guys back on the clock. Our biggest issue shouldn’t be who the hell is going to deliver our product.”

“Exactly.” I let out a snort.

THIRTY MINUTES INTO THE MEETING, THINGS WERE GOING poorly. I was annoyed, but I wasn’t stupid. I recognized the horrible turn this meeting was taking. Alan sat at the opposite end of the large conference table, glaring at me. Between our people and the drivers’ representatives, there were twelve of us crammed into the windowless room, and it was starting to get hot.

Craig loosened his tie and cleared his throat. Our in-house counsel was doing a shit job mediating this circus. If he used the word *compromise* one more time, I would fire him, regardless of Alan’s ranting about it. Alan was being a pussy about these negotiations. We had to hold our ground rather than let these buffoons walk all over us. There was no way in

hell I was going to let them drive my uncle's company into the ground.

“We’re not saying we’re unwilling to acquiesce to any of your demands.” Alan sent me a pointed look, but that was exactly what I was saying.

He and I needed to get on the same page. I refused to agree to fewer deliveries daily. If I did, we’d have to hire more full-time drivers and purchase more trucks and delivery equipment. That was out of the question. Along with their easier workdays, they were demanding higher pay and additional vacation time. Regardless of how sympathetic Alan was to these guys, we were already spending too much money on the easiest part of the operation. We would not bleed out over the details of delivering our products.

“We’re not asking you to reinvent the wheel here,” I said, scooting forward in my seat. “We’re just asking you to run your routes on time and do it with A+ customer service.” I internally rolled my eyes, hating the term my uncle had coined. A rating scale for successful deliveries was unnecessary. Get there on time, drop off the right beer, stack it nicely, and get out without leaving a mess. Rocket science it was not.

“Fifteen drops by the eleven-a.m. hard stop is virtually impossible. Not with the way the routes are laid out.” The union rep tossed his hands up in the air.

Stupid-ass rule. “No restaurant is so busy that it can’t accept deliveries between eleven and one.” The drop-off guidelines made no sense.

“Whoa, whoa, let’s not get upset here.” Craig was a jack wad. We were here today because we were all upset. “It’s not the fault of the drivers’ union or All Out. That’s a restaurant industry rule.”

No shit, asshole. Craig really wasn’t worth the money I was paying him.

“If we can take it down to twelve deliveries before lunch, plus make some headway on the vacation time and pay scale,

I'd think we'd have 90 percent compliance." The union rep leaned forward and zeroed in on me.

"I refuse to believe fifteen isn't possible," I said, pulling my shoulders back.

Alan was glaring again. It was like tiny needles being shot across the room. He was sure his experience made him better equipped to make the decision about the drivers' contract. Arrogance was hard to work with.

Vince, one of All Out's best drivers, cleared his throat. "If anyone could do it, you could, right?" He smirked, resting his thick forearms on the table as he leaned into the conversation.

"I don't have time to do my job and yours."

I didn't even have time for this. I should have been in my office going over the new formulas, approving the budgets for next year, testing the upcoming season's brew, and studying forecasts.

"Not every day," he said, cocking a thick, unkept brow, "but you could do it once, right?" The glint in Vince's brown eyes was all challenge. "If you were to run my route tomorrow..."

"I could do it one handed." On a normal day, I ran circles around our entire staff. My day started at five a.m. and ended around nine p.m., and that was if I didn't have a business dinner to work into my schedule. One delivery shift would be nothing.

Alan pushed his chair back and stood. "Hold up."

With a huff, I waved him off.

Vince leaned to one side and whispered to the union rep. The guy nodded and sat a little straighter.

"Okay, you run the route tomorrow. The full route. If you have no complaints, then we'll meet back here on Friday and sign the contract you've presented."

It couldn't be that easy, could it? Regardless, I wouldn't argue. "Sounds like a deal."

As the room cleared, Alan pulled me aside. “This is a horrible idea. Have you ever driven a truck? Tapped a keg?”

“I went to college, you know.” I’d tapped more kegs in my first year of college than the drivers did in a week.

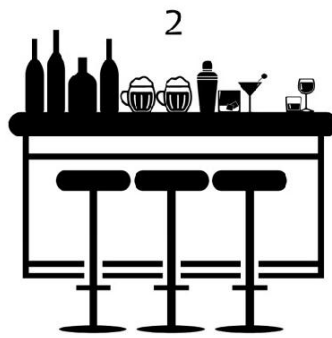
Alan sighed. “Setting up a kegerator or a rent-a-tap isn’t anything like what our guys do. Most of our customers are massive sports bars with multi-page purchase orders.”

Rolling my eyes, I brushed past him. I had shit to get done if I was going to spend the following morning making deliveries.

“Do you even know how to read a purchase order?” It was time Alan moved on from his old-school worrywart ways. My uncle may have been fine with it, but All Out was moving forward, and I didn’t work that way.

“Jesus, I work with budgets. How hard could it be?”

“Famous last words.”



Cara

I TURNED the page as I brought the green mug to my lips and blew across the surface of my life juice. Coffee was as important as air. And boy, did I need it today. I was cramming before heading in to work an extra shift at Red Zone. I only had a few months before the big exam. I'd stuck to strict schedules and prayed I'd be ready. Still, every time I thought about taking the bar, nerves rocked my stomach. Not to mention I was still working to lock down an internship for the spring.

I blew out a breath and forced the negative thoughts out of my mind. I had this. I would be fine. And so far, this last practice test had gone well.

The scheduling app notification popped up on my phone's screen just as it buzzed on the desk. Snagging it, I was ready to dismiss the reminder, but the words on the screen had me doing a double take.

What? My shift didn't start for a few more hours. It was nine a.m.—

Shit. Thursday meant delivery day.

Just like my normal Monday shift, Thursday started an hour and a half earlier than any others since it was our beer delivery day. Not only did I have to be there early, but I'd have to put all the beer away.

This should have occurred to me when Emily had begged me to cover her morning shift. Hunter had always worked a double shift on Thursdays, especially during football season, but he was on vacay this week, so Emily had been scheduled

in his place. I could do the night shift, but help a girl out. Mornings weren't my thing. Of course they weren't. Kegs were heavy.

After rushing through a shower and a subway delay, I stomped into Red Zone five minutes late.

Kevin, the manager, was in his office when I walked past. "The beer isn't here yet, so you get a pass. Don't clock in until the truck pulls up. This shift puts you over forty hours for the week."

"Love working for free." I scoffed and stepped inside the doorway, taking the swipe card he held out to me.

Kevin chuckled. "Is the dollar eighty an hour really gonna make or break ya, Cara?"

"No, but an hour and a half of waiting around might." Rather than standing here waiting for a late delivery, I could have been studying.

He rocked back in his chair. The office was tiny, so it hadn't moved more than a couple of inches before the back of the chair hit the wall and he sat up straight again. "Not my fault. Vince must be late."

Or maybe it was a fill-in and Vince was finally getting a much-needed vacation. Poor guy was always hustling. The company he worked for had him making too many deliveries in a day. Some corporate asshole apparently wanted to work his drivers to the bone. Or didn't know how to organize a schedule.

Kevin spun back to his computer with some kind of invoice in his hand. "Two kegs kicked last night. Why don't you clean out the reach-in while it's empty?"

Of course. The short girls were always expected to clean out the tiny-ass spaces. I opened my mouth to respond, but Kevin eyed me over his shoulder and cut me off before I could utter a bullshit excuse.

"If you didn't want to wait around, then you shouldn't have picked up the shift."

I stopped myself from rolling my eyes. That should be my new mantra. It was time to learn how to say no when a coworker asked me to cover for them. Especially during weeks like this one where I had a practice test scheduled.

I spun on my heel, but before I could leave, Kevin called my name.

“By the way, I have two tickets to All Out’s fall kick-off in Long Island. Did you want to go?”

“When is it?” I’d grown up not far from All Out’s facility and my mom still lived in the area, so I visited often. And although the company was garbage at setting up a delivery route, All Out knew how to do a beer fest.

“Last weekend of August.”

I’d already told my mom I’d visit that weekend and had blocked out the days in my study schedule, so the timing would be perfect. Maybe I could convince Glory to go with me.

“Do I get both tickets?”

“Sure. I’m not interested in traveling all the way to Long Island. At least not for this. Expect a fight when it comes time for their Christmas party, though.”

“Ha ha.” Last year, everyone at the bar was after those tickets. I hadn’t even bothered to fight for them. By this Christmas, I’d be eyeball deep prepping for a corporate internship. At least I hoped to be. If so, a brewery Christmas party, whether in midtown or not, wouldn’t be on my radar.

Without turning around again, I backed out of the office. The second I stepped out into the hall, I bumped into something and stumbled. The sound of water sloshing registered before I spun and took in the janitor’s wide eyes. I jumped back to avoid the spray.

“Crap.”

Droplets of water dotted Bryan’s shirt and even his cheeks. As I scanned his brown uniform, I was met with a soaked leg

and a massive puddle on the floor by the bucket, which still contained an inch or two of soapy water.

I winced. “Sorry.”

“What did you do now?” Kevin called from inside his office.

“Nothing. I—”

Bryan chuckled and shook his leg, sending water splattering off his pants and onto the floor.

“Of course not. I guess you never do anything.” Kevin scoffed, though he didn’t bother getting up from his desk. “Doesn’t mean disaster doesn’t follow your every step. It’s like Pandora’s box opened the day you were born.”

“Harsh.” I huffed.

“But true?” Bryan shrugged and fought a smile.

I stomped through the back and pushed through the swinging bar doors, then slammed my purse down on the bar. At least the place looked good. The floors and tables and bar top were all spotless. I never knew what to expect. It all depended on the closing bartender and how rushed they were to get out. There was always a fifty-fifty chance they’d leave a disaster for the morning crew.

From inside my purse, a text notification chimed, and I pulled out my phone.

Glory:

How’s the study going? Want to grab lunch? I could use a good laugh about what hurricane Cara brought in today.

I rolled my eyes. Why did everyone always assume these things were my fault? Rarely was I the one who caused the disasters that plagued me. Like at the gym last week. All I did was smile at the guy. How was I to blame for him losing his footing and face-planting off the back of the treadmill?

Cara:

Ha. Ha. And to think I was going to take you to All Out's fall kick-off at the end of the month.

I set my phone down on the bar and picked up a spray bottle and a rag, still trying to hype myself up about the task at hand. After this shift, there was no way I wouldn't have to buy a new pair of black pants. These were my only nice pair, and I was more than likely about to bleach them along with the beer cooler.

I tied my long, dark hair up into a ponytail, then opened the cooler. Not many of us could fit inside the three-foot-tall space. Lucky for my coworkers, I was short. And with the two empty kegs removed, I had plenty of room to work. I crouched and shuffled my way in, hoping that if I started at the back, I wouldn't get bleach on my pants.

With Bryan humming along to a country song I didn't know across the room, I climbed in and got started. I'd just finished the far wall and was getting started on the one to my left when I heard the snap. Then everything went black.

Shit. The door to the cooler had probably been in Bryan's way as he mopped behind the bar. Too bad he hadn't thought to peek in here before he shut it.

Yelling was no use. He always worked with ear buds in and his music blasting. And I'd left my phone on the bar, so I couldn't text him or Kevin.

Pitch black and thirty-eight degrees. Great.

I slumped by the door and knocked uselessly a dozen times before giving up. Already shivering, I took my hair down and ran my fingers through it so it settled around my neck. It wasn't much in the way of keeping me warm, but it was worth a try. The tank top emblazoned with the bar's logo wouldn't keep me from freezing to death, that was for sure. Hopefully they'd notice I was gone and come looking for me soon.

Seriously, why did this crap always happen to me? Maybe Kevin was right and I had inadvertently opened Pandora's box at some point in my life.

3



Pete

I SLAMMED my fist against the steering wheel, blaring the horn.

Big truck, small person. Who in their right mind just walked out into the street without looking? Half the population of New York City, it seemed. This was the fifth time I'd had to slam on the brakes because some asshole pranced out in front of me with their nose buried in their phone. The second I let off the horn, a crash echoed behind me. Shit. There went the cases of beer again.

For the fourth fucking time this morning, I'd have to reorganize the product. And I didn't have time for that shit. I was behind.

"Look before you walk so you don't die," I screamed at the windshield. The oblivious woman in the street paid no attention. Apparently, I was the only one worried about her not ending up in a casket today.

After I'd hit more traffic jams than I could count—construction, street closures, accidents—there was no way I'd make all my deliveries before the lunch cutoff. And how the hell did these guys sit in these uncomfortable seats all day? I was going to lose it if I got poked in the ass by this screw one more time. Not to mention the lack of air conditioning. Why hadn't the drivers demanded that in their contracts?

I locked my jaw and circled the block yet again. I'd been running thirty minutes behind since my second stop, and that was quickly growing to forty-five now that someone else was in the loading zone at the back door of my next bar.

Finally, I double-parked and climbed out. I shot a glare at the delivery guy parked in front of the bar, who was carrying fucking towels into the business next door.

Towels. Really? Two pounds of cotton. Hard to walk with that, right? I, on the other hand, would be delivering hundred-and-sixty-pound kegs.

I unlatched the back and flung the sliding door up, only to be met by a mess of kegs and cases of beer. The chaos was worse than the last time. I wouldn't bother fixing it again. I didn't have time, and it was only going to be utter shit anyway. But where was the purchase order for this place?

I'd just had it, but it had up and disappeared in the last two minutes. Fuck, this entire day had been a shit show. There had to be a better system to keep all this straight. Sweat trickled down my spine, and I pinched the front of my polo and tugged the damp material from my skin. Closing my eyes, I huffed out a frustrated breath. No wonder my drivers were rioting. Their job fucking sucked.

Hopefully this delivery would be a quick in and out. I couldn't deal with more problems.

After waiting a good seven minutes for the short, cranky manager to let me through the back cage, I rolled the hand truck through to the bar. I'd barely gotten into the air conditioning before the complaints started.

"Where's Vince, and why are you so late?" The guy's dark eyes bored into me. He was more annoyed than the last manager, and I wasn't even missing any of this bar's order.

"Have you ever delivered beer before? It isn't as easy as it looks," I huffed, wheeling the cart full of kegs inside.

The man's dark eyebrows shot up, and he shook his head. Then, without another word, he turned and walked away.

Exactly, dude.

Maybe I could drop these in the walk-in really quick and get back on the road. I had to make up time if I had any hope of pulling this whole thing off.

“We have some kicked kegs up front,” the manager called from behind me. I hadn’t heard him return.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, then I turned and attempted to look like I didn’t want to murder the guy. “Which ones?”

It shouldn’t be a problem. At my last stop, I’d wheeled the requested kegs behind the bar, and the bartender had taken over from there.

“Pumpkined Out.”

Scanning the kegs on my cart, I searched the labels. Perfect. I had that one.

But as I rolled into the empty bar, I was instantly annoyed. Where the hell was the bartender? I didn’t have time to wait for someone to get their act together and do their job. A purse and phone sat on the bar top, so she had to be here somewhere.

When she didn’t appear after a couple of minutes, I let out a huff and made my way behind the bar so I could get a look at the setup. Lines and holes and taps. Jesus, it looked like a map of New York’s subway system. But two taps sat on the bar next to the hole that led into the reach-in cooler. Seemed like the kegs had to connect there. Since the chick was still MIA—probably doing her makeup in the bathroom—I’d figure it out myself. It couldn’t be that hard, and I couldn’t afford to wait any longer.

I yanked on the line, but when I did, it twisted and pulled at an odd angle. How the fuck did they make this reach the keg? I pulled again and finally got it connected to the keg on the floor, though it barely reached. There was no way it would stretch far enough to allow me to push the keg into the cooler. I wasn’t even sure it was screwed on tight. The bartender would have to fix it. I didn’t have time.

I lifted the keg and balanced it on my foot while I used one hand to open the door to the reach-in below the bar top.

“Finally,” a feminine voice rang out. “With your earbuds in, I thought you’d never—”

I jumped back, startled by the person crawling out of the tiny-ass box.

“What the—” The rest of my words were cut off as the keg slipped from my hand and landed with a thud on the ground by my feet.

“Oh my God.” A horrified expression covered her face as beer sprayed out of the top of the keg, coating us.

“Make it stop,” I yelled over the chaos.

“Make it stop?” She scoffed. “Just undo it!” She threw up a hand to block the geyser of beer aimed at her face. “Why is it even tapped?”

I stepped back. “Undo what?” I couldn’t undo the fact that she’d jumped out of the cooler and scared the shit out of me. Beer continued to shower the bar, yet she remained where she was, staring at me.

“Jesus, never mind.” She twisted off the tap on the keg, and the beer fountain instantly stopped.

Right. She meant I should undo the tap. That made sense. But now that she’d gotten so close to the keg, she was soaked.

Although my shirt was damp, I had mostly avoided the spray. I couldn’t say the same about her. She planted her hands on her hips and glared as beer ran down her pretty face. Her jet-black hair was dripping, and her lips were pulled into a firm fuck-you frown, but man, was she gorgeous.

“What are you doing?”

“What am *I* doing?” I crossed my arms over my chest and surveyed this tiny creature in a very wet white tank top. Very see-through wet tank top. My gut clenched. “Why were you hiding inside a toddler refrigerator?”

“It’s called a reach-in.” She rolled her eyes like this was common knowledge. And in our industry, I guess it was. “Why did you tap the keg? How were you planning to get it inside?” She nodded to the small refrigerator under the bar.

I let my gaze drift down again. The white tank top clung to her every curve. Was her bra purple? Or maybe a dark red? I

couldn't tell, but I could see her flat stomach, a cute little belly button, and the curve of her hips. Rocking body.

"Eyes up." She crossed her arms, pulling me from my perusal.

I glanced back up at her face. "Huh?"

"You tapped it?"

I smirked and bit back a *no, but I'd sure like to*. Jesus, I needed to focus. Because regardless of what she was talking about, it didn't seem like she was offering to fuck me.

She rolled her big brown eyes and pointed to the door of the reach-in, which was still ajar. "It needs to go inside first"—she enunciated each word slowly, like she was speaking to an idiot—"before you tap it."

Ahh. The keg. We were talking about the keg.

"Before?" I cocked my head, examining the tiny box and the keg at my feet.

She opened the back flap at the top of the bar back. "You put the line in like this." She demonstrated and then waved to the inside of the reach-in. "And the keg goes in there before you attach the line."

That was smart. Maybe the most brilliant thing I'd seen all day.

"Is this your first day?" she asked, tilting her head to the side and pressing her lips into a tight line.

"Yeah." I'd keep the answer simple rather than launching into the details of why I was making deliveries. She probably wouldn't believe this insane plan anyway, and now I seemed like an idiot rather than the CEO of a company. "First day delivering beer." And my last. Fuck me if I was ever doing this shit job again. I had to hold back a wince at that thought. I needed a better plan for these poor delivery guys.

"Didn't anyone train you?"

"No."

“What kind of guy runs this company?” She shook her head. “I’ve always heard he was an asshole, but is he also an idiot, or just a miser?”

My heart lurched. Not many people had the nerve to insult me to my face. Though she didn’t realize that was exactly what she was doing. Why did she think I was an asshole? “What?”

“You know, someone who never wants to spend money? Only wants to hoard it?” The words were once again spoken slowly, as if she questioned my intelligence.

I gritted my teeth. “I know what a miser is. Just never heard anyone use it in a sentence.”

She shrugged and nodded to the keg. “If you get me another one, I’ll show you how to hook it up.”

“Another one?” It was mostly full.

“We can’t use that now.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “It’ll be all foam.”

Shit. Did I even have one to spare? If not, and I gave her one from the truck, then someone else would be shorted.

She glared at me. “We are not paying you for a skunked keg. If we serve that, it’ll piss off the customers, and the asshole who owns your company is shitty about complaints.”

I sighed. I was. That was before I knew how easy it was to make mistakes that led to complaints. “Fine.”

I headed out to get another one and was back behind the bar with the gorgeous raven-haired goddess in just over five minutes. She had pulled her wet hair up into a ponytail that showed off the smooth skin of her neck and shoulders.

My eyes lingered on the soft spot at the base of her throat where her pulse beat. Damn, I’d love to—

“Okay.” Her voice jarred me back to the moment. “Grab the handle and turn it as far as it will go, then lock it in place.” She twisted it off. “You try.” Stepping back, she passed me the line.

She was a good teacher. She was patient as she walked me through the process, when, in reality, she could have just taken the keg and sent me on my way.

“Got it, cara mia.” Crouching in front of the reach-in, I followed her directions.

“I never told you my name,” she said, her tone tight.

Locking the handle in place, I glanced up. “It’s Italian. Cara mia means ‘my dear.’ Like yes, my dear.”

“Oh.”

“Is your name Cara?”

She nodded and smiled down at me, and my heart skipped. Damn, she had a beautiful smile.

Shaking that thought from my head, I popped the keg into the reach-in.

“You did it. Good boy.”

Her praise sent a spark tingling down my spine. Though I’d been anxious to get their order delivered and get out, now I wished I could hang around and spend another ten minutes with this woman. Hell, I’d love a full night.

I wiped my hands down my pants as I stood and sent her a smirk. “So you like to give praise?”

“Yes.” Her eyes twinkled. “When I’m in charge.”

I raised one brow. “So does that mean...you like to dominate?”

“Always.” She flashed me a grin. “With everything.”

Images of her in leather rushed through my mind. How the tight fabric would cup her breasts and strips would wrap around her waist. Tiny thong. High heels.

Behind my jeans, my cock jumped at the mental picture. I needed to see this woman again.

So I went for it. “You go to any of the clubs?”

“Clubs?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Yeah.” Was that the right term? Or were they caves? No, that wasn’t right either. It was called BDSM—

“Yeah, sure.” She shrugged. “When I have time.”

“Do you have a favorite one?” I’d figure out where it was and make it my regular spot until I found her again.

Her eyes narrowed and her lips turned down. “Don’t you have more beer to deliver?”

“Yeah.” I smirked. “But maybe I could get another *good boy* before I go?”

She rolled her eyes and glanced at the name tag on my shirt. “Only when you deserve it, Pete.”



Pete

I SIGHED as the elevator dinged and the stainless-steel doors opened, revealing the top floor of All Out's offices.

The second I stepped out of the car, Alan stopped me. The lines between his brows became more pronounced as he glared. "You're late."

Understatement. I should have been done an hour ago. Although the six stops in the afternoon went smoothly—mostly liquor, which were much easier than the bars—with traffic, I hadn't been able to make up time.

"I was also short on three deliveries."

"I heard."

"But complaint free." I forced a smirk as I strolled down to my office. Although none of our customers had complaints, I had a laundry list of my own.

He scoffed behind me. "The drivers are never going to sign the contracts now."

"Good." I moved into my office and flipped through the stack of mail on my desk. "They shouldn't." I opened an envelope and scanned the document before looking back up to a slack-jawed Alan. "The way it's set up now, it's a wonder any of our drivers have stuck with us this long. Between the systems and the route layout, it's impossible. I've been crisscrossing the city all goddamn day."

I dropped the mail back onto the desk.

"I'm pretty sure that was one of their arguments." Alan wrinkled his nose and took a step back. "Why do you smell

like beer?”

Chuckling, I pictured the look on Cara’s face as beer coated both of us. I should have gotten her number. I’d almost gone back after my last delivery but didn’t want to show up looking—or smelling—like I did after a long, hot day of deliveries.

I walked through my office to the attached bathroom and turned on the shower. “We’ll figure out the contracts, and we can’t be assholes about it.”

Alan leaned on the doorjamb, his eyebrows almost to his hairline.

I shrugged. Yeah, we needed to make changes, and I was man enough to admit it. I yanked the shirt over my head, and Alan spun so his back was to me.

“What’s your plan?” He called over his shoulder.

I yanked off my jeans. “Maybe cut out two or three deliveries a day and redo the routes.” The warm water hit me as I stepped into the shower a moment later.

“Really?” Alan snorted, no doubt wearing that smug I-told-you-so smile on his weathered face. “If I’d thought this asinine idea was going to work, I would have suggested you drive the route months ago.”

I rolled my eyes but didn’t respond. As I was scrubbing my face, the door to the bathroom shut. Letting out a heavy sigh, I relaxed for the first time all day, and relished being able to finish my shower in peace. Once the towel was wrapped around my waist, I slid open the door to the small closet at the far end of the bathroom so I could grab a set of clothes I kept here for emergencies. A suit was out of the question. Not for a sports bar on a Thursday night. And I didn’t bother snagging anything emblazoned with the All Out logo. That left only one option.

“Where are you going?” Alan asked as I stepped out of the bathroom in a white button-down and dark jeans.

“I have dinner plans.”

He dragged his hand across his trimmed salt-and-pepper beard. “You don’t have any appointments on your calendar tonight.”

Correct. Because my date didn’t exactly know about my dinner plans yet. And I had to hurry if I wanted any chance of catching her.

Alan followed me out of the office and toward the elevators. “We should go over what our new offer will look like and get started on the cost analysis. The people you’re meeting will understand if you’re running a little late.”

I smirked. “Not likely.” I had no idea whether Cara was the understanding type, but I wasn’t willing to risk missing her. If I couldn’t catch her at the bar, then I had no way of getting in touch with her.

“What?” Alan frowned, his thick brows pulling together.

“Nothing.” I pushed the button for the lobby.

“Pete—” He crossed his arms over his round stomach.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” I said blowing him off as the doors slid shut between us.

The thirty-minute drive to the bar dragged on, but it was worth it when I walked in and my gaze locked on Cara. Her ponytail was drooping to the left, and she had a few spots on her shirt. Probably mostly the beer I sprayed her with. I smiled at the memory of the opaque white fabric. She had just thrown her purse over her shoulder and was making her way out from behind the bar when I reached her.

“Oh,” she said as she almost collided with me.

I gripped her by the elbows to steady her and was hit with a sweet smell that was definitely not stale beer. How did she manage to work an entire shift and still smell incredible?

“What—” She tilted her head back and blinked her big brown eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you.” I flashed her my charming *you know you’re happy to see me* grin.

Pursing her lips, she cocked her head to the side. “That’s a creepy smile. The real one is a much better look. I’d stick with that.”

I scoffed and shook my head. No one had ever complained about my smile before.

She chuckled. “I’m surprised you’re finished with your deliveries for the day. I’ve heard your CEO works you guys to the bone. He’s a real asshole, right?”

I fought the frown and swallowed back a retort, but I wished she’d stop calling me an asshole. It wasn’t that I hadn’t heard the complaints, and normally, I wore them like a badge of honor. From her pretty lips? I fucking hated it.

“He’s actually working on solutions for some of those issues now.” I shrugged, going for nonchalant. “And since I have more time, let me take you to dinner.”

Her eyes widened and she gaped for half a second, then she shook her head. “You might have showered and changed, but I haven’t and I have to study.”

Study? She didn’t look young enough to still be in college.

“You still have to eat, don’t you? Why do it alone?” She opened her mouth to respond, but I continued. “I sprayed you with beer, and you were so nice about it. It’s the least I can do.”

She let out a breath and gave me a thorough perusal from the top of my brown hair down to the loafers on my feet. Her face stayed impassive, making it impossible to tell what she was thinking. She tilted her head to the side again, and her long, shiny black hair fell over her shoulder. Her eyes were narrowed, and her lips were pursed. This did not look promising.

I was about to give up when she finally said, “Fine.”

I had to fight the air that wanted to whoosh out of my lungs at the relief I felt. “Perfect.” I wasn’t giving her a second to change her mind. Placing my hand on the small of her back and loving the way it felt to be so close to her, I steered her to the door. “I’ll drive.”

“You have a car?” She peered over her shoulder, her brows pinching together. “Parking is so expensive. I wish I could afford that.”

Crap. She was under the impression that I was a blue-collar kind of guy. “Uh—” I racked my brain for a plausible explanation for why I’d have a car. “I’m—I’m claustrophobic.” That was a legitimate reason to avoid taking the subway, right? “I don’t like the underground trains.”

While not remotely true, I did make a habit of avoiding the nasty subway, so that little untruth surely wouldn’t come back to bite me.

“Okay...” She shook her head. “But...wouldn’t the bus still be more affordable than paying for parking?”

“No, buses are expensive.” Weren’t they? Probably. “Plus, they make me claustrophobic, too. You know, with all the people.”

Was that how claustrophobia worked? Damn, I wasn’t sure.

Her brows were pinched and her nose was scrunched like she wasn’t quite sure she believed me, so I braced for the next question.

“Okay.” She shook her head. “I guess we all have our issues.”

“Yup.” I agreed, glad that awkward conversation was behind us. With my hand still on her back, soaking in her warmth, I led her to my black Porsche and opened the door for her.

“Wait.” She took a step back. “This tiny car is yours?”

Did she have a thing about small cars? This car tended to get compliments, not scrutiny.

“Uh—” I surveyed it to make sure it wasn’t covered in bird poop or something. But it was waxed and shining. “Yeah.”

“Does this not make you feel cramped?”

“No, it’s got a surprising amount of leg room.” I came in right at six feet, but I didn’t struggle to fit into a car.

She shook her head as she climbed in. “Just seems like a claustrophobic person would hate it.”

I shrugged and shut the door, wondering for a second who was claustrophobic. I rounded the back of the car and froze near the rear quarter panel on the driver’s side. Shit. I was supposed to be claustrophobic.

I cleared my throat and climbed in. “I do better in places that are mine. Places I’m familiar with. It’s just me in the car most of the time, so I don’t feel cramped or panicky.” Did that even make sense?

“Is it going to bother you if I’m here with you?”

Why hadn’t I gone with something like crowds or germs instead? Though taking her to a restaurant would be a challenge if I claimed either one, and I couldn’t take her back to my place and claim I was just a delivery driver. She would take one look around and call me out on the lie.

“I’ll be fine.” I smiled, knowing I would be since I wasn’t fucking claustrophobic. But I needed to remember to pretend I was.

Every few minutes, she’d peek over at me like maybe she was worried I’d have a panic attack. That would only be an issue if I kept forgetting that I was lying. Otherwise, the ride was peaceful. Traffic wasn’t too bad, and twenty minutes later, I pulled up to the curb and climbed out as the valet opened Cara’s door.

“This is ridiculous,” Cara said, wide-eyed.

“Ridiculous?” I scanned our surroundings. This was a nice neighborhood, and the food was amazing.

“Yeah, I assumed we’d grab a burger or pizza or something. I stink like beer, and I’m still dressed in my work clothes. Plus, neither of us should go broke paying for dinner.” She crossed her arms and glared at my favorite restaurant.

Reminding myself that I was broke and couldn't afford it, or at least playing the part—poorly, I might add—I gave up the idea of seared scallops and mushroom risotto. “I think we passed a pizza place...”

She glanced back the way we'd come, then to where the car had been, but the valet had already moved it. “I think so too, but will they tow your car if you leave it here?”

This place delivered dinner to my penthouse three nights a week, and I ate here multiple times a month. They would charge my card on file, and I'd send the valet a few pies from whatever shitty pizza place we found ourselves dining at tonight.

“No,” I assured her and headed for the sidewalk. “I don't like to worry, so let's roll the dice and just head to the pizza place.”

“Yeah, okay.” Though she didn't look convinced, she nodded and fell into step beside me. “Do you live up this way?”

“I do. Just a couple blocks up.” I tipped my chin, trying to be vague. “How about you?”

“I'm down by NYU, kind of between here and the bar.”

Again with the school, but Cara didn't look that young. “Do you go to NYU?”

She nodded, but before I could panic, she added, “Law school. I'm in my last year.”

I spotted the restaurant I'd noticed on our way past and steered her toward the door. “It's a great school.” The idiot I'd hired to be All Out's in-house counsel had graduated from there.

We settled into a booth with paper placemats and sticky seats. I had no idea how I'd impress this woman if this was what I had to work with, but I'd try.

“Do you have a wine list?” I asked the server who approached our table as soon as we sat down.

He snorted. “Yeah, dude. Red or white.”

“Do you normally drink wine with pizza?” Cara asked.

“No.” Pizza and beer. Everyone knew that.

She cocked her head to the side. “So why did you ask about wine?” Her brown eyes studied me as she waited for my response.

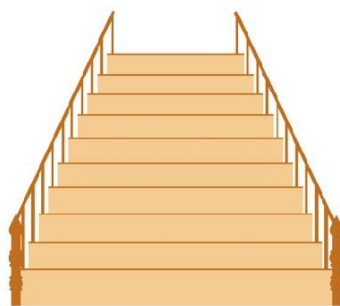
The answer was easy: because a date meant an impressive restaurant and nice wine. It was what women had always expected from me. But I couldn’t tell her that.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “Guess I wasn’t thinking.”

Her brows pulled together. “Do people ever tell you that you’re kind of weird?”

Nope. No one ever said stuff like that to me. Peter Caruso wasn’t the kind of guy people talked to that way. My money and my status as CEO of the fastest-growing craft beer company in the country kept people from being real with me. But Cara didn’t know who I was. This was a chance to just be me. So I’d take that chance and settle into the persona I only let my family and close friends see.

“Can we get two glasses of Pumpkined Out?” I asked the waiter.



Cara

THIS GUY WAS QUIRKY. Almost like he wasn't sure who he was supposed to be.

I chuckled at the glass of familiar beer in my hand. "You know, I'm not sure I love this one as much anymore."

"What do you mean? It's the best fall beer out there." Pete sat up straighter, pulling his shoulders back. Almost like my joke had upset him.

Normally I loved All Out's fall brew, but after I'd worn it all day, it had lost some of the appeal.

"You're awfully proud of a beer you just started delivering."

In response to my teasing, his lips fell into a firm line and his eyes darted around.

I shook my head. Maybe he wasn't new to the company, only to the delivery side of things. "Where did you work before the delivery job?"

He shrugged. "Same brewery since college."

I froze with my glass halfway to my mouth. "You've delivered beer for that company?" I assumed he was new to the business, since his lack of knowledge was impressively bad.

He glanced away and nodded slightly.

"But you've never hooked up a keg before today?" How was that even possible?

"Oh, that wasn't part of my job. Someone else did that."

“They paid two people per truck to deliver beer?” I’d never heard of that. “Doesn’t seem very efficient.”

He chuckled and took a sip of his beer. “You’re telling me. I realized today just how inefficient we were.”

“Well, I’m not sure All Out is any better.” I huffed. “The routes and schedules make no sense. Doesn’t seem like corporate has put much thought into organization. With the way the city is laid out, routes would make more sense running down the avenues.”

“What?” He scrutinized me like he was really assessing my suggestion.

“Well.” I cleared my throat and flipped the placemat over, then pulled a pen out of my purse and started diagramming. “The avenues are like this. Blocks go this way.” He moved around the table to sit next to me, and I scooted over to make room as I drew my grid.

“So you’re suggesting that the routes start uptown and run south?”

Setting down the pen, I traced my finger down the line of one of the avenues. “Yes, they never fully close the avenues, but side streets are shut down all the time, so drivers constantly have to circle back and loop around since all the blocks are one way.”

“Yeah, exactly. Wastes time.” Pete shook his head.

“Right. But if the routes are planned just right, you wouldn’t need to do that. And this way you stay out of the traffic on the FDR Drive and the Henry Hudson Parkway.”

He blinked at the map and traced the same line I had just run my finger over. His hand barely brushed against mine, but when it did, it sent a tingle up my arm. “Can I have this?”

“My placemat?” I asked.

“Yeah, this is a really good idea, Cara.”

“Sure.” I shrugged.

He folded the piece of paper and tucked it into his shirt pocket before dropping his arm behind me in the booth. His thumb brushed my shoulder for an instant, and my stomach jumped in response. He was so close I could smell the spicy hint of his cologne. Part of me wanted to lean in and sniff. The man smelled like heaven. His brown hair was swept across his forehead, and his hard jawline was covered in a light stubble. The basic *I'm trying hard to look like I'm not trying* look. But on Pete, it was hot. His dark brown eyes tracked over my face, watching me watch him. For a minute, the air between us hummed, but he broke the spell when he cleared his throat.

“What else would you do?”

I took a breath, reminding myself that we were having a conversation. I wasn't here to just check out the hot man sitting next to me. So I closed my eyes for a heartbeat to force my mind back to a place where I could focus on my suggestions. “Besides keeping extra of the popular items stocked in each truck and building an extra ten minutes per stop for traffic and disasters like keg geysers?”

He chuckled. “Yes, besides that.”

“I'd rework the routes. I swear every driver I've met complains about liquor stores being shoved into the eleven-to-one slot. It won't always work, so I'd give them a longer day with a lunch break during that time, then float that around the liquor stores and bars that don't open until five.”

He frowned in response to that suggestion.

“You might not care about lunch, but a lot of the drivers would like that.”

“No.” He smiled. “Those are great ideas. What kind of law are you planning to practice after graduation?”

I startled at the subject change. “I'm not sure. Definitely not family or estate or anything criminal. Too much drama. I'm leaning toward the corporate and contracts type of thing.”

“Would you want to work with the unions or big businesses?”

“Maybe the unions. I’m not cutthroat enough for big business.”

“Maybe bigger businesses need someone less cutthroat on their side.” He shifted, and his fingertips brushed against my upper arm.

My body broke out in goose bumps, and my heart beat a fast rhythm against my sternum.

He leaned in closer. “I could use someone like you...”

“Huh?” I choked out, confused. His comment almost made it sound like he was implying he was big business.

Jerking his arm away from me, he sat up straight. “I mean —” He swiped his hand down his face. “The drivers are currently negotiating their contracts. We could use someone like you.”

“Oh.” That made sense. “Well.” I chuckled. “I need to pass the bar first, and I’m not sure I’d be much help when it came to standing up against the asshole who runs All Out.”

His jaw locked, and his eyes hardened.

Hmm. Every time I mentioned the CEO, he tensed up. Did he know the guy personally or something?

“The drivers say that? They call him an asshole?” His words were clipped.

Dammit. I didn’t want my statement to come back to hurt Vince or any of the guys he worked with.

“No.” I assured. “Vince never has anything negative to say about anyone, but it’s obvious. They work him to the bone, and he never gets time off when he wants it. Did you know he had to watch his daughter’s high school graduation on Zoom?”

Pete’s face blanched, and his eyes bugged out of his head. “Yeah, guy does sound like an asshole.”

The server dropped off our slices, and we dug in while watching the comedian on the TV mounted on the wall.

“I love his drunk girls and crocodiles in pants joke.”

“You a fan of Chris?” he asked, shooting me a grin.

I nodded. “Matt Rife is my favorite, but I’m a big fan of just about any comedians.”

“Me too.” Pete went on about a few of his favorite stand-ups, quoting the funniest parts of some of their routines almost word for word. He had me laughing so hard I was almost in tears.

“There are some great comedy clubs around here. We should go sometime.”

“I’d like that.” I opened my wallet and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill when the waiter laid the check down.

“I got it.” He slid the cash back to me.

But I was determined. I picked it up and put it back on top of the check.

“It’s pizza and beer. The whole point of coming here was so we could split the check.”

He frowned at me and shook his head. Without another word, he snagged the check and my twenty and headed to the counter. I studied his profile as he talked to the woman at the register. He was strong. He didn’t look like he spent all his time at the gym, but the tight muscles of his shoulders were obvious under his white cotton button-down. Not to mention the tapered waist and an ass that looked spectacular in his jeans. He turned, and when he caught me staring, he smirked.

My face heated, and I glanced down.

“Hey.” Suddenly, he was beside me, tipping my chin up so I had to meet his deep-brown eyes. “I’d stare at you all day if I could *cara mia*, so I love having your eyes on me.”

My breath caught at the way *cara mia* almost felt like a caress. His voice was so smooth and deep and hypnotizing.

He focused on my lips for one brief second, and my heart skipped. Before I could even consider the idea that he might close the few inches between us, he released my chin and offered me his hand. I accepted, and instead of letting it go once I was on my feet, he wrapped his fingers around mine.

For a man who worked with his hands, his palms were surprisingly smooth.

He tossed a twenty on the table, then tugged my hand like he was ready to lead me to the door.

Eyes narrowed, I held myself in place firmly and looked from the table to him. “Did you not use it to pay?”

He shrugged. “I paid. You tipped.”

“That’s like a 65 percent tip!” I shouted, my stomach twisting at the idea of throwing around so much money.

Smirking, he regarded me. “He did a good job, Cara. And twenty dollars is nothing for a tip.”

“Good, yeah. But at most, that’s worth 25 percent.” I shook my head. “I need more customers like you.”

He tugged on my hand again, pulling me until there was only an inch of space between his body and mine. “Tell me what days you work, and I’ll be there every time.”

Was he joking? “You deliver beer every day, remember?” I shook my head.

He sighed. “Yes, that does seem to be hard for me to remember.”

I laughed. Pete was hot and funny, but very weird.

It wasn’t until we approached the door that I realized it was raining. “Darn it.” With as hard as it was coming down, we were going to be soaked by the time we walked the block back to the valet.

“Don’t worry.” Pete pulled me back from the door.

Before I could ask why his car was pulling up to the curb, some guy jumped out and ran to the door. Pete opened it, and the guy tossed him the key.

My mouth fell open, and the question on the tip of my tongue disappeared into the ether.

“Thanks, Pete,” the young guy said as he moved past us and strode to the counter.

“H-uh?” I stuttered, looking from Pete to the guy who was taking two pizzas from the woman behind the counter. “He knew your name.”

“We’re friends.” Pete pulled the door open and ran toward the car.

Dumbstruck, all I could do was follow. But I guessed it made sense now that he wasn’t worried about the restaurant being mad about his car.

My apartment wasn’t far, and with the rain coming down the way it was, the streets were fairly empty, so we got there in no time.

“You can’t park here,” I warned when he pulled up in front of my building and put his flashers on. “You’re going to get towed.”

“It’s fine. I’d rather get towed than wet.” Pete snorted. Was this guy for real?

“Are you friends with the police too?” I asked.

“How would I know the police?” He cocked his head and chuckled. “You’re cute when you’re confused. But come on. I’m going to walk you up. We’ll only be a minute.”

We ran inside, dodging the raindrops as best as we could, and I stopped when he headed toward the elevators.

“Don’t you want to take the stairs?” I pointed to the left.

“Why?” Pete’s brow rose.

“You’re claustrophobic.” I moved to the stairs and pulled the heavy door open.

With a sigh, he headed my way. “How very annoying of me,” he muttered as he grasped the door and gestured for me to step through. “What floor are you?”

“Fifteen.”

He sucked in a breath. “Fif-fifteen?”

I peered over my shoulder at him and bit back a laugh when his face paled. “A little exercise won’t hurt. It’ll help us

burn off the pizza and beer.”

“Fifteen flights is a hell of a lot more than a little exercise.”

I shrugged and jogged up the first flight. “You’ll be fine. We can race.”

“Is this how you punish your subs?”

My what? I turned at the landing, and Pete quickly came to a stop to avoid barreling into me.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head, and redness crept up his neck and into his face.

Outside my apartment door, I turned to face him.

He slapped a hand against the wall to brace himself as he took long pulls of breath in and let them out dramatically.

“Need. To. Catch. My. Breath,” he huffed.

“Oh, stop. Either you’re more out of shape than you look, or...” I shook my head and whacked him lightly with the back of my hand. “You’re being a little dramatic.”

He smiled and leaned in. “Maybe dramatic.”

His breath danced off the side of my face, and I fought the shiver.

“Odd how you’re suddenly not out of breath.”

He laughed and pulled the keys out of my hand. Before I could argue, he moved to my door and opened it. “Did I earn your phone number now that I’ve climbed fifteen flights of stairs?”

“Hmm. Maybe.” I stepped over the threshold and leaned against the door. “Especially since you’re about to walk down them again.”

He groaned and pulled his phone from his pocket. “Don’t make me beg, cara mia.” He held the device out to me and braced his hand on the doorjamb.

I sent myself a text and smirked.

Leaning in, he brushed his lips against my cheek. My heart, which had been fine on the steps, suddenly took off in a sprint as he pulled his phone back. And I swear my entire body tingled from the feel of his soft lips against my cheek alone.

“I’ll text you.” He smiled at me, then half turned and glared at the door to the stairs. “I must like you a whole hell of a lot to walk this again.”

He pushed through the door, and then he was gone, leaving me standing in my doorway wearing a smile. Weird or not, I definitely liked Pete.



Pete

ALAN SCOWLED as he stalked into my office in his usual navy-blue button-down with the embroidered All Out logo.

“Are we ready to actually work now?” he gritted out, dropping into the chair across from me and propping an ankle on his knee.

“Here.” I tossed my draft of the terms for new contracts for the drivers across the desk. After I’d walked down what felt like sixty-two thousand steps, darted through the rain, and climbed back into my car, I was wired. Honestly, I didn’t know whether it was the steps or Cara.

Probably the latter. Although my original plan had been to take her out, then get her into bed, I’d had no idea how much I’d enjoy her company. She was not only smoking hot, but she was smart. Her ideas had impressed the shit out of me, and she made me laugh and smile more than I realized any woman could.

“When did you do this?” Alan flipped the pages and skimmed over each one.

“Last night, like you wanted.” By the time we’d left the pizza place, I’d realized that I wanted to spend more time with Cara. A lot more time. And that meant I’d have to tell her the truth eventually. And I’d be damned if she still thought I was an asshole when I did, so I was fixing my image.

“Pete...we’re giving them personal days.” Alan thumbed to the last page. “This isn’t only reasonable; this is smart.”

“Of course it is. We aren’t assholes.” That was my new mantra.

“For almost a year now, you’ve been preaching about how we need to be more cutthroat.” Alan narrowed his eyes at me and held the stack of papers up in one hand.

“People change.” I shrugged.

“Not overnight.” He flipped to the last page. “Who wrote these?”

“That’s my handwriting.” I waved at the draft I’d stayed up half the night working on. “You know that.”

Alan huffed. “But who helped you?”

I wasn’t ready to bring up Cara yet. If I did, he’d give me a lecture for lying. Yes, the lying part was shitty, but if she’d known I was the asshole CEO, she wouldn’t have given me a chance. She had to get to know me first and then find out who I was.

“I didn’t need help.” Wasn’t he the one who’d been advocating for them? Just yesterday, he’d been trying to convince me to give into their demands. Yet now he was upset? “We can’t treat our employees poorly and have unreasonable expectations for them. We need to figure out better routes. Crisscrossing the city is ridiculous. We need better trucks too. Most uncomfortable thing I’ve ever ridden in. Also, I want a system in place where they can take time off when they need to.”

Alan scanned the documents again with only a grunt of approval. “I’ll have Craig look over these before our meeting with the drivers.”

I nodded. Now that it was settled, I wanted to focus on texting Cara. Although she had given me her number last night, I hadn’t contacted her yet. Not because it’d be needy—I didn’t give a shit if I came across as needy; she was great, and she should know that—but because I had no idea what kind of date to suggest. I’d love to say *hey, want to fly to Dallas this weekend and see the Matt Rife show?* but a trip like that wasn’t something my drivers could afford. Even my box seats at the Garden would be pushing it, though she’d probably flip if I took her to see Kevin Hart’s show in two weeks.

“Can I ask you something?” I tipped back in my chair and stared at the ceiling.

“What’s wrong?” Alan asked, his voice full of trepidation.

“What do you do if you don’t want to spend money?” I couldn’t take her for pizza every time I wanted to see her.

“Do?”

“Yeah. You know, like when you go out?” I spun back to look at him.

Alan pursed his lips and scrutinized me. Did he still not get my question?

“Like what do you do for fun if you’re trying to be cheap?”

“Pete, I’m not cheap.” He scoffed.

That was true. Alan had a house the size of a football field somewhere in Jersey and had just purchased his third boat or something like that. Yeah, the fucker was rich. And no help. Who did I know who was cheap?

I snapped my finger. “I should ask Owen. The schmuck’s a firefighter.”

A loud sigh echoed through the room. “Stop being an ass. He’s not cheap.”

Maybe I was being dramatic. “Okay...but, like, what do college students do?”

“College?” he asked, dropping his chin and giving me an incredulous look.

“For example, a law student. What could a law student afford to do?”

“Law, like someone who could write reasonable terms?” He chuckled and pushed to his feet.

“Huh?”

“Your girl of the week did these terms? Got it. While I don’t support the girl-of-the-week-mentality, I’m grateful for a suggested contract that the union will love.”

“Cara is so much more than a girl of the week.” I scowled at the idea of her being used for a few dates and sex.

Alan smiled. “I can’t wait to meet her.” With that, he strolled out of my office without bothering to close the door behind him.

I opened my text thread with Owen.

Me:

So, you don’t have money. Like, you’re broke.

Owen:

Is that an accusation or a statement?

Why was he being so sensitive?

Me:

There is nothing wrong with being broke.

Owen.

Too bad that’s not true about being a pompous prick.

Fine. I’d try a different approach.

Me:

If you can’t spend money, what do you do for dates? Like to impress someone?

Owen:

Not doing any of that these days.

Me:

What? Why?

Owen:

Cece's pregnant, remember?

Oh. Right. Well, he wasn't going to be helpful.

I switched over to Danny.

Me:

You're broke. Where would you go on a date?

Danny:

I'm not broke.

I sighed. Why is everyone making this so difficult?

Me:

Let's say I'm pretending to be broke and need a date idea.

Danny:

You're what?

Danny:

No, wait. I don't want to be involved in whatever the fuck you're doing. Just take her out for drinks.

Me:

Where should I go? Last night when I tried to go to Della Monte, she panicked. So that probably means the 800 club and Beast are out too, right?

Danny:

Right, dumbass. Obviously it can't be anything fancy. There's a sports bar near NYU. I'll look it up. It's low key. They probably do happy hour.

Me:

I don't care about happy hour.

Danny:

Not about you, dumbass.

Me:

How do you know about this place?

Danny:

Used to go there with Glory.

I winced. Damn, I shouldn't have forgotten that his ex went to NYU.

I really needed to be less of an asshole.



“THIS IS YOUR SECOND DATE?” Glory’s voice echoed through the phone as I walked down the busy city street.

“Yeah. He’s...” I didn’t know how to finish that sentence. Pete was odd, but when he texted and asked me to meet up for drinks, I couldn’t fight my smile. And I was excited about seeing him again. “Intriguingly weird.”

She chuckled. “Weird. Then why are you going out with him again?”

“Because he’s also funny. And hot.” I paused at the crosswalk and waited for the green light. “Like I keep telling you, you have to actually date people to find the right one.” Since Glory had broken up with her boyfriend, she’d been on an anti-dating kick. She’d dated the guy forever, but she was scared to do the long-distance thing, so she’d ended it. “My options are limited because, unlike you, I’m not living the life of the rich and famous.”

“I’m back in New York full time.” I could hear the eye roll in my bestie’s voice. “Plus, living in Haiti was not glamorous.”

“Doesn’t Edgar DeLeon own the Schools First that you were doing PR for? He’s the famous soccer guy, right? And I’m pretty sure I’ve heard you gush about hanging out with the Metros shortstop and the guy who plays for the Revs.” I smirked, even though she couldn’t see me.

“Yeah, yeah. Jose Garcia plays for the Metros. Super sweet guy. And the Revs’ outfielder? Kyle Bosco? Hilarious.”

The crosswalk signal changed, giving pedestrians the right of way, so I stepped off the curb. I hadn’t taken more than

three steps before a loud honk sounded and a car came skidding to a stop. The driver swung open his door, causing a bike carrier to swerve to avoid a head-on collision with the door. The biker instead crashed into a garbage can and dumped its contents onto the road.

“What the hell, lady?” the driver shouted at me. *Me*. The little dude on the crosswalk light was illuminated, yet this idiot was harassing me? He was the one in the wrong.

“Sounds like Calamity Cara strikes again.” Glory chuckled.

I rolled my eyes. “Not even my fault. I wasn’t jaywalking, and I had the right of way.”

“Of course, you rule follower, you.”

Sighing, I came to a stop outside the sports bar. I couldn’t have picked a better place, since I’d been at the NYU library most of the afternoon and this was a block away. The chill vibe of the place meant I hadn’t had to rush home and change from my jeans into a dress.

“All right, gotta go. About to walk in.”

“Call me later.”

After agreeing to check in with her, I ended the call, took a deep breath, and pulled the door open.

The Metros game playing on the screens above the bar caught my attention as I weaved through the busy space, searching for Pete.

I spotted him just as he stood and waved. With a smile, I pivoted and strode toward him, but two steps in, my stomach bottomed out. A chair was suddenly pushed out in front of me, and I had to think fast to side-step it. When I’d maneuvered past it without incident, I let my shoulders drop and heaved out a sigh of relief.

Pete chuckled. “You okay?” he asked when I was within earshot. His eyes raked over my crop top and jeans before lifting back to my face.

I found myself locked in his gaze, and the air between us charged with a current so strong I could practically hear the electricity coursing through it.

“You look gorgeous, cara mia,” he said, finally breaking eye contact to focus on my mouth.

Once again, the way he said it made my stomach flip. Pressing my teeth into my bottom lip, I fought the shiver that was trying to work through me.

“Thanks.” I swallowed.

He pulled out the stool next to him and signaled for the waitress. “What can I get you? I have a tab, so order whatever you want.”

He already had a beer sitting on the table, so I’d follow his lead.

“I guess a Michelob Ultra,” I said to the waitress.

His gaze snapped back to me. “What’s wrong with the Easy Out?”

“The what?” I cocked my head to the side.

“All Out’s light beer.” He glanced back to the waitress. “Can you bring us one of those and the Ultra?”

She nodded and walked away.

“I didn’t realize they had a light beer.” Red Zone carried a bunch of the All Out brand in bottles, along with Knocked Out and the seasonal on draft. Yet I’d never heard of Easy Out.

“It’s the best light beer out there.” He frowned, then dove into an explanation of the differences between Easy Out and other light beers. He was still going on about it when our waitress returned with our drinks. Wanting to appease him, I skipped the Ultra and tried it.

The full flavor hit my mouth, shocking me. It tasted like a full-calorie beer, but according to the label, it was a light beer.

“All Out should up their marketing campaign for this. It’s really good.” I took another sip.

“I know. I keep saying that,” he said with a hint of what might have been pride.

“You’re awfully invested in this company for being a new delivery driver.”

He shrugged and looked away. Crap. I hadn’t meant to offend him.

“There’s nothing wrong with being a delivery driver. It seems like a great job. Vince always raves about all the people he meets. So many of his regular drops feed him when he delivers the beer. And bars are always going to need beer, so you’ve got job security. If it wasn’t for the stupid owner, Vince would love his job.”

Pete’s eyes widened comically. Looked like I’d still stuck my foot in my mouth. His reaction only solidified my theory that he had some kind of connection to the owner. I needed to stop bashing the guy.

“The owner is probably fine.” I backpedaled. “Maybe he just doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

A redness crept up Pete’s neck and into his face. *Oh God, just shut up already.* I picked up the beer and took another sip, forcing myself to stop talking.

The crowd around us erupted in a cheer, thankfully breaking the uncomfortable tension brewing between us. Saved by a Mets three-run homer. I chuckled when I took in the guy the cameras were following. It was Jose Garcia, Glory’s new friend.

“I have a box—if you wanted to go sometime.”

Confused, I turned back to him. He was watching me instead of the game. His tone was full of a hesitancy I didn’t understand. Having a set of four box seats at Citi Field was awesome, but expensive.

“You have season tickets?”

He paused, his brows knitting together slightly. “Um, yeah.” He swallowed and looked around, his mouth pulling down at the corners. “I share them with a friend.” He hurried

on as if possessing tickets needed this monster explanation. “He knows a guy on the team.”

“Your friend knows one of the players? Who?” Wouldn’t it be ironic if he was friends with some of Glory’s friends? Glory’s brother was a former Metro himself and on the coaching staff now, so she knew most of the team.

“Yeah, my college roommate knows Corey Matthews.”

I almost choked on my beer. Glory’s brother Marc was one of Corey’s best friends. What a small world.

“I was hoping you were going to say Cortney Miller. He’s my favorite. I can’t believe he got traded.”

In response to my comment, Pete’s eyes flashed and his jaw clenched.

“You can’t hate Miller. Everyone loves him. Especially since he did that *Rolling Stone* cover.”

Pete scoffed and rolled his eyes. “The guy’s probably the best catcher in the league, but all everyone talks about is his ___”

“Thor-like good looks,” I finished.

Pete glared. “Going to root for Boston now?”

“Nope, Miller is a great player, but I grew up on Long Island. I could never become a Boston fan. That’s like blasphemy.”

Pete chuckled.

“Plus, I’ve never really had a thing for blond guys.”

Leaning back in his chair, Pete raised a brow. “What type of guys do you like?”

I took in the gorgeous man sitting next to me. “I’ve always been attracted to the Italian look. You know—tan, dark hair.”

He leaned in a little closer. “Dark eyes.”

His smile was growing.

“And lately...” I ran my bottom lip between my teeth, watching his eyes zero in on my mouth. “I’ve found I like

weird.”

Scoffing, he sat back, and I couldn't hold back the giggle that escaped.

“You are the only person I know who thinks I'm weird.” Pete chuckled and brought his beer to his lips.

“I very much doubt that.” I turned to the TV as another cheer echoed around the bar.

“So you like all sports, or just baseball?”

I shrugged. “I don't watch a lot of sports on TV, but I enjoy catching a game here and there. My best friend is a big Metros fan.”

“Oh really?” Pete tipped his head. “Is she a Cortney Miller fan too?”

Maybe. I didn't know whether she was into anyone at the moment, but Glory did have a thing for tall and blond; that was for sure.

“Just the Metros in general.” I hated name-dropping Glory's brother. “Her whole family, in fact.”

“We should go to a game sometime. You can bring your friend, and I'll bring mine.”

“That would be fun. I'd love to watch from box seats.” And I meant it. I liked Pete. And Glory could use a date with someone new. Maybe it would push her to get over Danny. No matter how much she denied it, the girl was still stuck on him.

8



Pete

WELL, fuck. I didn't have box seats. I had a box. As in a suite at Citi Field. And delivery guys didn't own suites. I had to get better at remembering to pretend I wasn't rich.

She tilted her head. "Did you change your mind?"

And I also had to stop wincing every time I messed this up. No wonder this woman thought I was weird. I didn't want to make it worse by saying that, yes, I had, in fact, changed my mind. But how the hell was I going to take her to a game? We could not go to my suite. I had been creative about explaining my mistakes so far, but there was no way I could bring her to a box at a massive stadium and still claim to be poor.

Before I could go into full-on panic mode, the answer came to me. I'd buy a couple of box seats. There. Easy.

"No. I'd love to go with you. Pick the game." I hesitated then. Did delivery drivers get days off? Mine sure didn't. "And I'll see if I can get the time off." I rushed the words out. Otherwise she'd call me on the fact that I was supposed to be working.

"No one ever calls you weird? Really?" A teasing smile flitted across her face.

No one would dare call me weird. I intimidated most people. "I can honestly say you're the only one who's said that."

She hid her smile behind her beer bottle as she raised it to her lips. "I think they just don't tell you."

Yeah. True. But I loved that Cara didn't have a problem being completely honest with me.

I smirked as she took another sip of the Easy Out. She hadn't even touched the Ultra since our drinks were delivered.

"Do you want another Easy Out?"

"Sure. The hint of lime is great." She studied the bottle in her hand. "Wonder how many calories it has."

"Ninety-four calories per twelve ounces."

"You know a lot about All Out's beer."

"The drivers have to sell it." I shrugged.

Her brows furrowed. "Don't the beer reps do that?"

Shit. Right. Beer reps. Every conversation with this woman made me question how I had spent the last two years running All Out. I sounded like a moron every time I talked beer with her.

"Is that what you want to do? Be a beer rep?" she asked.

I only ever intended to run the company, so I had no clue how I was supposed to answer that.

But luckily the waitress appeared at our table, and I had a temporary reprieve.

"Did you want to order food?" I directed at Cara.

"Yeah, I love the loaded nachos here."

While we ate the nachos, she talked about law school and studying for the bar. She wanted to do corporate work but had no concrete plan. I was already dreaming about replacing Craig with Cara when she got her license. She was so smart, and she had a knack for seeing the bigger picture. And she was a lot less cutthroat than I was. Her input would balance things out perfectly. Plus, I'd get to see her every day.

Only a couple of nachos remained on the plate when Cara said, "I should probably get going. I've got an early class tomorrow, and then I'm driving out to Long Island."

"Oh. For what?" I signaled for the waitress.

“To see my mom.”

Damn. We’d be in the same area, but I’d be too busy with the festival to see her.

“Do you have any free time next week?”

“I can probably squeeze you in,” she said with a cheeky smirk as the waitress approached with the bill. “I can pay for mine—”

I shook my head. “Nope. Not this time. I got it.”

She sighed. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Can I walk you home?”

“Can I pay next time?”

“Sure.” I smirked. That wasn’t actually going to happen, but I’d let her think she could if it meant I could spend a little more time with her.

As we walked, my situation hit me. I was still claustrophobic. And that meant she would make me climb fifteen flights of stairs again.

“You’re not planning to go to a friend’s house or anything tonight, are you?”

She didn’t stop walking, but she half turned and frowned at me. “No, why?”

“Just curious.” I shrugged.

She turned back to the sidewalk but side-eyed me, brows still pinched together, and shook her head.

By the time we’d approached her building, I’d made my decision. No stairs.

“We can take the elevator this time.” I bypassed the steps once inside and continued toward the elevator.

“But—” she started.

“I’ve been doing meditation,” I lied. “If I close my eyes and pretend that I’m somewhere else, I forget about being claustrophobic.”

“Does that really work?” She pursed her lips and studied my face, probably looking for the lie. “I didn’t realize that was a thing.”

Of course it wasn’t a thing, but I was making it one. I wasn’t walking up three hundred stairs again.

I shrugged, doubling down and hoping my expression looked earnest. “I’ve heard good things, so I’ve been practicing. Now it’s time to really give it a try.”

Even with my eyes firmly shut, I could feel her attention on me as the door closed. I breathed in and out slowly for what felt like a lifetime, since her building’s elevator was apparently the slowest one in existence.

“You doing okay?” she asked. There was an edge to her voice, like she was truly concerned for me.

“I’m perfect,” I croaked, playing the part of a man concentrating hard on not panicking. “I’m on a beach, watching you run in the waves in a string bikini.”

Beside me, she giggled. Then she whacked me in the stomach. With my eyes still closed, I grabbed for her blindly, then yanked her toward me once I caught her wrist. She came willingly as I pulled her into my chest.

I couldn’t see her, but the warmth of her body pressed into mine, and her perfume invaded my senses. My gut clenched and my heart beat hard as I slowly ran my hand over the silky skin of her arm up to her face. I cupped her cheek and tipped her chin up. Her breath caught, making my dick jump in my jeans. Each of her exhales rushed along my neck and made her soft breasts press against my sternum. Dammit. I couldn’t take it anymore.

I just needed one taste.

Lowering my face, I captured her plush lips. With a sigh, she opened for me. I took that as permission to dip inside her mouth and tangle my tongue with hers. She arched into me in response, and all the blood in my body beelined south. Desire pounded through me with the gentle whimper that came from deep within her throat.

I dragged my other hand from her waist to her neck, then spun so her back was pressed against the wall and proceeded to devour her.

Ding.

The elevator door opened, startling us both. It took me a second to find my bearings, but when I did, I quickly stepped back to block the door from closing. With her eyes locked on me, she pressed the tips of her fingers against her lips. The place I wanted to be. Especially when she smiled behind them.

Damn, she was gorgeous. And I wanted nothing more than to invite myself inside her apartment to finish what that kiss had started. But she stepped past me and placed an all too quick peck on my cheek.

“I’ll text you about the game?”

“Hell yeah you will.” I moved back into the elevator and watched her.

She headed for her apartment, smiling over her shoulder just as the elevator doors closed.

I rode back down to the lobby with my eyes wide open and a smile on my face. Damn. I liked this girl a whole hell of a lot, and that meant that on our next date, I had to tell her who I really was.



Cara

“I STILL CAN’T BELIEVE you snagged these tickets,” Glory said, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward a beer tent.

“Slow down. We don’t all have legs like giraffes,” I complained as I jogged to keep up with her.

It was too hot to run. It was almost ninety degrees, but no one but me seemed to mind. This place was hopping. All Out had a different tent for each of its brews, and various vendors were set up on either side of the fairway. At one end was a kids’ zone full of games, rides, and bouncy houses, and on the other, there were more food trucks than I’d ever seen in one place.

I groaned once we were in line. “Really? Pumpkined Out? It’s August.”

“It’s my favorite. Does not matter what time of year it is.” She fanned herself. Even in cutoffs and tank tops, it was hot as heck in the open field.

“I want to grab an Easy Out after you get your pumpkin.”

“Easy Out?” She cocked a brow and frowned. She was so much taller than I was that she had to tilt her head down to look me in the eye, and her long black ponytail fell over her shoulder.

“Yeah. I think I’m addicted. I bought a six-pack the other day to keep in the fridge after Pete made me try it.”

“Oh, Pete.” She chuckled. “No wonder you like it.”

“Shut up. It’s really good.”

“Guess I’ll have to try it so I can make sure you aren’t blinded by lust.” She rolled her eyes.

A moment later, the people in front of us walked away with their beers and we stepped up to the counter. As we did, the nozzle in the man’s hand sputtered and popped, sending beer spraying all over the inside of the tent. The man jumped back, rubbing his eye, and knocked into the tower of cups behind him. In slow motion, the whole stack teetered. Then it tipped, and the plastic cups clattered to the ground.

For a beat, there was nothing but silence.

Then Glory laughed. “You know that happened because you’re here, right?”

I rolled my eyes. My best friend was convinced I was a magnet for chaos. And although I wouldn’t say it a loud, I did notice that random shit like this happened around me often. It took them a few minutes to get a new keg tapped and a sleeve of fresh cups, but once Glory had her Pumpkined Out in hand, I led her toward the Easy Out tent.

“I’m telling you, this beer has the perfect hint of lime.”

“Or is it the perfect hint of Pete?” she teased as we joined the line.

While we waited, I scanned the people working behind the table.

I caught sight of a familiar dark-haired hottie and couldn’t help but grin. “Huh.” I had no idea he’d be here today, but there he stood in a white polo with the All Out logo. Whoever designed their gear was a master at marketing. Their logo—the bold letters surrounded by the hops flowers—always popped. “Pete’s here.”

“Where?” Glory looked over.

“Right there. Hmm. I wonder why he didn’t mention that he’d be here when I told him I’d be in Long Island.” I nodded toward where he was chatting to another man off to the side of the vendor table.

“Probably because he didn’t want to rope himself into meeting your mom or something.” Glory laughed. She stepped up close and looked to where I was pointing. The smile fell from her face. “Wait...” She scanned the area behind the tent, leaning one way, then the other. “You mean Peter Caruso. As in the owner of All Out?”

Somewhere nearby, I swore a record scratched. The what?

“No.” I shook my head. “The dark-haired guy in the white shirt and black pants. He’s a delivery driver. He must be dropping off beer.”

“That guy, right there? The one running his hand through his hair?” She pointed straight at Pete.

I nodded, my stomach suddenly tying itself in knots.

“He’s not a delivery driver. That’s Danny’s college roommate.”

“Danny...” I frowned. “Danny Evans’s roommate?”

Glory sighed. “Yes. Peter Caruso, the gazzionaire.”

I swallowed hard, trying to force my heart to dislodge itself from my throat. Was this some kind of joke?

He looked up as if he could sense our scrutiny and locked eyes with me. A smile broke out on his face for half a second, but then his attention flicked to my right. When he noticed Glory, that smile morphed into an expression that could only be described as *oh, fuck*.

And my stomach dropped. I’d thought that Pete and I were starting something that could be serious. But he’d been what? Playing a joke?

His jaw went rigid, and he closed his eyes and took a breath so deep I could see his chest rise and fall from here. Regardless of whether he’d pretended to be a delivery driver as a joke or as some sort of sick trick, it was obvious by the look on his face that he knew Glory, so she wasn’t wrong about who he was. After half a dozen heartbeats, while I was stunned speechless and frozen to the spot, he opened his eyes and focused on me again.

God, I felt stupid. How was I naïve enough to fall for whatever game this was? No way I'd let him see how badly this stung, so I steeled myself.

I mouthed "asshole" and grabbed Glory by the arm. "Come on, let's go."

"Where are we going?" she asked, though she didn't hesitate to follow after me.

"Far away from Pete." He had been lying to me the whole time. Probably laughing about how gullible I was.

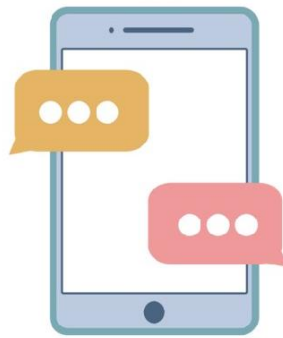
He shouted my name behind us, but I didn't turn around.

"He's following us," Glory said.

When I stole a glance over my shoulder, Pete was making his way through the crowd.

For once, luck was on my side and someone stepped in his way, giving us a chance to get lost in the throng of people.

10



Pete:

Where'd you go?

Pete:

Please pick up the phone. Just give me a minute to explain.

Pete:

Come on, Cara. It's been two days. I just want to talk. Can we meet?

Pete:

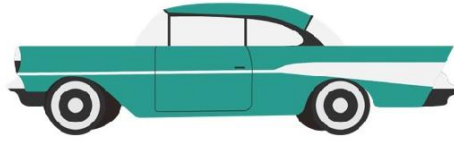
I swung by the bar today, but they said you don't work on Wednesdays.

Pete:

Don't make me keep showing up and pathetically looking for you.

Pete:

Have you ever let a person assume something about you because you just didn't know how to explain the truth?



Cara

IT WAS weird to mourn the loss of something I never actually had. But I had been feeling that way for the last week. Pete and I had really hadn't really even started. We were almost nothing in the grand scheme of things, but I missed that nothing. I had worked on Tuesday night, trying to ignore the Metros game playing on almost every screen around the bar. Because every time I saw the team, I thought of Pete. Not the owner of All Out, but the guy who thought closing his eyes would make him forget that he was claustrophobic.

Why the hell had he lied to me? What was his end game? Because he really couldn't have been stupid enough to think that a relationship based on a lie could work.

"You okay, girlie?" My mom bumped her shoulder against mine.

Around us, engines revved and too many people moved from one car to another. The place was loud and chaotic and not at all what I was in the mood for. But my dad had been big into classic cars when he was alive, and he'd always dragged us to car shows with him. Now my mom and I went to as many as my schedule would allow. Strangely, it really did help me feel closer to him.

"I'm fine." I forced myself to be in the moment. I wandered over to a 1970 Corvette, but I froze in place when a big orange pumpkin came into view. "Let's go back this way," I said, grabbing my mom's hand and tugging her in the opposite direction.

"Why?" she asked, digging her heels into the grass, unwilling to move.

“Just...I want to see what kind of cars there are down near the end.” I nodded and pulled on her forearm again, desperate to get away from the beer tent and the huge pumpkin looming nearby.

My mom pulled back and huffed. “What is wrong with you? You’ve been a space cadet all day, and now you’re panicking. What’s the problem?” She peered around us.

“Nothing. Just come on.” I stepped back, still pulling her with me, and bumped into something hard. My heart lurched as the loud, piercing sound of a car alarm rang out from behind me.

Frantically, I scanned the area around us, hoping the owner was nearby to shut it off quickly. But the blaring scream didn’t stop. I stole a glance at the All Out vendor table, praying I hadn’t garnered the attention of anyone who may or may not be working there, only to find Pete staring at me. My stomach plummeted.

He jumped out of his chair and dodged people left and right as he hurried toward us.

I swallowed thickly and braced myself. There was no getting out of this conversation.

Awesome.

“All Out has a setup here. The guy I was telling you about owns the company.” I sighed and nodded. “See the big pumpkin? And now Pete knows I’m here.”

“Oh, honey. Why not hear him out? You said he’s been texting you nonstop. And you’ve been miserable all weekend.” My mom shook her head. The silent *tsk, tsk* obvious, even if she didn’t voice it. “Being stubborn only hurts you, and I didn’t raise you to be that way.”

I guffawed. She was more stubborn than me. “Yeah, okay.”

“Go talk to him,” she insisted, patting my upper arm.

It wasn’t like I had much of a choice at this point. And from the smirk on my mother’s face as Pete finally reached us, she knew it too.

“Peter Caruso,” he said, holding his hand out to my mother. He was panting, and beads of sweat had formed at his hairline.

She shook his hand, but her lips pulled into a frown, and she cocked one scrutinizing brow. “I’ve heard about you.”

Pete winced. “All true and awful, I’m sure.”

She chuckled and stepped back. “I’ll give you two some time.”

He watched her step away before turning to me. “Cara,” he rasped, “please just give me two minutes.”

“This isn’t the time or the place.” I shook my head.

“It is the time, and I’ll find a place.” He spun, searching for a quiet spot.

My heart lurched when he grabbed my hand and goose bumps popped up all over my body. Why did I still react to him this way?

Jaw clenched, he continued his visual scan of the area, his dark eyes more serious than I’d ever seen them. “This way.” He pulled me toward the All Out tent. “We can talk in the pumpkin.”

The big orange thing was about the size of a shed. It was windowless, and the sun was bright and high in the sky, so I was prepared to feel like I’d stepped inside a sauna when I climbed in, but the dark space was surprisingly cool. As I moved deeper inside, I realized there was a vent pumping out cool air near the back. Spinning toward the door, I regarded Pete, then caught sight of three other people inside, along with stacks of bottles of All Out beers.

“Get. Out,” Pete ordered. He pointed to the bright grassy area just outside the pumpkin and held the door open as everyone filed out. Once we were alone, he slammed the door shut.

“You have a pumpkin fridge?” I asked, turning in a slow circle.

“It’s a normal fridge. It just has a pumpkin shell.” He shrugged. With a deep breath in, he dropped his shoulders, like all the stress he’d felt moments ago had melted away.

I wasn’t sure why. Being in the same room solved nothing.

“Okay,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest, “you got me in here. What do you want to say?”

“I’m sorry—”

“I got your texts. I’ve heard it already.” I huffed. “I don’t care that you’re sorry. You’re a lying asshole, and I don’t even understand why you did it.”

He tossed his arms in the air. “Because I wanted to sleep with you, and that wasn’t going to happen if I wasn’t a delivery schmuck.”

Wow. I blinked and scoffed. *That* was his big apology? Was he kidding? I glared, but all he did was stand there and study me silently. So I turned and pulled hard on the door. It didn’t budge.

“No. Cara, wait. Don’t leave. That came out wrong.”

I didn’t care. The two minutes he’d requested were up. I yanked again, harder this time, and stumbled back into his hard body. Was the door locked? I tried again, gentler this time, but it still didn’t budge.

“Did you lock me in a pumpkin?” I whirled on him and pulled my shoulders back.

“Pumpkin shell,” he corrected.

My only response was a scowl. If this motherfucker thought this was the time for humor...

He put both hands up. “But I didn’t lock us in.” He reached around me and tried the handle himself, though his effort was in vain. “Something tells me it was probably a you thing.”

“Me? You’re the one who slammed the door!”

He chuckled. “Yeah. But you’re the one who always seems to cause these things.” He shook his head and slid his hands

into his pockets, not looking the least bit upset. “Calamity Jane...or Calamity Cara, maybe?”

“And you’re the asshole who locked me in a pumpkin shell.”

I stomped over to the wall and slid to the floor, tucking my dress over my legs in hopes that I wouldn’t freeze in this frigid pumpkin. Sliding my eyes shut, I sighed. I was locked in here with him, but that didn’t mean I had to listen to him any longer. He’d already said plenty.



Pete

GOD, I needed to shut the fuck up. I was only making things worse. Apparently, I couldn't not be a dumbass around her. Ten minutes ago, when I noticed Cara standing just a few cars away from the All Out booth, looking hot as hell in her red sundress, I was sure luck was finally on my side. Like fate had intervened and put us in the same place at the same time. But if I couldn't get her to listen, then I had no hope of fixing this, regardless of fate's little nudge.

I pulled in a long, deep breath, then let it out slowly and forced my shoulders to relax again as I sat next to her. She opened her big brown eyes and surveyed me warily. More than anything, I wanted to be the recipient of one of her smiles again.

“What I was trying to say, if you had paid attention to the meaning behind my dumb words—”

She leveled me with a glare, so I tried again.

“At first, I lied because I'm a stupid man who doesn't think things through. But then we went out, and I realized you were so much more than a pretty face. But if I told you I was the guy you thought was an asshole—”

“What?” She cocked her head and finally looked at me.

“You called the owner of All Out an asshole like twelve times that night we went out for pizza.” I shrugged. “And that sucked, because you were talking about me.” I almost mumbled the last words.

“Oh.” Her cheeks reddened. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

I shrugged, searching for the right way to explain things. “How could I tell you then who I really was, knowing how shitty your opinion of me was? I don’t want you to think I’m an asshole.”

She sucked in a breath.

“I know it’s dumb, because everyone thinks I’m an asshole. I’ve never let that bother me before. It’s just different when you think that.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “But I was working up the nerve to tell you.”

“After I slept with you?” she asked. Her eyes narrowed, and there was a sharp edge to her voice again.

“No, before.” I rushed out. Even if it wasn’t technically the truth.

“Really?” She pressed her lips together in a line like she didn’t believe me.

Dammit.

I cleared my throat. It was time to strive for adorable rather than asshole, so I grinned. “Maybe after.”

“You’re an idiot.” She shivered.

Shit, she was probably freezing in that dress.

“A cute idiot?” I asked, laying on the charm as I wrapped my arm around her shoulder.

A small thrill filled me when she didn’t pull away. Instead, she backhanded my stomach and rolled her eyes. I snagged her wrist and tucked her into my side, soaking up the way it felt when her silky hair brushed against my neck. I smiled as once again I was hit with the scent of her perfume. For the first time in days, I felt like I could truly relax.

“Give me a chance, cara mia. I really like you.”

She twisted slightly to look me in the eye. Her expression was thoughtful, and she had her teeth pressed into her bottom lip.

Practically holding my breath, waiting for her rejection, I brushed the smooth skin of her cheek and tucked a lock of hair

behind her ear. Then I leaned in closer. So close I could feel the heat of her skin against my face. Still watching me intently, she swallowed, and my gut clenched as her exhale danced across my lips. Only an inch of space existed between us, and the need to feel her mouth on mine pounded through me. Slowly, not breaking eye contact, I dropped my head and brushed my lips against hers. The moment we made contact, the door creaked open, and Cara jumped, rearing her head back.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Sam, my event coordinator, said hesitantly.

“No, it’s fine.” Cara peeked around me and gave him a reassuring smile.

I didn’t agree, so I scowled at Sam.

“We need more of the Pumpkined Out.” He grabbed a case and hurried back out the door, making sure it shut behind him.

Though I probably should have hoped the door was fixed, I would not mind being stuck in here with Cara for the rest of the day.

“Let me take you out tonight? We can talk—”

She shook her head and let out a long breath.

The words died on my tongue, and my heart plummeted. Dammit. I thought I was on the right track to fixing things, but maybe that was wishful thinking.

“I can’t tonight.” She leaned her head on my shoulder, giving me hope.

I bit back a grin. It wasn’t a no. It was a not now.

“I’m spending the weekend with my mom.”

“One night this week?” I couldn’t keep the hope out of my voice.

“Maybe...” Smiling, she tipped her chin up to look at me. “If you’re a good boy. And if there’s nothing else you’ve lied about.”

I winced, and my stomach sank again. “Full disclosure? I’m not actually claustrophobic.”

Her eyes widened. “But you made us take all those stairs.”

“That was your idea.” I’d take the blame for lying, for being an idiot, for messing up, sure. But the stairs? That was all Cara. I would have chosen to ride the elevator while pretending to freak out a dozen times over before willingly hoofing it up fifteen flights.

“I was trying to help.” Damn, she was sweet, and she felt way too good leaning against me. “That should be your punishment for lying. Taking the stairs every day—”

“Done.” I didn’t bother waiting for her to finish. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to earn a second chance with her. Plus, I liked the idea of letting Cara punish me. She had hinted about being a *domme* the day we met, and if that was her kink, then I was there for it. “If you’ll go out with me again.”

She paused and regarded me with a look I couldn’t read.

“How about Metros box seats? This week? You can bring Glory.”

Cara ran a hand through her hair, then shook her head. “She hates you.”

“She hates everyone.” I smirked.

I was very familiar with Danny’s ex-girlfriend. I’d known her for years, and I wasn’t the least bit afraid of her. It was surprising, though, that I hadn’t met Cara before now. Though with Danny and Glory so hell-bent on keeping their relationship a secret from both their families, they didn’t go out in public too often. I’d only met Glory because Danny used to bring her to my penthouse all the time. “Besides, Glory’s disdain for me makes her the perfect safe person to bring for backup.”

She sighed. “Okay. I’ll see if I can talk her into coming.”

“Perfect.” I stood and held a hand out to Cara.

Her palm was cold when she slid it against mine, so I didn’t drop it once she was on her feet. After she’d righted

herself, she dropped her gaze to my lips. So I took advantage of the moment. I cupped her face and dropped my mouth to hers.

My cock surged at the feel of her plush lips against mine. Before I could sink into the kiss, though, she pulled back and peered over my shoulder at the door.

“My mom’s waiting.”

Holding back a sigh, I led her out of the pumpkin shell. Secretly, I was disappointed when the door opened easily. But even as she walked back to her mom and I stayed to finish the day, I couldn’t get rid of the smile plastered on my face. Because in three days, I’d get to take Cara out again.



Cara

GLORY, who spent far more time in this stadium than I did, led me through the main gate. I followed behind her as we headed through the concourse toward the escalators that would take us up to the suites where Pete was waiting.

My phone buzzed in my hand, so I held it up in front of me to unlock it and read the text Pete had just sent. “Why does he keep telling me this?”

“Telling you what?” Glory asked over her shoulder.

“Every time he takes the stairs, he texts me. Then he waits for me to tell him he’s a good boy.”

“He’s an idiot.” Glory smirked. “But apparently, he’s a kinky idiot.”

“What?” I rushed up three steps so we were standing side by side on the escalator and eyed her.

She shook her head. “I’m just being me, dirty mind and all. It sounds like praise kink. You know, *good boy*.” She chuckled. “It would be funny, though, if he was into praise and dirty talk, since you blush any time the word *sex* is even mentioned.”

“Shut up.” I hissed. Right on cue, my face went hot, only making her laugh harder.

She was far more verbal about sex than I was, and she loved to tease me about my discomfort.

“He’s been super open since this weekend.” Almost like he was trying to make up for lying by filling me in on every detail about his life. “He gives me a play-by-play every day, and I’m

pretty sure I've heard his entire life story by now, so I think he would have mentioned being into BDSM."

"Danny never mentioned Pete being into it either." She shrugged. "Did he say he wanted to sit down and talk about a contract or anything?"

My eyes widened. "A what?"

Glory shook her head. "Like I said, I'm sure it's just my dirty mind."

I hoped to God she was right. What the hell did I know about praise kink?

Once we exited the elevator, a man in a yellow security jacket stopped us and asked to see our tickets.

"Do you need someone to show you the way?" he asked after he scanned the digital tickets Pete had sent me.

"Nah." Glory shook her head. "I know where I'm going." She turned left and strutted down the wide hallway. "I've been in this suite before."

I cocked my head. "When?"

"Last summer." She shrugged. "Danny invited me. One of their friends was visiting. He lives in Virginia, I think. He brought his girlfriend. Danny was hoping we'd get along. Tanya, maybe? Trina? Tasha? Something like that." Her bright Metros-green nail color flashed as she waved a dismissive hand. "I don't remember her name, just that she was awful."

Glory tended to think everyone was awful. "Lucky for you, I'm your company today."

She snorted. "Yeah right. Pretty sure your boy will be all over you." She rolled her brown eyes at me. "I'll be stuck chatting with whoever Pete brought along. Maybe that guy from last year. He was hot. Owen, I think. You are sure he's not bringing Danny, right?"

Pete hadn't mentioned who he was bringing. But he had to know the history between his best friend and mine. Putting them in the same room was just asking for drama. "He knows

I'm bringing you. He wouldn't be stupid enough to bring your ex."

At least I hoped.

After one final curve, we found the suite door. I knocked, and a moment later, Pete opened it with a smile.

"Cara mia." He pulled me in for a hug.

I shivered as his warm lips pressed into my cheek.

Pulling back, he wore a soft smile and gave me a once-over. "You look gorgeous."

Although I'd gone with simple cutoffs and a Metros tee, I had spent an embarrassing amount of time on my hair and makeup.

"Thanks." I smiled up at him, feeling warm and tingly at his perusal and compliment.

When he glanced over my shoulder, his eyes went flat. "Glory."

"Hi, Pete." She stepped up beside me and frowned.

I couldn't say I was shocked by the tone of their greeting. If I was standing in front of Danny right now, I'd be looking at him exactly how Pete was looking at Glory. We probably needed to clear the air.

"Come on in." Pete's hand found the small of my back, and he guided me into the surprisingly large room.

I had expected a small office space with a few chairs, but this was the size of a spacious studio apartment. There was a kitchen area, a high-top table, and two sofas. The walls were adorned with tasteful artwork, and the accent colors throughout made the room warm and inviting. Until the door to the balcony opened and a tall blond man stepped in.

"When are these girls you invited going to get here?" Danny asked, his attention fixed on his phone.

When Glory gasped beside me, he glanced up, and his eyes widened before he narrowed them on Pete.

“What the hell?”

“You have to be kidding me, Pete,” Glory growled. “If your goal was to ensure I wouldn’t stay, then you win.” With that, she turned and stomped out of the room.

“Uh.” I looked from Pete to Danny and then to the door.

“You’re not going to go after her?” Pete asked Danny, pointing to the door.

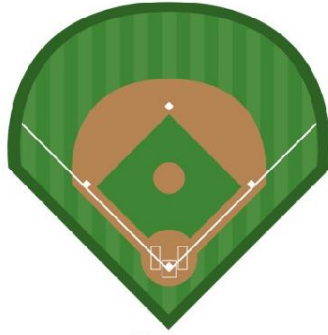
Danny plopped down onto the plush sofa and dropped his head back so he was staring at the ceiling. “How has chasing her ever helped me?”

“You’d be surprised how *not* terrible that would be,” I mumbled, narrowing my eyes at the both of them. When neither of them made a move, I huffed. “I’ll go after her.”

“We can both go.” Pete grabbed my hand and tugged me toward the door. “Danny can leave, and she can come back.”

From behind us, Danny sighed. “Wait.” He hauled himself off the couch and stomped our way. “If you two are a thing, then she and I need to find a way to coexist.” Running a hand through his hair, he whirled on Pete. “I understand that you’re making a point here, but a heads-up would have made things far less fucking awkward.” He slammed the door behind him.

“How in the world did you not realize this would be a total shit show?” I gritted out, planting my hands on my hips.



Pete

I WASN'T AS dumb as I looked. I knew that Glory and Danny wouldn't be thrilled to see each other. But Glory was Cara's friend, and that meant the Danny and Glory drama could be a problem for us. So why not address it and get past it now rather than dance around them for the next six months or more? I had zero remorse for my plan.

"They have unfinished business." I shrugged. "Avoiding each other wasn't helping. And if Danny was honest, he would admit he'd kill for a chance to talk to her."

"You sure you didn't do it so you could get me alone?" she countered.

That was just a bonus. "Not complaining about that turn of events."

She rolled her eyes, but I swore a hint of a smile tipped her lips.

"Come on. Let's watch the game." I grabbed two cans of Easy Out and led her onto the balcony.

"This is my new favorite beer." She took a sip, then held the can out and surveyed it.

"It's my favorite of ours too."

She reached into the back pocket of her tiny shorts. The movement drew my attention to her legs. Long and lean, and if I wasn't mistaken, perfect to wrap around my hips. My hands tingled with the urge to caress the soft skin of her inner thigh and brush across the crease below that perfectly round ass. My body tightened at the idea of touching her. Damn, now that we

were alone, I couldn't think of anything but getting my hands on her.

"Well, that's good," she said, startling me.

"Huh?" I blinked out of my lust-filled haze and tried to make sense of her comment. Had I said those things about getting my hands on her out loud?

"Danny convinced her to grab a drink with him and talk. Maybe they'll stop avoiding each other now." She dropped into a seat and tucked her phone away.

"Mission accomplished," I mumbled as I sat next to her.

"Tricking people into doing what you want is kind of your MO, huh?" She cocked a brow.

"Actually, no." Normally I was too busy to think twice about other people. She was the exception. No other woman I'd dated in the past got the effort I put into Cara. There was just something about her.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Cara mia, it's only with you. I'm single-mindedly focused on making sure nothing stands in our way." And I wouldn't apologize for it. No one had ever made me feel the way Cara did.

Never before had I been excited about a date. They were always a means to an end. Yet with Cara, just knowing I'd have a chance to sit across from her and talk made my heart do weird stuttering shit. And when I'd opened the door to the suite ten minutes ago, all the air had been sucked from my lungs at just the sight of her.

Scoffing, she leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms.

"Trust me, Cara," I murmured, draping an arm over her shoulders. "I'm yours to dominate." She might not believe it yet, but I wouldn't give up until she did.

Her lips tipped up in a genuine smile then. Damn, I loved the idea that she was happy to dominate me. I'd done some googling, and I planned to get her all the toys she desired. I'd spoil the ever-loving shit out of her as long as she'd let me.

“I heard you ended the driver strike?” Cara shifted so she was snuggled into my side.

“I did.” Twisting the ends of her hair around my finger, I soaked in how great it felt to have her close. “Using a lot of your ideas.” We used her suggestions and incorporated several of the drivers’ requests and came to a fair agreement. “Do you have plans for after you pass the bar?”

“I want to go to Italy.” She smiled up at me, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “It’s my dream trip. Visit the vineyards, see Rome and Venice, that kind of stuff.”

I laughed and shook my head. If that was her dream, then I’d make it happen. “I meant a job or an internship. You said something about corporate law.”

“Oh.” A beautiful rosy flush tinged her cheeks as she played with the tab of her beer can. “I guess I should plan for my career and stuff. But I’ve been holding on to the reward for all the work I’ve done in law school.”

I understood that. And I hadn’t meant to embarrass her. “Italy’s a great present for yourself. I love it there. Used to go with my Uncle Gio and my dad.”

“Used to?” She frowned.

“Yeah,” I said, my chest suddenly feeling a little tighter. “My uncle died a few years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She rubbed my thigh in soothing circles.

My muscles clenched, a little more stimulated than soothed by the action. Even through my jeans, the idea of her soft hands on me was enticing.

“Thanks.” I shifted in my seat, but just a little. I didn’t want to dislodge her hand from where she’d settled it on my thigh.

She continued moving her thumb in circles, and my cock was having a really hard time ignoring it. The guy wanted her hand to move about six inches higher, and he didn’t give a shit that we were sitting out in the middle of a stadium crowd or

that I was about to dive into details about my dead uncle. Closing my eyes, I willed my dick to settle down. I had to focus on our conversation.

“Gio was a second father to me. As a kid, I spent so much time with him at All Out. That continued through college and after. I’d always been fascinated by the ins and outs of his brewery. He didn’t have kids, and my dad has never been interested in All Out, so my uncle left his business to me.”

“But your dad is still alive?” she asked, still caressing my leg absentmindedly. She might not be paying attention to it, but I was hyper-focused.

“Yep. My parents live in Florida now. They’re enjoying retirement.” Unable to take her ministrations any longer without mauling her right here, I entwined our fingers. Though the move forced her to stop, it did nothing to calm the pounding desire in my stomach. My need to have her warred with my need to know more about her.

For the first time in my life, I cared more about what a woman had to say than I did about giving in to my baser instincts. So I needed to stop thinking about pulling her onto my lap and slipping those tiny shorts off.

I cleared my throat. “What about your parents? Anyone ever tell you that you look just like your mom?”

She smiled. “Yeah. We get that a lot. My dad...” She pressed her lips together and looked out at the field.

Every time she said anything that made her nervous or sad, she turned away from me, so I braced for what she’d say next.

“My dad died two years ago.”

I squeezed her hand and scooted closer, encouraging her to keep going.

“He was really into cars. We’d go to car shows a lot, the three of us. So Mom and I try to uphold that tradition and go when we can.”

“I work a lot of car shows for All Out. Do you go to the one in Hoboken?”

She shifted so she was looking at me and dove into a story about one trip to that particular show. That led to another story, then another. The words flowed out of her.

While she spoke, I threaded my fingers through her long hair and listened, soaking in the joy that emanated from her when she talked about some of her fondest memories.

And when she glanced up at me again, I couldn't stop myself from leaning in and claiming her mouth. Her lips parted, and I took the opportunity to really taste her. Grabbing her waist, I pulled her onto my lap and reveled at how perfect her body felt resting on me. My hands skimmed along her shirt, and she shivered in response. That shiver quickly turned to rocking on my lap. Her hands moved into my hair, and her fingers twisted and tugged, making my cock surge. Damn, I wanted to own this woman. Dominate her.

Oh. Wait.

I wanted to be dominated by her. That was her thing.

Our heavy breaths mingled as I pulled back and rested my forehead against hers.

“Come home with me tonight.”

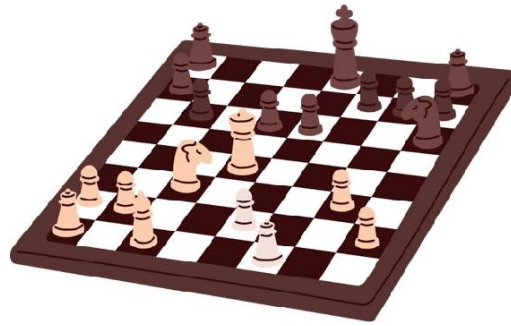
“I can't.” Our noses brushed as she shook her head. “Early class tomorrow.”

“How about Saturday night?” I didn't give a shit if I sounded desperate.

“Okay...”

“My place? I'll order dinner.”

I'd avoid the stairs at all costs on Saturday so she'd have a reason to punish me. Because although it had never been anything I was into in the past, I was into Cara. So if it was her thing, then I'd order all the toys she could possibly need so we could make it a night neither of us would forget.



Cara

“WHAT DO YOU mean he sent a car?” Standing outside my building, I glanced from the white business card in my hand to the man in the dark suit next to me.

I’d planned to walk the handful of blocks to Pete’s place, but the second I stepped onto the sidewalk, some dude named Ben hopped out of a black limo and introduced himself as my driver.

“Mr. Caruso instructed me to pick you up and asked me to give you my card for any future needs you may have. Call me any time you need a ride.” The man gestured toward the limo. “I’ll grab the door for you.”

I climbed into the car, then dug my phone out of my purse.

Pete answered on the first ring. “Hey, baby. You running late?”

“No, I’m just confused as to why I suddenly have a driver I didn’t ask for.”

He sighed. “There’s no reason for you to walk all over the city when Ben can take you where you need to go. I’m already paying him and rarely even use the car service, so you might as well enjoy it.”

“It’s ten blocks to your place. This is more than a little over the top.” I glanced down at my dress. I’d donned a simple white sundress because having dinner in should have been simple. But nowhere in the definition of simple was there mention of a limo. Nothing had been simple since I’d met Pete. He was like a tornado blowing in and turning my boring life into craziness.

“I get pleasure in spoiling you, cara mia. So let me.”

Huffing, I rolled my eyes. Pete had sent flowers three times in the last week. And last night while I was at work, he’d sent chicken parm and penne vodka for the entire staff. Although it had been melt-in-my-mouth good, I was starting to stress about how I could reciprocate these over-the-top gestures.

“Use Ben whenever you want. He’s at your beck and call.” He cleared his throat. “For your transportation needs. I’m at your beck and call for the other needs.”

I laughed. Pete was under the impression that I wanted to boss him around, and I had no idea where the idea had come from.

We were still on the phone when the car pulled up in front of a high-rise.

“I’m apparently here. We can finish this conversation in person in just a minute.” I shook my head.

“The doorman is expecting you. He’ll send you right up.”

Ben opened the door for me, so I stuffed my phone into my purse and climbed out. As soon as I’d righted myself on the sidewalk, another guy moved my way.

“Miss Loper.” He nodded and held out an arm, signaling for me to head inside. He followed me through the lobby and into the elevator, then swiped a card and pushed the button for the sixty-fifth floor before stepping out.

Man alive. When Pete said he’d taken the stairs every day this week, I had no clue he’d meant sixty-five flights. His legs must be burning. The elevator lurched and then shot up. In what felt like a second, the doors opened with a ding. They led straight into a foyer that was the size of my entire apartment. It was gorgeous, with wood floors and intricate molding. A huge painting of what looked like Tuscany was the focal point of the space.

“Cara?” Pete called, stepping—barefoot—into the overly grand entryway.

My heart settled at the sight of him in jeans and a fitted navy-blue T-shirt. He looked like the Pete I knew rather than the man who sent limo drivers to be at my beck and call.

“You look gorgeous.” His lips brushed mine, then he put his hand on the small of my back and guided me into an open living room and kitchen space.

My mouth fell open, and my heart lurched. I didn’t know what I’d expected, but holy shit, it was not this. Two levels of floor-to-ceiling windows gave way to a breathtaking view of the skyline in one direction and the Hudson River in the other. The living area was complete with a large marble fireplace, tons of bookshelves, and plush furniture. Every inch of it screamed penthouse. There was not one area that didn’t look like it belonged in a magazine.

Drawn to the shelves, I shuffled closer. They were filled with both books and random decor. Smiling, I ran my fingers over the crystals of the black-and-clear chessboard with pieces scattered as if a game was in progress.

“My friend Owen and I have an ongoing tournament.” Pete chuckled. “He’ll freak out if you move a piece.”

Glory had mentioned Owen the other day.

“How do you play if he lives in Virginia?” I asked, checking out the details of the crystals woven in with the metal.

He stepped up behind me and rested his chin on my shoulder. I tried not to shiver as he wrapped his arm around my waist.

“He’s in North Carolina now. With his new girlfriend, Cece. But we play using that camera.” He tipped his head to the small black box on the top of the shelf directly above. “It gives us a top view of the board. He tells me his move, and I adjust the pieces. I’m ahead by two games.”

I leaned back into his solid chest. “It’s gorgeous.”

“It’s a Bernard Maquin original. I had him design it a few years ago when I was in France. I like the contrast of the onyx and the diamonds.”

My eyes widened. “These are all real diamonds?” There had to be hundreds.

“Yeah, and onyx set in platinum.”

He said it so casually, and yet it was otherworldly to me. This thing probably cost more than a car.

Other shelves housed statues from India, a mask from Africa, small paintings, and a dozen or so knickknacks. Each one looked as though it had come from a different place around the world. And they were all probably worth more than I’d make in a lifetime.

“I’m passionate about seeing the world.” Pete picked up a Russian Fabergé egg, then set it down again gently.

Each item was incredible in its own right. I was blown away by how many places it seemed he’d been.

“I’ve always wanted to travel, but I’ve never been farther than Connecticut.”

“Besides Italy, where would you like to go?” He sidled up beside me and studied me as I eyed all his treasures.

“Greece.”

I ran my fingers along a long line of David Baldacci’s novels. It looked as though he and I had the same taste in books. I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised. For as different as we were, we had a lot in common.

I peered up at him and smiled. “I want to see the Parthenon and the Acropolis.”

“The beaches there are great too,” Pete agreed. “I’d love to go back with you. Make a list of everything you want to see, and we’ll go.”

I scanned his shelves again, taking in the photos of him. He had traveled the world, and he owned an incredibly successful business. In contrast, I’d never been anywhere interesting or done anything of note. It hadn’t been so blatantly obvious until this moment, but he was very much out of my league.

With my heart clenched in the confines of my chest and dread growing in the pit of my stomach, I dropped my head and examined my pink toenails.

I shrugged. “You’ll probably get bored revisiting all the places you’ve already gone.”

Beside me, he grunted, but I didn’t look up. Not even as he palmed the side of my neck. With his thumb, he forced my chin up until I met his dark brown eyes.

“You’re the farthest thing from boring I’ve ever encountered.” He moved that thumb up and caressed my cheek. “And getting to see all the places through your eyes will be an entirely new kind of fun.” His tongue peeked out, wetting his bottom lip, mesmerizing me.

He lowered his face to mine and captured my mouth with his. The press of his warm lips against mine scattered all the doubts swirling inside me. There was magic in his kiss. My heart skipped a beat, and my body electrified.

I leaned into him, ready to deepen the connection, but a throat cleared behind me, making me jump. I hadn’t realized we weren’t alone. But Pete simply glanced past me.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I’m headed out.”

I turned and practically gasped at the celebrity chef in the black coat standing across the room. The man was on television all the time.

“Great. Thanks, Rox.”

“You know Rox Kleinfield?” I whispered, even though the chef had already stepped into the elevator.

“Della Monte is my favorite restaurant in the city.”

I cocked my head and surveyed him, trying to place the restaurant but drawing a blank. I’d never eaten in the celebrity chef’s restaurant.

He chuckled. “The overpriced place I tried to take you to the first time we went out.”

Oh. “Where you know the valet.”

He shook his head. “Where the valets know me. I bribed them with pizzas so they’d bring my car to us at the end of the night.”

Right. We lived in such different worlds. He tugged on my hand, and I followed him toward the large island.

“I would have loved to cook for you, but if I made the food, we probably wouldn’t want to eat it.” Pete smirked.

“So you suck at cooking?” I cocked a brow and sat on one of the five stools resting along the massive granite island.

“I’ve never needed to learn.” He picked up a plate and moved to the gas range and the sauté pans sitting on top. “But Rox’s scallops and mushroom risotto is to die for, so I asked him to make it for us.”

“Right.” I pressed my lips together and shook my head, trying to force myself not to once again fall into the rabbit hole of this man. “Why not have a world-renown chef pop over to make dinner for two?”

He chuckled and continued plating our dinner. “Where do you want to eat?” He pointed to the massive window and the deck on the other side. Naturally, there was also an infinity pool and hot tub. “We can sit out there, but it is humid tonight.” He tipped his head at the dining table that sat fourteen. “Or there.”

“Or we could eat at the counter,” I suggested. Although this kitchen was a chef’s dream, it didn’t intimidate me as much as the other places.

“Whatever cara mia wants.” He set a plate in front of me, then grabbed his own and slid onto the stool next to me. Once he was settled, he tucked a foot under the rung of my stool and pulled me close.

As my first bite hit my tastebuds, I moaned. Man, I should have let him take me to that restaurant weeks ago. This food was amazing.

“I know.” He bumped my shoulder gently. “It’s perfection on a fork.”

I couldn't disagree. He dug in too, and we chatted as we ate. The whole time, he toyed with my hair or rubbed my shoulders. There wasn't a moment during our meal when he wasn't touching me.

"I have a confession to make," Pete said when we had both finished our dinner.

I raised one eyebrow and tilted my head in response to the smirk he wasn't even bothering to hide. The last time he'd made a confession, I'd discovered that instead of driving a delivery truck for a living, he was the owner of a multi-billion-dollar company. I wasn't sure I could handle another admission like that.

"I didn't take the stairs today."

My heart, which had picked up its pace in anticipation, steadied quickly at his confusing, trivial declaration. He was on the sixty-fifth floor. Why would he take the stairs? And why did he feel the need to update me constantly? I could hardly fault him for not wanting to spend thirty minutes hoofing it up to the penthouse when he had a perfectly good elevator at his disposal. But it seemed important to him.

"Oh?"

His wicked smile said he expected me to play along. Maybe he liked this little inside joke we had going.

"You're a bad boy. I guess you'll have to think of a way to make it up to me."

"I thought you might respond like that." He stood, still wearing a wicked, elated expression, and offered me his hand. "So I ordered a few things you can use to punish me."

"Punish you?" I almost tripped as I rose to my feet.

"Yes." He grasped my upper arms to steady me. "I know you love that." I didn't know about that, but the bright smile and sparkle in his eyes said *he* loved it. "I picked up a variety of things so you'd have options."

"Options?" I sounded like a parrot, mimicking his every word, but it seemed as though my brain had gone offline.

He'd made jokes about me telling him he was a good boy and punishing him. But...options? For punishment? I had no earthly idea what he was talking about. He yanked on my hand, practically giddy, so I obediently followed him down a long hallway and into a bedroom.

His bedroom. The room was full of thick, dark furniture, and the king-size bed was centered on one wall. Just like the rest of the place, his bedroom was gorgeous. But I stopped dead in my tracks at what was laid out on the end of the mattress.

Oh my God.

Did he really think I was into all this?

I stepped forward for a better look, hoping that once I got closer, I'd realize it wasn't what I thought I was. But nope. It was exactly what it looked like. Different types of whips and ropes, and was that a crop? Maybe, but did I really even know what a crop was? Or how to use a crop? Or how to use any of this? No. I didn't have the first clue. Closer now, I examined the "toys," as he'd called them, again, and my heart rate spiked.

What the fuck was the thing with the rings?

Maybe...he wanted to use this stuff on me? Hmm. I actually hated that idea less. Blinking rapidly, I willed my heart to settle. But when I glanced up, Pete was frowning.

"You want me to—"

"I'm sorry." He ran a hand down his face. "Is this not the kind of stuff you like to use?"

My mouth dropped open, and words failed me.

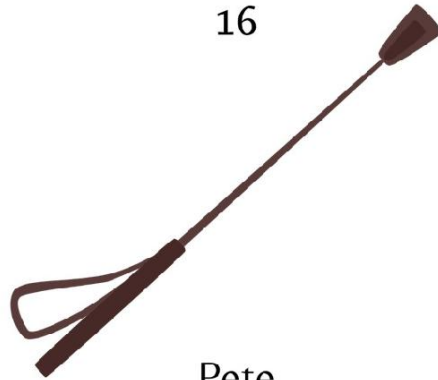
He didn't wait for a response anyway. "I know dommes use their own stuff. But I didn't know what clubs you went to, and we're not at your place, so I thought maybe we could start with something of our own."

Oh my God. He really thought I was a domme? *Why?*

I took a deep breath and studied his face.

Did he need this?

He looked so earnest. I wasn't sure how to tell him none of this was me. Maybe I could do some research and figure it out. How hard could this be? I'd read a few romance novels that featured BDSM, and his uncertainty made me think he wasn't an expert either. But how did I get through tonight?



Pete

CARA CONTEMPLATED the toys I'd spread out on the bed and turned back to me. Her eyes were wide, and she swallowed thickly as she searched my face. Shit. I had messed this up. She didn't like any of it. And I didn't give a shit. I just wanted her.

She licked her lips and cleared her throat. "Is this important for you tonight?"

"No," I said quickly. "If this stuff is wrong, we don't need to use any of it."

Stepping closer, she settled her palm on my pec, then ran it up to my shoulder. Just that simple touch made my body tighten. Damn, I loved the feel of her hands on me.

"Maybe tonight we just forget that stuff," she murmured, her eyes locked on mine. Taking in a deep breath, she trailed her fingers down my chest and abs. Fuck. My stomach tightened and my cock surged as she continued her exploration. I almost wept when she let her finger drift back up and locked her hands behind my neck. "Just see how we fit."

"If that's what you want." I cuffed the back of her neck and lowered my face to hers. I had no issue just exploring all of her.

Soft, plush lips pressed against mine briefly before I ran my tongue along her bottom lip, coaxing her to open for me.

Her mouth parted with a sigh, and my tongue dove in, claiming her the way I'd been dying to since the moment I'd seen her. An electric current like I'd never felt before shot

through me. With a groan, I sank into the kiss. I invaded her mouth the way I wanted to dominate her body. The slight moan that echoed deep in her chest only encouraged me.

She didn't seem to mind if I took control, which worked perfectly for me. I'd been dying to have her under my control for weeks.

My pulse pounded with anticipation as I skimmed a hand down the soft skin of her neck. My dick throbbed against my zipper, begging for her.

Spinning her quickly, I moved her toward my bed and lowered her slowly, pressing my weight into her. She arched off the mattress into me. Full, round breasts pushed into my chest. My hand skimmed the satin skin of her neck and shoulder. Over her collarbone and the crest of her perfect breast. I took the weight of it in my hand. Even through the fabric, her nipple pressed into my palm. One flick of my thumb over it, and she rewarded me with a breathy moan, causing a deep, hard ache in my cock.

I thrust against her. Her answering whimper vibrated through me, straight between my legs, increasing the pounding need to claim more than just her mouth as mine. I shifted slightly to lift the thin white dress up over her head.

She lay back on my bed in just a thin white thong.

Fuck. I felt like I swallowed my tongue.

She pressed her teeth into her bottom lip, almost like she was nervous, but she had no reason to be. She was fucking stunning.

"I've pictured this so many times, but I had no idea you'd be a million times better than I imagined."

A blush crept up her chest and neck until it colored her cheeks.

I bent over her and ran my lips against her skin, and in response, goose bumps erupted.

Damn, I needed to feel her against me.

I yanked my shirt over my head, then dove in again and claimed her lips.

Fuck. She felt like heaven. I wanted her wet and ready, begging for me.

The idea of the sweet plea leaving her lips rocked through me. Slowly, I worked my way down her body until my lips ghosted over the thin lace of her thong.

She thrust up. "Pete."

The breathy plea had me tugging on the fabric between my mouth and her pussy.

"Damn, you're so wet." I groaned, inhaling the scent of her arousal.

"I need you," she answered. "Please, stop teasing me."

That desperate *please* was music to my ears, and I rewarded her with a long, slow lap over her pussy. Her moan was all the encouragement I needed to continue. Her pleasure was my driving force. And fuck, I was enjoying it as much as she was.

Having her writhing under me was everything.

I sank two fingers deep inside her and curled them upward, hitting the perfect spot, and her legs tightened around my head. Her pussy gripped me as she came, calling my name. But I didn't stop. I wanted all her pleasure. I wanted to suck out every drop until she was spent.

The glow of her orgasm still lit her face as I stood and removed my pants.

"Flip over," I ordered, snagging a condom from my nightstand. "On your knees."

She smirked at me as I sauntered back over to her. Damn, she loved that idea. Obediently, she rolled over and positioned herself on all fours. There was a perfection having her this way. Ass up and ready for me. I ran my hand over the curve of her ass and around her hip to cup her pussy.

"Mine," I commanded.

Her long, dark hair cascaded over her shoulder as she looked back at me. “Yes. Make me yours,” she whispered.

Pulling away before I took her bare right then and there—because, damn, she had me in her clutches—I opened the foil packet. Our eyes met as I rolled the condom on my length. Again, I ran my hands over her ass, and then I gripped her hips and pulled her to me. With a long exhale, I guided myself inside her hot body. So wet and ready, she took every inch of me like she was made for it.

It was erotic and intimate, watching exactly where we became one.

“What a perfect pussy,” I mumbled.

I held her there for the briefest moment, then pulled back and set a rhythm. Two thrusts in, and she was pushing against me, meeting me stroke for stroke. My vision swirled as she rocked back, taking me deeper. Shit. I had to lock my knees so they wouldn’t give out as each thrust of my hips caused pleasure to pulse through me. Her responding moans only spurred me on. Every pound was driving her higher. With every stroke, her pussy gripped my cock tighter.

“That’s it,” I said. “So wet, so fucking tight. I want to feel you come all over me.”

“Yes, Pete,” she moaned, rocking harder against me.

My stomach tightened. I thrust up hard into her, losing control. But she needed to finish first. Holding tight to her hip with one hand, I found her clit with the other.

She immediately spiraled, clenching around me. I snapped. My hips slammed up faster and harder until I exploded. The world disappeared and euphoria filled me. My heart seized and then exploded in an eruption of emotions that I’d never felt before.

Mine, my mind screamed as a small smile lifted the corner of Cara’s mouth. Her eyes weren’t open, but she looked blissed out, perfectly glowing below me.

“Give me a second.” I pulled away as soon as my breath evened out.

I tossed the condom and stared down as the water swirled in the toilet. I flipped between spent and wanting to pin Cara down and start all over again. But next time, I had to give her more control, because although we had agreed to no toys tonight, I had taken over. And I wanted to make sure she was as happy as I was. Everything with Cara got better by the day. And I wasn't letting her go—no matter what I had to do.



THE CROWD WAS a big one for a Tuesday at lunchtime, and I was rushing around like a chicken with my head cut off. Kevin was doing his usual—yelling at everyone while not actually doing anything to help. I dropped food off at one of my tables and finally had a second to breathe while I waited for one last order from the kitchen.

I moved back behind the bar, silently praying it would slow down soon.

“Cara,” Kevin bellowed from the back.

I left the bar and headed to the kitchen to grab that last tray of food. Although I used to love bartending, lately I’d dreaded coming to work.

Balancing the tray on my shoulder, I moved out into the dining room. Before I could make it back to the bar again, though, a pair of women stepped inside and settled at a high-top in my section. So I deposited the tray I’d been carrying and headed their way, grabbing two cocktail napkins to toss on their table.

Halfway there, I caught sight of Pete. He stepped inside and gestured to two seats at the bar. I nodded before greeting my table. The women each ordered a glass of white wine, so I fulfilled their order, made sure they didn’t want to order food, then ducked under the bar and headed toward Pete and the older man with a slight paunch who’d taken the barstool next to him.

Pete’s smile widened when I approached.

“Hey.” There was no reason to be nervous, but my stomach still twisted at the sight of him. “What are you doing here?”

I leaned over the bar to get a little closer.

“Just came to see you.” He grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. We’d texted almost constantly, and he’d even called me twice since Saturday, but we hadn’t had time to hang out since. “It’s been entirely too long, and I miss your beautiful smile.”

“Oh?” I tried not to blush, but my face heated, nonetheless. Damn, that was cute. Just like it was cute that he’d had tacos delivered for me and my coworkers last night. Not to mention that a steaming cup of my favorite coffee and Ben had been waiting for me in front of my building every morning. He’d been driving me to class or work and then back home.

The man with slightly graying hair beside Pete cleared his throat. Like Pete, he was wearing an All Out button-down. While Pete’s was white today, this man’s was blue. “I tagged along so I could meet the person who ended our strike.”

Pete chuckled. “This is Alan Beria. He’s my right-hand guy at All Out. Alan, this is my Cara.”

The affection in his tone made my heart squeeze in an unfamiliar and strange way. But I couldn’t deny how much I loved being called *his* Cara.

“Nice to meet you—” I started, but snapped my mouth shut when his words registered. “Wait, how did I end the strike?”

Alan laughed as he shook my hand. “Because of you, Pete didn’t want to be an asshole anymore.”

“No.” Pete shook his head. “I don’t want Cara to think I’m an asshole. I don’t give a shit if you hate me.”

I laughed when Alan heaved an exhausted sigh.

“Well, I’m glad I could help.”

“Did you see the link I sent you? The Bob Marley joke about bags?” Pete asked.

I loved Bob Marley—the comedian, not the musician. “Yes. I haven’t had time to respond because we’ve been slammed. Actually, I should check on my tables, so I’ll grab your drinks in one minute.”

I did a round, refilling three drinks and clearing a couple of tables, then headed back to the guys.

“Do you want a drink?” I asked.

“We’ll have two Pumpkined Outs,” Alan answered for both of them. Pete was too busy scowling and scanning the room to respond.

“You need help. You shouldn’t have to run around like this.” He frowned. “Why didn’t they schedule two bartenders today?”

I shot him a grin. He was cute. It wasn’t even that busy anymore. “A second bartender would mean fewer tips for me. I’m glad there isn’t anyone in the lounge today.” I tipped my head to the high-top tables behind the bar. When a second server came in to work that section at lunch, I made so much less money.

Pete’s response to that was to narrow his eyes at me.

“Oh no.” Alan chuckled. “We aren’t buying this bar so she can make more money and work less.”

I laughed at the absurdity of that statement.

“How did you know I was going to say that?” Pete asked.

I gaped at him as my stomach dropped. “You may *not* do that.” I shook my head and turned to Alan. “You can’t let him do that. I’m only working here until Christmas. I should have an internship by January.”

I pulled out two cold glasses and held the first under the Pumpkined Out tap.

“Have you already committed to an internship?” Alan asked.

I shrugged and stopped the tap, then picked up the second glass and filled it. “Not yet, but I’m not picky. Anywhere that

will take me.”

“We could use you.”

My heart skipped, and my gaze shot to Alan.

He shrugged. “Just a suggestion if you’re interested.”

Beer ran over my hand, and I snapped my gaze back to the taps. The glass was now overflowing, so I stopped the tap quickly.

“Pete gave me your resume. You’re smart and you’re talented. And we already know you can control the biggest issue at All Out.” Alan smirked.

Furrowing my brow, I watched him. What kind of issue could I control, and how did he know I had the ability?

Pete snorted. “You’re seriously calling me the biggest issue?”

Oh. I bit back a smile.

“Can I think about it?”

I was hesitant to say yes just yet. Pete and I were new. And I’d already discovered that Pete liked to swoop in and take care of me. Things were good between us, but I still had to figure out the domme thing and how important it was to him. Because although I’d gotten around it the other night and the sex had been amazing, if our sexual relationship hinged on me using weird toys to punish him, that could present a problem. I’d try. I liked him, and I was open to exploring his interests—I’d been googling and reading BDSM smut for the last few days—but I wasn’t sure I was cut out to be a domme. And if I wasn’t, would he still want to be with me? If not, it wouldn’t be wise to commit to interning for All Out.

I handed Pete his beer.

“I’d love it if you worked for me, but you’re smart and capable. I have no doubt you’ll get a job with any organization you’re interested in,” Pete said. “Though I’m not saying I won’t go out and buy that business.”

Alan sighed. “You can’t control everything with money, Pete.”

As I set Alan’s beer on the bar, the glass slipped just a little in my hand. Beer sloshed over the rim and onto the bar, leaving a foamy puddle. Quickly, I reached for a napkin from the stack I’d set beside me.

“No worries. I got it,” Alan said as he too went for the napkins. But as he brought his hand back, he bumped the glass, causing it to teeter.

Simultaneously, we reached out to steady it, but our hands collided and knocked the drink over completely. Beer splashed across the bar in a wave. Alan’s eyes widened comically as the ice-cold beer ran onto his lap. We were both stumbling with the glass as it rolled, but it escaped our clutches and shattered on the floor.

I winced.

Pete chuckled. “Calamity Cara at her finest.”

I did not cause these things, but somehow, I always seemed to be the one dealing with them.



Pete

“SHE’S GREAT,” Alan said as we stepped into the cool September afternoon. Pedestrians rushed along the sidewalk, and a horn honked in the distance. “I’m serious about getting her on the All Out team.”

“Yeah, I really like her.” I smiled. “Even though she’s a magnet for chaos.”

I couldn’t help but grin at his still-wet pants. He was sporting the *I pissed myself* look, but Alan had been chill about it. He’d insisted we stay to eat lunch, only asking for a towel to dry himself.

“I think my beer bath was more my fault than hers.” Alan shrugged.

I shook my head. “She never causes the disasters, but I swear her presence is the catalyst.”

Ahead of us, Ben opened the door to the limo so we could climb in.

Alan grabbed the folder he’d left on the seat and flipped through it.

“I hope the meeting with the head of delivery goes better than that meeting with inventory did this morning.” I sighed. Seeing Cara was exactly what I’d needed after such a clusterfuck. We were still in the midst of an overhaul at All Out. Though we were on the right track, getting the drivers to sign the new contracts had been easier than implementing the changes I wanted done.

“It’ll be fine. The drivers are the ones who wanted the changes.” Alan pulled out a sheet of paper and handed to me. “This is the software we should go with.”

He and I debated the merits of it as we made our way back to the office. In the end, we decided to go with it, and a week later, at the meeting with the head of delivery, I couldn’t wipe the grin from my face. Tony was just as excited about the software that managed the drivers’ schedules and time off.

“Glad you’re on board.” The leather of my chair creaked as I sat back.

Tony chuckled. “I suggested this software months ago. Of course I like it.”

I cocked a brow. “You did?”

He nodded and shot me a smirk.

“Oh.” I shrugged. “Well, glad we’re on the same page now.”

“Why the change of heart?” he asked, propping one elbow on the armrest of his chair. “And not just on this. You seem like a much happier person in general lately.”

Before I could gush about Cara, a knock sounded on my office door.

“Yes?” I called out. Our meeting had been set to wrap up about twenty minutes ago, so it was likely my assistant coming to move things along.

Alice peeked in, pushing her thick glasses up on her nose. “Cara’s here. You’re late for dinner.”

“We’re just finishing up.” I stood, and Tony did as well. “Let her in.”

A moment later, the woman of my dreams stepped into my office. A siren in red. “Hi, hun. Oh shoot. Sorry to interrupt.”

“You’re not—” My words cut off as I perused her outfit and stopped on a pair of red sky-high heels.

Damn. I made my way back up, focusing on her long legs and flipping through images of those legs tucked tightly

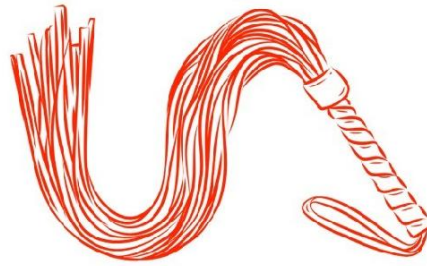
around my waist. And those shoes? Fuck yeah. I'd insist she keep them on as I drilled into her tonight, because ordering this woman around in the bedroom was my new favorite pastime.

My stomach dropped, and I winced at the thought. She was in charge tonight. Shit. I had to remind myself of that constantly. If I didn't start letting her take over and support her kink, then she might get bored with me. And that was the last thing I wanted.

"Cara, this is Tony." I gestured between the two. "Tony, this is my Cara."

She made her way inside the office and shook his hand.

"Suddenly I understand the change of heart completely." Tony chuckled. "Nice to meet you, Cara. Have fun, you two."



Cara

“LOVE THE HEELS. They’re giving me all kinds of ideas,” Pete growled as he placed his hand on my lower back and guided me into his penthouse.

Oh my God. What does he want me to do with my heels? I’d been googling kinky shit all week, and I still didn’t feel any more confident about stepping outside my comfort zone.

“Ordered more things to try,” he said, tossing his suit jacket over the back of the sofa. He was watching me intently as he got to work undoing the cuffs of his sleeves. “Thought you might like one of these.” He waved to the large dining room table that sat off the living area.

“Huh?” I spun around and gaped like a fish. He had an assortment of new toys and accessories laid out. Even after all my research, I could only name about half of them. Shit. I couldn’t seem to keep up. “Why?”

What I really wanted to ask was: *why do you think I’m into this?*

“You didn’t seem impressed with what I picked out last time so...” He ducked his head and raked his hand through his dark hair, leaving the thought hanging between us.

Okay. I was still clueless, but I’d make this work somehow. It couldn’t be that hard.

I could do this.

Fake it till you make it, right?

I’d play along, then maybe he’d take over like he had the other times, and then we’d have amazing sex again. So far,

that was how things had gone each time we found ourselves in bed together, and I had zero complaints. But based on how hard he was trying to implement this domme/sub stuff into our sex life, it seemed like it wasn't enough for him. So it was time to suck it up and figure this out.

Except that meant I could completely screw everything up.

And things with Pete were great. Our conversations were easy, and as different as our lives were, we had so many similar interests—books, music, food, and a dozen other things we'd discovered so far. He'd even purchased tickets to three comedy shows over the next few months. Plus he supported my career goals and encouraged my study time rather than try to monopolize it. Before we started dating, I thought I was happy, but it was nothing in comparison to the way I felt these days. So far, he was the perfect partner in every sense.

Well, almost. So my plan to become the domme he needed had to work. I'd done even more research with BDSM romances over the last couple of days to brush up, and I was ready to implement what I'd learned.

Maybe. Hopefully.

Across the room, Pete was now loosening his tie. Maybe I could use that.

Come on, Cara. Think. What did the chick in Mercy do?

“Kneel.” The words tumbled from my mouth.

Pete froze, his hand still on the knot of his tie. “What?”

I squared my shoulders and tried to put some semblance of command into my voice. “Go get naked.” I waved toward the bedroom. “Kneel and wait for me.”

His eyes flared in response to my command, and I internally cheered. This was going better than I hoped.

He removed the tie from his neck and placed it on the table. Then, without a word, he disappeared down the hallway that led to the bedroom.

Now, what toy or accessory should I use on him? Had to be something simple. I had done some research on impact

play, and some of those scenarios seemed safe enough. So I picked through a few of the options before deciding on a basic leather flogger.

It was a straightforward tool. Except I had no idea how hard I was supposed to hit him with it.

I took a deep breath, grabbed the tie he'd discarded, and trudged down the hall toward the bedroom. He had followed directions to a T—except he still had his boxer briefs on.

Okay. What do I do now?

He was kneeling on the plush rug that covered most of the open space at the foot of his bed. And he looked great doing it. But shit, what the heck would a dominant person ask their sub in a situation like this? My heart was practically beating out of my chest already, and I hadn't even touched him. Willing it to settle, I drew on something I'd read this week.

Oh. That one book made the person crawl. Maybe...

“Crawl to me.” It came out as more of a question than a command, and I winced.

His face contorted, and he made no attempt to move.

Was that too much?

“I mean I'll crawl to you.” I smiled and dropped to all fours, then made my way toward him. Though the characters in all the books made this sound sexy, I had the tie and the flogger in my hands, and it just felt awkward as I sat up on my knees in front of him.

He tilted his head to the side and glanced down at the equipment I'd brought with me.

Dammit. What do I do next?

“Wrap this around your wrists.” I handed him the tie.

He raised one eyebrow at me. Then, silently, he did as I asked.

I brought my arm up and flicked my wrist gently. The flogger thudded against his chest. He dipped his chin and eyed where it had smacked him, letting out a muffled chuckle.

Jesus, I really sucked at this.

Throwing in the towel, I sighed and dropped my shoulders. “Just kiss me.”

In one swift movement, he pulled his hands out of the tie and threw it to the side. Then he took the flogger from me and tossed it off the rug.

“Whatever you say, cara mia.” He tangled both of his hands in my hair, tugging slightly.

A tingling spread through me as he ran his fingers down my body and found the hem of my strappy dress. Pulling back just a little, he dragged it up and over my head. His pupils blew out as he took in my braless breasts.

I arched into his touch when he ran his thumbs over my nipples.

“Lay down. Let me look at you,” he commanded, grasping my waist with one hand and pressing against my shoulder with the other, guiding me to my back on the rug.

My breath hitched and my body heated from his intense focus as his gaze swept over me. Every time he looked at me, it felt like he was trying to burn every detail into his brain.

“Leave the heels on,” he murmured, running a hand down my leg.

“You like those?” I smirked, lifting one red heel in the air.

“Very much.” Pushing my legs apart, he positioned himself between them and traced the lacy material of my red thong. “And this too.”

I squirmed. His fingers were so close to where I needed him to touch me. Slowly, he slid the scrap of lace down my legs and over my heels. Then he pressed kisses along one of my legs, working his way up my body. My core tightened as his mouth skated up my thigh and over my hip.

“Pete, please.” I groaned, bucking when his lips closed over my nipple and he tugged on it with his teeth.

Jesus, if he kept it up, I was going to come from that alone.

“Patience.” He lapped at my peak. “Tonight, I’m going to take my sweet time with you.” Moving to the other breast, he showed it the same attention. “Let me worship you like you deserve.”

Nobody had ever taken their time with me like this. All the licking and sucking and nipping was too much but not enough at the same time. I needed more, yet I wasn’t sure how much more I could stand. I was ready to explode, and the man was still wearing his underwear.

His hand trailed down my side and landed between my thighs.

“Oh.” I moaned and arched off the rug when his fingers pressed against my clit. “Pete, need you to kiss me.”

He watched me with hooded eyes, then raised himself up on one elbow and molded his mouth to mine.

I lifted my hips again, chasing his touch, desperate for release.

“I said patience...” He nipped at my lower lip.

“I’m going insane,” I panted. “I need—” I threw my head back as he circled my clit with his thumb and pushed two fingers inside me.

He pumped in and out of me until my mouth fell open and waves of pleasure rocketed through me.

“That’s it. Come for me, cara mia.” He encouraged me all the way, guiding me through my release.

As my orgasm ebbed, I sagged, my body completely relaxed. But now I wanted him deep inside me.

“Need to feel you,” I begged, propping myself up on my elbows.

He climbed to his feet, looming over me, and discarded his boxers before retrieving a condom from his wallet and rolling it on.

“Let me feel those heels,” he growled as he dropped to his knees between my thighs.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, and in return, he braced himself on his forearms, caging me in against the world's softest rug, and lined himself up with my entrance.

Dropping his head, he smashed his lips against mine, and with a single thrust, he pushed inside me.

“Oh...God,” I moaned, unable to do anything more than lie back and relish the fullness.

He slid all the way out and plunged back in, rotating his hips and hitting the perfect spot. His gaze was focused on me, searching my face each time he moved, watching for cues and reading me more accurately than anyone ever had.

I never wanted this to end.

But before long, his thrusts became harder and faster—more desperate, erratic.

Needy.

And I couldn't hold on for much longer. So I gripped his shoulders and arched into each of his thrusts, matching his intensity with my own.

“You feel so good.” He pushed himself up on one hand and tweaked my nipple. “Give me one more. Come for me again, cara mia.”

At his command, I cried out. This orgasm hit me harder than the first one had, and my core clenched impossibly tight.

“Fuck,” he bellowed as he pounded into me until he faltered and his muscles tightened under my touch.

After a heartbeat, he continued his movement, though his thrusts slowed. We were both panting when he collapsed on top of me, still holding his weight up with one arm.

Humming contentedly, I brushed my lips against his temple and ran my fingers down his back and over his ass.

“We're doing that again after we eat dinner.” He raised up and smiled down at me. “Preferably more than once.”

I chuckled. “Love that idea.”

He placed a gentle kiss on my lips, then he heaved himself up and helped me to my feet. Once he ensured I was steady, he disappeared into the connecting bathroom.

Nerves settled in my stomach again. I just hoped he didn't expect any of the kinky stuff again.

Two hours later, I lay in his arms with my head on his chest, thankful that he hadn't brought any of it up again. Maybe he was starting to understand that I really wasn't into it.



Cara

“Is it going to be weird for you that things between Pete and I are getting serious?” I took a sip from my bottle of Easy Out and surveyed my friend. I hadn’t seen Glory since the baseball game a few weeks ago, so a lunch meet-up with her today was much needed.

“Danny and I agreed to be civil around the family and you two. We can’t keep skipping things and avoiding each other, so we’re gonna keep our distance.” She shrugged and pulled her long hair over her shoulder. Her eyes were downcast, and she swallowed thickly as she traced a line on the faux-wood tabletop.

What she and Danny needed was to actually talk instead of play this game of avoidance. It was obvious that she was miserable.

“Are you saying it’s serious with you and Pete?”

I’d been holding back because gushing about Pete while she was still crushed over the demise of her relationship with Danny felt cruel. But I really wanted to tell her about him. Since the day we’d met, he’d messed with my routine, but I also was loving it. Studying was more fun when he rewarded right answers with orgasms. And although there was a chaos in the fact that he just showed up places often, it was also the best type of surprise. Life with Pete wasn’t boring.

“It’s so good, Glore. He’s sweet and supportive.” I couldn’t hold back my smile. “The other day, he quizzed me for two hours before my test.”

“Look at you blushing.” She tapped her maroon nails on the table. “You’re falling hard.”

I was pretty sure I’d already fallen. Because Pete was the type of guy that was easy to fall for.

The waitress dropped off a basket of chips and salsa, and Glory snatched a few.

“So it’s all great, then?” she asked as she popped a chip into her mouth.

“Yeah,” I breathed, deciding to open up. I could use her advice. “The only thing—”

My phone chimed on the table in front of me. The text from Pete cut off my train of thought.

Oh man. Not another weird suggestion.

“Pete, stop buying me stuff.”

I dropped my head to the table, seriously considering banging it against the wood surface.

“What?”

I glanced up at her and frowned.

“Why would you want him to stop buying stuff for you? He has plenty of money.” Glory popped another chip into her mouth and raised one dark brow at me.

“The issue is what he’s buying.” I shook my head and whispered, “Like...accessories.”

She frowned and brought her beer to her lips. “You have an aversion to purses now or something?”

I wished it was purses. I loved purses. And shoes. And earrings. I just did not love whatever the fuck he’d just sent.

“No, not those accessories.” I huffed. Dammit. I was going to have to spell this out if I wanted her advice. “Like leashes and collars...”

Her brown eyes narrowed and she leaned forward. “You don’t have a dog—Oh my gosh, did he buy you a dog?” She smiled. “That’s so cute. I can be Aunt Glory to the puppy.”

“No. For the love of God, don’t mention that. He *will* buy one if he thinks I want it. But it’s not a dog leash.” I blew out a frustrated breath and ducked my head in hopes that no one around would overhear. “Like people leashes.”

“Oh.” She smirked and picked up her drink again. “So he’s kinky. Never would have thought that about Pete. What’s he into?”

Rather than having to explain it to her, I slid my phone across the table so she could see the pictures Pete was currently sending me.

“Jesus. What kind of sex are you having?” she asked rather loudly before her mouth dropped open and she brought my phone closer to her face. “That looks like a...spatula? Hmm, seems fun.”

A couple at a table nearby glanced over, and a rush of heat washed over me.

“Shut up. I don’t want the whole restaurant to know my boyfriend keeps buying me things to punish him with.”

She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “He’s, like, really into this BDSM stuff. Are you?”

At least she was no longer almost yelling, but still...

“I hate you so much right now,” I muttered. “And no, I’m not.”

The phone chimed from Glory’s hand, and her eyes widened.

Oh no. What now?

Her head tilted and her brows creased. “Not even sure what this is—” She tilted the phone sideways and chuckled. “It almost looks like a harness for a tiny dog.”

“Well, it goes with the theme. He’s been sending with the collars and leashes, but—”

“OMG,” she all but screamed, leaning forward. “This is for his dick.”

“What?” I reared back. He wouldn’t. Would he?

“Hmm, I’m not sure how you’d use this during sex,” Glory added. “Hope it comes with good instructions.”

“I don’t understand why he would want to do any of this.” I sighed and dropped my head to the table again. “Did Danny want to do stuff like this?”

“Oh no.” She shook her head. “Danny wouldn’t fit in that tiny thing. He’s hung.”

“Too much information.” I wrinkled my nose.

My phone buzzed again, and I lunged for it. God knew what else he might send me.

“Funny. You’re all uptight, while your boyfriend wants to wear a special swing for his dick.” She cackled and grabbed another chip.

I rolled my eyes, silently willing my body temperature to normalize before I left sweat stains on my shirt.

“If this relationship is really serious, you have to be honest. And you can’t keep having kinky sex if it’s not your thing.”

“But we’re not...”

“Then you really need to tell him. ’Cause he’ll get bored if he’s into all this.”

“I know.” I moaned. “You’re right.”

Though a knot of dread formed in my stomach—what if he was already getting bored?—I let out a sigh and responded to his text.

There. I’d done it.



Pete

BESIDE ME, Danny huffed at the TV screen, but I was too distracted to focus on the game. Although it was early in the season, these two teams were predicted to be the ones to beat. But for the last hour or so, I'd been preoccupied with my texts with Cara, and I hadn't been following along.

Cara mia:

Don't think I'm into those.

I let out a sigh. "She doesn't like any of them."

"Any of what?" Danny didn't even look away from the game.

"The pictures I'm sending."

"Yes! Nice throw, Clay." He smirked. "Most women don't like dick pics."

"Fuck you." I tossed my phone onto the coffee table and took a swig of my beer.

The last thing I needed right now was to be mocked. I hadn't told Danny what was going on, but maybe asking for advice wasn't the worst idea. I snagged my beer and took a long pull, garnering a little courage, then went for it. "Have you ever dated someone who was...bossy?"

He put his beer on the table and turned away from the commercial break to give me his attention. "Have you met Glory? She's the definition of bossy."

That was absolutely true. But not in the sense I meant. At least I didn't think she was.

“Like...controlling?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Again, Glory.”

How could I explain this?

“No, like controlling...” I cleared my throat. “In the bedroom?”

He leaned back into the couch and crossed his arms, waiting for me to explain more.

“Like a domme.”

“Cara is a domme?” He narrowed his eyes on me. “Are you sure? I haven't gotten that vibe from her.”

I didn't get that vibe from her either. She was almost the opposite of bossy. I was the one who tended to be controlling. And she seemed to like that. Not just in the bedroom either. She deferred to me more often than not when it was time to choose a restaurant or make plans to go out. She liked when I showed up to see her. In general, she was easy-going and easy to be with.

I rubbed my chest, hoping to ease the pain that flared at the idea that we couldn't get past this issue.

“She told me she was a domme.” I sighed. “But she doesn't like anything I've bought for us to try.”

Pulling up the pictures I'd just sent her, I showed him, then I went through the laundry list of the thirty other things I'd purchased or suggested.

“I'm doing something wrong, man, and I can't figure out what it is.” I raked my hand through my hair and stared at the ceiling.

Silently, he flipped through my phone. His eyebrows shot up a few times, but he tried to hide his reaction. I didn't blame him, though. Some of the stuff looked painful.

“Is the sex bad?” he finally asked.

“No.” It was amazing. Being with Cara was unlike anything I’d experienced before. She was sexy and sweet. And the way she gripped my dick every time she came was heaven. “But she’s not getting to be in charge, ’cause I keep taking over.”

“Of course you do. Nothing about you is submissive, dumbass.” He scoffed. “If you’re not naturally submissive, then you won’t be able to submit. It’s a personality thing.”

That was a concern for me. But I’d been trying anyway, because Cara and I fit together perfectly in every way. Even physically, at least from my perspective. And lately, I didn’t see any part of my future without her in it.

“I need to make this work. If I can find something she likes, maybe it’ll help me get into it too.”

Danny side-eyed me and opened his mouth to respond, but I cut him off.

“Come on. If it was something as easy as being submissive, wouldn’t you fix it for Glory?”

Danny pressed his lips into a tight line and scanned my face. “Wait, you and Cara—like, this is the real deal?”

“Dude, I don’t know. But I’m willing to try anything ’cause I lo—” I swallowed the word, baffled at what had almost escaped my lips.

My best friend hadn’t missed the slip, though. His eyes were huge.

“I want this to work.”

Letting out a loud sigh, he dropped his head into his hands. The huge man seemed to shrink before my eyes.

“What?”

“My sister married Glory’s brother, and now my best friend is going to marry her best friend. I’ll never get away from her.”

Shit. I could sympathize with him. But if he felt about Glory the way I did about Cara, then why wasn’t he doing

more to fix things? Why wasn't he devoting every moment of his life to winning her back? From what Cara said about it, it seemed like Glory was crushed by their breakup too.

"Maybe sit down and have an honest talk with Glory," I suggested.

"Hi, pot, meet kettle." Danny narrowed his eyes at me. "You need to talk to Cara. If you don't, then eventually, this whole submissive thing is going to blow up."

I huffed. "Not if you just help me figure it out."

"Fine." He blew out a breath. "What is she into?"

"Hell if I know. But she liked when I had to take the stairs."

He scratched at his scruff and shook his head. "Like exercise?"

"Yeah. Sure." I shrugged, sitting a little straighter.

"Okay. Find something that involves exercise, then." He tossed his hands in the air and slumped back against the couch.

He was no help.

"What about one of your zillion brothers? Surely somebody in your family has dated someone—"

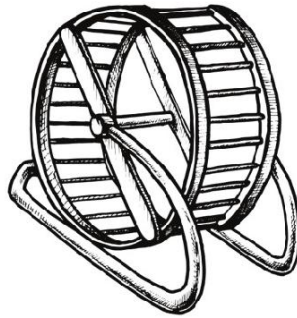
"Doubt it. But maybe Lily knows. Want me to text her?"

I wasn't sure what was going on with him and the freaky makeup artist, but they'd been hanging out a lot lately. And not just because his brother Will was married to her best friend.

"You still talking to her?"

"Yeah, she's cool." He grabbed his phone from the coffee table and typed out a text. After a moment, he laughed. "She said it's not her jam, but she sent me a link you can check out. I'll forward it to you."

After browsing the site for a good ten minutes, I was convinced I'd found the perfect thing for us to try. I just hoped she loved it.



Cara

I LEANED back against the elevator wall as it made its ascent. Pete was really excited about a new purchase he wanted us to try tonight, but I was struggling to work up any enthusiasm for the idea of a new toy. Glory was right. I needed to tell him the truth. I couldn't keep dragging him along if this wasn't something I could give him.

But I didn't want things to end with Pete.

His face lit up when the elevator opened and I stepped off.

"Cara mia." He rushed forward and cupped my cheeks with both of his hands. Then, with hearts practically dancing in his eyes, he leaned in and pressed his lips against mine. I melted into his hold, wishing I wasn't about to crush him.

He pulled back wearing a wide smile and rocked back and forth like he couldn't contain his excitement.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and forced my feet to move when he took me by the hand and led me farther into his penthouse.

But I came up short and gaped at the sight that greeted me.

What the hell was that?

It looked like a giant hamster wheel. It was tall enough that even Pete could stand up straight if he climbed into it.

Pete squeezed my hand and turned to me. His eyes sparkled and his smile was massive. How was he finding this shit? And how had he already gotten it installed on a hook in the wall? Two days ago, this weird metal wheel had not been here.

He looked so excited, and he had gone to so much trouble. Yet here I was planning to stomp on the idea without even trying it. Why was I being such a bitch?

There was no reason I couldn't at least try my hand at this big wheel. In a way, it was like a treadmill, right? I'd step up into it and run. I tipped my head to the side and assessed it a little more thoroughly. Were we supposed to be naked? Or was this a clothes-on thing? I'd probably have to work up the nerve to ask.

At least this wouldn't be inflicting pain—because that I couldn't get myself excited about. It wasn't my thing.

“I know you love exercise,” he began.

I loved exercise? That was an interesting statement.

Although I was a member of Planet Fitness, I didn't actually go to the gym. I always meant to make time for it, but when it came time to set an alarm and pull myself out of bed to work out, I'd choose an extra hour of sleep or I'd use the time to study instead. I didn't mind being physical, but I couldn't fathom where he'd gotten the idea that I loved exercise so much that I'd want to incorporate it into our sex life.

“I know you've probably done this before, but I haven't ___”

My heart stuttered in my chest. Did I seem like the type of person who ran on hamster wheels? Because I was today years old when I learned that human-size hamster wheels existed.

I opened my mouth and turned, ready to correct him, but damn, he was so adorable with his wide grin and hopeful puppy dog eyes. I couldn't burst his bubble.

“Okay.” I dropped my purse onto the sofa. Eyeing the contraption, I shrugged out of my sweater and laid it over the back of the sofa. Wedges were probably a bad idea, so I slid those off too. “I'll give it a try.” I shrugged and headed toward the apparatus that sat in the corner of the large open area.

Taking in a deep breath, I glanced back at him. The smile he'd been sporting was gone. Instead, he wore a look of

confusion that I didn't understand.

“Am I supposed to be naked?” I asked. Running without a bra would suck.

“I'm not...” Pete cocked his head and frowned. “You don't need to be.”

“Great.” I was determined to make this work, but for now, at least, I'd keep my clothes on.

Glory and I had tried those big inflatable balls once at a fair. This couldn't be much different.

Right?



Pete

I FIGURED she'd want me to do it. It seemed like the perfect *punish me with exercise* type thing. So why was she climbing on instead of commanding me to? Was she testing it out first to make sure it met her specifications?

She glanced over, wearing a nervous smile, then placed her hands on the wheel in front of her. Hesitantly, she picked up one foot and stepped forward, then did the same with the other, causing the wheel to creak as it turned. Wide-eyed, she looked my way, and I forced myself to smile.

It hit me then that this was probably a terrible idea. I glanced at the bookshelves where I displayed the treasures I'd collected during my travels. Then I assessed the TV and the furniture. Cara's ability to cause chaos was unreal, and compounded by the wheel? Well, things could get interesting. Nothing in here was irreplaceable, though, so I held myself back and watched her tentatively.

Slowly, the wheel turned, and as she got used to the movement, it spun faster. Pretty quickly, though, it looked as though the wheel was controlling her rather than the other way around. Did she realize how fast she was going? She looked as though she was struggling to keep up, yet she didn't slow the thing to a more reasonable speed.

Stepping forward, I reached out, ready to help her, but before I could, she wobbled to the side, and her bare foot slipped. Her whole body lurched, and her hip hit the wheel as she fell.

In slow motion, Cara hit the ground. The wheel teetered on its axis, banged against her shoulder, and dislodged itself from

its mount on the wall.

My stomach dropped as it rolled across my living room and crashed into the TV. The screen cracked down the middle before the huge metal cylinder ricocheted off it and slammed into my coffee table, which collapsed on impact.

I ran straight to Cara, dodging the out-of-control hunk of metal.

“Are you okay?” I pulled her into my arms and held her tight.

Tears soaked the fabric of my shirt as her whole body shook.

My heart clenched. Dammit. I’d made her cry. This was supposed to be making her happy. How was I getting this so wrong?

“For the love of God, I can’t do this anymore,” she wailed.

My arms automatically locked tighter around her, as if my body refused to give in to the notion.

I couldn’t lose her. “We can figure this out, cara mia.”

“I broke your TV and your coffee table,” she sobbed into my chest. “And probably that awful wheel too.”

“I don’t give a shit about any of that. I’ll buy new stuff.” I rubbed my hands up and down her back. “I can buy ten TVs. They’re replaceable; you’re not.”

She pulled back and looked up at me, her eyes wide. Even with tears coating her long, dark lashes, she was beautiful. Her tears might be a gut punch, but the idea of fixing things for her was my driving force.

“I’m getting us all the wrong stuff.” I kissed the side of her head and pulled her in tight again. “What we should have done from the start is shop together.”

“I don’t want to shop for anything.” She sighed, her shoulders sagging.

“Okay,” I breathed out, pulling her back so I could see her face again. “I’ll figure this out. Just tell me what you want.”

“I don’t want any of this.” The words were an almost whisper, and she kept her eyes downcast. “Before you, my life was normal. I would have graduated from law school, gotten a job, met an average Joe, and lived a boring life. Now I’m running on hamster wheels...”

My stomach bottomed out as I finally understood what she was saying, and my hands fell from around her as my body went ice cold.

I swallowed the lump that lodged itself at the back of my throat.

She was ending things between us. Because, in the end, I could never be the boring delivery driver she had agreed to date at first.

I cleared my throat. “Okay.”

“Okay?” She finally looked up at me. This time, her eyes were lit with excitement. “It’s really okay?”

Fuck. Here she was, overcome with joy at the prospect of breaking up with me, while my heart was being ripped from my chest.

Pressing my hand to my sternum, I rubbed circles over it, willing the debilitating ache to recede. “Yeah.” I cleared my throat again, hoping my voice wouldn’t crack. “If you want to break up with me...”

“What?” The confusion in the statement matched the look on her face. “Break up with you?”

“Isn’t that what you’re saying? I’m not boring enough?” I shrugged, still collecting the pieces of my heart scattering on the floor around us.

“No.” She shook her head and wiped the tears off her cheeks. “I like you. I love that my life isn’t boring anymore. I don’t want just some Joe Schmo. I want you.”

My heart soared. Damn. Maybe this wasn’t the end of us.

“But I don’t like any of this stuff.” She waved her hand toward the hamster wheel. “I know you’re into this kinky

stuff, but I don't know when or how I made you think that I like it."

I blinked and held my breath, assessing her.

"You think *I* like this stuff?"

She nodded.

"I don't like it." I racked my brain, searching for the comments that tipped me off to her proclivities on that very first day. "After you called me good boy—well." I couldn't fight the grin. "I kinda liked *good boy*..."

She chuckled. "I know you like *good boy*."

"But I asked you about dominating. And about going to clubs. You said you went."

"Um, yeah. Sometimes I go to dance and have a couple of drinks." She nibbled on her lip and tipped her head to the side. "What does that have to do with any of this?"

"I didn't mean dance clubs. I meant dungeons."

"Dungeons?" She shook her head. "What are those?"

I pulled the confused woman back into my arms where she belonged and laughed at the absurdity of it all. "It doesn't matter, *cara mia*. The point is that if you don't need any of this, then I sure as hell don't need any of this."

"Thank goodness." She leaned into me. "None of this is me."

"That's good." I chuckled. "Because you suck at it."

Burying her face in my chest, she laughed. "I know. I hate being in charge."

"Someone told me recently that if you're not naturally submissive, you can't force yourself to be submissive. That probably means you can't force yourself to be dominant either." I shrugged.

"Someone?" She pulled back and frowned up at me. "You talked to people who do this stuff?"

“You are adorable when you’re jealous.” I leaned in and kissed her forehead. “But there is no need for it. You’re the only woman I want. I was just asking Danny about it.”

“Danny?” Her brows pulled together again.

Oh. She thought I was implying that he was into this stuff.

I shook my head. “He didn’t know any more about it than I did.”

With my heart piecing itself back together in my chest, I scanned the disaster that had become my living room. She’d put up with so much shit from me if she wasn’t into any of this.

“Cara.” I tipped her chin up so she was forced to look at me. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

She sighed. “Everything was going so well with us, apart from your need for me to punish you. I was more than willing to learn and try my hand at being a domme if it meant I wouldn’t lose you.”

A bark of laughter erupted from me. God. We were ridiculous. The two of us had been doing the same thing. Not clarifying with one another, only making assumptions, and desperately trying to hold on to what we had.

“I have no intention of ever giving you up,” I promised. “But if this is going to work, we have to be honest and up-front.”

“I can definitely do that.”

“Come on.” I tucked her hair over her shoulders. “Let’s get the wheel back on the stand and get some of this mess cleaned up.”

As we worked together to roll the cursed thing across the room, I couldn’t hold back my laughter.

She stopped and put her hands on her hips. “What about this is so funny? This is a disaster.”

“Just wondering what the chances are that this could happen to anyone but you.” I smiled. “My very own Calamity

Cara.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, shut up.”

“Wouldn’t want you any other way, cara mia.”



Cara

FLIPPING THE CHICKEN OVER, I glanced at Pete. He was propped up against the counter next to me, smirking down at his phone.

With a playful scoff, he sauntered across the space, heading for the chessboard, and moved one of Owen’s pieces. “Fell right into my trap.”

Although my man seemed very sure of himself, I’d seen Owen trap him a few too many times in the last month. Their version of chess was hard core. They made every game seem like the Super Bowl. Pete made his move and then paced, waiting for Owen’s next text.

I couldn’t help but watch the way his back muscles moved as he crossed the open area. And that ass? Damn. As I was checking him out, the hook on the wall from the hamster wheel caught my eye. He really needed to have it removed. He’d returned the damn wheel right away, but he still hadn’t bothered having someone come in and get rid of the hardware.

Regardless, I was glad we’d moved past the toys and the leashes. I chuckled just thinking about the whole mess we had let ourselves get into. How my bossy boyfriend ever thought he could be submissive was beyond me. Bending was not in the man’s nature, let alone giving up control completely.

“He claims he and Cece are sitting down to eat, but I think he knows I’ve got him.” Pete tossed his phone onto the counter, then wrapped his arms around me from behind. “If we’d just ordered something”—his lips brushed across my neck—“we could have already eaten and moved on to dessert.”

“I like to cook. You know that.” I smiled but leaned into him and soaked in the way it felt to be in his arms. “So don’t try that whole *we need a full-time chef* thing again.”

“I know.” He blew out a breath and released me, then he moved back to his spot against the counter. “If it makes you happy, then you can cook every night.”

Okay, maybe he did bend to me on occasion, but to everyone else, he was still a demanding jerk. I saw it more now that I was interning at All Out. He’d used some kind of spell to talk me into quitting my job at the bar and going to work for his company. In the end, he was right. The experience I was getting at All Out was invaluable. Even if my schedule had only gotten busier. The school semester was in full swing, and I was still studying for the bar, but I hadn’t for a moment regretted making the change.

“We’ll have plenty of time for dessert before I leave.”

His lips dropped into a pout. “I don’t want you to leave tonight. We barely see each other.”

“What are you talking about?” We were together all the time.

He held the plate out as I transferred the chicken from the pan. I added the butter and mushrooms to the pan, then regarded him.

“I see you every afternoon at the office.”

“It’s not the same as when you’re here with me.” He slapped my ass, and I shivered at the sting. “I can’t do that there. I have to be somewhat professional.”

“Yeah, okay.” I rolled my eyes and pulled open a drawer, looking for the zester. “Were you being professional last week when you locked your office door so we could have sex on your desk?”

He chuckled. “We should take that kind of lunch break more often.”

“You’re ridiculous.” I shut the third drawer. “Where’s the zester?” Although I’d been cooking for him a few times a

week, I was still learning my way around his kitchen.

“If you were here more often, you’d know.” He reached into the large pitcher of utensils next to the stove top and dug around until he found what he was looking for.

“I’m here most nights.”

“Yeah, but not every night.” He held the lemon and the zester out to me. “You still stay at that tiny apartment on the nights before you have class.”

“My stuff’s there.” I shrugged and got to work zesting the lemon and adding it to the mushrooms. “And I did stay on Thursday.”

“Let’s move all your stuff here. Then you can stay every night.”

“That would be living together.” I chuckled, sautéing the mushrooms in butter.

“Yeah.” His tone was far more serious than the one he usually used.

“Wait.” I swallowed. “Are you asking me to move in?”

“If I thought demanding you move in would work, I would’ve already done it.” His eyes were soft, his expression earnest.

I paused with the spoon in my hand and surveyed him. We’d been dating for three months. “Do you think it’s too soon?”

“Soon?” He frowned. “I’ve been waiting for you to move in for six weeks.”

“Six weeks?” The spoon fell from my hand, and the wooden handle clattered on the edge of the pan.

“Yeah, once we got past that whole hamster wheel thing.”

I chuckled and shook my head, then dragged the container of flour closer to the stove so I could add a couple of tablespoons to the butter and mushrooms. He remained by my side, silently watching me and letting me process his

suggestion as I added the chicken broth and mixed everything together.

“Cara mia.”

Now that I had the contents in the pan simmering, I turned all the way toward him, giving him my full attention. He gripped my hips and pulled me flush against him, causing me to tilt my head back to look up at him.

“I don’t have any doubts about us. I want you here all the time.” He cupped my cheek with his large palm. “You know I love you, so why not start our life together?”

“I love you too...but...” I sighed. Who was I kidding? I was going to say yes. I hated the nights we weren’t together just as much as he did. “Are your parents going to freak out that I’m moving in so soon?”

I had met them a couple of weeks ago. They were nice, but I’d gotten the impression that they thought we were moving too fast.

He shrugged. “They seemed fine when I told them we’d be married by the end of the year.”

“What?” My eyes popped open wide and my heart lurched in my chest. No wonder they thought we were moving too fast. “It’s November. You’re crazy.”

“Only about you.”



Pete

OUR DRIVER OPENED THE DOOR, and once Cara had stepped out of the car, I followed and placed my hand on the small of her back so I could guide her to the entrance of our hotel.

“Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Caruso.” The concierge smiled at us as we entered the resort. I loved it every time someone called her that. We’d been married for five months, and although we’d gotten a lot of “you’re rushing it” speeches, I wanted my girl locked down and with a rock on her hand so everyone knew she was mine. She liked to joke that we were together because I trapped her in a pumpkin shell, but the truth was that we were made for each other.

“Did you enjoy the vineyards?” the man asked.

“They were so stunning. Pictures don’t do it justice, and lunch was to die for.” Cara beamed.

Bringing her to Tuscany to tour the vineyards and visit the places she’d always dreamed of seeing made me feel like I’d already accomplished one of my life’s goals.

Pretty sure I was more excited when she passed the bar than she was, and I wanted nothing more than to whisk her away to celebrate. I’d fought to make this a three-week trip, but Cara insisted we couldn’t be gone that long.

She was right, of course. We both had to get back to All Out.

Craig remained on staff. There was something to be said about being cutthroat when it was necessary, but I’d brought Cara on to work alongside him. Both she and Alan knew as well as I did that I needed her. She kept me in check. She

could tell me when I was being that asshole CEO again, and she'd remind me of the importance of taking care of my employees.

Tomorrow we were heading to Rome. She was excited to see the Vatican and the Colosseum. I was looking forward to seeing it all through her eyes. Watching her enjoy the places I loved was quickly becoming my favorite pastime. Moving forward, we'd committed ourselves to taking two trips a year so we could start knocking off every one of the places on her bucket list. I couldn't wait.

Once we were ensconced in the elevator, I pushed the button for the top floor and stepped back.

She used to balk at staying in penthouses when we traveled, but she'd finally settled in. During this trip, it almost seemed like second nature to her. Occasionally, she still pushed back when I spoiled her. She preferred to cook dinner over having food delivered or hiring someone to cook for us. The one thing she rarely complained about, though, was having a full-time driver. It was hard not to love traveling around the city so easily.

"I'm feeling claustrophobic." I shot her a sly smile as I leaned back against the stainless-steel wall.

She rolled her eyes but stepped forward until her body was inches from mine. "Oh?"

"Yeah." I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her flush against me. "Maybe we can think of something that would distract me?"

She smiled up at me, her eyes dancing. "You can try that meditation trick again."

"I'd rather distract myself by kissing you." I threaded my fingers through her hair and brushed my lips against hers, savoring the warmth of her body pressed into mine and the scent of her surrounding me. Pulling back, I stared down into her eyes and found everything I never knew I needed looking back at me. Getting locked inside a pumpkin shell with her

might have been the luckiest thing that had ever happened to me.

Epilogue



Cara

“DADDY, DADDY. BUBBLES.” Grace ran up to Owen, twirling and releasing more bubbles into the air, then she took off again.

“I can’t believe she’s two already.” Danny shook his head.

We’d traveled to North Carolina for Grace’s birthday. Spending the weekend with Pete’s two best friends and their wives was a bonus.

“I still can’t believe you fuc—”

I elbowed Pete in the stomach, causing him to double over.

“Right.” He shook his head. “Language.”

He was not ready for little ones yet, but that was okay. Neither was I. We were enjoying our travels and slowly checking off our bucket list of places. Work was as busy as ever. All Out had spent the last two years growing. We’d even added a second corporate office on the West Coast.

Our friends all chuckled at Pete’s expression.

“Can’t believe both of you have little humans now.” Pete nodded toward the kids.

To be honest, I couldn’t either. Between the stories about how horrible Owen’s ex was and the constant drama between Danny and Glory, I never thought we’d get to a place where I like both Owen’s and Danny’s wives. But I could honestly say these two were some of my closest friends.

The small blond-haired boy who had been spinning in circles caught my eye as he toddled after Grace. I followed

him, having no intention of letting him out of my sight. This little guy had a knack for finding trouble.

“Danny?” Pete’s voice echoed behind me as the toddler picked up speed. “Why is my wife chasing after your mini me?”

I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see Danny shrug.

“Where’s the wife?” Pete asked.

He snorted and scanned the yard, then leaned forward to peer through the sliding glass door. “Like I have any control over what she does. She was here a minute ago.”

“I told her I’d watch Chris.” I might not have been ready for my own kids, but I loved playing with my friends’ little ones. “He wanted to hang out with Aunt Cara. Right, buddy?” I scooped the little boy up and lifted him into the air, and a burst of giggles erupted from him.

“Are you trying to tell me you want a mini me?”

I scoffed and shot him a smirk.

“Or you want a mini you. I think we both would prefer that.” Pete chuckled.

“Eh, maybe we should start with a puppy.” Not that having a puppy in a high-rise penthouse would be much easier.

“Pick a day this week, and we’ll go get one.” With mirth dancing in his eyes, he sipped from his bottle of Easy Out.

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop from laughing. His *you want something? Then I’ll get it for you* way of doing things shouldn’t surprise me anymore, but it still caught me off guard from time to time.

“Maybe a house would be better first,” I called as Chris took off running again.

“You two discuss your future dog. I got my son.” Danny heaved himself up and strode my way.

“We can have grass installed on the patio. I’ve checked into it. In case you decide you want to stay in the city forever,”

Pete said as I stepped back onto the patio.

He was always ten steps ahead of me.

“But.” He shrugged. “If you want to go the house route, I’ve had one picked out for a while now, so whenever you’re ready—”

I froze and my heart lodged in my throat. Oh God. Now what had he done? “One what?”

“A house.” He frowned at me like he couldn’t understand what else he could have meant. But we’d never talked about buying a house.

I blinked. “You picked out a house for us?”

“Of course. I had to be ready for the day you decided you wanted one. My favorite is definitely the best available...” He took my hand. “But we can look at a couple, then you can pick the one you like. Because in the end, I want you to be happy more than I need the best house.”

I shook my head. “You’re crazy.”

He stepped forward and placed a kiss on my cheek. “Forever crazy about you.”

Despite this man’s ridiculous moments, my heart warmed at his words. I would never get tired of that response.

ALSO BY KACIE WEST

AJ RANNEY & JENNI BARA

Kacie West Books:

Goldilocks and the Grumpy Bear

Tumbling Head Over Heels

Along Came The Girl

Peter Pumpkined Out

Jenni Bara Books:

More Than The Game

More Than Fine

More Than A Hero

More Than A Story

More Than Myself

Mother Maker (coming 2024)

AJ Ranney Books:

Always Yours

Wishing to be Yours

Impossibly Yours

Imperfectly Yours (coming 2024)

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

Dear Reader (AJ here),

When Jenni dropped a pen name for her character Morgan in *More than a Hero* I just knew we needed to bring Kacie West's stories to life. Convincing Jenni to do it with me was the easy part, keeping up with her...well let's just say she keeps me on my toes.

Kacie's debut novel came from the fact that we wanted to write our favorite tropes first. I thought we meant snowed in because who doesn't love a snowed in Christmas story? But Jenni's favorite trope is grumpy/sunshine. Remember how I said she keeps me on my toes? Well in the middle of the night she came up with the crazy idea that we could make it Goldilocks. I, of course, had no idea what she was talking about. But once she explained (in the morning at a reasonable hour), I absolutely loved the idea of mixing our two favorite tropes and doing a spin off of a classic. And Goldilocks and the Grumpy Bear was born. Which then paved the way to our theme of funny smutty versions of popular nursery rhymes.

If you've read *More than a Hero*, then you know Morgan was working on a bartender stuck in a reach-in and a very hot Italian delivery driver shows up and she scares the life out of him when she jumps out of the cooler. I've been waiting forever to write this one! And I had so much fun plotting with Jenni and writing the bones all summer, even in the car on our way back from Maine with our kiddos. Even though she talks so much faster than I can write or type. But we make it work and always have fun doing it!

So now that Goldilocks got snowed in with the Grumpy Bear, Jack brought Jill up the hill with him before Tumbling Head Over Heels together, a spider sent Little Miss Muffet straight into Owen's arms, and Peter locked his *cara mia* in a pumpkin shell, what are we doing next?

This spring we'll put Humpty Dumpty together again and then later in the year we're going to find a perfect match for the little lady who lives with too many kids in a shoe. We would love to have you join us for the entire trip.

Happy reading.

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Becca and the rest of the Author agency you all are the best. You keep up with us and always keep things under control. Even when Jenni adds to the list or make everything chaos.

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Daphne and Britt, thank you for being friends and teachers. The amount of knowledge and insight you have given is something that we are eternally grateful for. And your friendship is something we don't want to do without. Even the funny parts like Britt reading Jenni's thoughts. You two are the best. Everyone should check out the Lovewell Lumberjacks by

Daphne Elliot and the Boston Billionaires series by Brittanee Nicole because these two women have too much talent to not be known to every reader.

Annie, thank you for your cover help. You are never fazed by all the SOS help or the fact that half a world away, you are teaching wraps. And on top of that, you never hesitate to make time for a beta read. You rock! And everyone should check out The Temptation Series by Annie Charms.

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To all our friends and family, a big thank you because we love you, and your support is something we are eternally thankful to have.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

AJ fell in love with Morgan's pen name, Kacie West, from *More than a Hero* and talked Jenni into bringing her books to life. Kacie West was born as a real-life author, and the two began co-writing. AJ is the plotter, organizer, and planner, so she writes all the bones of the story, then sends it back to Jenni. Then, when AJ is busy with her two kids, husband, and her house full of animals, Jenni goes through to add, edit, and tweak it. Which sometimes includes line editing her own sentences more than a few times to make it all just right. Then while AJ works on more bones, Jenni goes back to her four kids and day job as a paralegal in family law, writing real life unhappily ever afters all day. AJ and Jenni have not only become co-authors but great friends, and they can't wait to bring more of Kacie West's stories to life.