



BIANCA'S BODYGUARD

Daddy

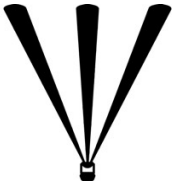
USA Today Bestselling Author

Honey Meyer

BIANCA'S BODYGUARD DADDY

Bright Lights Little Darlings Book Three

HONEY MEYER



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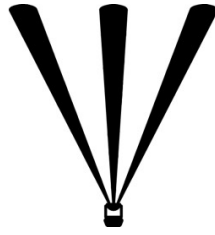
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WELCOME TO CLOVER CITY!

The fictional Clover City is home to the Clover City Littles series, and parts of the Bright Lights Little Darlings series. While it's most fun to read them in order (hello, cameos!), the books can be read in any order.

Always want to be in the loop about what's happening next in Clover City? Join my newsletter The Hive and never miss a thing! <https://readerlinks.com/1/2889721>

CHAPTER ONE



“I don’t need a fucking babysitter.”

“That’s debatable,” muttered Anderson. “But I’m not talking about hiring a babysitter, I’m talking about a bodyguard. You can’t keep running them off. I know you don’t like having people around—”

“That’s because people suck,” Bianca muttered, folding her arms across her chest and flopping back on the couch and pulling her legs up to sit mermaid style.

Anderson rolled his eyes and she wanted throw something at him. He was a good manager, had helped her make some really good career moves, but she didn’t like him much. Didn’t have to, she guessed, but it sure would be nice.

Then again, she didn’t like many people, and if she was being honest, the feeling was mutual. No one seemed to like her much at all. Wanted to fuck her? Yes. Were interested in her money and her fame? For sure. But actually enjoyed her company? Pfft, no. It had been like that her whole life, and she’d never really understood why.

“You know who else sucks?” Anderson demanded. “Psycho stalkers, that’s who.”

He brandished the shuddersome letters at her again, and okay, fine, yes. This guy was creepy as hell. And as much as she’d like to say he was like the other harmless assholes, it felt different to her too. For starters, there were pictures of her, and not ones that had been published in the legit press or even on any sketchy fly-by-night gossip blogs.

“I guess so.”

Anderson looked like he wanted to throttle her. Standard, and not in a fun way.

“Alright then, it’s settled. You’re getting a new personal protection detail, top of the line. 24/7, and not the rent-a-cops you’ve been able to chase off. There’s a price to pay for being gorgeous and famous, and unfortunately you’re paying it.”

“You’re goddamn right I’m paying for it. How much is this going to cost me, anyway?”

Anderson sighed and dropped the papers face down on her coffee table before plopping down on the opposite side of the couch. At least she didn’t have to look at the freakishly neat letters that had no fingerprints and no real identifying characteristics. Except for the uniquely disgusting threats they made to her person.

The way this guy talked about wanting to make her into his perfect little doll was gross. She was no one’s puppet. No one told her what to do unless they paid out the nose for the privilege, or under extremely special circumstances, she allowed it. She hadn’t allowed it for quite some time.

“A pretty penny. Good, discreet security doesn’t come cheap, especially when you have a reputation for being a holy terror, which you do. I asked around and the same name came up over and over. Carcharodon Security. They’ve provided protection for everyone from politicians to financial sector bigwigs, done some celeb work, and word on the street is that they’ve even protected some dodgy oligarch types and their families. I pulled some strings and got some phone time with Taj Hovick, the owner. He’s an ex-Navy SEAL, clearly knows his shit, and agreed the letters you’ve gotten are troublesome.”

“Of course he did,” she grumbled, squeezing her arms across her ribcage and tucking her knees up under her chin. She was never really comfortable unless she was in a little ball—it was fucking torture to sit “properly” during pressers and other public shit. As if that crap weren’t already bad enough. All those people staring at her, wondering if she was going to put a foot wrong when she answered their questions.

Thankfully she had top-notch media training, and got coaching for every project but occasionally reporters could surprise her and that's when things went off the rails. "He wants to make money."

"Don't we all? But a couple people I talked to said they'd contacted Carcharodon and been turned away so I don't think they're desperate for business. Mr. Hovick seemed legitimately bothered, and agrees this isn't like those harmless fans who are awkward and inappropriate and lonely."

Yeah, those people she could sympathize with. Empathize with, even. She was one of Hollywood's most in demand actors, but take away the money and the fame and the red carpet gowns and the stylist-inflicted hair and makeup and that's what would be left. A woman who was awkward, inappropriate, and deeply lonely. Good thing she was hot, willing to bust her ass in a way most people weren't, and had spent a lifetime perfecting how to imitate people; she was pretty confident those were the only things keeping her from being completely alone.

Bianca looked at the letters again. The ones that had come to her house in plain white envelopes with her name typed on the front, snuck in with the rest of her mail but with no postmark which meant the fucker had been at her house and had somehow managed to evade the security cameras. Even face down, they made her queasy.

Fear lodged in her throat and she tried to swallow it because she didn't get scared. Not about stalkers anyway. She got angry. And apparently she hired a brute squad.

"Fine. But I don't want a bunch of vulgar meathead Neanderthals following me around and fucking up my shit, okay? I want well-dressed, clean-cut men who know how to shut the hell up and stay out of my way, and who don't dare speak to me unless spoken to. I want them so out of my hair that I wonder if they're even there. Got it?"

She didn't need or want any more attention than she already got, and she also didn't want bodyguards who

expected her to talk to them. They were going to hate her anyway, it would be nice if it wasn't personal for once.

"I'll see what I can do," Anderson said in a way that made it clear he was going to do whatever he thought was best, as always. It was annoying he was right so much of the time.



"I'm not a fucking babysitter."

"Oh, I know," his boss, Taj Hovick, drawled.

How Taj kept his desk clean when he so often had his massive fucking feet on it was a mystery but then again, there was a whole lot about Taj that was a real head scratcher. Like how he looked like a skull-cracking knuckle dragger but was also probably the smartest person Theo Palmer knew.

"You know, most guys would be happy to have a bit of a cushy gig coming off that clusterfuck you just handled."

It had been a fucked up job, he couldn't deny that. Being hired as private security for a democratic candidate running for office in a fascist state was something else. She'd lost, of course, because the whole election was rigged and people were terrified and the current president had military support, but it had been nice to feel like he was working on something that mattered. That had given people hope, inspired some good trouble.

It had also kept him on his toes and awake at night. Between the death threats and the bomb scares and the harassment campaigns run by the state, he'd had his hands full. It had taken everything he had to get that woman out of her country the day following the election and it had been a total rush. 10/10 would do that job over again, even if he'd been strafing a runway with bullets at three o'clock in the morning while hanging out of a helicopter that was escorting hers to a neighboring country where a plane had been waiting to fly her halfway across the world to somewhere that would nominally be safe.

He hadn't wanted to actually hurt anyone—a lot of those military guys were just following orders, trying to hold onto their jobs because it was the only way to feed their families and hell, keep them alive in that fucking dictatorship—but he wasn't going to let them kill his teammates or his client if he could help it.

Had it been stressful as all hell and had he been risking his life the entire time? Yes. Had it made him feel more alive than he had since leaving the Navy? Also yes.

“Yeah, well, not me. Give this spoiled Hollywood princess to someone else. Brats aren't my thing. Professionally,” he amended when Taj gave him a look that said *I've met you before, you kinky motherfucker*.

“Can't.”

Taj shrugged as though the issue were closed. For as much as it pissed Theo off, it probably was. Taj ran a tight ship, and if he needed Theo on this job then he did. Even if that was true, he was still going to push his luck. If he didn't, Taj would probably ask if he'd been replaced by an alien or some shit. It wouldn't be like him to roll over and take it, not from anyone.

Yeah, Theo loved this job and he was great at it. He liked working out of Taj's shop more than he'd liked working anywhere else and he wasn't in a hurry to leave. But he wasn't in the military anymore. If there was a job he didn't like, he didn't have to salute and follow orders, bark out, “Sir, yes, Sir!” He could voice his opinion, ask his questions, and if Taj had a problem with that, he could get fucked.

“Why not?”

“I promised her manager I'd put one of my best guys on it. They were all busy so I'm stuck with you.”

Theo shot his boss a withering look and Taj just grinned back because he was an asshole like that. Until he wasn't.

His massive shoes came off the desk and Taj leaned forward over the gigantic dark wood thing, resting his blocky chin on interwoven fingers as a V formed between his thick brows. Yeah, Taj could look pensive sometimes, but there was

something about his expression that said troubled, not just thoughtful.

“In all seriousness. You know I’m as likely to tell these celebs to fuck off as I am to take their money for a cakewalk job that some rent-a-cop could handle. But her manager showed me the letters this sick fuck has sent. They’re close, they’re personal, and as someone who’s religious about their kink being consensual and informed, they’re going to make you want to hunt down this asshole and...”

Taj shook his head looking disturbed and that man had seen some things.

“You remember the Donahue job we did?”

A shudder ran down Theo’s spine because how could he forget? He knew a lot of sadists, knew Ryker Donahue played safely with his partners and worshiped the ground his little girl walked on, but there was another side to that guy. A piece of his soul that was so dark it was pitch black, and Theo only knew that from being on the clean-up crew for what he’d done to the man who’d kidnapped and tortured his sweet Cosima. The aftermath of that shit was burned into his grey matter and no amount of happy-placing or brain bleach would ever get it out. So yeah, he remembered. Nodded to confirm.

“That. If this psycho gets ahold of this woman? It’s gonna be ugly. I’m talking some real ‘it puts the lotion in the basket’ kind of shit, okay? Dollification is a real and valid kink but this ain’t it. This guy isn’t playing, he actually wants to take this woman and turn her into his perfect, obedient sex doll, playmate, princess on a pedestal but one who won’t dare talk back. Mark my words, this guy is as bad as the sicko we helped take care of on the Donahue job. We’re not going to let him anywhere near her. That shit is not happening to any woman if we can help it. Got me?”

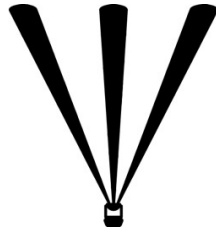
Well fuck. As much as he liked brats, Theo also had a soft spot for damsels in distress. Which was part of the reason why he preferred male clients. No risk of any Whitney Houston-Kevin Costner crap with some dude, he just didn’t swing that way.

He wouldn't risk his job and his reputation for some woman though. He'd worked too hard and too long to get here, and no pussy was worth losing all that. Theo knew himself well enough to know his weaknesses, and made them a non-issue whenever possible. He was just going to have to keep his dick in his pants. Shouldn't be that hard, he had willpower to spare and no time for people who took the entertainment industry seriously.

“Fine. But you put someone else in charge of this detail as soon as possible and give me something worthwhile to do.”

“Sure,” Taj said dismissively. “Now get outta my office, I've got a phone call to make.”

CHAPTER TWO



Being on location was not her favorite. It meant being away from her house, being away from her things, having as much control of her surroundings as she ever had. Even though Bianca had stayed at this hotel several times—in this suite, even—it wasn't home.

She'd be here for a couple months while they did most of the filming for *Knightstyled: Onslaught* and then they'd head to New Orleans to get a few on location shots before going home to LA for a bunch of the stunt-heavy green screen work. They'd already destroyed New York, London, San Francisco, and Tokyo in the *Knightstyled* franchise, and they wouldn't bother with Clover City. To be honest, New Orleans was a bit of an odd choice, but it was really recognizable unlike some other generic cities. Like who the fuck would recognize Portland?

Another hotel, another place to tolerate before she could go home. And unlike in Clover City where they had semi-permanent things set up that guaranteed a smother filming experience, New Orleans would be pretty makeshift and she wasn't looking forward to it. She'd cross that bridge when she got to it, she supposed. She had this phase of filming to deal with first.

Anderson had come ahead to deal with setting up her suite to her specifications, but it was still going to be not home. She didn't have all her things, shit would grate on her nerves and make her feel like she was clothed in sandpaper, and she'd have to deal with people acting like she was a spoiled ass diva

when she requested it be fixed. In addition to the usual stress of being in a different place, she was dealing with yet another new security detail.

Her team from Carcharodon had been here for a couple days already, working with the hotel to secure the premises, planning routes to and from the set, familiarizing themselves with the where she'd be filming, as well as running background checks on staff. It was a whole lot and seemed unnecessary. Yes, this guy was a nutjob, but hopefully he was a SoCal nut, and hadn't followed her to the backwater that was Clover City. Why anyone would come here voluntarily, she didn't know.

Anderson had already unplugged all the electronics in the suite that she wouldn't use like the TV so she wouldn't have to deal with the buzz of electricity, but there was still a lightbulb that needed to be replaced because she could hear it hum. Even if Anderson couldn't, and rolled his eyes when he thought she wasn't looking, it was driving her up a fucking wall, and she was already in a foul, wound-up mood. How hard was it for someone to take care of this shit so she wouldn't have to deal with it? Too hard apparently.

Finally there was a knock at the door to the suite and Anderson went to answer it. She heard the murmur of male voices, and she wondered if Anderson was warning them about her. Probably. He would've already but she wouldn't be surprised if he were reiterating that she was...difficult.

Bianca supposed that was true, but it also didn't seem entirely fair in a way she couldn't put a finger on. Why didn't the things that bothered her bother other people? Didn't matter. It was time for her to try to keep her temper in check because she'd promised Anderson she'd at least try not to run this latest batch of bodyguards off. Yet.

She turned in time to see Anderson leading what seemed like a baseball team's worth of men into the suite's living area. At least they were all wearing suits and ties, and aside from the mostly high-and-tight haircuts didn't look as though they'd walked straight off a military base and into her hotel suite.

“Gentlemen, I’d like you to meet Ms. Lacoste. If you could introduce yourselves,” Anderson prodded.

A massive guy who looked like he could scare off a rabid bear by raising an eyebrow stepped forward and offered her a hand. Apparently amidst all his warnings about how she was hell on wheels, Anderson had failed to mention to them that she didn’t like to be touched. She shot her manager a glare, but shook the man’s hand anyway.

It wasn’t grubby hands grabbing for her like they did on red carpets, it wasn’t anyone trying to touch her hair or get close to her for a selfie when she was out in public just trying to live her fucking life. A handshake she could deal with.

“Taj Hovick. I won’t be part of your detail, but I’m the owner of Carcharodon. If you have any trouble with your team, you should always feel free to reach out directly to me.” He pulled a business card from an inside pocket of his suit coat and gave it to her. “That has my personal cell on it. Please don’t hesitate to call me anytime day or night.”

Apparently she rated the big guns if the owner had come to set things up. And he might look like a brute who could snap her in half and would definitely play a ruffian in a Knightstyled movie, but he was articulate and polite. Plus he was wearing an expensive suit with exquisite tailoring and his grip on her hand had been firm without trying to crush her or insultingly limp. Handshakes were one of the few things she trusted about people.

“Thank you, Mr. Hovick.”

“Call me Taj if you like, Ms. Lacoste. I’ll introduce your detail who will be onsite with you. This is Theo Palmer, he’s the head of your team and your point person if you need anything. Theo’s one of my best. He’s former Navy, and was one of the first people I brought onboard at Carcharodon.”

When Bianca got a look at the guy Taj was gesturing to, she could barely believe she’d missed him. Although given that Taj was a mountain of a man and probably topped out around six-six, she shouldn’t really be surprised that she’d barely registered anything or anyone else. But all six-two of

Theo Palmer with his close-cropped blond hair, icy blue eyes, and stern jaw covered with stubble had her knees going weak like she'd been stunned by a bolt from Viridescenz's trident.

It was annoying that the very things that turned her on also tended to infuriate her. Theo looked like he wanted to take her over his lap and spank her ass. Which if he legit wanted to as part of a consensual arrangement would be one thing but if it was because he really thought she was an unruly Hollywood brat who was beneath his pay grade, well, he could fuck off. Not to mention the last time she'd consented to something like that, it hadn't gone well.

"Ma'am," he said with a crisp nod.

"Don't 'ma'am' me. I'm not your grandmother," she snapped, and then flushed when he raised his brows at her, a silent chastisement.

"Understood."

This was off to a great start. Ugh, he was going to be insufferable, wasn't he? Being all built and condescending and hot and irritating? That was just her fucking luck.

Thankfully before she could say anything else she might regret, Taj was introducing the next person in line and she could only shoot a glare back at Theo who was standing with his hands behind his back and staring into the middle distance like a good soldier. Yep, he was going to drive her up a fucking wall.



He'd looked up Bianca Lacoste right after Taj had given him his assignment. He'd recognized the name of course but he wasn't one to keep up with Hollywood gossip. In his brief internet search, he'd seen a million pictures of her walking red carpets and posing for photo shoots in high fashion magazines. Plus some candids of her about town that paparazzi had snapped, and of course stills from her film career.

The dossier Taj had sent him off with contained much the same with a little more background but this woman had been working in show business since she was a kid and didn't seem to have much of a life outside her job. Very few romantic relationships, not much in the way of associates listed outside of co-stars and other people in the film industry, her parents were living but she didn't seem close with them. Maybe because she was so uptight and tyrannical.

He enjoyed the Knightstyeled films as much as anyone else did, maybe a little more. He'd grown up reading comic books, and while he didn't anymore he still recognized some of the story lines and characters. Piper Solena aka Invicta might've fueled more than one hormonal wet dream and covert wank fest in his childhood bathroom, and it was real unfortunate that Bianca Lacoste looked like the heroine come to life. Especially because he was pretty sure she was half-demon in real life and not just on-screen.

The way she'd snapped when he was trying to be polite and professional didn't bode well. She was probably going to be one of those clients he couldn't win with. Could he go back to fending for his life in a military dictatorship, please?

Taj had introduced the rest of her detail—a crew of nine seemed like overkill for one spoiled starlet, but Taj really had a bad feeling about her stalker so top of the line full spread with redundancies it was. It would make scheduling people for time off easier on his end, that was for sure but it was still annoying. Who did this woman think she was anyway? And from what he'd seen, whoever wanted to kidnap her really had their work cut out for them. Hell, the guy would probably change his mind after a couple hours and bring her back.

It would be one thing to handle this woman as a play partner or as his very own little girl but this was a professional matter and he couldn't let any of his daddy instincts bleed through. Besides, she probably wasn't a bratty little. Just a high-strung, entitled Hollywood princess who thought she'd earned the diamonds on the soles of her shoes.

Taj and Anderson had taken a seat at the dining table to hammer out a few last minute details, and Theo dismissed his

team. No need for them to stand here being useless eye candy for Bianca. He might think this was overkill even if Taj was right about this stalker, but Theo still had a job to do and he'd do it.

His team could be studying blueprints of the hotel and maps of the areas where filming would be taking place, or going over the schedules that the harried line producer had given them. Although the bug-eyed and balding man named Isaac had also been clear that the schedule was a best guess and it was basically guaranteed to change. Great.

Once he'd assigned his men to their tasks and sent them on their way, he turned his attention to Bianca. Even though she was coming off a few weeks break after her last job, she still looked agitated and uneasy. What kind of bug did she have up her ass that she couldn't be happy in this luxurious suite with an enormous fruit basket and every comfort a person could ask for?

Her arms folded across her chest and the way she flicked her fingers said she wasn't happy though. He'd wonder if she was staying awake at night, worrying over this creepy fucker who was stalking her, but Taj had said she was more annoyed than afraid. Maybe it had been a long flight out from LA. Hell, maybe she was just classically hangry. The fruit basket hadn't been opened after all.

Theo was no one's errand boy, but he did have strong caregiving instincts, and sometimes with these prickly clients all it took was a little kindness and they'd get along better. It definitely wasn't his daddy compulsions taking over when he offered, "You look a little worn out. Want to have a seat and I can get you a glass of water, maybe something to eat?"

Mostly clients enjoyed that kind of solicitousness, especially when he'd been stuck with women. Bianca, however, was not an average client.

"I'll thank you not to comment on my appearance. What the hell? Your job is to keep your mouth shut and your eyes open. Did your boss not make it clear that you're not to speak

unless spoken to? I don't want you here, and I especially don't want you offering unsolicited advice."

Well fuck, no wonder this woman didn't have much in the way of friends. She took what was supposed to be a kind gesture and twisted it into him being a dick face. He absolutely was sometimes, but he'd been trying to be nice. This was going to be a long damn assignment if they were already butting heads like this.

He could be the bigger person—metaphorically as well as literally because Bianca Lacoste was more petite in real life than she seemed on screen—and try to smooth things over, even if he had to grit his teeth to do it. One of the obnoxious things about working with diva clients.

"Sorry. I just thought you seemed a little strung-out and boosting your blood sugar might help. Trying to do you a favor."

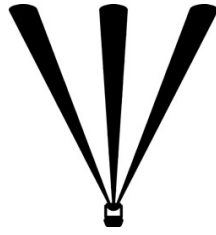
Okay, that might've been more poking the bear than soothing the beast judging by the way Bianca's brown eyes flashed murder and she planted her hands on her hips.

"I have a nutritionist and a trainer and I don't need some toy soldier giving me pointers. What are you going to do next, you blowhard misogynist, tell me to smile? You can fuck off because no one tells me what to do."

Oh yeah, this was going to be a hellish assignment. His clients usually liked him, and if they didn't, they at least respected him. Bianca clearly did neither. They were going to get one thing clear, though, and if it got him fired, more's the better. This unhinged brat wasn't going to talk to him like that.

"You pay me to tell you what to do, princess. That's my job. I tell you what to do to keep your spoiled little rich bitch ass safe. Got it?"

CHAPTER THREE



Oddly, things hadn't improved since their first meeting. Theo had been on Hollywood brat duty for two days, and he was already over it. Bianca was wound ridiculously tight, everything had to be just so, and if she didn't get her way she was liable to have a fit.

He hadn't been unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of one of those, although he no doubt would be. She'd already demanded he be fired the first time they met. Anderson and Taj had smoothed her frazzled feathers and she'd agreed to give it a go for real but he'd sensed an impending fit. Once Taj had left, and Theo had excused himself to check on his team, he'd heard most of her tantrum through the door to the suite where Anderson was getting his ass handed to him.

This morning, though, he'd been informed that her highness would be going for a run and she hated treadmills. Luckily, they'd scouted out the route she liked to take before she'd arrived and while he didn't love it—she didn't *have* to go outside, and it would make his life easier if she didn't expose herself more than completely necessary—it could've been worse. He'd sent Dex out a few minutes ago while Bianca limbered up in her sitting area, and Kanon would follow them at a distance. Close enough to keep an eye out, but far enough behind that her majesty wouldn't have a hissy fit. She was already ticked off that she had to see him.

It was funny how Theo'd been shot at, chased by armed insurgents, put his life on the line by going into enemy

territory more times than he could count, but the the thing that had him filled with dread was a petite actress who faked what the good people he'd served with did for real. Maybe that's why she had so much energy left to be nasty; Bianca Lacoste only played a make believe hero on the big screen and was otherwise a spoiled little pain in his ass.

He knocked on the door to Bianca's suite at oh-six-thirty as he'd been instructed and he was met by the smoking hot brunette glaring up at him. Why could she not have been one of those willowy blonde types? Objectively, he knew they were attractive, but they did nothing for him personally. Bianca's darker coloring that hinted at her Mediterranean ancestry, her fit but still curvy body, and those big brown eyes pinged something inside him that made him want to put her hair in pigtails and hold her hand when they crossed the street.

This particular bombshell however would not have had any of that in a billion years. It was clear she'd rather have knifed him in the eye than accept any kindness from him. Fine.

"Is this really necessary? I've done this run a million times."

"Which is precisely why we should be changing your route every day, or better yet, doing this in the hotel gym, or best of all, have a treadmill brought into your suite."

Her scowl deepened. "This is such bullshit."

"Tell me about it," he muttered.

He'd rather be doing pretty much anything other than babysitting this woman, but Taj had been right—the letters she'd received were pretty fucking creepy and there was something about them that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end as he'd reread them. They were very... particular. This guy definitely had an unhealthy obsession with his charge.

The man wanted to control everything about her and keep her all to himself. Insisted he knew how to make her happy, and what was best for her. Which as far as Theo could tell from the mindless Bianca-Lacoste-shaped automaton the dude

seemed to want was to remove any shred of autonomy. He'd have to give the hellcat a lobotomy if he expected that kind of obedience from her. The sickening thing was that Theo thought the guy might be willing to do something like that to get what he wanted.

He could understand the compulsion to control women, having it himself, but there were lines, and this sick fuck had crossed them long ago. So here he was. At least until he gave Taj enough shit that his boss switched his duty.

“Can we go now or do you want me to put on body armor or get a fucking motorcade in order?” Bianca demanded.

“We're just waiting on you.”

They rode down in the elevator together, Bianca putting in her earbuds presumably so she wouldn't have to listen to him. He'd argued that it would be safer for her not to wear them but Anderson had made it clear that was a non-starter. Those two had a real weird relationship that he didn't want to think too hard about. Wasn't any of his business.

Once they got out to the street, he pressed his earpiece to get an update from his scout. “We good, Dex?”

“Yeah, boss. Nothing out of the ordinary, no blockages or unexpected street closures, no large unexplained vehicles, we're good.”

“We're heading out momentarily.”

He made eye contact with Kanon who was stretching his quads to the side of the valet stand, and their tail gave him a thumb's up.

“Ready whenever you are,” he told Bianca.

She didn't want him to call her “ma'am” and while Taj might lick her diamond-heeled shoes, he wasn't going to. Ms. Lacoste? Nah. He just avoided calling her anything which seemed to suit both of them just fine.

“Just keep up, okay? I'm not slowing down for you.”

That was the last thing she said before she turned her head, lush ponytail swinging over her shoulder to land against her

back in a wave of mahogany, and took off, flashing the bottoms of her no doubt ridiculously expensive running shoes as she sprinted away from him. Her hair, though, Jesus Christ. What he wouldn't do to have that wrapped around his fist.

“Oh,” he said, shaking his head and chuckling as he launched after her. That's how this was going to be.

Controlling the urge to take Bianca over his knee and spank her pert little bottom was probably better cardio than this run would be. That and the jerk-off session he was going to have in the shower after this was over because the sight of her narrow waist that flared into generous hips that were hugged by leggings so tight and thin they left very little to his imagination was enough to harden his dick.

Good thing there was nothing likable about this woman aside from her body, because if she were sweet or funny or had brains for anything important instead of show business, he'd be a goner. Lucky for Theo and his attachment to his job, she didn't seem to be anything of the sort. Just a really angry and stuck-up rich girl who felt like she could talk to people however she felt like and there'd be no consequences. Much to his irritation, he couldn't provide those consequences. Which was really unfortunate because maybe she'd be sweeter once she got a good hiding.

Not worth thinking about because she'd never look twice at a meathead like him, especially not surrounded by other silver screen royalty like she was day in and day out. Didn't matter. She was awful and she clearly felt the same about him. But his job was to keep her safe and he'd do it, following her at two paces while she pounded the pavement of Clover City.



“Ten more reps.”

Ugh. Her body was aching, her muscles were quaking, and she felt like her arms were about to give out. But if Jason

demanded it, then she'd do it. She didn't say no, not to her trainer.

Push-ups, deadlifts, hip thrusts, cable rows, bicep curls, pull-ups, hammer curls, barbell lunges, lateral pulldowns, air squats, chin-ups, leg presses, squats, calf raises, hamstring curls... The list of exercises she did to get and stay in shape for the Knightstyled movies went on and on and on, although she was usually focusing on like seven of those on any given day. Whatever Jason told her to do, she did. No matter what.

He'd driven her to tears before and he probably would again. But physical pain and frustration at not being stronger were some of the least punishing tears she shed. Besides, she was well aware her career hung by a relatively thin thread. She caused delays on productions, she didn't do enough press, her co-stars didn't like her. She had to make it worth their while to cast her somehow, and that meant memorizing her lines faster than anyone else, taking direction like a dream, and pushing herself past her breaking point in any way she could.

It had been a stroke of luck to get cast in the Knightstyled franchise, and she had Anderson to thank for that. But with multiple movies basically guaranteed and a fan base that would be ripshit if one of the main superheroes got killed off only a few installments in, it was about as close to a sure thing as anyone could get in Hollywood.

There was the usual sexist bullshit, and she could still lose out on an origin film for *Invicta* but fingers crossed that *Hydrostat's* would do numbers at the box office, and *Mentallus's* as well. Then they couldn't refuse her. *Couldn't*. And they sure as fuck better not put Rillequis ahead of her, not with Ansel Pike dropping off the face of the earth and being replaced with Sol DeWitt. Sol was good, but he lacked the intensity that Ansel had. Then again, he also lacked the substance abuse problem. Bianca had ninety-nine problems, but drugs and drinking too much weren't one of them.

There was no way she'd be able to keep up with this kind of training regimen if she was drinking or using, aside from it just seeming...wrong. Yeah, in addition to being in and out of school for filming her whole childhood, that goody-two-shoes

bit hadn't helped win her friends. Whatever, it had helped win her a job she was really good at and that happened to pay a fuckton of money. That had to be good enough since she didn't have much else.

Like a husband. Or a boyfriend. Or a daddy. Or a lover. Someone, anyone. Wasn't worth thinking about because the only men in her life barely tolerated her. Anderson, her cast mates, and now her security detail.

She thought it would irritate the fuck out of her to have Theo Palmer watching her work out, hovering like a helicopter parent, fretting like a mother hen but mostly he stayed out of her way. And when she did catch a glimpse at his face, he didn't seem disgusted. Mostly neutral, but she could've sworn even her GI Joe come to life of a bodyguard looked impressed when she managed to rip out a set of 400 pound hip thrusts. Of course then she could've collapsed with her glutes on fire.

These fucking pull-ups though, she bet any of her bodyguards could outdo her on those. They might not have Jason beating the crap out of them six days a week, sometimes twice a day, but they also had the benefit of men's natural upper body strength and they all looked like they worked out. Probably so they could stalk her on her runs.

Part of her wanted to challenge Theo to work out alongside her but then he'd be...alongside her, and that wouldn't do. She had to stay focused, and not on his body that she'd maybe pictured while she rubbed one out in her lonely hotel bed last night.



A couple hours later, Theo was leaving Dex in charge while he headed to his own room a floor down from Bianca's. He had to check in with Taj, and Dex and Kanon could handle standing guard while Bianca took a shower after her grueling workout.

For real, though. He couldn't say he liked Bianca any better than he had when they met, but he sure as fuck had a lot more respect for her now. That woman busted her ass. Wasn't

exactly a buddy run like he'd had to do as a SEAL—hauling one of your teammates on your back up a hill—but if her trainer demanded it, he wouldn't be surprised if that woman found a way to make it happen. Tough as nails, and not a complainer. About this anyway, and sometimes, he suspected, to her own detriment. She'd looked fucking exhausted and close to tears while her trainer, Jason, had kept pushing beyond what Theo thought might be her limits.

Who was looking out for her? If anyone? Anderson definitely herded her around like an angry sack of cats, and seemed to do right by her career, but where was he the rest of the time?

Telling Bianca's celebrity trainer that she'd had enough for today was definitely not part of Theo's job description. If it wasn't a threat to her life, then it wasn't his problem. Except wouldn't pushing too hard on already intense as hell workouts count as harm?

Aw hell no, Palmer. This woman made more money on her last movie than you'll ever see in a lifetime. She needs you looking out for her like she needs chopsticks to eat soup. Do not get involved. And do not think about her in the shower, for fuck's sake.

Once he'd reached his room, he tossed himself over the bed. Some bosses stood on ceremony, he'd always been glad Taj wasn't one of them. If he had to look shit up on his laptop then he'd go sit at the desk, but until then, he could catch up his CO just as well from this position.

“How's hell on wheels?”

“Kind of a badass, to be honest, but also a fucking princess. And not like the beloved by everyone in the realm for her kindness type. More likely to spit on peasants, cuss out seamstresses, and fling mud at footmen, that kind of thing.”

“Charming.”

Theo snorted because that was the last word he'd use to describe Bianca. She might be able to hold some kind of sway

over people with her beauty and talent, but once she opened her mouth off set? Damn.

“You see anything troubling today?”

“No letters, no calls or texts coming through on her phone although that’s never been this guy’s MO. I’m wondering if we won’t have a bit of peace and quiet on this coast.”

“That’d be nice, but we still need to keep an eye out like this fucker is a constant threat. If he’s based in LA and doesn’t want to travel, more’s the better. But we both know Bianca is easier to access in Clover City because the hotel is more public than her home, and the set isn’t on a closely guarded, closed studio lot.”

“Don’t I know it.”

What they left unsaid because it was still a couple months away was that New Orleans—if she hadn’t actually managed to fire his ass by then—was going to be even worse.

“How was her run today? Know you weren’t thrilled about that.”

“Would you be?” Theo shot back, but with no real heat.

“No. But you know how it goes. Gotta keep the clients happy, or we’ve got no clients.”

“No,” Theo grumbled. “We have to keep the clients *alive* or we have no clients.”

“Was it really that bad?”

Theo knew if he said yes, that it had felt unsafe and he’d been genuinely concerned for Bianca’s safety or that of his people, Taj would have a talk with Anderson, who would then get the snot kicked out of him by a livid Bianca, but that wasn’t Theo’s problem. Unfortunately for him, he wasn’t in the habit of lying and it hadn’t been terrible.

“It was actually fine. For now. I sent Dex out ahead, had Kanon trail us, and there wasn’t a lick of trouble. Not even any autograph seekers.”

“So what’re you bitching about?”

“You know I don’t like this cotton candy shit.”

“That woman is nothing like cotton candy.”

That was true. Cotton candy didn’t hip thrust four hundred pounds, didn’t deadlift two hundred pounds, didn’t do chain-weighted push-ups. And hadn’t seeing her draped in those massive, heavy chains done something to his brain? Like think about how else he might like to chain her up for a very different kind of exercise.

“Cotton candy spun around rebar and studded with diamonds and shards of broken glass, maybe.”

“Sounds like just your type,” Taj teased, and for a second Theo felt like he’d taken a lightning bolt to the skull. His boss wasn’t wrong. Not entirely. What’d they say, the opposite of love wasn’t hate, it was indifference? He wasn’t anywhere in the neighborhood of indifferent to Bianca. And while she didn’t get along well with any of her detail, she seemed to save most of her venom for him.

At least Bianca didn’t seem to have a soft side. She was simply pretty. And while she did have a stalker, she didn’t seem distressed by it at all. Not even an advisable amount.

It was annoying when clients fussed and fretted over every tiny danger. Like, nah, dude, I cannot keep you from stubbing a toe. But it was more troubling, and frankly more dangerous, when they acted like they were invincible or that nothing was wrong. If Carcharodon was involved, something wasn’t right. Taj didn’t have enough staff or frankly the interest to take on work where clients were simply being melodramatic. Not for long anyway.

“Whatever you do, don’t catch feels,” Taj warned, a bit of steel in his tone along with the mocking. Yeah, there was one hard and fast rule, and that was no fucking the clientele.

“That’s like telling me not to catch feels for the Wicked Witch and her flying monkeys. Not an issue.”

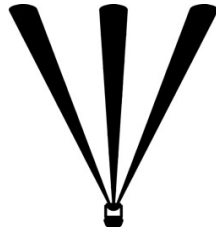
“Green’s not your kink, huh?”

It really wasn’t. Brats, yes please. Because deep down, they wanted to be tamed. Bianca didn’t seem interested in

anything of the sort. Honestly, it was a good thing Bianca didn't have a sweet bone in her body because he could totally imagine her at his feet, looking up at him with those melty pools of liquid brown eyes, and asking him if she could, please, taste his cock.

“Not when it's a shade of evil, no. Can we move on, though? I don't have all day to shoot the shit. I wanted to go over the plans for while she's on set for the next few days.”

CHAPTER FOUR



She ought to be grateful for all the fan mail she received. And on some level, she was. It meant it would be harder to fire her from any of the films she was contracted for—especially future installments of the Knightstyled franchise. But mostly they depressed her. The letters might be addressed to Bianca, but really they were for Piper/Invicta. People claimed to admire her, think she was incredible, want to be her friend, said they loved her, but the only ones she really believed were the ones that said she was beautiful. That was just a fact.

Mostly she'd hand them over to Anderson and he'd make sure they got sent an "autographed" photo of her, aka a picture that had her fake signature printed on it. Or sometimes they'd rub her the wrong way and she'd ask not to get any more mail from that particular "fan."

Only rarely would she keep anything, and those were always drawings from little kids who were probably too young to be watching Paladin movies but she wasn't a parent and hopefully never would be so what the hell did she know. She'd keep a couple of those on her fridge or hung up in her trailer at any given time to look at when she was feeling shitty. They reminded her that she had a job to do, and that she—as Invicta—didn't want to disappoint little Noah or Emma. No doubt they would be let down by meeting her in real life since she was intolerable.

She used to stress more when opening her mail because while Anderson or her PA would go through it first, there was

always something kind of nasty that made it through. She had to admit that since Theo's goon squad had taken over screening the hundreds of letters and cards and packages that arrived every day that she pretty much never got anything that made her uncomfortable.

It had become an almost relaxing thing to do while she took a break from filming. Except for the whole knowing no one would like her half as well if they met her in real life thing. That still sucked pretty bad. It was the fifth day of filming here in Clover City and after filming one of those scenes where Invicta, Rillequis, Mentallus, Hydrostat, and a few other Knightstyled characters banded together despite their differences to defeat Thoria, their latest adversary. She was actually kind of cool, for a villain. The character had the power to recharge spent nuclear fuel and survive any amount of radioactivity, and some other atomic superpowers she'd acquired during a freak meltdown at a nuclear power plant, obviously. But she'd chosen to use those powers for evil instead of good, as bad guys were wont to do.

Bianca had probably thumbed through a hundred letters and cards when she got to one that sent shudders of revulsion running through her. Plain white with her name typed on the front, no postmark. It had been slit open at the top like all the other envelopes, which should've meant it was safe, even though she knew in her bones it wasn't.

Why she opened it anyway, she couldn't have explained. It was automatic even as she knew she'd regret it.

She pulled out the familiar white printer paper with its perfect tri-fold, four by six black and white photos included. Her, on the set, taking direction from Tina in between takes. Her, in the fucking hotel parking garage, flanked by Theo and Kanon. There were a few more, all of them equally as intrusive and gut-churning.

Finally her sense of self-preservation reached her fingers and she dropped everything on the floor, let out an embarrassingly shrill scream and backed up like it was a mouse and she was one of those women who couldn't tolerate the presence of rodents.

A second later, Theo was busting down the door of her trailer, Kanon hot on his heels. In a few long strides, Theo was at her side, his big hand circling her biceps.

“Bianca, what’s going on?”

She jabbed a finger toward the pile she’d left on the floor, and a few things happened in quick succession. Theo tucked her under his arm and steered her out of the trailer, giving the letter as wide a berth as possible, and on their way out, told Kanon, “Get Dex, Haven, and Barrett down here, stat, and get Taj on the phone. You take pictures, you don’t touch anything, and you don’t do anything else until we talk to Taj.”

“Got it, boss.”

Once they were outside, her memory kicked in, even though she wished it wouldn’t. Her parents described it as photographic, but that wasn’t quite true. She didn’t have a better way to explain it though. What she did know was that some of the text from the letter was burned indelibly into her mind, which was just fucking great.

...make you my perfect little princess...

...obedient and submissive...

...keep you hidden away from the rest of the world...

...together, forever...

It was the first letter from that creepy motherfucker that she’d heard Theo’s team refer to as the doll-maker since she’d been in Clover City. Which made her the doll. Gross. She’d been here for over a week and she’d let her guard down.

The letter hadn’t been in her hotel suite, which would’ve been the most disturbing, but being stuffed in with her fan mail was almost as bad. It meant the guy was somewhere close, and that he had access to the set.

As much as she hated having Theo and his thugs around twenty-four-seven, she knew they were good at what they did. Even if they didn’t like her they’d never let something like that letter slip through. Even if she knew Theo would badger whoever had been on mail duty that day.

“Bianca?”

Theo was gripping her biceps and his warm hands felt good, even if he was holding her a little harder than necessary. Maybe *because* he was. She blinked up to look at him, his stern features comforting for the first time because he knew what he was doing, and he was going to put all those skills into action on her behalf.

“Yeah?”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Was there anything in the envelope besides the pictures and the letter? Like a powder or an odd smell?”

“No.”

“Anything different about it at all?”

She searched her mind for a second, but yes, there had been.

“The envelope was sealed but the top had been sliced, like your team does with a letter opener when they check my mail. They were never open like that before. He must’ve done it so it would blend in.”

Theo nodded.

“I think you’re right. You’ve got a sharp memory. Good girl.”

She didn’t want to like those two words so much, but she did and they made her want to step into Theo’s arms and have him hug her tight, tell her everything would be okay because he wasn’t going to let anything bad happen to her. But even though getting that letter was traumatic, she wasn’t completely off her rocker. Besides, there was a wash of red over Theo’s cheekbones and he cleared his throat and dropped his hands like wow, he really hadn’t meant to say that. Of course he hadn’t; he hated her. And the feeling was mutual. Wasn’t it?



It had been a day. Bianca getting that letter was the end to a day that had been fine, and the start of snapping into action. Which was his job and he loved the adrenaline rush of it, but he hated that she felt unsafe, hated that he and his team had failed to protect her from seeing that letter and those pictures, and more so that they'd dropped enough balls that this guy had been able to get on set to take those pictures and deliver the letter with enough time to slit the top so it would blend in with her previously opened fan mail. Bastard.

That frustration sparking shit in his brain was the only reason he'd told Bianca she was a good girl. Bad move, real bad. But she hadn't throat-punched him which is what he would've expected to be honest. Didn't mean anything; she'd just been shaken. He was sure if he let that slip some other time she'd send a knee to his junk and break his nose with a palm punch.

Luckily he hadn't had time to dwell because he'd been too busy orchestrating his team, checking in with Taj, and getting local law enforcement involved. He hadn't wanted to, but it's not like they had their own forensics lab to check the letter and photo for prints, even though he knew they wouldn't find any. Still had to do it because he wasn't going to be the asshole who missed the one mistake this psycho made.

He'd made sure Barrett and Haven had eyes on Bianca for the rest of the day, and he'd never been far away. Now they were back at the hotel and the elevator that went directly from the garage up to the floor her suite was on was broken. And it was an old hotel, which meant the part they needed might take a while to get. He kept his cool though, because Bianca didn't need to worry about anything else. She'd been quiet and docile on the way here, and that was disturbing enough.

"Slight change of plans," he announced gruffly when they'd pulled into the space reserved for the SUV he was driving for this job. "Elevator's busted so we're taking a

detour through the lobby. Not a big deal, we've got a contingency plan for this that we ran before you arrived."

Which was true, and in the rearview mirror, he saw the starlet nod. She didn't look like red carpet Bianca Lacoste right now, though, just a pretty brunette who'd had a long day. Well, they'd get her to her suite without incident so she could get some rest.

Kanon had come ahead, and Barrett and Haven got out to summon the elevator and hold it for Theo and Dex to get Bianca inside. Once they reached the lobby, his team made a diamond around their client, Barrett taking the lead, Theo and Dex on either side of her, and Haven bringing up the back. There wasn't a large space that they had to cross to get to the other set of elevators that would bring them upstairs, but big enough.

The shitty thing about this level of security was that it offered protection, yeah, but it also drew attention. And of course this was the day some asshole gossip website had published that Bianca was staying at this hotel because there was a whole fan mob waiting for them. Must have arrived recently if hotel security hadn't cleared them.

Was her stalker responsible for this? Was he in the crowd, possibly armed? In the letters the doll-maker sent, he hadn't said anything about killing or injuring her, but at some point these deranged fuckers often resorted to a "if I can't have her, no one can" mentality and serious violence became almost a given. Up until that point, there was some hope that their "love" for their victim would stop them from inciting any real harm.

Suddenly they were being swarmed by people waving posters, brandishing stuffies and flowers, shoving various Knightstyled memorabilia at Bianca probably in the hopes that she'd sign it. Not today.

These fans were aggressive too, pushing past him and his team. Most people were rude but weren't excited to tango with a bunch of six-foot-plus armed bodyguards and would back off. One of them managed to get between Barrett and Dex, and

they were grabbing at Bianca. Something in his brain went positively feral.

Yeah, he was protective of all his clients because that was his job. But there was a level of oh hell no that he didn't usually reach unless it was personal. There was nothing personal about this job, it was probably just his nervous system kicking it up a notch after the earlier threat of the letter and photos.

Whatever it was, he put himself between a cowering Bianca and the overzealous fan, snarling, "Get back and don't touch her or I'll have you arrested for assault."

For the second time that day, he put an arm around Bianca's shoulders and pulled her into him, sheltered her with the bulk of his body and used the longer reach of his arms to keep the frenzied fans from touching her. How the fuck dare they? Most of him was pissed on her behalf—she was entitled to bodily autonomy and integrity like anyone else and how fucking dare people take that away from her?—but a small part of him was enraged that they were fucking with something that was his, and making it impossible for him to protect her. Every ounce of dominance he had in his body revolted and this mob was lucky that the hotel's security joined the fray because Theo was about to start smashing heads.

After a couple minutes, he managed to bundle her into the elevator along with Barrett, Dex, and Haven. Unlike outside her trailer, he didn't hold her at arm's length and ask if she was okay. He already knew she wasn't, because she was shaking. And there was the unpleasant reality that there could be more fans outside her suite, although hopefully Kanon would've given him a head's up about that.

Luckily there was only Kanon standing guard at the door to the suite when they arrived, and Theo hustled Bianca through the door. He would've let her go then, he really would've, except that she was clinging to him. Fuck knew he didn't want her to be so scared that a badass like her was reduced to a trembling bundle of nerves, but there was something perfect about the way her tight little body pressed

against his, how she was just the right height to bury her head in his chest and slip her arms around his waist.

The other guys could do another sweep of the suite even though Kanon would've done one when he got back. Theo could take a minute and give Bianca the comfort she seemed to need. And for her to want it from him? Things must be really bad.

A few minutes later, Dex gave him a thumbs up that the suite was clear, but Bianca didn't seem ready to let go. To be honest, neither was he. It soothed something in him too to feel her heart slow, and her grasp on him loosen as she unwound. So maybe she felt good to hug. It had obviously been too long since he'd been with a woman. He'd have to ask Taj to call in that favor at the club he'd mentioned because feeling anything but professional responsibility toward this woman was trouble.

Knowing he'd stepped over the line, Theo tried to step back behind it and peeled Bianca off him.

"My team has checked your suite, it's clear. I'll, uh, give you some privacy."

"I..."

Did he want her to ask him to stay? No, definitely not. Because if she did, he would, and he would almost certainly touch her again. Down that road lay madness. And also some pretty hot danger-banging mixed with hate sex. Which would be so incendiary it would probably result in him losing all objectivity, if not his job.

But with Bianca looking so small and vulnerable, he wouldn't be able to say no either. *Quick, Palmer, you're known for thinking on your feet.*

"Given the threats present today, I'll be staying in the second bedroom until further notice."

Fucking brilliant, you moron. No way that could go badly, except every single fucking way in the book.

Hopefully she would argue and he could take it back. But no, he wasn't that lucky. Not today. Today, Bianca's shoulders

dropped and she wrapped her toned arms around her midsection.

“Thanks.”

Theo dropped a crisp nod, even though inside he was feeling anything but cool. But this would be fine. Bianca loathed him, sassed him any chance she got. No doubt she'd get pissed off about having him in her space in a couple days tops and he'd be able to act like going back to his own room was to appease her highness. In the meantime...

“I've got to check in with Mr. Hovick and hotel security, make sure we don't have another incident like that again. I'll be back in a couple hours, Dex can be with you in the meantime.”

And if he found his team member cuddling their client, he would blow a fucking gasket. If Bianca's was anyone's she was his. Fuck all did he need to get out of here as fast as his feet would carry him.

“I suggest you eat something if you can—”

“Not hungry,” she muttered, shaking her head.

Oh, she would eat something if he put her in his lap and hand fed her, he was sure, but fuck, no, absolutely not. Couldn't even let himself *think* about shit like that. No picturing her nipping at his fingertips while he offered her bites, no playful scolding and telling his little girl to behave.

He cleared his throat, and his voice still came out gruffer than he meant when he told her, “Then I suggest you try to get some sleep.”

Theo couldn't stick around to hear her response because he was about to lose his damn mind and insist on tucking her in. Fucking hell. He really needed to get off this job, and away from her. Not for the excuses he'd been giving Taj, but for reasons that were even worse. Was he seriously falling for Bianca Lacoste?

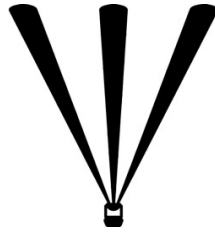
There had to be some other explanation as to why he couldn't get her out of his head through all the phone calls and meetings, the coordination with the hotel, the security the

studio had hired for the set, CCPD, all that. Yeah he did his job because he was a professional and otherwise Taj would serve his balls fried up and with some dipping sauce at the Carcharodon holiday party. But the whole time he was thinking of Bianca's wide-eyed look, the feel of her pressed against him, *fuck*, the smell of her hair.

And when he got back to the suite, he told himself it was simply his duty to poke his head into her room, not that he hoped she'd be awake and some very filthy fantasies of his would become reality. It was worse though. Instead of Bianca stretched alluringly over the bed in some skimpy lingerie, waiting for him, she was under the covers and holding a...was that a crocodile or alligator? Whatever it was, apparently Bianca Lacoste went to sleep cuddling a stuffie that was almost as big as she was.

Please let her start acting like a spoiled rotten, backbiting hellcat again soon, for the sake of his sanity and his continued employment.

CHAPTER FIVE



One wild thing about movies that she thought a lot of people didn't understand was that they didn't get shot in order. It wasn't like they filmed the thing from beginning to end, and even individual scenes often weren't shot in order. Thank goodness for the people who kept track of where everything was supposed to be in any given shot, because if it was left up to her the fanboys would have a field day pointing out mistakes.

Today they were filming part of a fight scene that could be done without a green screen. Bianca loved these days because they were so consuming. She'd memorized her stunt sequences and lines, now all she had to do was perform them and incorporate feedback from the stunt coordinator, the director, and wait for her co-stars to get their shit right.

Not that she never made mistakes but Dane and Braeker were far more likely to cause outtakes. Sol was too boring to do anything worth including in bonus features, although to be honest, half the time she didn't understand why people were laughing at the jokes Dane and Braeker made.

At least they'd killed off Dr. Villain in *Knightstyled: The Rising* so she didn't have to contend with those two and Tom who'd basically been the Three Stooges. Ridiculous. And somehow their delay-causing antics were fine whereas hers were unacceptable and had Tina cursing her name to the heavens and threatening Anderson to find someone else to fill the role of Invicta if he couldn't get her under control. Frankly, it didn't seem fair at all.

Whatever. Today would be a good day. She'd gotten into her costume, her hair and makeup were finished, and Theo hadn't been all up in her grill this morning. Good because after the past few days she could use some space from that man. She didn't like knowing that he smelled good, she didn't like having him sleeping only a few yards away in the second bedroom of the suite, and she really didn't like knowing what it felt like to have his body pressed against hers. Theo could keep his distance and look grumpy from wherever he'd stationed himself on set today.

It was annoying that she found herself looking for the blond bodyguard and relaxing slightly when she located him. Especially after the latest creepy missive. She told herself it was like the rest of her routines; she just liked having everything in its place and could go about her business when her world was as it should be. If anyone asked her about why she cared so much, that's what she would say.

But when push came to shove inside her own head, she knew she didn't pay nearly as close attention to Dex or Kanon or Haven or Barrett's whereabouts. And who the fuck cared where Mike and Chris were, she rarely engaged with those two.

As soon as she saw Tina, though, she knew something wasn't right.

"Morning, Bianca. You look like you're ready to get to work."

"I am," she said cautiously. "This scene should be fun."

Tina gave her a tight smile that said everything was about to go to shit.

"So there's been a small change in plans."

Oh no.

Physically, Bianca was very flexible. Not as flexible as those nasty incels who drew her in various disgusting sex positions would like to believe, and not exactly contortionist material. But she knew for being as strong as she was, she was also damn bendy and the stunt coordinator liked to take

advantage of that when he could. Especially since her male co-workers just...could not. When they'd done group training, the guys' yoga was laughable. Braeker could barely touch his toes. She was also damn good at faking getting hit. Yes, in that way, she was A-plus at rolling with the punches.

Flexible about changes in schedule on the other hand, she was not. All of the buoyancy she'd been feeling drained out of her, and suddenly her feet felt as though they were encased in lead.

“What? Why?”

She could hear the whiny edge in her voice even as she tried to keep it under wraps and Tina's exasperated sigh confirmed the director had heard it too.

“Somehow the wrong rigging for Thoria's stunts in this scene ended up here. They sent the wrong fucking crate on the truck, and the correct one is still at the studio in LA. The rigging's getting flown out as we speak so we'll be able to shoot that scene tomorrow. But today we're going to do the confrontation outside the nuclear waste storage facility where Thoria tells Invicta that the Solenas aren't her real parents just before Hydrostat and Mentallus arrive and it rolls right into that fight scene.”

She could understand the words that were coming out of Tina's mouth, but she couldn't make them compute. That was not a thing that was going to happen, because that's not what was supposed to happen.

“No.”

Tina blinked. “What do you mean, ‘no’? This isn't up for discussion. You know our schedule is tight and we've got to get this stuff wrapped however we can. We're already over budget, in part because of you—”

Yeah, she knew it. And Bianca could feel it coming on. A tantrum. She had expected to do one thing, and now they were demanding she do another with no preparation, no apology, no break to get her head around what she was going to have to do now.

Doing a poignant scene like finding out from her nemesis that it hadn't been some freak accident of nature when she'd been an infant that had given her her powers, but that she'd been born with them and wasn't the product of two human parents as she'd always believed was heavy emotional lifting. Which she could absolutely do...if she was prepared to. But it depleted her in a totally different way to summon all those feelings. She was not prepared for that.

She'd been preparing to do a fight scene since going to bed last night and that's what she was ready for. Not emoting. She could do her fight choreography in her sleep but trying to grab ahold of the lines from the disclosure scene—even though she could've spouted them off a few seconds ago—was like wading through molasses.

“I know you've got the lines memorized, and we've done the blocking before, so what's the big deal?”

Various degrees of heat cascaded through her body as she looked up at Tina. She was a good director and Bianca appreciated the chance to work with her. But sometimes Tina just...didn't seem to get it. And why would she? No one else felt this way.

Like she so often did when she was getting heated, Bianca began flicking her ring fingers against the pads of her thumbs. This... It wasn't right. She couldn't just turn on a dime like this, completely reverse course when she'd been totally ready to do something else.

And yet she was being made to feel unreasonable for not being able to do a one-eighty. Tina was already frustrated, and Bianca's ribs were closing in on her lungs because her heart felt so hot that it was melting the rest of her internal organs, turning her bones into a hot slurry.

Like a train that took far too long to come to a screeching halt, Bianca felt the impacts of all her failures like they were physical barriers she was slamming into. She couldn't change course easy peasy, she couldn't hold in her feelings about being expected to do so.

Then there was the humiliation of disappointing Tina and her co-stars, knowing that the entire cast and crew had their eyes on her while she was plowing into all of these things that hurt. It was physically painful, her muscles all twisted up and her blood boiling, her brain going completely haywire, all of these feelings welling up like bodies in a below sea level cemetery. She hated it, hated herself for being like this, hated the way people were looking at her, judging her. Why didn't anyone understand? Why was she the only person in the whole universe who felt this way, acted like this?

"It *is* a big deal!" she screamed, the shrillness of her own voice like fingernails on the chalkboard of her brain while she clawed at her hair, messing it all up. "This is not what I'm supposed to be doing. It's wrong, it's all wrong. How do you expect me to work under these conditions? This is bullshit!"

Tears had started pouring down her cheeks and fucking up her makeup, she wanted to rip her costume off and smash it because everything was wrong.

"It's not fair. This isn't fair! Stop looking at me, I hate you!"

Usually she could rage and scream and swear and fume until she'd burnt herself out and felt half-human again instead of this fiery, seething monster who was going on a rampage. Once she'd collected herself some, even if she was still swamped with shame and regret and embarrassment, she'd be able to do her job but it took a while.

Sometimes though, it hurt too much to even be here. She couldn't stand the weight of everyone's attention, of their disdain and wondering what the fuck was wrong with her. If she could answer that question, maybe she could fucking fix it. Did they think she *liked* being like this? Feeling like a ticking time bomb with some triggers she knew about and others that were a complete fucking surprise?

Right now she just wanted, no, *needed* to get the hell out of here. Away from everyone to someplace she could breathe and cry and let her feelings erupt. Get to an unpopulated area

to let the worst of her temper tantrum detonate, because this wasn't the worst of it, and she knew it.

Her father had excused this kind of behavior as her "artistic temperament," her mother had acted as though it wasn't happening, and she'd felt so fucking alone, knowing she was different and that everyone was fucking looking at her and wondering what her problem was, and yet being entirely unable to do anything about it.

She needed to get out of here, away from everyone rolling their eyes and shaking their heads, being disgusted by her lack of self-control and her puerile fits. Why were there so many fucking people on movie sets anyway? More obstacles for her to run through like a professional linebacker playing red rover with kindergartners. She was out of here.



Holy shit. Theo had heard Bianca pitching fits when she talked to Anderson, and heard the rumors too of what she could be like on set but seeing it happen in real time was something else. He'd seen people with horrible road rage, he'd seen guys go feral with impotent fury when missions hadn't gone the way they were supposed to while he was in the service, but this was different.

Different too from the way kids would pitch fits in the supermarket or toy stores because their parents wouldn't get them something they wanted. He'd say he'd never seen a grown ass person act like this, but something he couldn't quite grab ahold of poked at the back of his brain.

He couldn't think too hard about it though, because Bianca was taking off. What the hell? He'd expected her to stomp her feet, maybe throw something, but he hadn't put money on her bolting from the set, heedless of everyone and everything in her path. Girl was like a tiny red freight train, the little engine who was fucking going to so get out of her goddamn way. And it was his job to go after her. *Fuck.*

Theo took off at a sprint, ticked off he hadn't been closer when Bianca made a break for it. Note to self: when her highness started throwing a tantrum, he should move in to make it easier to catch up. Because she was fast. Especially because while he was trying his best to pick his way around people and equipment and Bianca didn't seem to give a shit who or what she hit. Damn, she was going to hurt at least herself, if not a bunch of other people, and do damage to what he understood to be some pretty pricey lights, cameras, and the other shit that made movie magic.

At least they were both somewhat unfamiliar with their surroundings, this being the first day any of the talent was working on this particular set. Yeah, Theo had seen schematics and walked the layout when prepping upon his arrival, but it was one thing to walk a perimeter and familiarize yourself with means of egress and potential places for a stalker to hide out. Completely different to go running through a place at top speed when things had been moved to get ready to film a certain scene.

He thought Bianca was running mindlessly full steam ahead because of how recklessly she was slamming into shit, but he must've been mistaken about that because she banked a sharp turn and darted between two trailers. At least she hadn't left the larger area they had blocked off for filming but shit, she could not do that. Just couldn't. Jesus Christ, no wonder her other security details had quit. Between her sharp and dismissive attitude and shit like this?

What the hell had happened back there anyhow? Because Bianca had been in a...good mood when he'd met her in the kitchen of the suite this morning and asked if she was ready to go. Hadn't even been snippy with him when he escorted her through the hotel and into the SUV where Dex was waiting for them. She'd still seemed calm, maybe even happy when they'd arrived at the set. She'd done hair, makeup, costuming, all fine. Then she'd talked to Tina for a second and it had been like someone snapped their fingers and everything went to absolute hell.

Taking the turn into the small space as fast as he dared given all the wiring taped to the ground and the fact that the trailers were crammed pretty damn close together, he set eyes on the starlet. Bianca was muttering and shrieking, pacing back and forth in the tiny space. So different from the woman he'd escorted here a couple hours ago and...how the hell did that happen? He didn't believe in ghosts or demons or any supernatural crap like that, but possession by some evil spirit seemed as likely as any explanation for Bianca suddenly losing her shit so completely seemed as likely as anything else.

Theo took a few steps closer, wary that she might lash out at him, but she hadn't seemed malicious when she'd run into people before. She hadn't gone out of her way to hit them, she just...hadn't stopped herself from doing it. Which also wasn't great but it was better than the alternative.

"Bianca?" he ventured, because there was no way he was going with Ms. Lacoste right now. Someone else could kiss her diamond-soled shoes while she was throwing a shit fit, but it wasn't going to be him. Besides, it seemed extra bizarrely formal now that he was sleeping—and maybe jerking off to thoughts of her—a couple doors down in the suite.

She didn't respond, didn't seem to hear him at all, actually. Just kept up with her manic pacing while whispering to herself, and letting out a periodic agonized screech. Was she having some kind of psychotic break? Why was no one besides Dex hot on his heels? Dex who'd just made it to the entrance of the tiny, makeshift alley who he waved off. Somehow he didn't think that having more people here would help Bianca. If she could be helped.

Theo took a few more steps toward her, ready to block her or beat it if she started throwing punches—he'd seen this girl fight. It might be fake but she was strong and fast and right now didn't seem to have much in the way of impulse control or concern for her own safety which made her dangerous as hell.

"Bianca."

Not a question. A statement that got her attention, and had her wheeling on him.

“Go away!” she screamed, slamming a hand into the side of the trailer with a dull metallic thud.

“Can’t do that. It’s my job to keep you safe. Can’t do that when you take off across a set with at best, porous borders. Did you think about that when you ran? That if your stalker was around and waiting for an opportunity to snatch you, running away like that would’ve created very favorable circumstances?”

Given how stricken she looked, it was maybe not his best idea to yell at her, but she’d scared the living shit out of him.

“I...”

She shrieked wordlessly and tore at her hair more. What in the ever-loving hell was happening?

Bianca buried her face in her hands and sobbed for a minute before looking up at him again.

“It’s hard for me to think straight when this happens.”

“Okay,” he told her.

Whatever “this” was he could see that it took a toll on her, and didn’t seem to create awesome conditions for having her head on straight. She’d gone through a dozen different moods in the past ten minutes, most of them really bad. Kind of reminded him of some people he’d served with who developed PTSD but different. She wasn’t having flashbacks, there hadn’t been any kind of trigger that he could see, he would know if she’d been in the military and she hadn’t—she’d been acting since she was a kid, and there wasn’t so much as a USO tour in the dossier he’d been given. Not any sexual assault or other violent crime either. Although god knew that didn’t mean there hadn’t been any. Panic attack?

Whatever it was, one thing was for sure. She wasn’t doing this for attention. If anything, she seemed mortified. And sure, she was an actress, but there were a million other ways she could’ve gotten attention. Ways that wouldn’t mean people being furious with her.

Bianca seemed to have edged far enough out of whatever was that she wasn't screaming or clawing at her neck anymore. Just crying in big, heaving sobs. He didn't think he was going to get much in the way of answers from her, and judging by the lack of interest or concern from the rest of the cast and crew this was par for some kind of course anyway, so he wasn't going to ask her for something she couldn't deliver.

What he could do though was ask, "Bee. What do you need?"

For a minute, he thought she wasn't going to be able to answer that, bawling like she was. But then she got her weeping a little more under control until she could get a few words out between snuffles.

"Time. Just time. I need...time."

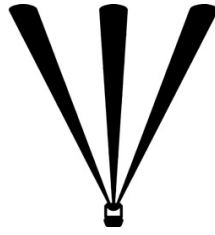
"Here?"

He didn't love this little makeshift alleyway but it wasn't terrible as far as defensible positions went. He'd need to get a guy on the roof of the building behind Bianca, but that could be done.

She nodded, hiccuping, hugging herself. Theo fought the urge to go to her, fold her into his arms and let her cry against him. But she'd shown no signs of being willing to tolerate that kind of contact from him—not gutting him like a fish when he'd called her a good girl was hardly consent or endorsement. But he'd do what he could for her.

"Okay. I'll buy you as much time and space as I can. I'm gonna block the entrance," he told her, gesturing to where they'd both come in, and where Dex was presumably standing guard. "You let me know when you're ready."

CHAPTER SIX



It had been a couple days since her tantrum. It had taken her almost half-an-hour to get herself back to a condition she could possibly work in, but she was sure it would've taken longer if Theo hadn't intercepted their nebbishy junior assistant director JJ, a couple of PAs, and even Tina. He'd set up a blockade and she'd been so grateful for it. Even if she could hear the people demanding that she come back to the set, she didn't have to deal with them. Theo did it for her.

It was still mortifying, but when she was ready, she'd brazened out her humiliation to have her hair and makeup fixed, and then done her fucking job. Once they'd shot the scene to Tina's satisfaction, she'd been able to head back to the hotel which was good because she was fucking exhausted. Her fits always took so much out of her.

Her knight in an off-the-rack suit and shoulder holster tried to talk to her a little on the ride back, and again in the suite they were apparently going to share for the foreseeable future, but she shut him down. She felt a little bad being so rude and snappish when he'd done nothing but help her, but not bad enough to admit she didn't know what the fuck happened to her when she melted down like that. It was really shitty to have so little understanding of your own self and she'd rather be a bitch than a disaster.

Despite his kindness, or maybe because of it, she still hated Theo. He was pushy, high-handed, harsh, and he didn't seem to like her any better than she liked him. He was literally

only here for the paycheck and it felt like he'd gladly take a suicide mission instead of "babysitting" her.

It was unfortunate that he also featured in her fantasies. Yeah, he was far too hot to be a bodyguard, but that wasn't the only thing. She worked with a lot of attractive people and most of them she could take or leave. Okay, it was 98.75 percent leave. But there was something about Theo...

The truth was she didn't always actually mind when he bossed her around. Goddamn right she acted like she did, but it could be soothing to be told what to do. Not to mention that the way he put his body between her and anything he thought might be a threat made her melt every time. It was honestly kind of sweet that he looked so thoroughly vexed when he couldn't be close to her and thought he ought to be. A line would form between those brows of his as he watched her with those eagle eyes. And the couple of times he'd held her? Swoon city. She'd done nude scenes in front of dozens of people that were seen by millions, and yet she'd never felt as naked as she did when he locked his gaze on her, touched her. She also felt safest when he was on duty.

He was now, but she thought they must be close to a shift change. When he wasn't on duty and he wasn't in the other bedroom in the suite, she didn't know where he was. Which shouldn't bother her. He was her employee, he had a whole life outside of the time he spent with her and it was none of her business what he did when he was off duty as long as he provided adequate protection in his stead. Which of course he did.

Except she wanted to know, and she was pretty used to getting her way. Where did he go when he wasn't with her? Most of the time, even before he'd moved into the suite, she'd had the sense he was still nearby, but sometimes...sometimes he wasn't. And when he came back, he didn't seem quite as pissed off. Not that she cared about Theo's mood. As long as it wasn't interfering in his work—and she'd never had reason to believe that the fact that he loathed her had anything to do with him performing his duties—she didn't care. Actually, he

seemed to take some perverse pleasure in protecting her despite hating her guts. Weirdo.

There was a knock on her bedroom door and she pushed off the chais she'd been lounging on to answer it. Checking the peephole, she saw Theo looking back at her. It was a little startling to see the man she'd just been mooning over right outside her door. Ugh, what did he want?

She undid the lock then swung the door open and snapped, "What?"

"Good evening to you too, Bianca."

His verbal slap to her wrist made heat rise in her cheeks but instead of apologizing, she drew herself up and put on her most imperious expression. "I don't pay you to give me lessons in decorum. What do you want?"

"I want you to learn how to use your fucking phone," he growled.

Right. She had a habit of muting the volume and her notifications when she just couldn't even deal, and it ticked Theo off because he wanted to be able to reach her twenty-four/seven. Well, he could fucking knock on her door like he was doing now.

"Sounds like a personal problem."

He muttered something she couldn't quite make out but definitely could have been "You're my personal problem," and raked his fingers through his hair. Was Theo's hair soft? It looked soft. A little longer than most of his team's, and looked like it might curl if he let it grow out a bit more. Whatever. She was definitely not thinking about running her hands through Theo Stick-Up-His-Butt Palmer's pretty hair.

"Shift change. Mike and Chris are on duty now. I'd tell you to behave, but..."

"I never do?"

"No, you never do so I'm not going to waste my breath. Just don't get in so much trouble I get fired."

“I thought you wanted to get fired,” she shot back, putting her hands on her hips, realizing too late that she wasn’t wearing much. Just a short silk robe that was definitely gaping at her chest now. Whatever, not like Theo was going to look.

Did he like women? Did he even like sex? He hadn’t seemed to have any interest in touching her, even though a good percentage of the globe would probably jump at the chance. Instead of enjoying himself, did he just step into a recharging booth because he wasn’t human? The man could go for twenty-four hours straight. Did he have the same stamina in bed as he did for bodyguarding? The thought heated her cheeks again, and she was grateful that her skin tone hid when she flushed. Mostly.

His brows crunched together for a split second and then his features smoothed out. “I want to get fired from *this* job, your highness. Not from my job in general.”

She’d sort of hoped he’d say he didn’t want her to get hurt, but he didn’t care. She was just a client to him, and an obnoxious one at that.

How on earth did people get other people to like them? Such a fucking mystery. Whenever she tried something that other people seemed to do to make friends it didn’t work. Playing the imitation game was great for landing roles but it hadn’t served her well in real life relationships. Wasn’t time to feel shitty about not having friends. She didn’t need friends. People were terrible.

“Also sounds like a personal problem.”

“Goodnight, Bianca. Don’t forget to lock your door.”

She didn’t respond, but closed the door in his stupid face. And after she heard him exit the suite, then shut and lock the door behind him, ran on tiptoes across the living area and perhaps pressed her ear to the door to see if she could make out what her bodyguards were saying to each other. Probably complaining about what an insufferable bitch she was.

It was hard to hear through the thick wood, but she did catch the muffled end of Theo’s instructions to his

subordinates.

“—might not pick up my cell. You need me and I don’t answer on your first try, you call this number and ask for me. Whoever answers will know what to do.”

Now that was interesting. Theo had some sort of life? That didn’t seem right. All he did was growl and grumble and be annoyed with her. And occasionally do something kind of nice, she guessed. Also kept her safe, she supposed. There hadn’t been any more letters or any more gangs of wild fans mobbing her.

There was a little more murmured conversation and irritation welled in her as she pressed her ear against the door so hard it hurt. She wanted to know and it was infuriating they weren’t talking loud enough for her to hear.

“—far. Pine Street, near Bishop Park.”

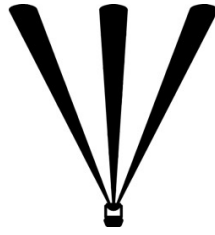
“Got it, boss. Have a good night.”

More murmurs that faded as Theo and his shift partners Dex and Kanon must’ve wandered off. Bianca pushed away from the door and flopped on the couch in the living room. She didn’t really give a shit what Mike and Chris had to say. Good thing they were her overnight shift for the most part because they were her least favorites.

It was times like this she wished she had anything in common with the characters she played. Sure she had the body and the training to do the stunts and action sequences, but that was on set. It wasn’t real. There were always people there telling her precisely what to do and when, how hard to kick, when to punch. There were always wires and padding and spotters and all sorts of other things to keep her from getting hurt. In real life? All her skills were useless.

But...even for someone who wasn’t an Army Ranger or a Cuban spy or a superhero, it probably wouldn’t be that difficult to sneak out. Maybe follow Theo. After all, it really seemed like her security seemed far more interested in keeping other people out than in keeping her in.

CHAPTER SEVEN



It had been the work of a moment to pull on a black skater skirt, camisole, and matching mini trench coat, and super easy to get out of her suite without alerting Mike and Chris. Mostly they were outside in the hotel hallway, and made regular circuits every fifteen minutes or so through the suite and to the back staircase that went up the roof and down to the basement.

They knew better than to bother her if her bedroom door was shut so she closed it and then scooted out the fire door to the rear staircase and hauled ass down the stairs. What would she do if she couldn't find Theo?

She'd worry about that once she got out of the building. It had sounded like he'd told Mike and Chris he'd be someplace close to Pine Street near Bishop Park so that narrowed it down quite a bit. Also knew it might not be far but they wouldn't be walking.

After trotting through the basement and escaping out the back, she darted through the alleyway and ran to the curb to hail a cab. The weather was good and it was too late for dinner, too early for people to be heading back from nights out at clubs so it was pretty easy to snag one.

"Just wait here," she told the driver. "I'm supposed to follow my friend to where we're going. He'll be in a black SUV, pulling out of the hotel garage."

"Whatever, lady," the guy grumbled.

Bianca perched on the edge of the grimy backseat and leaned up between the front seats, eyes glued to the automatic garage door that opened and closed to let people in and out of the subterranean parking structure. She was concentrating so hard she could almost ignore the stale cigarette and sweat smell emanating from the carpets in the beat up sedan.

Luckily it was only a minute until the metal shutters rolled up and there was the familiar black SUV.

“That one!”

“Alright, alright. Give me some room.”

Clearly her high ponytail and no makeup were acting as a disguise because she suspected this man would be a lot nicer to her if he recognized her as Bianca Lacoste. Well, she could deal with a little rudeness if it meant her identity was secret.

They trailed Theo’s SUV through the city streets, and it was kind of exciting. She’d never tailed someone for real before, and even better, she hoped there would be something good at the end. She would be pretty bummed if he was just going to some woman’s apartment or a dodgy bar. Although for however rough Theo could seem, he didn’t really seem like the dive bar type. Maybe it would be something really scandalous. But what would that even be? Clover City was boring as hell.

It didn’t take long for them to reach their destination, or where Theo pulled into a parking spot at any rate. There wasn’t anything interesting around as far as she could tell. Not a trendy shopping spot or nightlife hub. Was there even such a thing in Clover City? If there was, it wasn’t here in this block of bland brick mid-rises that looked to be some mix of industrial and office space.

She had the driver pull over at the corner past where Theo had parked since she’d noticed a bar they could ostensibly be going to, and she climbed out in a hurry, not wanting to lose sight of Theo but also not wanting to be seen. Mr. Sour Cabbie might not recognize her, but Theo would for sure. Probably even if she was wearing one of those inflatable T-rex suits.

She threw a twenty at the cab driver before shutting the door and then darting to peek out from behind the corner building.

It took Theo a minute to climb out of the SUV and then head to a mid-rise that didn't look much different than any of the others on the block. This was getting sketchier all the time. What could he be doing in this neighborhood? So mysterious. Then she heard the squawk and grind of an intercom and Theo got buzzed in, opening a door and heading into one the brick building.

Her imagination was running wild with possibilities. Was it an underground strip club? Was it a cult? Was it an addiction meeting? Did Theo have a therapist? Ooo, was it a fight club? Theo would be crazy hot in a fight club, she would absolutely pay money to see that. His usually stoic, stern demeanor becoming even more intense, all those muscles he kept hidden under off-the-rack suits on display, watching his trained fighter's body move? Oh yeah, she would pay big money to watch that fight.

Bianca tried to be cool as she walked toward the building but her mind was a live wire, buzzing with curiosity. Especially because there was a parking lot beside the building that Theo hadn't parked in, even though there were empty spots. Why would he park on the street when there was a lot right here? She had so many questions and she hoped she would be able to get some answers.

She had even more questions when she got to the door of the place and...there was no signage, no nothing except an intercom and plain numbers above a black door: 1864. What the fuck?

It occurred to her for the first time that perhaps following Theo wasn't her best laid plan. What did she really know about the guy anyway except that she made him angry and that he got paid a ton of money to scowl at her? Oh, also that he had a body like a greek god and a face to match. Aside from that, she didn't know anything about him. Maybe he was a mobster. Maybe he was involved in human trafficking. Maybe this whole "bodyguard" thing was a front for an international

crime syndicate. Or maybe she'd been reading too many thriller scripts. That seemed more likely, to be honest.

She was tempted to push the button for the intercom but she had no idea what to say, and improv had never been her strong suit. She could memorize things all day long and do precisely as she was directed but making things up on the fly was not her specialty.

Maybe if she waited, someone else would come and she'd be able to eavesdrop and figure out what was going on. Or maybe Theo would come out in a few minutes and go somewhere else. It was very annoying to have so many questions and no script to give her the answers.

She moved away from the door and loitered in between a couple of the parked cars, leaning up against a brick wall, then pulling out her phone to pretend to be busy. No one left the building for over an hour, and no one pulled into the parking lot either. She was beginning to lose her patience—or was that her nerve—when a few women spilled out the door Theo had gone in.

For a second she thought they'd left some kind nightclub even though she couldn't hear any music wafting out the door, but there was something a little...off about their clothes. They all had on light coats kind of like hers, but one of the women was wearing black leather pants and a red brocade corset underneath a cropped and studded leather jacket, another was wearing thigh high stockings and a tiny plaid skirt, complete with a white Peter Pan-collared shirt and a little school girl tie, plus a ring pop on the hand she was waving around. She couldn't see the other one as clearly because they were all giggling and laughing and seeming like they were having the best time. Must be nice to have friends like that. What was so funny anyway?

“Oh my god, Marley, was it amazing?”

“Yeah, Mar. Tell us everything. Like, *everything* everything.”

“Like you couldn't see it. It's not like we were in a private room,” the third woman said, sounding awfully smug.

Now Bianca could see that she was wearing jeans, but also a baby pink hoodie, and she had her light brown hair in pigtails. And was that a...a pacifier dangling from her collar? Were these girls ravers? Then where was the rave? This neighborhood would make sense then, although she couldn't picture Theo wearing a fractal-printed bodysuit so tight it looked like it had been painted on, and draped in glow sticks. Also, no music. Weird, weird, weird.

They all laughed again, and headed toward where Bianca was pretending to look at her phone. Hopefully they wouldn't notice her because she was also eager for Mar to spill. Was this like a massage parlor, the kind with happy endings? The curiosity was killing her.

"It was phenomenal. He's got the best hands, and totally knows what he's doing. He was so strong, he totally had me pinned over his lap and there was no way I was going anywhere. It was so hot."

Oh. That was interesting. And sexy as fuck.

"What's Blondie's deal anyway? I've seen him before but only like once before tonight."

"He said he's in town for business, but that he'll be leaving in like a month."

"Boo!" cried the one in the school girl clothes.

"I know," Marley whined. "I would definitely like to get spanked by him again. So good. And that's not the only thing he knows how to do with his hands."

The girls laughed and Bianca felt her cheeks get hot. Spanking? Sex stuff? Was this some kind of kink club? Theo? In a kink club? Because given the things they'd said about the guy involved, it definitely sounded like they could be talking about Theo. Hot, strong, blond dude? Check, check, and check.

The first woman, the one in the pretty corset, started to talk above the laughter.

"Y'all know DDlg isn't really my jam, but that man was fine and super intense. I would call him Daddy and let him

spank me any day of the week.”

What? If they were talking about Theo—

The girls were passing directly in front of her and finally noticed her between the cars. She gave them a tight smile, and they offered a chorus of greetings and goodnights before devolving into a flurry of giggles and hilarious stage whispers. Yeah, she was maybe kind of envious of people who had friends like that. Or, you know, friends at all.

But at least she was equipped with some information now.

Next step was to figure out how to get in the door. She was pretty practiced at getting her way, but that was only useful in person. She could be charming, show some leg, drop some names, and impress someone enough to hopefully gain access to this...club? Maybe? But the door armed with a buzzer was an obstacle. She'd just have to wait and hopefully sneak in with the next people who were coming or going. Because now she really had to know. What was Theo—Daddy?—up to?



Thank god for Hive, and thank god for Taj to getting him in. The owners had still run background checks on him and asked for a couple references from play partners, but once those had come up good, they'd welcomed him like an old friend. Well, Hudson and Ian and their little girl Cosima had. Despite having met briefly before, Ryker had simply given him a nod and glared at him from under black brows. Couldn't really blame the guy; Theo probably didn't bring up any fond memories for him, given how they knew each other.

Regardless, being able to come to Hive a couple times over the past few weeks had been his saving grace. Not just because he enjoyed the company of other kinksters and it was fun to play, but it was probably the only thing that had kept him from dragging Bianca over his knee and spanking her gorgeous ass. Absolutely unbelievable, totally maddening brat.

If he'd met her in a club or at a munch, anywhere but as a goddamn client, he would've gone after her hard. As things

were, it was infuriating that he had to be near her all the time and not top her. Not in the way he really wanted to anyhow. The woman he'd just sent on her way with a bright red backside and an orgasm—following a little light aftercare which was all she'd been interested in since she'd seemed eager to get back to her friends—on the other hand...

Yes, she'd been fun and it had been a relief to let some of his impulses loose. But it hadn't slaked his thirst, not even close. Probably because what he was really thirsty for was a woman who wanted to gouge his eyes out and make them into earrings she'd flaunt on the red carpet. And why did *that* turn him on?

Palm still hot and ringing from the spanking he'd just administered, Theo grabbed another glass of water and headed for the Nursery. That was where most of the DDIg and age play activities took place here. While he probably wouldn't play again this evening—although never say never—it would be nice to be surrounded by that atmosphere, maybe spark some fantasies for him to go back to the hotel and get off to. Probably picturing Bianca Lacoste as the little girl turned ass up over his lap, even as she was asleep right down the hallway.

Only a minute after he'd made his way into the Nursery and before he'd even had a chance to survey all the scenes that were taking place, a flustered looking Ian came in, raking a hand through his unruly red hair. And headed straight for Theo. *Shit.*

“Hey, man,” the ginger said once he'd reached Theo's side, leaning in and dropping his voice low. “I'm so sorry to do this and I'd normally have the staff handle it, but...”

“No worries,” he said. Maybe there was some asshat acting up and they needed muscle. He could play the bouncer, he didn't mind. It would be more action than he'd seen on the Lacoste job in the past week. “What's up? Need me to show someone the door?”

Ian's face screwed up, and he shoved his hand through his hair again. “Not exactly, but sort of. There's a woman at the front desk, says she knows you and knows you're here. She's

making kind of a scene. Club policy is not to disclose whether an individual is here or a member, or anything, really, but—”

“Fuck,” Theo muttered. How she’d done it, he didn’t know. Or why. And those two beanbags for brains who were supposed to be keeping an eye on her were fucking fired. Mike and Chris had never been his favorites but now they were on his shit list.

“Yeah. Our members value discretion, and I can’t have someone threatening to call the cops if we won’t let her in to see you. Most times I’d tell people to go right ahead. We’ve got a couple friends on the force and they mostly leave us alone since we keep to the letter of the law and we look after our people. But when the person in question is...”

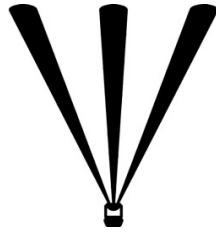
Bianca Fucking Lacoste.

He may as well have said it, they were both thinking it so loudly he was surprised the entire room didn’t turn around.

Ian grimaced, and his eyes got huge. He looked like a cartoon. Theo felt like a cartoon, with steam about to come out of his ears. Spoiled, impulsive little brat who didn’t care about consequences for anyone, not even herself. And if she got him barred from Hive, the one release he had in this fucking town, he was going to have a real chat with Taj. For now, he had to deal with her highness.

“No problem, I get it. I’ll take care of this. I’m just sorry the club got caught up in her drama. She’s really gone the extra mile this time. I’ll get her out of here, and quietly, You have my word.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



“**H**ow dare you? Do you even know who I am?”

This wasn't the first time she'd said those words, but it was the first time she was saying them to the completely impassive mountain of a man who was blocking the entrance to what she was almost certain by now was a fetish club.

She'd managed to catch the door when a group had come in a couple minutes ago, but she hadn't made it past the young person at the desk with a lot of piercings and a name tag that said “River, They/Them.” And when she'd gotten all entitled with them, they'd paled but hadn't let her by. No, they'd called their boss, a good-looking redheaded guy who'd then called the giant who was keeping her from Theo.

He was huge, not as tall as Taj but brawny as all get out, his arms like holiday ham hocks folded across his chest.

“Miss, I've already told you—”

Miss wasn't quite as bad as “ma'am” but it wasn't good either. And if he recited their policy one more time, she was going to start screaming at the top of her lungs. It was a simple request. She wanted to see Theo and she wanted to see him now. She knew he was here—had literally seen him walk in the door—so how hard was that?

“This...treatment is unacceptable. You know I could have half a dozen squad cars from Clover City PD pulling in here with sirens blaring in a few minutes, right? That's what it

means to be a VIP. I'm very important, and if you don't let me in to see Theo Palmer right the fuck now..."

She'd punctuated her demand with jabs of her finger on the bland wood desk, and left the threat hanging in the air. Until the man in question rounded a corner with ice blue eyes flashing.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Bianca bit her lip at his murderous tone and a frisson ran through her. Theo was mad. Like, big mad.

He grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the desk and into a corner of the small entryway before he dropped his hold.

"You violated my privacy, you're causing a scene, you're endangering yourself by galavanting around Clover City with no security detail, and you're a fucking Hollywood star. If some paparazzi happened to follow you here and snapped pics of you going into a kink club? Fucking hell, Bianca. Jesus fuck. There's only so much I can do if you're intent on destroying yourself. So I'm asking you again, what the fuck are you doing here?"

"I don't have to tell you anything," she replied tartly, folding her arms across her chest but not feeling very brave anymore.

"The fuck you don't," Theo muttered, looking absolutely incensed. "How'd you get here?"

"Cab."

"Fine. You're maybe not going to answer my questions here and now, but you will answer them. And for now, you're not welcome here and we're going back to the hotel. You haven't just violated my privacy, but everyone here's and that's a shitty thing to do. I knew you were a diva but I had no idea how self-absorbed you really are. I bet that didn't even occur to you. Now let's go before you make an even bigger mess that I have to clean up."

Oh no. Theo was right. It hadn't occurred to her. She'd been so focused on what she wanted she hadn't considered

much else. She was used to paps following her, snapping pictures, and hounding her. It was just how her life was. But what if there was someone else famous here? Or even just a regular person who could face negative consequences from being discovered at a place like this? It shouldn't matter, but she wasn't naive enough to think that in reality it didn't. She'd heard the rumors about Braeker and Dane, knew well enough that gossip like that could fuck up a person's career, and with enough evidence, maybe end it.

What if someone else got outed by her actions? That would suck, and that wasn't what she'd intended at all. Weirdly, it made her feel more defensive. She hadn't *meant* to make trouble for anyone else. And she wouldn't have if he would have just told her where he went on his off hours. Not that she'd asked, but still. Why did Theo get to be all up in her business but she couldn't know any of his? It wasn't *fair*.

As much as she wanted to, though, she wasn't going to keep making a scene if only so she didn't draw any more attention to their location. She really hadn't meant to make trouble for anyone.

Theo practically dragged her out of the club and down the street before he put her in the passenger side of the black SUV he always drove. She felt queasy as he drove them through the streets of Clover City, both of them quietly seething until he parked in the hotel garage, and then handed her out of the massive vehicle and into the elevator that would take them to the ground floor because they still hadn't managed to fix the damn elevator that went straight to her floor.

Being marched through the lobby of the hotel with Theo's hand circling her arm just above her elbow was, yes, mortifying, although she hoped no one could tell exactly what was happening. Especially because in this fairly nondescript outfit and her hair and makeup entirely undone she probably didn't look much like the Bianca Lacoste people would expect. Theo's rough and unsparing handling also had her stomach flipping and she couldn't totally figure out why.

There was definitely embarrassment there, for sure. But there was also some...excitement? Even if he was mad at her

—and wow, was he ever—she wasn't afraid he'd hurt her. First of all, he wouldn't dare. Second, he just...wouldn't. And the way his fingers dug into her flesh pinged something inside her. If only this was pretend anger instead of real.

He didn't even let go of her in the elevator up to her suite which was a little funny, and she couldn't help but sass him.

“Where exactly do you think I'm going to go?”

“I have no idea. But I've underestimated you before and I'm never doing it again. I'm not taking any chances with you.”

A perverse pleasure curled in her belly and made its way to where it tugged up the corners of her mouth. Theo might think she was an asshole, but at least she was an asshole he respected. That was better than him dismissing her. And the way he said he wasn't taking any chances with her, all growly and protective, even if it was only his job? Swoon city.

The doors slid open and he led her down the hallway. When Chris and Mike saw their boss propelling her toward them, they both did double takes. Looking at her, eyeing the door to the suite where they thought she was, and then back. They both started to talk, and Theo cut them off with a slash of his hand through the air.

“I don't want to hear another word. You're both fired. From this job, and from any duty I pull in the future. Taj gets the last word on whether you've still got jobs with Carcharodon, but I'd get my resume in order if I were you. Now get out.”

The men looked like they wanted to argue but probably thought better of it after seeing Theo's dark expression and hearing the steel in his voice. Even she was starting to wonder if sneaking out had been a mistake.

Theo didn't wait for them to leave, but let himself into the suite and towed her in after him. God she wished she had that kind of confidence, even as she often wished she didn't have to make so many decisions. That ability to be so sure of herself without having been given explicit direction would be...life-

changing. She shouldn't be envying him in this moment but here they were.

Once they were inside, Theo released his hold on her, and honestly, she kind of missed it. She shoved her coat off and dropped it where she stood. There were pink marks on her skin where his fingers had been and she wondered if they'd bruise. Bizarrely, she hoped so.

He yanked his phone from his pocket, tapped at the screen—no doubt sending for reinforcements since he'd just fired the men on night shift—and then shoved it back in his pocket before she could even think of anything to say or do.

“You have a lot of explaining to do. Now, spill.”

“Explain what?” She shrugged, wrapping her arms around her midsection in a hug and trying her best to sound haughty even though she was starting to feel like a scolded little girl. “I snuck out. I followed you. I found you. Then you dragged me back here. What else is there to say?”

The animosity sculpting his features deepened and he looked like he might throttle her. Or maybe...spank her?

“How about why?”

Oh. It had been a while since anyone asked her why. Why she was pitching a fit. Why she couldn't just settle down like a grown-ass woman. Why she acted the way she did. It was terrifying. Far more than when he'd been frogmarching her out of the club or into the hotel. Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words could actually hurt. Those did hurt, even though she should be grateful. She was, a little, and that scared her even more.

“I felt like it,” she said, shrugging again in what she hoped was an offhanded way. “I'm going to bed now. Get out.”

“Not a chance.”

Her mouth twisted involuntarily.

“What are you going to do if I refuse, spank me?”



Jesus Christ, this woman was going to be the death of him. If she only knew that he'd been aching to do just that since the moment she'd first challenged him. Was she toying with him? That wasn't a good idea.

"No. You're my client. I don't spank clients."

"But you do spank other people."

"You know I do."

Again, he didn't know how she knew, but she clearly did. She hadn't gained access to the inner part of the club where people actually played so she hadn't witnessed the scene he'd done tonight but she also wasn't stupid. She'd found Hive, figured out what it was, and now he had to deal with the consequences. But if he had to, so the fuck did she.

Bianca's eyes narrowed like she was studying him, considering, and then her lips parted like there were words on the tip of her tongue.

"Who?" she finally blurted, the slightest wash of pink coming over her cheeks.

Huh. Not what he expected. He'd thought it was more likely that she'd call Taj and scream at him for having a pervert on staff and to send her someone else immediately because she wouldn't tolerate his presence for any longer. But no. Then again, if she'd wanted to do that, she could've done it once she'd figured out what Hive was and she hadn't. No, she'd terrorized River, tried to bully good-time guy Ian, and turned teddybear Hudson into a Daddy Grizzly Bear who got pissed as hell when anyone threatened his people.

"Curious, huh? Is that why you followed me?"

"Maybe. But I didn't think I was going to find *that*."

Bianca didn't seem afraid or disgusted, and he didn't think she'd seen or heard much of anything, but he wanted her to know anyway.

“You know everyone at the club was there voluntarily and everything that was happening was consensual, right? I know it doesn’t always look that way, but for some people, the struggle is part of the game, part of the fun.”

His charge gave excellent huff, looking so damn insulted that he’d think she didn’t know what kink was.

“Yeah, I know what BDSM is, thanks. But you didn’t answer my question. If you don’t spank clients, who do you spank?”

Persistent little thing. Of course she was. You didn’t get a body like that, a career like that, without a shit ton of hard work and grit. He’d seen it for himself, and he knew damn well she wouldn’t just drop this bone and trot off. Not when she could clamp her sharp little teeth around it and play tug-of-war with him anyhow.

“You didn’t answer mine either,” he pointed out.

“Fine. I was curious, okay? I wanted to know what you do when you’re not with me. I thought you might just climb into a battery recharger or something. You’re obviously not human.”

Huh. She thought about him when he wasn’t there? In any way other than she hoped he got hit by a bus? That was surprising, bordering on shocking. And...touching. Sort of.

“You think about me when I’m not here, huh?” he teased, and loved the way those doe eyes of hers flashed with murderous intent.

“Whatever. You think about me all the time.”

“Sure do,” he conceded, and then shrugged just to piss her off. “But that’s my job. What’s your excuse?”

Flushed and flustered Bianca might be his favorite Bianca. Given that he was never going to get to have her ass up over his lap or writhing in pleasure beneath him, anyway. Fuck she must be a little spitfire in bed. Wouldn’t he have a grand old time subduing her until she was a whimpering, blissed out mess underneath him? Once he’d spanked and fucked the attitude out of her, maybe she’d let him hold her. Or not. She was probably more apt to leave the side of the bed cold than he

was. Bianca Lacoste didn't seem like a woman who got attached to lovers. More like used them to get what she wanted and then left them behind.

“I told you. Curiosity. Now you have to answer me.”

Theo didn't really want to, but he had agreed and fairness seemed very important to Bianca. That was almost something that was included in her diatribes when she was pitching her fits. About how things were unfair. How life had been unfair to the smoking hot and crazy talented and well-compensated starlet he had yet to figure out, but that was a puzzle for another day.

They'd made a deal of sorts, and he'd honor it even if it wasn't any of her business. He needed for her to trust him if he meant to do his job, which he would despite her best efforts to confound him. He wasn't going to accomplish that by flaking out because he didn't want to talk about his kink life. Cat was out of the bag, what was the big deal if the kittens followed?

“I spank mostly women, but I've spanked other people too. Sometimes in clubs with a pick-up play partner like tonight, but I prefer to be in a relationship with the person I do kink with. Get to know what they like, what they don't, how their minds work, what makes them tick. And what gets them off.”

He grinned at her then, just to fuck with her, and her flush deepened.

“So it's always for fun? You don't, like, legit spank women? As a punishment?”

Did she sound disappointed? Fuck. His dick had been firmly of the opinion that he should pin Bianca over his lap and ruck up her skirt before, and now it was getting outright hard. He could usually control himself better than that.

His face pinched as he thought about how to explain this to her. How well-versed was she in kink anyway? Not super knowledgeable, he didn't think, but not a wide-eyed innocent either.

“That's...not an easy answer. It's always consensual, always agreed upon. With pick-up play, it's always fun

because we both like it, even if it's a role play that my partner's misbehaved. In relationships, it really depends on the dynamic we've established. So if we've agreed on rules for her to follow—"

Bianca snorted and he almost cracked up. Brat bratty brat.

"And consequences for when she breaks them, then yes, I'd enforce those rules. A top who doesn't follow through on agreed upon consequences doesn't deserve to be a top. So I suppose in that sense I do sometimes punish women. But only because she's given me that authority. I don't assume that and it doesn't apply to anyone besides the person I made that agreement with."

"She called you Daddy," Bianca pointed out, her brows raising in what he might call an accusation.

Goddamn where was this woman getting her intel? And could he get ahold of that source, please?

Actually, it must've been the woman he played with tonight because Bianca didn't seem like to type to play the long game. Maybe with her career, but not with juicy info like this anyway. He would've heard about it before if she'd gotten it anywhere else. Damn, he wished Marley could've kept her mouth shut.

Given that she hadn't, he was going to have to talk about this too. Maybe call Ian later both to apologize for Bianca—again—but also to ask that hey give their members a reminder about discretion and to close the damn door behind them.

"Uh, yeah. That's a role I like. Daddy Dom, and my partner's my little girl. With the woman I played with this evening, it didn't really go beyond what we called each other during the scene. With my other partners, it's usually different."

"How?"

Theo wanted to tease her again, tell her he'd answered about half a dozen questions and that she had to reciprocate before she asked any more. On the other hand, even though

she was still being kinda haughty, he liked this curious kitten version of the woman who was usually such a hellcat.

“Sometimes I give them rules, like I said. It’s important to me to look after them. Keep them safe, physically and emotionally. Praise them when they’re good and talk to them about their behavior when they’re” ...His brain was going to melt out of his ears if he said “naughty” to Bianca Lacoste... “less than good.”

“And they like that? Does it...help?”

Theo had been punched, hit, and kicked. Hell, he’d been shot. But nothing had stolen his breath quite like Bianca’s question that was verging on a plea. Had he been reading her wrong all this time? He’d had inklings and talked himself out of it, but maybe he’d been right. Maybe he’d been going about dealing with her all wrong. No, not dealing. *Handling*.

“Never mind,” she said, shaking her head so hard her ponytail swung behind her.

“That something else you’re curious about?”

Something crackled between them. Theo hadn’t registered the air thickening, the pop and snap of the electricity arcing, that unspoken sizzle. But it hit him now. How Bianca’s wide eyes and the way she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth screamed *yes*.

“So what if I am?” she muttered, breaking the connection by turning away, tone petulant at best. “Not like you’re going to show me.”

“You don’t think so, huh?”

Her head whipped around and her gaze swept up and down his body. She’d looked at him that way before, and he’d assumed it was comparing him to the men she spent time with. Braeker Thompson, Dane Henley, the other stars in the Paladin Universe who were all muscular and Hollywood groomed. Theo didn’t kid himself; he was in good shape, but in a functional way, not in the way that those guys were. Still, he got the feeling this time that she was appreciating him, not finding him lacking.

“You wouldn’t,” she told him, shrugging back on that arrogant attitude, but it didn’t fit her so well right now. Reminded him of a little girl dressing up in her mom’s clothes.

Christ, had he had a little under his nose all this time and not realized it? He was a fucking idiot for a lot of reasons, but he generally prided himself on being a pretty good daddy. He’d better be good at something if he went through with this though because Taj was going to have his balls, and he was rather attached to them. On the other hand, could he *not* go through with this?

Bianca must have found his pause disconcerting because she started rambling, pacing as she did.

“You wouldn’t. You just said. And because you wouldn’t dare. You wouldn’t be my daddy. There’s no way.”

The despondency in her tone was it, the last straw. Bianca Lacoste was one of the most beautiful women on the planet. She was young, she was rich, she was a star. She could have any man she wanted, and for some reason she seemed so certain no one would want her. Or at least no one worth having, no one who might, fuck, *help* her? Maybe that’s what she’d been craving, needing, and Theo might be just the man to give it to her. But he wasn’t above extracting something he wanted in the process. Because he was mercenary like that.

“If I do this, will you behave?”

She frowned and crossed those toned, tanned arms across her chest.

“Excuse me? Are you bribing me because I’ve been a pain in your ass and you want your job to be easier? I don’t need you to take pity on me. If you don’t want to, I’ll be able to feel it and it will just be insulting.”

Theo closed his eyes, clenched his hands into fists and blew a breath out his nose. But the urge remained. And you know what? Fuck that.

Fuck this job, fuck this business, but most of all fuck her.

Theo stalked toward her, boxed her in against the wall and then gripped her jaw hard. Bianca’s brown eyes popped wide

and her mouth probably would've dropped open except she couldn't move because he was holding her fast.

“There are very few things in this world that I want more than to take you in hand, babygirl. You don't have to worry about me not wanting you. What you should be concerned about is me never letting you go.”

Heat flared in her eyes and he wanted to kiss her until he'd memorized every contour of her mouth. Drop to his knees and bury his face in her cunt until he couldn't remember tasting anything else.

But that wasn't the lesson he was trying to teach her and fuck all did she have a lot to learn.

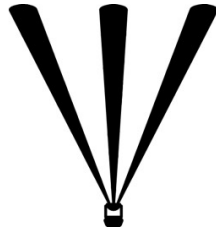
“If you agree to obey me, I'll be your daddy. 24/7, no reprieves, no exceptions. You fuck around and find out, babygirl. I dare you.”

Her little kitten tongue darted out to lick her lips and blood surged to his cock.

“You're going to get a taste right now for that stunt you pulled tonight. I'm going to let you go and you're going to turn around, put your hands on the wall, stick out that pert little ass, and I'm going to spank you. I don't want a fucking word to pass between these lips,” he said, drawing a thumb roughly over the soft plumpness of her mouth. “Are we understood?”

Then his little honeybee had the nerve to shake her head no.

CHAPTER NINE



Bianca was trembling like a leaf in the wind. She'd gotten herself off a million times while dreaming up scenarios very much like this but she'd never thought any of them would come *true*. Theo didn't like her. He thought she was spoiled and reckless and stupid and selfish. He loathed her.

This turn of events was...unexpected to say the least. And maybe he'd deep-fried her brain but she still had a little sense left.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” he growled, leaning in closer his lantern jaw with its perfect amount of stubble achingly close.

“I—”

Theo loosened his grip and stared down at her.

“I need a word,” she said, and swallowed. “To say. If I get too—I'm not scared, but I need a word. All the books say so,” she finished on a mutter.

She didn't really want him to know that's where she'd gotten most of her information on kink, but she wasn't excited about talking to him about her only real life experience either.

The corner of Theo's mouth tipped up and he ran the pad of his thumb over her cheekbone. It made the butterflies in her tummy beat their wings. He looked softer somehow. And maybe...proud of her too? Which didn't make sense. He hated it when she argued with him. Like, a lot.

“You’re right, babygirl. You need a safe word. I was going to give you one but I’m glad you asked. Good job advocating for yourself. If you ever do this with anyone else and they tell you that you don’t need one? You tell them to fuck all the way off, you understand me?”

Theo was funny when he wasn’t being a domineering asshole. Well, he was being domineering, but not in as much of an asshole way as usual. No, this she liked very much. And him calling her babygirl? Made her want to fling herself into his arms to be hugged and held and petted. To feel small and safe in a way she didn’t even when she had Theo and Dex and Kanon on set with her. This was different. Private. Not about her public persona, but about her.

“So what’s your word?” he prodded.

“Mariposa.”

Theo nodded. “Good choice. You say that if it gets to be too much.”

She felt the scowl knit her brows. “I’m not fragile.”

“Oh, I’m aware. I sit through your training, your filming, your workouts. I know you’re tough. But this isn’t all about physical strength or stamina. It can mess with your head and it’s real different from having Jason beat on you, your stunt coordinator toss you through the air, or Tina tell you to get going on take thirty-seven. So don’t you dare not use your safe word because you think it’ll make you look weak.”

Theo put both his hands on her face—not gripping hard but cradling her softly like she was precious. Like he actually cared. He was right—this was going to fuck with her head. Fuck her right into thinking he actually gave a shit about her.

“My first responsibility is always to keep you safe. You being my babygirl and me being your daddy doesn’t change that. If anything, it’s more true. So you’ve got to talk to me so I can keep you safe. I never want to hurt you.”

You will, she thought. Everyone does.

But she kept her mouth shut. Theo studied her face like she was a studio schematic or a hotel floor plan. Dude was intense,

about everything. Was there anything he enjoyed? Had fun with?

“Anything else you want to say? Ask? I got a little carried away and you were right to call me on it. I’m proud of you and I always want you to go with your gut on this stuff.”

Why the fuck were tears pricking at the backs of her eyes? Honestly.

“I’m fine,” she said, hoping he didn’t notice the tiny crack in her voice.

“Good.”

His demeanor changed then along with his grip on her. His big hands slid down to grasp her hips and he turned her easily until she faced the wall. Then he hovered behind her, only just not touching. It made her want to shove back against him, but she wouldn’t. Not now.

She was rewarded by Theo leaning down to murmur in her ear, his breath sultry on her skin.

“Now that we’ve come to an understanding, pull up your skirt and push down your panties. Daddy’s little babygirl has been naughty and she needs to be punished.”



This was too fast. Hell, he’d had more thorough negotiations with Marley at Hive. But he’d also known Bianca for a while now. Then again, he’d known her for a while and hadn’t gotten the fucking memo that she was kinky as hell and aching for a daddy. Showed what he knew about the woman. One thing he knew for sure was that she didn’t have a lot of patience.

He let her go, and gratification surged through him as her hands went to the hem of her skirt and pulled it up to her waist. But then she stopped. Froze, more like.

“What’s going on, honeybee? Talk to Daddy.”

“I don’t know... It won’t... How do I get it to stay up?” she muttered.

Fuck he liked her like this, so much.

“Fair question. We’ll tuck it into your waistband, like this, so I can see your perfect backside.”

Bianca whimpered but didn’t say her safeword, didn’t say no, as he pushed the fabric between her skin and the skirt. She just waited until he’d finished, and then slid her hands up her thighs, hooked her thumbs in the sides of her skimpy panties and slid them down until they rested under her smooth, brown backside. Then she set her hands on the wall in front of her, just as he’d instructed. She was tan all over, and he didn’t know why that surprised him.

And there was her ass. Given the clothes—and lack of clothes—he’d seen her in, he hadn’t thought it would be so much different to see her bare bottom. He’d been mistaken. Dead wrong, actually. It was a different ballgame and had his dick stiff in his pants. Thank god he was wearing jeans. She’d be able to see the outline of his raging hard-on but at least he wasn’t obscenely tenting dress slacks.

Bianca gasped when he set his palm on her skin, and he barely kept from inhaling sharply himself. He’d just spanked a woman not a couple hours before, but for all the enjoyment he’d gotten from spanking Marley—and he had enjoyed it—it was nothing compared to this.

He continued to run his hand over the fullness of Bianca’s gorgeous backside while he talked to her, told her what was going to happen. He could at least do that much right.

“This is a punishment for sneaking out. That was very naughty and unsafe, and it’s not to happen ever again. If you’re curious about something, you ask me, you don’t go running around a strange city alone. Do you understand me, young lady?”

He punctuated his question with a slap to the underside of her cheek and she made a little noise that went straight to his cock, made it leap like a dog for a treat.

“Y-yes.”

He slapped the other cheek. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“That’s a good girl,” he purred, stroking the flesh he’d just spanked. “That’s how you answer all my questions. Understand?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Quick learner.”

He caught the corner of her mouth turning up from her lovely face in profile, as if she was pleased with his praise. Fuck, if calling himself Daddy was all he had to do to get this woman to follow his instructions, he should’ve done this ages ago.

“I’m going to give you a warm up, and I’m going to tell you when I switch to your punishment. It’s going to be an easy one since I’ve never spanked you before. Have you ever been spanked, honeybee?”

He couldn’t help the pause in his caresses when she didn’t answer right away. He’d anticipated a quick, “No, Daddy,” because the Bianca he knew wouldn’t let a man spank her unless it was for a role. Had he somehow overlooked a spanking scene in one of her movies? There was no fucking way.

“Yes, Daddy,” she said softly.

“As a kid, or as a grown-up?”

Another pause, and alarm bells went off in his head. Maybe he wouldn’t be spanking Bianca tonight, and that would be okay. For the best for a lot of reasons, but he hoped to god it wouldn’t be for the reason he was suspecting now.

“As an adult, like this,” she said, sounding a little sad and far away, before tacking on an amendment. “Sort of.”

“Sort of how? I need to know, Bianca.”

She wrenched the corner of her mouth to the side where it had been tipped up in pleasure before and he hated it. What had this fucker done to her?

“I, um... This isn’t my first superhero movie. I mean, obviously, but Knightstyled isn’t the first time I’ve been part of an adaptation of a comic.”

“*Darkstalkers*,” he said, and her head swung toward him. A perverse pleasure wound through him that she’d kept her hands on the wall though. He’d thought Bianca Lacoste might be the death of him, but he hadn’t thought it would be from *this*.

“You know about that?”

“Yes. We do very thorough research on our clients. I know about all your films. But that one stuck out. It’s not typical for someone who played a superhero in a flop to get cast in one again so soon, especially not one the magnitude of Knightstyled.”

“Yeah.”

She seemed to chew on that for a moment, and he let her. There was no rush. He could rub her bottom all night long and not be disappointed about it. It was kind of a funny way to be having this conversation, but it was working so he wasn’t going to fight it.

“I... While I was working on that movie, I was dating Flint Gannon.”

Another fucking hitch in his stroking because Bianca had been eighteen when she’d worked on that movie, and Flint had to have been, what, forty-two when he played the vampire-turned-superhero? Not the biggest age gap ever in Hollywood, but not insignificant. He didn’t want to be too hasty to judge, but it didn’t sound like it had gone well.

“He’s the one who spanked you?”

“Yes. But it was...”

She shook her head, and pinched her mouth shut. *Talk to me, honeybee*, he pleaded silently in his head.

“Sometimes it was like this, and I liked it. I said yes, and this is what I was expecting. Sort of punishment, but also sort of not.”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “That’s right.”

“But sometimes he’d spank me, and I felt like he was actually mad. It hurt, and not in a fun way. It was yucky, and confusing, because I’d agreed to it, but not like that. And when I asked him, he’d mock me. But it took me a while—”

Bianca snapped her mouth shut and looked at the ground for a few seconds.

“I’m not always great at understanding what people mean, or what their intentions are. I’m really good at mimicry, and I get what people are feeling when it’s spelled out in a script like that, but sometimes in real life... I just don’t get it.”

Huh. That was useful information to have, and maybe explained why she was so hostile all the time. If you didn’t understand what people were trying to say and it turned out that a lot of people were shitty, why wouldn’t you just throw up your defenses in order to keep everyone away? Especially in this business where most people were snakes or sharks or whatever kind of animal was most likely to be all smiles to your face and then turn around and bite you in the ass.

“I thought Flint wanted to be my daddy for real. I thought he knew everything. He didn’t, and at the end of everything, he went back to the girlfriend he’d told me he’d broken up with.”

Rage stewed in Theo’s stomach. How could someone be so cruel to another person? Especially because Theo was pretty sure that fucker had known he was taking advantage of Bianca.

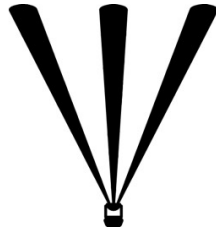
“He was a bad man, Bee. No one should ever hit you or hurt you in anger. Not even when you’re being punished. They should always be in complete control, and you can’t do that when you’re angry. And he was a real shitstick for using you like that. I’m sorry.”

She pursed her mouth and shrugged as well as she could with her palms still glued to the paint.

“Apparently it’s kind of a right of passage, but I didn’t know. I think people tried to tell me, but I didn’t get it.”

“They should’ve tried harder,” he said fiercely, and that earned him the sweetest smile he’d ever seen grace Bianca’s face.

CHAPTER TEN



“We can stop,” he told her. “I didn’t know. I never want you to feel bad about this. It’s a big deal and something I take really seriously. I would understand if you aren’t ready to put that trust in me, especially after how that rat bastard treated you.”

But she did trust Theo. He could be a grumpy, growly asshole but he never lied to her, not ever. He was...what did you call that, honorable? Something you heard a lot in movies, but was in kind of short supply in real life as far as she could tell.

“I don’t want to stop, but I...”

“What do you need, babygirl?”

“Do you promise not to lie to me?”

“Promise.”

“You won’t hit me when you’re angry?”

“Never ever,” he said, and even though he didn’t say as much, she could hear the pledge in his voice. Swear on his mother’s grave, that kind of thing. Did Theo have a mother? He must. Or at least must have had one. He couldn’t have just hatched from a stone in the woods. Probably.

“And if I use my safeword it stops?”

“Every single time. We don’t even have to just use your safeword. If you say ‘stop’ it stops. If you say ‘no’ it stops. Until you’re really confident and secure, we don’t have to play with any of that CNC stuff. It can be fun, but that’s what I

want it to be. I don't want you panicking because you're blanking on your safeword."

"Okay."

Flint would've tutted at her by now, told her not to worry her pretty little head, he knew what he was doing. Theo didn't even seem impatient.

"And I am 100 percent fine pressing the pause button if you need to, at any point. You've always got a choice, babygirl. I never want to take that from you."

That made her laugh, just a tiny bit.

"Even though you said, 'If you agree to obey me, I'll be your daddy. 24/7, no reprieves, no exceptions. You fuck around and find out, babygirl. I dare you'?"

It was Theo's turn to laugh.

"Holy shit. I've heard you do impressions before, but I didn't know you could do me. That was incredible. Really. Jesus I'm glad you've never used that power for evil."

"How do you know I haven't?" she deadpanned with a shrug, which made him laugh even harder.

"You're amazing. Really talented. I don't know much about movies or acting or anything really, but I think you're really good."

Ugh, that compliment burned even as it made her feel good. Kind of like that tiger balm Jason told her to use after she'd had a really intense lifting session.

"Thanks. Can you spank me now?"

"Little Miss Can't Take a Compliment," he murmured. "We'll see what we can do about that. And I'd love to, if you're really sure."

The way he'd been stroking her butt this whole time should've been weird, but the truth was she liked it a lot. It felt good, and it mellowed her somehow.

"Sure, sure, Daddy," she said, feeling her skin heat from her cheeks down to her chest. It felt so good to call him that,

almost as good as it felt when he called her babygirl or honeybee. So damn good.

“Okay, as long as you know I mean it. You’ve got choices, always, even when I’m trying to sound all hot and domly. I do expect you to listen to me and to behave, but I also expect you to have questions and to argue with me sometimes. None of that is off limits.”

Even though she’d known that somehow, it was still nice to hear. She nodded to let him know she’d heard him, and then Theo—Daddy?—swooped in to give her a quick kiss on the cheek that felt more intimate than some of the sex she’d had.

When he leaned up again, he hooked his fingers around her hipbones and urged her a couple steps out from the wall.

“There you go, babygirl. Stick that sweet little bottom out for me. Oh, yes, just like that.”

She felt ridiculous but also preened under his praise, and she knew she was wet. Soaked, probably, at the apex of her thighs, as well as her breasts feeling at once tight and heavy as she bent over slightly at this awkward angle. Whatever, it wasn’t painful, she could take it. And she would. For her daddy.

Bianca knew it was coming, but it was still a bit shocking when Theo started smacking her butt for real. Not hard, because he’d said he was going to warm her up, but with intent. This wasn’t a casual swat for being mouthy or to emphasize a point. She could tell immediately too, the difference between him and Flint.

Flint had never started out soft like this, had never covered the whole of her butt with his palm, making every bit of skin from just below her tailbone to the tops of her thighs feel... attended to. Seen. Acknowledged. Which was a weird thing to think about your ass, but it was *true*. It felt like Theo cared, even when he started spanking her harder.

He still covered every inch of that band, kept if not a steady rhythm then a consistent firmness. She knew what to expect, and there was no malice or animosity there.

After a while, he stopped swatting her, and went back to those caresses that had felt so good.

“You doing okay, Bee?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Your bottom hurt?”

“No, Daddy. It feels a little warm and it stings a little when you...when you...”

“Say it, babygirl.”

“When you spank me.”

And why did saying that word make her nipples tighten so much she could feel the hard little buds rub against the lace of her bra?

“That’s good. I’m gonna go a little harder on you now, but it’s still a warm-up. Ass out now like a good girl. Perfect.”



Perfect was an understatement. It was harder to see the pink on the Mediterranean bronze of her skin, but he could make it out. Especially when he increased the strength of his blows. He was almost done with her warm-up because he wasn’t going to go hard on her. Not at first and not until he was more certain of her calibration. He didn’t want her to wake up sore and resentful because she’d been riding high on adrenaline and endorphins and hadn’t registered the pain.

Theo was going to do this right. Not just because that’s how he always tried to do things, but because after a shitty first experience, he wanted to give her a good one, a safe and conscientious one so she could see what having a daddy could really be like. So far she’d taken to it like a fish to water.

After one more notch on his mental hardness scale, he rubbed her warm backside, dragged his nails over her rosy skin. He loved the way Bianca gasped in response. After everything she went through in her training, doing stunts,

seemingly endless days on set, and a little sensation play could have that effect on her? Awesome.

“That was your warm-up, Bee. Now your punishment is going to start. Daddy’s giving you a bad girl spanking because you endangered yourself, you violated my privacy, and you put other people at risk. Is that acceptable behavior?”

“No, Daddy.”

“Are you going to do it again?”

There was a pause and he tipped his head. Was she going to make a smart remark? That was fine, she’d find out what happened when she sassed him when they were doing this.

“Something to say, princess?”

He let the amusement seep into his voice because he was amused and he wanted her to feel comfortable speaking up, even if he teased her about it.

“Sometimes for my job I have to do things that are kind of unsafe. I can’t promise not to do that stuff anymore.”

“That’s fair. I don’t love that some of your stunts can be dangerous but I’ll let you, Tina, the stunt coordinator, and the insurance hash that stuff out. But I do want you to always speak up if you feel really unsafe doing a stunt. Or tell me and I’ll bring it up with Tina. I know you’re brave and you work hard as hell, but you shouldn’t feel like you can’t push back. Got it?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Anything else?”

“I do stuff wrong a lot. Sometimes I do it on purpose, but sometimes not. I understand if I get punished for something I know is bad, but it doesn’t seem fair to get punished for something I didn’t know was bad.”

She had a point, and he was floored by how candid she was being. Maybe this was Bianca in litterspace.

“Thank you for sharing that with me, babygirl, I really appreciate that. If you genuinely don’t know something was

wrong then no, you won't get punished for it. But I expect you to be as honest with me as you just were. No telling me you didn't know to get out of punishments, right?"

"No, Daddy."

It was sweet how aghast she sounded. How easily she slipped into this earnestness was charming.

"Good girl. I think we understand each other, unless there was something else you wanted to say."

"Just that... I really am sorry. You were right that I didn't think how me going to Hive would affect other people, and I did violate your privacy. And I knew you wouldn't like me sneaking out but I did it anyway."

"I'm glad you can see how what you did was wrong. As your daddy, it's my job to help you do better. We'll work on this stuff together. And in the meantime, you're going to accept your punishment and then all will be forgiven."

"Yes, Daddy."

"I'm going really easy on you. Only a dozen spanks, but they're going to be a lot harder than that warm-up. You can safe out if it's really too much or if you get scared, I promise I won't think any less of you. This is all new and it can be a lot. Mess with your head, remember?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Okay, I'm starting now."

As much as he loved spanking women—he really fucking did, and this one in particular—he did try to put aside the titillation when he was administering a punishment, especially when his partner took it as seriously as Bianca seemed to. Not that he wouldn't enjoy it, but it wasn't quite as salacious as usual. Seemed only fair, since he knew this would hurt and probably in a way Bianca would not enjoy.

Theo drew his hand back, and then brought it down hard on her cheek. His little girl squeaked and rocked forward but she kept her hands on the wall.

“Back in position, honeybee. There’s my good girl. That was one.”

He alternated sides and spaced out the blows, not being an asshole and playing the same damn spot game. Aiming for slow enough that she would feel each spank but not so drawn out that she would lose her nerve, he made sure she felt each crack of his palm against her flesh and he counted them out for her. Eventually that would be her responsibility, but not tonight. It was over soon, although it had probably felt a lot longer to her.

“All done, babygirl. You did such a good job.”

“All done, Daddy?”

“Sure are. You can stand up now. Do you want a hug, or —”

Mostly littles wanted hugs and cuddles and reassurances and praise when they’d been disciplined, or even spanked for fun. Sometimes they needed some space but clearly Bianca fit into the first category—she’d barely gotten upright before she walked into his arms, smooshed her face into his chest, and wrapped her arms around his waist. Oof. If only he’d known this about her weeks ago. Well, he knew now.

She wasn’t crying, and he hadn’t expected her to, but she was still probably pretty worn out from all the drama and no doubt the adrenaline was draining out of her system. Once she’d stopped hugging him quite so aggressively, he picked her up and toted her into her room.

Once he set her on her feet, he took a seat on the chaise.

“I have to send some messages to my boss and to the guys on the team. You get ready for bed while I do that, and then I’ll tuck you in.”

Her eyes got kind of big, but Bianca didn’t argue, just opened a drawer and pulled out a small pile of clothes that must’ve been her pajamas. It was funny she went into her en suite to change but she could, for now.

It took her a while to get ready, and he could imagine why. She had more lotions and potions on her counter than a

drugstore, and he bet she used every single one religiously. Well, she could teach him how to help. When she finally came back in, she looked damn sleepy and didn't resist when he gripped the back of her neck and used that to steer her toward the bed. She did however, reach underneath the enormous bed, and came up with the enormous stuffie he'd seen her cuddling a couple weeks ago.

"This is Pickle," she told him, dark eyes daring him to talk shit about the giant crocodile—alligator?—she was clutching.

He would do no such thing. Daddy 101: Littles took their stuffies very seriously, and you should too.

"What kind of animal is Pickle?"

"She's a saltwater crocodile."

And Pickle was a she. Of course. And of course Bianca would have a stuffie of one of the most dangerous animals in the world. Basically her mascot.

"How long have you had Pickle?"

Some grown-ups collected stuffies, but he couldn't picture Bianca being one of them. Besides, the crocodile looked almost threadbare in some spots and like her stuffing had been redistributed from her original shape to how she'd been held by a little girl for years upon years.

"Since I was seven."

"Did you pick her out yourself?"

"No, she was a gift," Bianca said quietly, stroking the crocodile's head. It looked like Pickle had received a lot of affection in her time on this planet with Bee as her companion, being petted and hugged.

"That's kind of a funny present for a first grade girl. Did you really love crocodiles or something?"

"No," Bianca said, her mouth twisting to the side. "I was already doing mostly movies at that point, although sometimes TV or commercials. I missed a lot of school and had tutors on set. But my mom wanted me to have a birthday party and

insisted we invite my whole class. The kids in my class didn't like me. I've never really played well with others."

He sometimes wondered if Bianca thought it was odd that she was so surrounded by other people but also so alone. Now he had his answer, and it was a sad one.

"Anyway, most of the kids didn't come, and the ones who did mostly gave me generic presents, like whatever the trendiest doll or coolest toy was then. But one of the cool, popular girls gave me Pickle. And told me the crocodile was just like me. Mean and ugly."

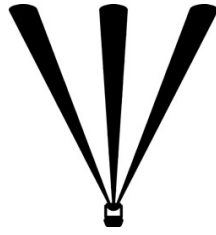
"What a little shit," he said, his nose wrinkling. Sure, he'd gotten into some scuffles when he was a kid, but he didn't remember anyone ever saying stuff like that.

"Brandy DeJoy wasn't a nice person. But it wasn't Pickle's fault." Bee shrugged and held the stuffie closer. "I thought she was just misunderstood. So I named her, and she's been my friend ever since."

That was damn adorable. But also kind of sad. He was glad Bianca had made the best of a bad situation but also angry because she shouldn't have had to.

"I'm glad you and Pickle found each other, and now you both need to get your beauty sleep. Under the covers."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The next day, she had a late call time, and she woke up wondering if everything that had happened last night had been a dream. The fact that her butt was still a little warm, and a tiny bit sore when she laid on it said it hadn't been.

She got up and got dressed before heading out to the kitchen where Theo had already been up for hours. But he helped her get her food ready, sat with her at the dining table and when she was finished, told her they were going to talk.

“I was thinking. You can't call me Daddy, not on set and not within earshot of my team. I'm in no way embarrassed about my relationship with you but it could cost me my job. And there's nothing wrong with being little, but I think you don't want your colleagues knowing that about you. Am I right?”

“Yes,” she said, having to bite back the Daddy that was so eagerly waiting on her tongue.

“I think I've got an idea for how to keep it secret, but for us to still communicate. You're going to call me Teddy. People will think you're giving me shit—”

“Who says I won't be?”

Theo blinked and then laughed. Low, with half a smirk tugging up one corner of his mouth, and shaking his head. Bianca had a whole second to enjoy it before she found herself back against the wall, Theo's hand wrapped around her throat.

His fingers dug into the sides of her neck just hard enough to make her gasp and have her knees go weak. Shit, what was so freaking hot about that? It probably should have scared her, but it didn't. Theo didn't scare her, not deeply, anyway. Just in that blood-rushing-in-her-ears, heart-beating-fast, breathless kind of way she loved.

“You go right ahead, babygirl,” he told her, nudging her chin up with his thumb, forcing her to look him in the eyes. “You dish it all out whenever we're in public, so long as you know that when we're alone, you're going to pay for it. I'm going to take every act of disobedience, every word of sass, every roll of your eyes out on this little bottom of yours.”

He shoved a hand up her skirt and squeezed a handful of her butt cheek. Theo had really, really big hands.

“You've got a really gorgeous backside, but it's going to look even prettier with my marks on it. And given what a mouth you've got on you and how much your attitude needs to be adjusted, I bet your bottom's going to be red and sore a whole lot.”

A whimper escaped her throat and she wet her lips. Also suspected she was embarrassingly wet between her legs. Had been since last night.

One of his brows kicked up along with the corner of his mouth—but it wasn't all amusement there. She'd learned well how to read people's expressions, to replicate them on her own features, and there was an extra layer there. Hunger, but not for food. He looked ravenous. For her.

“You like that idea, huh, you little brat? Daddy flipping up your skirt and tugging down your panties, holding you across my lap and blistering your butt while you squirm and squeal?”

“Mmm.”

This wasn't practiced, it wasn't studied. The feelings she usually kept locked up tight until she just couldn't anymore felt like they were spilling out of her, leaking around the edges of who she thought she should be; who she thought people wanted her, expected her to be.

“What was that, honeybee?”

If he hadn't been holding her mouth shut with the pad of his thumb pressing into her chin, her mouth would have dropped open. Might've staggered or swooned because of all the things people had called her none had ever been so sweet. Well, honey was sweet. She supposed bees weren't but she was going to take what she could get, and what seemed to be on offer with the way he increased the pressure on her throat. *Fuck*. He was going to disintegrate all of her control and she didn't need any help with that. Except maybe with Theo holding her up it wouldn't be so bad...

She swallowed hard which only increased the finely honed crush of his hold on her neck. Her breasts ached with the need to be touched and she curled her hands into fists, squeezed and let go, trying to get a hold on the riot he was stoking in her body. The need he was stirring up.

“Yes, Teddy.”

God, that word. How had he done it? It felt as good tripping off her tongue, out from between her teeth as “Daddy” had. Maybe better? That generic sure was intoxicating, but her brain was swamped with some kind of ambrosia Theo seemed to have brewed just for her.

“That's a good girl. Not that I think that's going to stop you from mouthing off for a single second, but at least you know what's going to happen when you do. Actually, I think you could use a reminder right now.”

The speed at which this man moved was unbelievable. She was in damn good shape, had finely honed reflexes, could perform tightly choreographed fight scenes impeccably but she had nothing on Theo. Maybe because he'd been in actual life and death situations where he needed those skills and she only played at it. Whatever it was, she went from pushed against the wall to turned over his shoulder in a split-second.

The shock of it stilled her, but only for a second, and then she was twisting and kicking and pounding her fists on whatever parts of him she could reach, screeching and railing.

“How dare you, you oaf? Do you know who I am? If you hurt me—”

Thwack, Theo’s meaty palm landed against her ass and she squawked from the surprise, and also from the sting. “Ow!”

“Oh, babygirl, you don’t know from ow,” he fairly growled at her as he sat down at the edge of the bed and manhandled her until she was turned over his lap. “But you will.”



Was there a prettier sight in the world than having Bianca Lacoste, Hollywood starlet, turned ass-up over his knee, raising hell with her plush mouth, talented tongue, and sharp little teeth, all while struggling like a fox caught in a trap? If there was, he hadn’t seen it.

Theo loved how strong and earnest her fight was, how he legit had to *try* to immobilize her. Not that she’d ever win, but it was more than cute that she tried. Got his blood humming and pumping, had his heart rate up and his dick hard as hell. Christ, what a vicious little vixen. He’d have to be careful not to let her actually hurt herself. Or him for that matter. He didn’t think she’d do it on purpose, but she wouldn’t pull any punches either.

Pride swelled his head that she saw him as a worthy enough opponent that she’d fight hard and trust him to catch her, handle her. Hold her. He would.

It wasn’t easy to maneuver her flailing limbs into submission, and he worked up a sweat, but finally he had his fierce little bee pinned. One leg trapped between his thighs, she was off balance and couldn’t get leverage for shit, especially with her hands pinned to the small of her back.

Theo wrapped a hand around the fall of her cascade of luxuriant hair that she’d tied up in a high, tight ponytail, and used his grip to pull her head back. Sharply enough to get her attention and make her gasp—fuck, he loved that sound—but not to injure her. He’d never do anything to harm his honeybee.

Bianca paused, and her ribcage heaved against his thigh. Yeah, he wanted her to be obedient and accept his discipline, but he never wanted her to lose that spirit, so much fucking moxie it permeated the air. What would be the fun in that?

“You listen to me, babygirl. Teddy’s going to spank this taut little bottom of yours until it’s the same shade as those flushed cheeks. It’s going to hurt, and every time you move, you’re going to think of me. How I handled you, and spanked you. You want me to say that again? Seems like you can’t get enough.”

Every little hum and mewl was music to his ears. His little girl made a noise every time he said he was going to spank her, and fuck if that didn’t make him want to whisper threats into her ear until she was bucking over his lap, no doubt trying to rub that sweet little button of a clit in just the right way to get herself off. He wouldn’t let her, not a chance. He couldn’t wait to explore her, and he’d be the one delivering pleasure.

He did lean down until his lips nearly brushed her ear, settling his weight across her back.

“Such a naughty, feisty little thing. You’re hell in a hand basket, a tempest in a teapot. And Teddy’s going to spank that posturing right out of you. You fight all you want, honeybee. You’re going to be so sweet and sorry, feeling like your bottom’s been stung a thousand times when Teddy’s done spanking you.”

“F-fuck you,” she spat, and he didn’t tried to hide his chuckle.

“Oh, no, babygirl,” he crooned, perverse pleasure coursing through him when she snarled at his indulgent, condescending tone. He loved her sweet and abiding, but this was fun too. “No. If you’re very good and take your hiding the way a good girl should, then maybe Teddy will fuck *you*. I bet you’re already soaking wet, aren’t you? What a filthy girl, getting slick and nasty just from being threatened with a spanking. By the time I’m through with you, you’re going to be so swollen and drenched, your honey’s going to dripping down your thighs.”

“Argh!”

Bianca’s inarticulate sound of rage set sparks off in his brain. Theo had absolutely no doubt they’d start a fire. But he’d be in control until he’d delivered precisely what he’d promised.

“I hate you! You’re a disgusting pervert. You can’t do this to me. You filthy freak!”

Other people might’ve been taken aback or singed by her heated words, but not him. They only built the bonfire that he’d blaze when he was goddamn good and ready.

He relinquished the grip on her ponytail for long enough to free his belt and cinch it around her wrists. Wasn’t his finest work, but it would do to free up his hands and the way he’d woven it around her limbs shouldn’t cut too much into her skin or damage her nerves. Even so, he squeezed her wrists in their bonds and leaned down again, told her, “You tell me if your wrists hurt or if your hands go numb.”

“Yes, Teddy,” she murmured, her sweet agreement pleasing him in a way he’d never dreamed of.

“Good girl.”

With a quick nip of her ear, he shrugged his role back on.

“You better watch that mouth, babygirl, or Teddy’s going to wash those insults right out with soap. Make you stand in front of that big mirror over the bathroom sink and watch while I scrub that naughty tongue. I’ll have your panties around your thighs, your skirt tucked into your waistband so your bright pink bottom’s on display. Maybe Teddy will finger fuck your tight little pussy while you cry and shake your head because no matter what you say, your body’s going to tell the truth. That you fucking love it when Teddy punishes his naughty little bee.”

Her groan was all he needed to hear. Resonated like a tuning fork with something deep inside him.

“It’s no use arguing, babygirl. You want Teddy to discipline you, spank this spoiled little bottom. You need it.”

Theo wrapped that gorgeous hank of hair around his wrist, and used it to pull back her head again, expose her throat until she whined, probably feeling vulnerable. Good. She was at his mercy, which was precisely where she needed to be.

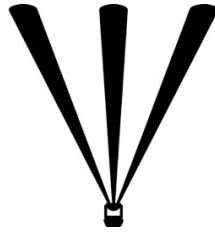
He hadn't quite figured it out yet, but there was something more to Bianca than everyone thought. He was going to dig it up, dust it off, and spit polish her until she shone. Maybe not for everyone, but for him at least. He'd get it through her gorgeous, stubborn little head that she couldn't keep on like this. It was going to get her in trouble, and it was going to get her hurt, and he wasn't going to stand by and watch her sabotage her career and possibly her safety.

That was a worry for another time. At this very second, he had a skirt to ruck up, panties to yank over Bianca's perfect behind so he could lay the first of many swats across her smooth skin. Her buttocks were round, and her tanned, toned flesh was going to yield so nicely under his palm.

Which it did, when he started applying spanks, alternating cheeks as he administered the measured licks to get her warmed up. Sure this was nominally a punishment for mouthing off but he intended to make a meal of it, enjoy the fuck out of every second, and give his honeybee something to think about.

"That's alright," he lectured as he continued to pepper her bottom with spanks, her backside jiggling as he smacked her. "That's what Teddy's here for. To turn this beautiful backside all red and ouchie, make you think twice about your choices because you know if you misbehave, Teddy's going to spank you."

CHAPTER TWELVE



It felt like forever that Theo spanked her, his big hand coming down on her backside over and over and over, building a heat that wasn't just a surface sting, but a feeling that reached so far inside she could swear it warmed her bones. That was the thing about Theo; he always made her feel warm whereas so many other people left her absolutely cold.

At last, he stopped hitting her, and she sucked a breath into her lungs, bracing for another volley of swats. It didn't come.

Instead, he trailed his hand lightly over the flesh he'd just been abusing, and she hissed. She was so sensitive that with the slightest touch, she felt as though she was going to jump out of her skin. It was almost worse than being smacked. *Spanked*. Whoa, that word was just...hotwired somewhere inside her. Somewheres? Because it definitely electrified her brain but also certain parts of her body. Parts of her that were aching to be touched. Grabbed, squeezed, handled like he'd handled the whole of her.

When he dragged blunt nails across her swollen cheeks, she wanted to scream. Not because it hurt but because it was just so much she couldn't even process what he was doing to her. Like water that had seeped into cracks and then turned to ice, she felt like she was being split apart. And it felt good? Like she might come harder than she ever had, or like she might burst into tears, or just flat out burst.

Thankfully before she could do any of those things, he returned to rubbing her, a little harder this time in a way that

felt steadying, brought her back from the precipice. Jesus Christ, she was always on guard and he'd taken that all away but in a way that didn't make her feel like she was going to crumble. Or if she did like he'd scoop up the pieces, knead and stroke them until he could sculpt her into something beautiful and new.

“There, that's better. Not so mouthy anymore, are you, babygirl?”

She thought about spitting invectives at him—that would be what her character would do if someone had taken her hostage and subjected her to these kinds of...indignities after all—but she wasn't Invicta right now, and while it was, yes, embarrassing to be spanked over his knee like a child, it was wonderful in a way she couldn't have fathomed. Also, her butt really hurt, and she wasn't sure she could take any more without breaking down into tears. Especially now that he was giving her a break. Maybe spanking was like wearing those beastly heels her stylist was always forcing on her? She could manage them for hours but once she took them off, there was no way in hell she was putting them back on.

So she shook her head, and soaked in the dreamy feeling of his approving words melting over her—“That's Teddy's good girl.”

Theo stroked her for another few minutes. She could've struggled or yelled at him, but even when he released her hands from the belt he'd looped around her wrists, she stayed still, letting herself by limp and for once, breathe. It had been so long since she let herself just breathe.

“Once you stopped putting up a fuss, you were such a well-behaved girl,” he told her. “And your bottom colors like a dream. You're so pink and warm, honeybee.”

There was marvel in his voice and there it was again, the warmth flooding her, and not just because he'd applied enough friction to her ass to set it ablaze. Bianca let him arrange her so she was draped over his lap, and shivered when he trailed his fingers so close to her pussy she had to wonder if he could sense how wet she was.

Well, he should know, and she wanted to tell him, invite him. Hell, she wanted to flat out beg him, so she widened her knees.

“I was good, Teddy. You said so.”

He chuckled. “You’re right, I did. So I guess you deserve to get fucked, don’t you babygirl?”

“Yes, Teddy.”

He laughed again. Sometimes when people laughed at her it felt mean even if she couldn’t quite figure out why—people were such a fucking mystery. They didn’t want you to tell the truth. There was some code everyone but her seemed to have been born knowing, and she’d almost cracked it but it was exhausting. Like she was constantly speaking a language that wasn’t hers and she wasn’t quite fluent enough to think in it, dream in it. So much got lost in translation.

But the way Theo laughed didn’t poke at that part of her that said she’d fucked up and been weird and now she was going to pay for it. It was more like he was surprised, but not in a bad way.

“Then I guess I owe you a good fuck. Spread your legs wider, babygirl.”

Not that she was going to all of a sudden become meek and 100 percent compliant, but she’d cooperate if it got her off. She’d heard Theo was good with his hands, after all.

Teddy smoothed his palm over one of her butt cheeks and squeezed, the pressure on the tenderized skin making her suck air through her teeth.

“I fucking love it when you hiss, honeybee. Or gasp, sigh. Fuck, I love it when you *breathe*.”

Whoa. She was always cautious when people appeared to like her, because ninety-nine times out of a hundred it was because they wanted something from her. Wanted to use her. Which wasn’t always bad; sometimes she was happy to use them right back. But to have someone say that they loved that she was...alive? That she existed? That wasn’t a thing that

happened. Super sus so she'd try not to let it go to her head, but she wanted it.

She did gasp when she felt blunt fingers at her entrance. A gasp that slid into a groan when Theo circled his fingertips, spreading her wetness to her clit and her perineum. And goddamn right she arched her back, pushed her hips toward his fingers, and felt not an ounce of embarrassment when Theo said, "That's my greedy little girl. You want Teddy's fingers in that pretty little pussy of yours?"

"Yes, Teddy!"

Jeez, was it not obvious? Not like she'd been subtle.

Thankfully Theo took pity on her. Sort of. Slid a single, thick finger inside her and hummed low in his throat with what sounded like genuine pleasure. Just shy of a growl, it sent a wave of arousal cascading over her when she already felt swamped.

"Fuck, babygirl, you're so wet. So ready. Don't you worry, Teddy's not going to keep this hungry little cunt waiting. Teddy's going to satisfy you. I promised, and I always keep my promises."

That struck a chord but thankfully Bianca didn't have long to think about how or why; she was too distracted by Theo sliding another finger inside her, pumping a few times before his questing digits found her g-spot and rubbed over it, making her buck and moan.

"My little honeybee likes that, huh?"

Fuck did she ever, but she also knew her own body well enough to know that wasn't going to deliver the promised orgasm.

"Yeah, yes, oh—"

He worked a third finger into her, stretching her entrance. There was only his fingers inside her and his other hand resting at the small of her back but somehow she felt pinned more effectively than she had when he'd used his whole body to restrain her. Maybe because she didn't even *want* to struggle?

Theo was a physical person, of course she'd known that. Couldn't possibly ignore how he moved, how at ease he seemed in his skin. Not like her. Yes, her body was a finely honed instrument but she felt as though she had to work endlessly to have it that way, keep it that way. Theo on the other hand would probably still look like a ripped-ass superhero if he took a month off his workouts, and coordination and balance were instinct to him, not hard won from hours upon hours of training.

What she hadn't expected was him applying that kinesthetic, anatomical awareness to her. Or maybe he'd just slept with a shit ton of women and had some serious bedroom skills to show for it. Whatever it was, she wasn't sorry.

"Hmm. I think you do like this, but I don't think it's going to get you off," he speculated idly while he continued to scramble her brain like friendly fire from Mentallus by fingerfucking her at a steady but relentless pace.

"Won't," she agreed, pushing her hips back and trying to spread her legs further, angle her hips just so to get the perfect amount of friction on her clit. "Rotate your hand. Fuck me harder."

Ugh, Theo wasn't going to be one of those asshole dudes who thought they knew her body better than she did, and got insulted when she gave pointers, was he? Good god, the ego on some of these jerks was massive. Flint had been like that. Always thought he knew better. And why would you rather leave your partner high and dry instead of getting them off just because they told you how? Men were morons.

But despite him being toppy as hell, Theo didn't seem affronted. No, he took her advice, turning his hand while his fingers were fully inside her which made her see stars.

"Your tight little pussy is going to feel fantastic around my cock. I can't wait to get my dick inside you, babygirl. But first things first."

First thing was apparently backing out his fingers until the tips were just barely still in her channel and then thrusting so

hard it made her rock forward, and utter a wordless exclamation of “Ngh!”

Goddamn. Whatever mechanism powered jackhammers had nothing on this man’s arms. She almost came just wondering if his hips had the same capabilities, picturing him looming over her, hand wrapped around her throat, snapping his hips like they were powered by hydraulics while his cock was buried inside her until her eyes rolled back in her head.

She liked this too, though, a lot. Being facedown usually made her feel small and used and vulnerable. Which she wouldn’t tolerate with most people. But Theo? His job was literally to keep her safe, and he’d promised that him becoming her Teddy only made that more true, not less. So she let herself sink into that dangerous sensation, let it take her over. A sizzling pleasure that could send her up in flames, wreck her. Oh well, at least she’d get some phenomenal climaxes out of it first.

An orgasm was building inside her now, coiling in her pelvis and tensing her muscles. But before the string of arousal could snap into that pulsing pleasure, Theo slowed his thrusts.

“What the hell?!”

So she wasn’t the most submissive lover. Whatever. When it came to getting off, she had her eye on the prize and no one was going to get in the way of that. She half-expected Theo to smack her ass for her outburst and that would’ve made her more salty. Instead there was that low, throaty, evil chuckle that did things to her insides as she felt his thumb at her entrance.

Holy shit. Not that she was opposed to fisting—seemed intriguing, actually—but like, not now. Bianca was about to squawk her objection when the pad of his thumb slicked from where he’d gathered some moisture to her asshole. Circled it and applied a small amount of pressure.

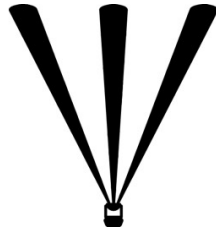
“Someday I’m going to fuck you here, too, honeybee. Not today, but someday. You’re going to take every inch of Teddy’s cock in this tiny little hole. You’re gonna be stuffed so

full. That's what I want you to think about. How deep and hard I'm going to drive my dick inside every hole you have."

Some of her sex partners had talked dirty to her before but none to the same effect as Theo. And she did think about him fucking her everywhere as he ramped up the speed and harshness of his thrusts again, the pad of his thumb pressing against her asshole in a way that made her want to demand he fuck her there too, now.

The rhythm and impact were inescapable, her climax inevitable. Sometimes she was fighting against her partners to get off, but with Theo there were no cross-purposes. Only both their bodies working in tandem toward the same goal, pushing her further and faster until her engines burned out in a blaze of muscle-clenching glory.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



It had been a couple weeks since he'd become Bianca's daddy, and it had been fantastic. Not just the kink and the sex, although those things were absolutely phenomenal. It was more Bianca's attitude.

He wouldn't call it night and day, more like clouds were clearing from in front of the sun of the day. Like her trusting him so deeply let a part of herself she usually kept hidden shine. She was more cooperative with the security measures, hadn't been as catty with his team or with the filming crew. And it was their little secret that when she sassed him and called him Teddy—which everyone around them found fucking hilarious—that it was really her way of acknowledging their relationship, her submission, and his responsibilities to her.

But for however much better things had gotten, she was still throwing tantrums every few days, and she still avoided talking to anyone when it wasn't absolutely necessary. He didn't get it.

Worse, he didn't know how to fix it. If it could be fixed.

All he could do was run interference and give her some space when she was full-on losing it, distract her from being mortified once it was over, put ointment on the scratches she sometimes gouged in her skin and put her to bed when she'd worn herself out from screaming and stomping around.

There had to be an explanation for why a woman with so much self-control, who was so savvy in some ways, and

mostly so sweet with him could suddenly pitch a screaming fit, and seemed absolutely baffled by some pretty basic human interactions. Something maybe that he even knew and just couldn't recall. Brains were real stupid sometimes.

Finally, one afternoon when Bianca was getting a well-deserved in-room massage, it clicked and he got on the phone. To Taj of all people.

“If you're calling to bail on the Lacoste job, I already told you no. I don't have anyone else who can handle her right now, so you're stuck until—”

“That's—That's not why I'm calling,” Theo told him, scrubbing a hand over the back of his neck. It was hot and prickly, like he'd been out in the sun too long and wasn't distracted enough by his charge to put all his bodily sensations aside. Feeling things was gross, and he hated lying to his boss even by omission. It was his own fucking fault for falling for the client.

There was a pause, and Theo could picture Taj's brows going up, the corners of his mouth turning down, and that brute kicking his feet up onto the top of his desk. If he was in the office anyway, which was unlikely. Whatever.

“Oh yeah? You decide being on babewatch isn't so bad after all?”

Theo rolled his eyes, shook his head, took another pass of his palm over the back of his neck because the heat wouldn't stop. Seemed hotter now. He opened his mouth to respond with something along the lines of “No it's fucking awful, she's a terror,” because he was realizing that wasn't true. And enough people had talked enough shit about Bianca that maybe he should leave off.

“Your sister, Ciera?”

Another pause, and Theo would bet money Taj wasn't kicking back in his desk chair anymore if he had been in the first place. He was protective of all his people, but Theo knew his brute of a boss had a soft spot like a marshmallow for his baby sister.

“What about her?”

Yep, low growl that verged on threatening. God help anyone who ever hurt that girl because Taj would rip them in half with his bare freaking hands.

“She doing okay?”

“She’s fine,” Taj allowed. “Still at school, getting a PhD in neurobiology. She’s doing really well, actually. Why are you asking about Ci?”

Theo wasn’t the smartest guy, had never had all that much use for books or school. What he did know was people. And instincts. And something in his head was trying to connect dots, make a pattern. He could be real wrong, but if he was right... The muscles in his face and in his shoulders all bunched up. Talking about shit other than work shit was not his favorite. But this could be worth it. Fingers fucking crossed.

“I think you said a while back that she’s autistic, right?”

“Yeah. What has that got to do with anything?”

Images of Bianca pitching her fits with the screaming and yelling flashed through his mind, but along with them, what came before: Bee flicking her fingers at her sides, or sometimes covering her ears with her hands, clawing at her neck and chest.

“I think maybe Bianca is too. You know all those tantrums she throws? After spending some time with her, I don’t think that’s what it is. I’m no expert but they kinda seem more like meltdowns to me. Like Ciera had that one time.”

Half a dozen guys from Carcharodon had been at a club in Stockholm after finishing a job, drinking and dancing. Ciera had been there too, Taj having flown her over from London where she was studying. His employees had been under strict instructions to show Ci a good time and keep an eye on her but if anyone laid a hand on her, they were dead.

For having such a massive thug for a brother, Ciera was on the petite side, delicate and pretty. If you didn’t know they were siblings, you probably wouldn’t guess. Ci had seemed to

have a good time for the most part, and Theo had chalked up Taj's frequent checking in with her to being an overprotective older brother with murder on his mind. But when the pulsing club music had switched to a live DJ and the lights went from low to pitch black with strobes flashing, something had happened.

All of a sudden Ciera had gone from a flirty twenty-something enjoying the solicitous attention of half a dozen ex-military guys to completely freaking out. Screaming, rocking violently back and forth, slapping herself in the head. Theo had seen a lot of shit in his years in the military but that had been one of the most disconcerting things he'd ever experienced.

Taj had sworn but then scooped Ciera up, seeming completely unruffled after that split second of fuck, holding her tight and carrying her out of the club and into the cool night air. Theo had followed them into an alley where Taj had set Ciera on her feet but was still holding her against him, circling her slim wrists with his meaty fists so she couldn't hit herself and using a low rumbly voice to talk to her.

"You want to make yourself useful?" Taj had bit off in his direction. "Get a couple bottles of water from the bar and tell the guys we'll see them back at the hotel. And close my tab when y'all are done."

"Got it, boss."

Probably playing the same memory over in his mind, Taj grunted. "No shit."

"Yeah."

"You ask her about it? Mention it to anyone?"

"Nah. I could be barking up the wrong tree. Even if I'm not, a lot of people are shitty about that stuff. Like it's a bad thing to be... What's that word? Neuro-something? You know what I'm mean."

"Neurodivergent. And yeah, people can be real dicks. Ci can have a real hard time even with people who understand

what's going on. If that's the case though, Jesus. She could get some support, accommodations. Make her life easier."

Damn right she could, and it would start with him. He had some research to do, and some theories to test, and then he'd talk to Bee.



He got his chance the next day.

The morning had gone fine, but after they took a break and touched up everyone's hair and makeup, they were going to start filming a different scene. Even though shit didn't look much different to him—a green screen was a green screen and stunt harnesses were stunt harnesses, right?—something about it seemed to agitate Bee.

Now that he'd done some reading on the web about autistic meltdowns and what preceded them, he was looking for them. And fuck if he couldn't see some of the signs clear as day. Flicking at her fingers, pacing, seeming as though she was trying to escape even if she wasn't running like she had before. It didn't stop when Tina called "Action."

Bee was offscreen now, but she was supposed to walk into a shot in a few seconds and he got the sense that wasn't going to happen without her losing her shit. No, he corrected himself, having a meltdown.

He was loathe to fuck up the filming, but what was the worst thing that could happen? Tina would cuss him out, he wouldn't help Bee, and they'd go back and do it over again. What was the best thing that could happen, though? Tina would still curse at him, he would help Bee avoid a meltdown that would exhaust her, and they'd be able to wrap this shot a lot sooner. His choice was clear from a cost-benefit analysis.

"Hold up," Theo said, letting his voice boom which felt real weird on the set where he always tried to be quiet and stay out of the way.

People all around him groaned and swore as he strode into view of the camera, and he didn't fucking care. Not even when Tina roared, "God-fucking-dammit, Theo!"

He wanted to get to Bee, but it might be more useful in the long term to take a detour to explain himself to Tina first.

"Look," he told the director. "Your starlet is about to lose her shit. If you let me deal with this now, I think I can have you back in business in fifteen minutes instead of an hour. Will you at least let me try?"

"How do you—"

"Doesn't matter," Theo said, shaking his head. This was need to know, and Tina didn't. Not yet anyway. If he was right, and Bianca was okay with telling her, maybe they could figure out workarounds for the things that were most likely to set his honeybee off. "Can I try or do you want to fuck your entire afternoon?"

Tina's glare was so tart he could taste the sourness on his tongue. "Worth a shot since you've screwed this shot and we need to reset the whole damn thing. May as well make yourself useful. Or try."

His hope in his line of work was actually to be overkill, superfluous, unnecessary. He wanted to be insurance—you prayed you never needed it, but if you happened to, you were glad it was there. Maybe today though, he could be of use.

Theo ducked a nod before hustling over to where Bianca was pacing back and forth, ring fingers flicking madly at her thumbs, and he could swear her lips were moving even if there was no sound. Her hands kept raising coming up to her chest and then she forced them back down. Did she want to cover her eyes? Her ears? Was she fighting the urge?

He glanced around to check if anyone was close enough to overhear if he kept his voice down. When he was sure he didn't have to worry, he tried to get his little girl's attention.

"Bianca."

She didn't answer him but started shaking her head, the tendons in her neck standing out with strain.

“Bee,” he tried, which only succeeded in making her shake her hands out and go back to flicking her fingers.

The next time she passed him, he circled a hand around one of her biceps, and put all the sternness he could muster into his voice.

“Honeybee, come with me.”

That managed to get her attention enough that she looked at him and her lips stopped moving.

“Now,” he pressed. “Teddy’s not going to ask twice.”

Her chest was rising and falling rapidly as she gave a tiny nod, maybe all she could manage right now and that was fine. He could take it from here.

Using the grip he had on her arm, he led her behind the massive green screen they’d put up to deal with this stunt heavy scene, well aware everyone was staring at them. The last thing he wanted to do was embarrass her, but...was it more embarrassing to be led off by your bodyguard or to have people talk shit about your constant tantrums? He hoped when she wasn’t in the throes of a meltdown or rumbling toward one that she’d agree it was the latter.

Once hidden by the screen and the scaffolding, he gathered her, costume and all, tight against him. One arm around her waist, and a hand cradling the back of her head as he pressed her face into his chest.

“Close your eyes, babygirl. Breathe. Can you breathe with me?”

He wanted to look at her, study the expression on her face but he couldn’t do that and give her the pressure she seemed to like so much at the same time, so he’d use other clues to try to decipher what was going on. It took a minute, but her breathing slowed and when she wrapped her arms around his waist, he didn’t feel her flicking her fingers anymore. Those both seemed like good signs.

“That’s my good girl, what a good job you’re doing. I love your hugs, honeybee.”

Theo held her for another minute, stroked her hair while trying to avoid fucking it up too bad.

“What happened out there?” he asked softly, hoping questions wouldn’t set her off. He wanted to make this better, not worse.

“Lights,” she muttered into his chest.

Lights? She was constantly in front of lights as bright as the sun. Like in ballparks when there was a night game, so freaking bright it seemed legit like the day. He’d learned that sometimes triggers changed, they could be there one day and gone the next, but fuck that’d be a rough one with the amount of time she spent in front of cameras filming and also doing press and walking red carpets and everything else.

“Something specific about the lights? Too bright? Can you hear them?”

He’d learned too that a lot of autistic people could hear electricity. Could tell if the TV was on even if the screen was black, noticed the hum of appliances most people weren’t sensitive enough to hear or automatically blocked out.

“I hear them all the time,” she said absently as if that was a perfectly normal thing. Apparently to her it was. “It wasn’t that. They’re just too...blue. They hurt my eyes. Like icicles stabbing my brain.”

“Well that sounds fucking awful, babygirl. No wonder you were on the verge of a meltdown.”

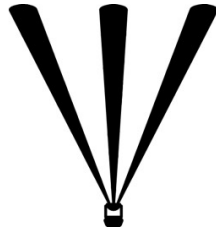
“You mean a tantrum?” she asked, sounding salty, and now that he could hear it, defensive and vulnerable. He’d been so wrong about her; everyone had been so wrong. Well, he was going to make it right.

“No, I don’t. Tantrums are meant to be manipulative. You’re not trying to be an asshole until you get your way, you’re legitimately in distress, in pain.”

He planted a kiss on the top of her head and squeezed her even tighter. “I’m sorry it took me so long to realize it. I was a total dick and you deserve better than that. Give me a few

minutes and I'll try to get it fixed, okay? Wait here, I'll come get you."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“**Y**ou’ve gotta make the lights less blue.”

“I don’t have to do fuck all,” Tina spat back.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re the boss, I get it. I’m just some ex-military meathead who’s ruining your day. I’m not trying to be a sexist prick by telling you how to do your job, I’m just trying to get this show back on the road.”

“If I make the lights warmer, it’s going to ruin the mood of the scene. It’s supposed to be cold, desolate, frozen wasteland. Not some goddamn Caribbean vacation.”

All this movie stuff was still a trip to him. Even having seen how they made certain stunts happen, how they plugged in entire backgrounds, the crazy things they did to be able to map CGI costumes and entire characters into the film, it was still magic to him. He did keep an ear out, though, and threw in some jargon to plead his case.

“Then fucking fix it in post-production or something, I don’t know. I’m telling you, you fix this and Bianca will be ready to go.”

The skepticism on Tina’s face was real loud, and she looked like she wanted to crack his nuts between her teeth. Not his kink. For for his honeybee though? He’d take all the stink eye in the world. Which was why he stood there with his hands on his hips, gaze level and unrelenting.

“I don’t know jackshit about making movies—”

Tina had the world's best scoff, and Theo knew he deserved that.

“But I do know Bianca and I'm guessing whatever it'll cost you to slap a filter on this footage is going to be a lot less than potentially hours of delay in filming. You keep complaining about all the delays and how much it's costing you, and Isaac's over in his trailer pulling out what little hair he has left. I'm giving you a way to avoid some of that wasted time and money and you're not even gonna try it? I've seen the other Knightstyled movies and they're awesome. Loved every single one of them, and so did a lot of other people. You're really good at your job. But if you don't even give this a shot, you're not as smart as you think you are.”

He had literally faced down people with machine guns who looked less like they wanted to kill him than Tina did right now. He got it. It would be like her trying to tell him how to establish a perimeter or how best to take out a sniper, and it would piss him off. But this wasn't about movie-making, it was about his babygirl, and just happened to involve a movie that was probably going to bring in over a billion dollars over the course of its lifetime.

He would gladly face down Tina's wrath to help Bianca avoid a meltdown, and if this worked, it would help everyone. Win, win, win, and what wasn't good about that? Tina didn't look much happier, but she did lean back in her chair and lifted her chin.

“Fine, we'll do it your way and when all the fan boys come beating down my door about it, you can defend me.”

Well, he probably wasn't going to be Bianca's bodyguard for much longer—wouldn't be now if Taj had any idea what was going on—and if he survived his boss's righteous fury for sleeping with his charge then he was going to need something to do.

“Sure, deal, whatever. You're not going to be sorry.”



Whatever Theo had said to Tina had worked. She looked ticked off, but not as exasperated as she did when Bianca had pitched an hour-long fit on set, so that was better. And the lights were better. They were still too...white, but even if it fatigued her eyes and she'd have a headache after dealing with them forever, it wasn't the same as the earlier brain-stabbing blue. That had been so much that she'd been completely overwhelmed by it.

Bianca had to get that hideous feeling out of her head, and the only way she could think to do it was to let all the feelings and intensity that had swamped her out through her body. It didn't make any sense, but then again, neither did losing her shit over lights that were too blue.

She felt kind of silly walking back onto the set, and having the utter despair and overwhelm be gone now that they'd warmed up the lights in tone a bit, but it wasn't any worse than having to face everyone after she'd screamed and stomped and clawed. Still embarrassing but maybe they wouldn't hate her so much since it hadn't taken nearly as long. If only she could figure out how to tell Tina those things herself instead of waiting for Teddy to ask her about it. Would it work with the other things likely to set her off? Who knew. Baby steps. How had Theo known what to do anyway? He had, as usual, some explaining to do. But that could wait until after she'd done her job.

Filming the penultimate fight scene for the movie went well. It was set in a nuclear wasteland, which was where Thoria had gained her powers, and was attempting to retrieve the radioactive materials contained in a concrete bunker that she planned to turn into a bomb to be set off at the World Nuclear Conference. All the stunts went well, people hit their marks and remembered their lines, none of the props fell apart or went flying when they weren't supposed to. It was probably the smoothest action scene they'd done so far for *Knightstyled: Onslaught*. Even Tina seemed...pleased?

She showered off in her trailer after they were finished, and when they got back to the hotel, Teddy insisted on giving her a bath. He didn't have to insist very hard. It was the perfect

end to a good day to have the lights in her en suite turned down, candles lit on the counter, and being held by a really hot daddy in steaming hot water that soothed her overworked muscles.

“How you feeling, honeybee?” he murmured in her ear from where he sat behind her.

“Really good. It was a good day. Can I ask you something?”

“Anytime.”

He emphasized his pledge with a kiss to her cheek and it made her feel extra warm inside.

“How did you know?”

“How did I know what?”

That was a good question, because there wasn't just one thing.

“How did you know I was about to have a tantrum? How did you know what would make it stop? What did you say to Tina?”

Theo was quiet for a moment so long it was unsettling.

“Before I answer any of that, I've got a question for you.”

“That doesn't seem fair, but okay.”

She was certain that Teddy had pulled the entire day out of the fire so she'd give him whatever he wanted. It was annoying that he wanted to talk instead of demand sexual favors, but she could tolerate this. For a bit.

“I don't want you to be insulted or get upset. There's nothing to be insulted about.”

“Um, okay?”

“Have you ever done any kind of neuro-psych evaluation?”

“No. I don't even know what that is.”

“Neither did I until yesterday. Has anyone ever said anything about neurodiversity to you?”

“Only for like fundraising pitches. I get a billion of those things, my PA sorts through all that stuff.”

“I don’t know that much about it either, to be honest. So take everything I’m about to say with a grain of salt, and definitely talk to an expert or tell me to fuck off, alright?”

“Okay.”

This was a weird conversation to be having, and she felt like it was weirder in a bathtub. But would it have felt less weird in her bed with Pickle or sitting on the couch or at the dining table? Didn’t really matter because it was happening here. In this little cocoon Teddy had made them.

“I think you might be autistic.”

That stopped her hands from trailing through the bubbles.

“Why?”

It felt like Theo released a breath, his chest collapsing some behind her. Apparently he’d been nervous to talk to her about this. Probably because he thought she’d throw one of her Classic Bianca Lacoste Tantrums. She wasn’t mad, though—what was there to be mad about?—but she was confused. People had said a lot of things about her, but no one had ever suggested she might be autistic. Why would Theo?

“Well, today, for example, on set, you said the lights were too blue, they felt like they were icicles stabbing into your brain. No one else seemed to feel that way. A lot of autistic people have sensory issues. Like tags or seams on clothes can bother them to the point of being painful, that kind of thing. And you said you could hear electricity. Being extra-perceptive to things like that is really common for autistic people.”

Huh.

“You said today. What else?”

“Having trouble reading other people’s expressions or intentions is a pretty classic autistic trait, and you’ve mentioned that before.”

That was true too.

“And a few weeks ago, you had a meltdown because Tina changed the scene you’d be shooting at the last second. Abrupt changes in plans is something a lot of autistic people have difficulty with.”

All of that sounded exactly like her. But that also didn’t match what she thought of when she thought of autism.

“But...I can talk just fine. My parents said I talked early.”

“Sure. Not everyone who’s autistic is the same. And some traits are almost like superpowers. You have really good hearing and you’re incredibly observant. That’s why you’re so good at mimicking people’s voices and expressions. They call it being on the spectrum because there’s like a color wheel of stuff you can have issues with. Not as in a spectrum on a line like how well done your steak is.”

“I like it bloody.”

“Oh, I know.”

This was a lot. A lot to think about, a lot to process. She didn’t know the first thing about autism. How had it been so obvious to Theo when it hadn’t been to anyone else? Maybe he was wrong? Or maybe he was right, and she wasn’t alone. Maybe there were other people who felt and acted like her and there had been a word for it this whole fucking time.

“Teddy?”

“Yeah, babygirl?”

“I’m glad you told me, but it’s a lot. Can we not talk about it anymore right now? I want to see all this stuff and read more about it, and talk to someone like you said, but right now...”

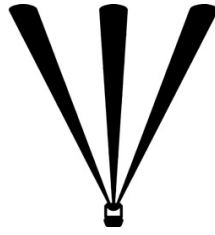
“Right now you just want to take a bath with Teddy?”

“Please, please.”

It had been a good day but it had still been tiring and she just wanted to enjoy herself. Be surrounded by the hot water and the iridescent bubbles, cozy up with her handsome daddy who’d given her so much to think about because he wanted to help her. That was maybe the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her.

“You got it, honeybee.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



It had been murder getting through last night and all day without being able to get his hands on his honeybee. He'd had to act like everything was totally and completely normal and he definitely didn't have a relationship with Bianca above and beyond client and bodyguard because Taj was in town.

Yeah, it was great to see the big guy and he was happy his boss was here to go over what was going to happen when they headed for New Orleans, have him check in with the team, and even handle a couple shifts, but fuck all did he miss Bianca.

It had been really fucking awkward when they'd gone to Hive last night too.

"You not going to play with anyone? I thought for sure giving the hours you've been pulling and with your handful of a client you'd want to blow off some steam."

Theo had shrugged, and tried not to look too guilty of breaking the cardinal rule of don't fuck the clients.

"Feel like I'm getting into that place where I might want to settle down, you know? I know some people keep playing with others but I dunno. I've always felt like kind of a one-woman man. I know you can be ethical about it and everyone's onboard and consenting but..." He shrugged again and hoped for once Taj was actually as thick-skulled as his big blockhead implied. "I've just been in a mood to be in a relationship, not just some casual get your kicks play, that's all."

He'd left out the part where he thought he might've found the girl he wanted to settle down with. Taj didn't need to know that. Yet. Hell, he hadn't brought it up with the woman in question, so Taj could wait his turn.

But once the big man was headed off to meet with a client in New York, Theo was hauling ass to Bianca's suite, ready to put his little girl through her paces. She'd been on her very best behavior while Taj was here, maybe trying to make sure his boss was impressed by his performance. It had been so sweet, but he knew how much it cost her to mask like that and he wanted to both reward her for being so kind and doing something nice for him but also make it damn clear that wasn't her job and he didn't want her doing that for anyone, and especially not for him.

It hurt her to keep all that inside, to try as hard as she could to be "normal"—whatever the hell that was anyway—and it was exhausting. Used up energy she could be putting toward more productive things. They'd learned about masking together, talked about how she wouldn't do that in front of him.

He knew it was a work in progress, because it was hard to stop doing things you'd done your whole life to fit in better, but he wasn't going to tolerate her hurting herself if it could be helped, same way he'd call her out and get her help if she was cutting herself or drinking too much or doing other self-destructive shit. It wasn't quite fair to compare those things because masking was often rewarded while those other things weren't, but the effect on her would be the same. No good, and he only wanted the best for his babygirl.



If someone would've told her three months ago that she would love kneeling at some man's feet so much, she would've laughed in their face. Then again, if someone would've told her a few months ago that she was probably autistic she would've given them the side eye too, and the more she learned about it, the more certain she was that Theo had been

right. She still had so much to learn, and she wanted to get it confirmed and had made an appointment back in LA to do a neuro-psych eval once *Knightstyled: Onslaught* was wrapped, but she was pretty sure what the results would be.

Similarly, here she was, on the floor with Theo cupping her face in his big hands and she'd rarely felt so peaceful. This is how it started. How she handed herself over to him and how she could let herself just be. It was a gift he gave her that she still didn't know how to properly take advantage of, or how to thank him for. Even if he said her being herself and being his obedient little girl were enough she couldn't believe that was actually true.

She was naked but it didn't feel entirely as though it was for his pleasure. It was, she knew, because he made no secret of the fact that she turned him on. But part of his pleasure was letting her be free of things that bothered and pained her. How a tag between her shoulder blades could make her want to cry when she could get punched and kicked and run until she was ready to drop and not be bothered she didn't know. But there it was.

Teddy encouraging her to let her feel more had opened the floodgates for some sensory things she'd just been dealing with so hard she'd thought it didn't bother her. She'd been wrong. She'd just been spending a ton of energy to convince herself it was fine, it wasn't that bad. Theo refused to let her do that anymore which was agonizing in some ways, but a relief in others. So here she was, no tags, no seams, no fabric. The carpet on her shins didn't bother her—he'd asked—and she loved the feel of his hands.

“The last day and a half while Taj was here was hard for you, weren't they, babygirl?”

“Yes, Teddy.”

His blue eyes could seem cold, she supposed. They were crystal clear like a pristine mountain lake that would be freezing if you jumped into it. But they felt warm to her.

“I really, deeply appreciate that you were trying to make a good impression on him so he would think I've been doing a

good job. That was so kind and thoughtful of you and I know how difficult it is for you to mask like that, especially when you don't get an outlet at the end of the day.”

That was something she loved about Theo, her Teddy. He was always direct with her. If she'd done a good job, he said so. If he was disappointed, he let her know. It was maybe the same thing she liked about her trainers and Tina and Anderson. There was no language to decode, no euphemisms or innuendo to decipher, no little white lies she was supposed to know how to tell. It was such a relief to maybe have an answer for why those things were so hard for her.

“Do you understand that I noticed all your hard work and it makes me feel really special that you would do that for me?”

“Yes, Teddy.”

Not only did she understand it, but she felt it. His approval set off sparklers inside her brain, made her feel all hotly effervescent and consumed with joy. It was one of the best feelings on earth, and she suspected she was going to get rewarded with another one of the best feelings on earth in the not so distant future.

“Good.”

He kissed her then, first a firm press to her lips that made arousal bloom in her pelvis and grow through her chest, followed by kisses on her cheeks, one on her forehead that made her feel like an angel, and finally one on her nose that made her giggle.

“I also need you to understand that if you ever mask on my behalf again, I will take you across my knee and spank your perfect bottom until it's so red and sore you won't be able to sit for days without thinking of me.”

“But—”

Theo shook his head. “No buts, honeybee. There are times you're gonna have to mask in order to get by in this business. I get that, and it sucks. You shouldn't ever have to hide who you are, or hurt yourself to make other people more comfortable, but this is the world we live in. We're gonna work on that too.

But I'm your daddy, your Teddy. My job is to protect you and keep you safe. If I'm asking you to hurt yourself to make my life easier, am I doing my job?"

Bianca felt her face scrunch up in a way her esthetician would scowl at.

"But—"

Theo shook his head, and the corner of his mouth tugged up in a way that told her even if he was going to scold her and he was serious, he wasn't mad. "What did I literally just say, babygirl? And don't tell me you don't remember, because I know you've got a mind like a steel trap for dialogue."

"No buts, honeybee," she parroted back, even throwing on her Theo voice that always made him laugh. She didn't think it was very good, but he said it was uncanny. What did he know anyway? Amateur.

"That's right. No buts because that's how I say I care about you, that's how I say you're mine. I knock down walls and beat back the crowds and slay the dragons so you can be the magical princess you are. I'm just a grunt. Some muscles with half a brain in his head. That's all I've ever been and that's all I'll ever be. But I'll be perfectly content with my life if I can let a little girl like you shine, you hear me? So you don't fucking mask for me. Otherwise, I'm just a meathead and any ox could do my job."

She had been sitting with her butt on her heels and her hands clasped sweetly in her lap, just the way Teddy liked. But Theo talking about himself like that was not something she was going to take sitting down. Instead, she knelt up and put her hands on her hips.

"Fine. I won't. But you listen to me, bub. Don't you ever talk bad about yourself like that ever again. Otherwise, I'll... I'll... I don't know yet, but I'll figure it out and you won't like it."

That was pretty pathetic as threats went but she couldn't use her usual ones on Theo and he knew it.

“You are so smart and so kind and thoughtful, and you take such good care of me. And no one, not anyone, ever noticed I was having meltdowns and not tantrums. Or if they knew or suspected that I was autistic, they never cared enough or they were too invested in my success to name it, to help me. You have changed my life. So no more saying mean things about my Teddy.”

Sometimes people’s facial expressions were a mystery to her. Probably because most people tried to hide what they were feeling. But she knew Theo tried to let his guard down around her, since it was only fair. Yes, he liked being in control—of himself as well as her—but he also didn’t want her working hard trying to figure out what was going through his head.

Theo’s expression right now was loud and clear: she’d touched a nerve. Not in a bad way, she didn’t think, but she knew how it could feel kind of painful even if it was in a good way. She knew that feeling very well.

“That’s—” His deep voice was hoarse, and he cleared his throat before continuing. “You’ve got yourself a deal, honeybee. Now what do you say we stop talking about all these feelings, and we have some fun? I’ve been thinking and dreaming about all the naughty things I want to do to you for days, and if I don’t get to act on those ideas soon, my head’s gonna explode.”

She had to giggle. That was quite the image.

“No exploding Teddies,” she declared. “That would be gross and messy and nobody wants to clean that up. I’d get blamed for it in the tabloids too. Another Hollywood starlet trashes her hotel room, does tens of thousands of dollars worth of damage with bear brains all over her suite while filming. Could we at least keep me out of the press unless it’s for bad behavior that’s actually my fault?”

“That’s the idea, yeah.”

And then he was lifting her off the floor and urging her legs around his waist so he could carry her across the room. This was going to be fun.



Hotel rooms were absolute shit for attachment points, and he wished for the millionth time that he could take Bianca to Hive. Or better yet, to Brae and Ash's in-home dungeon that he'd heard tell of from Taj. But given that he didn't want his boss to find out he was fucking the client—the only hard and fast rule Taj seemed to have—those were both no-gos. So making do with what was at hand was going to have to suffice.

Luckily, the luxe suite they'd been sharing for a couple months now was far kink friendlier than the average hotel room.

Theo had considered leaving his lovely little girl naked but he wanted her in deeper headspace than that, especially after the conversation they'd just had. He didn't want to underestimate Bianca, but he also didn't want to overestimate her. She was quite the puzzle, his little honeybee, and it could be surprising where her strengths and weaknesses lay. In some areas she was so sharp and in others, things he'd always taken for granted just didn't seem to compute. Which seemed to track with the whole autistic thing.

He knew some people were under the impression that autistic people were somehow less emotional or less sensitive to others' emotions, but he'd found the exact opposite to be true. Bianca felt things so, so deeply that sometimes it hurt him, or gave him joy. And to watch her fierce expression when she insisted he not speak badly of himself...yeah, that had fucking knocked him out. In a good way. He hoped to do the same thing for her right now. To say thank you for everything she'd done during Taj's visit, even if he hadn't liked it. That wasn't quite right. He loved the impulse, he didn't care for the expression.

So here he was straightening a stretchy cotton crop top with eyelet lace at the bottom hem and at her biceps on her lithe frame. It was pink and had candy printed all over it, plus darker pink ribbons woven through the lac and tied in bows. It

didn't show off any cleavage but it hugged her tits and showed them off and left her toned midriff bare.

“No itchy tags or seams or other stuff?”

“No, Teddy.

“Perfect. Now for the bottoms.”

He tugged a skirt in the same color pink up her legs and over her hips. This one didn't have the candy print all over, just at the hem with bigger pictures, and of course there was more lace and ribbon at the waist and bottom. And it had very, very good twirl, which Bianca of course demonstrated as soon as he'd settled the waistband just below her navel and double-checked there wasn't any sensory fuckery going on with it.

That had been one of the first things he learned about little girls: If you wanted to put them in a skirt, it had best have good twirl. And pockets if you could help it. Nothing lit up a little girl's face—or even a woman who didn't go in for DDlg or age play's for that matter—than a dress or a skirt with pockets. That joke about *How do you know if a woman's dress has pockets? She'll tell you* was absolutely true.

This skirt, however, was too short to have pockets. Way too short. It was meant to be worn with a diaper and cover and keep them visible but Bianca didn't play that little and that was fine with him. He wouldn't have minded if she did, but this suited him perfectly.

“Look, Teddy! It has really good twirl,” she told him, spinning around the living room.

“Sure does, babygirl,” he agreed. Damn, she was too cute. Good thing too, because when—not if, but when—Taj found out about them, Theo was gonna be out a set of nuts, and he wanted it to be worth it.

Not only was she so freaking adorable his heart could burst but especially with the folds of her skirt swirling around her, he could catch glimpses of her sweet, bouncy backside and her precious little cunt. Fuck, she turned him on. So yeah, worth it.

“Alright you,” he said, catching her arm and pulling her flush against him. “Not too much twirling, don't want to make

yourself dizzy.”

Judging by the slightly woozy way she looked up at him, she maybe already was. Silly little girl.

“But Teddy, it’s so fun.”

“I’ve got some other fun things to do with you, honeybee. Now come on. Can you be a good girl and stand still for Teddy for a little bit?”

“Yes, Teddy,” she singsonged while he walked her back to the threshold between rooms.

He brushed her hair out and put it into quick plaited pigtails and then made sure he had everything he was going to need on hand because he wasn’t going to be running all over the suite looking for stuff. Nah, he needed to stay right here.

Theo took out a couple hanks of rope from his bag, and held one out to Bianca. It was light blue and matched some of the candy printed on her outfit.

“This okay for today?”

He knew a lot of people preferred natural rope, but for his money, you couldn’t beat nylon for the colors. Plus given how smooth and soft it was, it seemed least likely to do shitty things to Bianca’s touch sensitivities. He couldn’t imagine tying her with jute or hemp or coconut, but who knew. Some stuff you just had to try. And try on different days. Maybe something scratchy as fuck would be just the ticket when she was feeling masochistic in a certain way.

His little girl’s eyes got bright as she reached out to touch the coiled bundle, and her mouth formed a little O as she touched it. Then stroked it. Ah, shit, watching this girl pet rope was getting him hard.

“Yes, please, Teddy!”

“Okay. That’s what I’m gonna use and if it starts feeling yucky, you just let me know.”

Bianca nodded, looking very serious. Unlike when she was Bianca Lacoste, toxic Hollywood diva—which was turning out to be more myth than reality anyway—she always listened

to him very closely when she was little, and followed his directions to the letter.

Positioning her where he wanted her, Theo set to work tying some quick but still pretty cuffs around her wrists and then stringing her up so her arms were in a giant Y in the doorway. Pretty little thing looked rope drunk by the time he was finished, and wasn't that just his luck. They'd have a lot of fun with all the ways he could tie her, but for today, he'd been fantasizing about a very particular scene and was committed to playing it out.

Once he was sure she wasn't going anywhere—unless she needed to, obviously. He had a pair of paramedic shears nearby anytime he played with rope—he took the next items out of his bag and set to buckling the cuffs they'd used before around her ankles and then attached them to a spreader bar. He widened the telescoping metal until her arms were taut and she whimpered. Didn't sound anywhere close to pain to him, but he checked in just to make sure.

“Y’okay, babygirl?” he asked, holding her chin between his fingers. It was a struggle to keep the smile from his face because judging by the blown-pupil, flush-faced look, Bianca was feeling pretty damn good.

“Oh, yes, Teddy. So good.”

“Good. Because I’m about to make you a little less comfortable.”

“Okay,” she agreed dreamily, and he couldn't help but kiss her on the lips, hard. Fantastic woman, wish come true.

True to his word, he tightened the ropes attached to her wrist cuffs, which forced her onto her toes, her calves flexing as she went onto the balls of her feet.

“Oh,” she breathed.

“Uh-huh. So you let me know if you get a cramp or this starts hurting in a bad way. No toughing it out. Got me?”

“Yes, Teddy.”

“Good girl. I’ve got a couple more things for you before we start playing for real.”

From the bag, he grabbed a small case and cracked it open, and Bee smiled when she saw what was in his hand.

“My paci.”

“That’s right, babygirl. You just suck on this and be a good girl for Teddy,” he told her as he popped the nipple into her mouth and watched her suckle. He’d given her one to try a couple days ago and she’d fucking loved it. Maybe sometime he could get her to let him give her a bottle. Even if it skewed younger than she usually did, he thought she’d like it given her fondness for her paci.

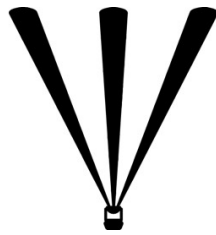
“We’ve got a paci for your backside, too,” he told her as he took out her favorite plug and lubed it up before pushing the tip to her rear entrance. She’d taken to being plugged so well, and he loved the way her body accepted the intrusion, taking the silicone inside her ass and leaving the gem on the flared base winking between her cheeks.

Without needing to be coaxed, Bee closed her eyes and took deep breaths, and he praised her for it, slipping the plug inside and then toying with it. She whimpered and made the sweetest sounds of suffering arousal around her paci and he had to tear himself away from her ass. Didn’t help that the heart-shaped pink gem looked especially filthy glinting from under her why-was-it-even-there skirt.

He grabbed a pink blindfold and showed it to her. “It’s soft and it’s not going to be too tight. We talked about this, but you’re allowed to change your mind anytime. Tell me if it’s uncomfortable or if it gets scary, okay?”

Once he had her nod of affirmation, he slipped the fabric over her eyes and she made the most contented little sound. So beautiful and submissive, all bound up in his ropes and his cuffs and his control. And now it was time for the real fun to begin.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Except for the strain in the muscles of her lower body, Bianca could have stayed like this forever. And given the stamina she'd built up during half a decade of filming superhero movies, she could stay even like this for a damn long time. Despite the stress on her muscles, she was feeling blissfully relaxed. Head empty of almost everything, because she'd handed herself over to Theo, and her Teddy would take care of everything.

Even if she couldn't see him, she could sense him, and he kept a hand on her so she could track his movements too. He laid a hand flat on her tummy and then circled around her until he was at her back and set both hands on her waist, stroking his thumbs up and down her spine.

“You're so pretty all strung up and helpless like this, babygirl. Teddy's going to take good care of you, promise. Doesn't mean I'm not going to hurt you, but you like that, don't you?”

She mewled and nodded when he bent down and sunk his teeth into her trap, biting hard like an animal about to mount his mate. Her nipples were furled tight and probably poking obscenely through the adorable top her daddy had put her in. They both liked it, that mix of sweet and dirty, and she would have rocked her hips except that it wasn't possible with her body drawn tight like an arrow. She could bear it until he let her go to fly.

“That's my good girl. Now I'm gonna touch you all over, wherever I feel like, for however long I want. This body is

mine to please, mine to torment, mine to do with whatever I feel like.”

If anyone else had suggested that her body was anything but her own, that she was some sort of property, she would slit their throats. With Theo, though, the assertion of control was all pleasure, confirmation that she wasn't in control anymore.

He ran his hands all over her body, and it felt as though he was studying, appreciating every inch of her. He cast a spell on her with that firm but gentle touch and she was deep in subspace when he put his front to her back, wrapped one hand around her throat and pushed the other against her belly before murmuring in her ear.

“No matter what I do, you're going to hold onto the paci in your mouth and the paci in your bottom. If you drop either one, there will be consequences, understand?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Oh, did she ever. She was tempted to bite down on the silicone nipple in her mouth to make sure it didn't go anywhere but she didn't think he'd like that either. Biting wouldn't turn her on; sucking would.

A second later, he released the grip he had on her throat, and shifted so he could spank her backside. Not hard, but with his hand still pressed into her belly she felt it more. Even more so when he slid his fingers down her skirt and cupped her mons and then delved back to her entrance to collect her own moisture to slick over her clit. It wasn't quite enough to make her come but it wasn't far off either, and she wanted so badly to grind her clit against something and get off.

“Ah-ah,” Teddy tsked at her, and spanked her pussy with even less pressure. The slight sting was more than enough to get her attention though. “You get what I give you, babygirl. And I'm going to tease you for hours.”

He was the meanest Teddy ever. She was even more certain when he continued to spank her bottom and alternate rubbing of her clit with slaps between her thighs. She was

going to be so out of her head with horniness, she wasn't going to have room for anything else.

At long last, she thought she was being granted a reprieve because he stopped. But it was only to torture her in a different way. Theo pulled down the neck of her top, and plumped her breasts on top of the stretchy fabric so they were framed by what used to be the neckline. And then proceeded to pinch and roll and tug at her nipples until she thought her wetness must be dripping down her thighs. Then he bent to suck and bite at the tip of one breast and grind the other sensitive peak between his fingers until she was yelping and begging behind the paci tucked in her mouth. It was like a gag in some ways, although she could spit it out at any time. Perfect for the feeling of restriction without the dangers of not being able to use her voice.

“That’s it, honeybee. You make all your pretty, helpless noises while Teddy plays with your gorgeous tits. That makes you so horny, doesn’t it? When your daddy is rough with your sensitive little nipples?”

As if to make his point or spur on her response, he bit her. Hard, and she nearly dropped her pacifier as she squealed.

“Hmm, I think you like this so much it’s distracting. Here, Teddy will help you with that.”

She doubted that, very much. And her skepticism was proven warranted when he focused his attentions on one nipple before closing a clamp over the furred peak. The bite and the pressure made her eyes roll back, and again when he affixed a clamp to the other side. That did get her attention for sure, but it didn’t curtail her arousal. As much as she would’ve liked it to, anyway. If anything, the clamps drew more attention to her tits and they felt swollen and hot and needy, much like the rest of her.

“Such a pretty little present all wrapped up for me,” he mused as he kneaded and squeezed her breasts, flicked at the clamps that were biting down hard on her delicate flesh. “And I’m not quite ready to unwrap you yet.”

He gave her breasts a few slaps each that had the clamps tugging harder with each bounce and she could've come then. With just a few more well-placed open-handed blows, she could've had some sweet relief. But he was determined to torment her, and wouldn't allow it. Instead she sensed him circling back to where his bag of wicked tricks was and when he came back it was to drape the falls of a flogger over her shoulder. No, not just one flogger. Two, because there were the tails of another over her other shoulder. My, my.

Then his mouth was at her ear again, his breath warm and misty on her skin. "I'm going to flog you, princess. And all I want you to do is let me."

She wanted to roll her eyes and ask how could she not when he had her bound like this, but somehow the sass wouldn't come to the surface. She simply nodded her agreement, knowing he meant something deeper than physical bondage. He wanted her to accept the flogging. Take it perhaps, as the gift she thought he meant it to be. Bianca wasn't sure what kind of gift was on offer, but given how greedy she was when it came to Theo, there was no way she was going to turn this down.

He dragged the strands over her shoulders, and then there was the thwap of some soft kind of hide across the back of her ribcage and her shoulder blades. The strokes felt almost lazy for how soft they were. Sometimes when he was gentle, she got impatient or irritated; what did he take her for, some weakling who couldn't handle more? But she'd learned to believe Theo when he told her she was strong. He didn't play games with her on purpose or by accident. This was all about experience, sensation, and life didn't always have to be hard.

Bianca perhaps became grateful for the lighter touches of the flogger's kiss when Theo moved from criss-crossing her back and buttocks to her front. The same soft strokes were far more intense when he was hitting her across her chest and her pelvis and her thighs. Nerves were really something else, the human body a maze of fuckery. Who'd come up with this crackpot design anyhow? Sometimes she wanted to strangle them, especially on days when her brain was making

everything so fucking hard, but in this moment she was grateful. And that gratitude encompassed the man who was plying her with sensations.

He settled into a rhythm as he worked his way around her body, and the beat had her entranced as surely as the pulsing music at a nightclub. Not that she could tolerate that atmosphere often between the volume and the crowds, but on the off days she could, she loved to lose herself in the music, surrender her body to the the pulsing vibrations, give her mind a rest. Which was exactly what Theo was doing for her now.

She didn't know exactly how long he stroked her skin with the suede falls—she was almost certain now they were suede—but she did know she felt as though she was floating. Somewhere that let her mind be quiet while her body was more alive than it had ever been. Consumed by sensation, there was a weight to his attention—could you float underwater without drowning? There was no other way to use words to say how she felt. Her language was gone, any masks she wore had been stripped away, and she felt raw while also being soothed. Was this what it felt like to be understood?

Shock sizzled through her when Teddy's thumbs brushed across her cheeks. They were wet, and she hadn't noticed when he'd stopped flogging her. There was a vague sense of pride that she'd kept the paci in her mouth and still had the plug lodged in her ass; hopefully she'd made Theo happy and he hadn't been trying to make her drop them so he could "punish" her. She didn't want to be punished.

"There's my sweet little honeybee," Teddy crooned as he kissed her cheeks and then peeled her blindfold away. She had to blink and let the world come back into focus. No, she didn't want the whole world, just her daddy and there he was, smiling at her as though she'd given him everything he'd ever wanted.

"Are those upset tears?" he asked, looking a smidge concerned but not as much as he would if he thought they actually were.

Bianca shook her head because no. She was having a lot of feelings, but none of them were bad.

“That’s what I thought. I’ll give you a minute and then there’s one more thing you’re going to take.”

More nodding because yes, absolutely. She would take anything for him, from him, especially if those were one and the same.

He gave her a quick, firm kiss and then delved back into his bag of wicked tricks, coming back with another, smaller, bundle of rope, this one a buttery yellow, and a wand vibrator. Oh no.

She didn’t dare spit out her paci but she wanted to. Oh, did she want to. She was so, so turned on right now that a vibe was a recipe for near-instantaneous orgasm. He’d flick the switch, press the button, whatever the mechanism was, press the vibe to her clit, and she would be climaxing a split-second later. And then she’d pay for it.

Theo stood in front of her and she braced herself. It would be intense, but she could hold off. For a little bit? Maybe?

But instead of putting the bulbous head of the wand between her legs, Theo put it on the outside curve of her breast. And when he turned it on, it felt like her arousal reached a new level she hadn’t known about before. Like she’d had to unlock every level that had come before now before she could access it.

The buzz permeated her breast and also reminded her of the clamps that were still pinching her nipples tightly. Made her ache and gasp and pull and whine. She would’ve stomped a foot but she could barely move. And then of course he switched to the other side, drawing the vibrating head across her ribs, following the curve of her tits.

Everything was tied up and twisted, full, and consumed. There was nothing else in the world besides her and Theo and what was happening between them.

Teddy dragged the vibe down her sternum, to her navel and over her belly. Even though she’d almost certainly drop

the paci when she came, she couldn't wait for the vibe to make contact with her clit so she could come. There was too much sensation all over, too much feeling. Her body was full up and she needed to spill over the edges, release some of that energy out into the world or it would drive her mad.

But he only grazed her mound before tracing her hipbone and then paused at the small of her back before drawing it up and down her spine and then teasing her cleft. Then he pressed the head to the plug lodged inside her and she nearly lost her mind, feeling the vibrations deep inside. Jerked in her bonds, keened behind her self-imposed gag, felt all her muscles tighten. She was on the verge and so mindful that her pussy was aching and empty.

“Almost, honeybee, almost there. God you're gorgeous.”

She opened her eyes which she'd clamped closed at some point just in time to watch Theo as he skimmed the vibe along the bottom curve of her ass and came around front to face her. Took her chin between his fingers and forced her to meet his gaze.

“I want you to look at me, babygirl. I want you to look at me while you come, see who's setting you off like fireworks on the fourth of July. I want you to think my name so loudly I can hear it.”

Bianca nodded convulsively, because what else was there to do? Every fiber of every muscle in her body tightened, her pulse pounded in her ears, her heart raced, and her lungs were about to burst as he slid the vibe from the center of her ribs down, down, lower, until he finally made contact with her clit.

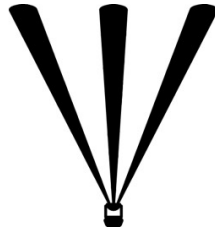
There was a second of quiet stillness like a vacuum before everything exploded, burst, broke down the dam that had been containing her. Teddy's thick arm slung around her waist, she bucked and twisted and cried out, dropping her paci to the floor because she couldn't keep quiet. But she didn't close her eyes, didn't drop her gaze. No, she stared at him the entire time and felt like she was lighting her soul on fire to let another human see her this way.

It felt like forever until she was on the downslope to aftershocks, but just as she thought she was going to get a rest from this almost monstrous intensity, Theo released her waist and plucked first one then the other clamps from her nipples and let them clatter to the floor while the blood rushed in and he kicked up the intensity of the vibe, sending her spinning into another pulsing clutch of climax. Her orgasm was so forceful it felt almost violent, and she shook with the force of it.

“Yes, princess,” he hissed, fire in those ice-blue eyes. “Give it all to me. Everything you’ve got. I can hold you, keep you safe.”

And he did.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



He'd been concerned when Bee went limp in his arms, but once she'd blinked groggily at him a couple seconds later and seemed to have full control of her motor skills he felt downright smug. Yeah, he'd aimed to have her shooting across the Clover City skyline like a comet but he couldn't have fathomed how bright she would burn or for how long. She was incredible. For a person so guarded, how she gave herself over was a gift. Truly.

As soon as he was confident his honeybee could support her own weight for another minute, he set to releasing her from her bonds and stripping her of everything except the plug which he left in place. Once she was loose, he scooped her up, cradling her against his chest and nearly lost his head when she wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. She was so, so sweet, so pliant and soft.

He carried her over to her bed and pulled back the sheets to lay her down. He'd planned to go get her some water while she caught her breath, but she tugged at his shirtsleeve and gave him the widest-eyed plea he'd ever seen.

“Stay with me, Teddy. Please?”

“I'm not going anywhere, babygirl,” he assured her, brushing hair away from her face. “Just getting you something to drink.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Cuddles now, drink later. Please, Teddy, I need you.”

“Okay,” he acquiesced.

Wasn't like it was a hardship to climb in next to Bianca and pull her against him, feel her hot little body pressed alongside the length of his. He loved being dressed while she was naked, could feel the warmth of her skin even through his clothes, but when he had her—and he would be having her shortly—he'd strip off so he could feel all of her. It was funny the different ways you could be close to someone.

Even though he hadn't been buried to the hilt inside her, that sex he'd just had with Bee was one of the most intimate moments of his life. She'd let her guard down, handed herself over to him, been so incredibly raw, and the way she'd looked at him while she came...fuck. He wanted to master every inch of her, know her inside and out. He wanted to earn that trust from her, and he wanted to be worthy of the privilege.

He held her for a while, her face snuggled into his chest, and kissed the top of her head. Despite his raging hard-on and the hunger for her that could devour him from the inside out, he was also oddly content. It was peaceful to lie here with her, stroking her soft skin, feel her breathing.

Eventually, though, that care-taking itch got the best of him, and he reached down beside the bed and grabbed the crocodile who was almost as big as Bianca herself.

“Here, babygirl. Why don't you cuddle Pickle while I get you some water?”

Bee gave him a frownie face and he shook his head.

“I won't be gone long, promise. But I'm not going to let my little girl get dehydrated, now am I?”

She pinched her full lips together until they pressed into a line. “No, Teddy.”

“That's right. So give Pickle a big hug and I'll be right back.”

He slid out from under her and tucked Pickle in his place. Someday he'd get used to the enormous stuffed crocodile in their bed, but today wasn't that day. As long as he didn't forget about it entirely and totally freak out when he came back to

find an enormous green beast under the covers with his little girl, he'd be fine.

True to his word, it didn't take him long to return with two glasses of water. He scooped up Bianca and Pickle and settled them both in his lap, and enjoyed his little girl's squeals and giggles. She wasn't always cuddly, but he loved it when she was.

Theo downed half his glass in a few swallows, and then picked up Bee's glass. She reached for it, and he tsked at her.

"Ah-ah, no, babygirl. Let Teddy do it."

Bianca blinked at him, and he wondered if that was too far, if holding a cup to her lips and having her drink would register as too young for her. Wasn't worth arguing about if so, he wasn't in the mood to press her on anything. Mostly he wanted to get some water into her, and then get his cock into her. She was still plugged and it would be even more heavenly than usual to sink balls-deep into her tight little pussy.

His little honeybee seemed to debate with herself for a second but then, at just above a whisper, said, "Yes, Teddy."

She did hug Pickle tighter when he put the glass to her mouth, and was a little stiff in his arms, but he gave her a few sips and then petted her hair and praised her, kissed her forehead and she relaxed again. Actually seemed kind of dreamy by the time she'd had the whole glass.

"More, princess?"

"No thank you, Teddy."

As much as he wanted to fuck her into next week, she was looking so sweet and sleepy, and god knew she needed her rest. Maybe he'd put her to bed and jerk off while thinking about the scene they'd just had. That had been so hot, it had definitely earned a permanent place in his spank bank.

"Such a good girl. And you're looking awfully tired there, honeybee. You ready for Teddy to get you ready for bed and tuck you in? I had more planned for you, but it can wait if you're ready to go night-night."

He knew, though, the way her eyes lit, that it wasn't quite time for sleeping.

“More, Teddy, please. More.”

“My pleasure. But I think Pickle needs to go have a nap on the chaise. I'm a kinky bastard, but animals are a no-go.”

Bianca bounced off his lap and trotted over to the little sitting area in her room, looking ridiculously adorable toting the enormous crocodile with her and sexy as hell with the pink jewel between her butt cheeks, and then tucking Pickle in under a blanket on the chaise before petting her head and dropping a kiss right between her beady eyes. If only the people who thought Bianca was a spoiled, bratty diva could see her now. She wasn't. She had so much love and care to give, she just needed for people to understand her, and be willing to receive it.

He stood up and started unbuttoning his shirt, but Bianca stilled his hands with her own.

“Can I, Teddy? Please?”

“You want to undress me?”

“Yes, please. Please, please.”

She scratched her nails over his chest, skimming his nipples in a way that had him inhaling sharply, and licked her lips while looking up at him through her lashes.

“You may. That was very polite asking, You did a great job, honeybee.”

She beamed at him and then set to methodically unbuttoning his shirt and then sliding it over his shoulders before tugging his cuffs over his wrists. Bianca paused then, her gaze raking from his shoulders to the waistband of his pants, assessing.

Theo wasn't an especially vain man—he stayed in shape for his job, not so he looked good naked—and he'd also never bothered comparing himself to other men. Sure a lot of people seemed to like how he looked in a wanted-to-get-in-his-pants kinda way, and that was nice, but he knew as well as anyone a

nice set of abs only got a person so far. Then again, he'd never been with a woman who was surrounded by movie stars all day. It was a little disconcerting to have Bianca studying him.

"See something you like?" he joked, fighting the urge to flex. *Don't be that guy, Palmer.*

"Yeah, sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I'm just feeling a little self-conscious."

"Why?"

Her tipped-head wide-eyed gaze was too cute.

"You know you literally work with guys who play superheroes all day, right? I work out, but no one gets paid to make me look good with my shirt off, you know?"

"But you do."

Sometimes her matter-of-factness was disconcerting but at the moment he found it disarming. Bianca was absolute crap at lying, she just...didn't. So if she said he looked good with no shirt, he'd believe her.

"Thank you."

"Can I touch you? Please please?"

"Please, please," he told her, the corner of his mouth tugging up.

She was too busy to notice his teasing though, setting her hands on his chest and dragging her palms over his pecs and abs. It felt wildly good to have her touching him, even if it wasn't sexy, exactly. More like she was exploring. She could explore all she liked, become familiar with the topography of his body. God knew he liked exploring her.

After a few minutes of running her hands over his torso, Bianca unbuckled his belt, undid his pants and slipped her hand inside to palm his dick. Her hot little grip was enough to drag a groan from him, and make his eyes roll back in his head. So good.

When he could focus on her again, she licked her full lips. "May I taste you, Teddy? Please?"

“I would love that. Do you want to explore like you’ve been doing, or can I get a little rough with you?”

He knew his answer by the way her eyes widened, how she clamped her lips between her teeth.

“I like the sound of rough, but rough how?”

“Good question.”

He slid fingers into her hair, and made a fist near her scalp, pulling tight enough to make her gasp.

“Pull your hair.”

“Uh-huh.”

Using the grip he had on her long, silky locks, he pulled her head down until she had to bend over.

“Put you on your knees.”

Bianca dropped to the floor, looking up at him with parted lips and blown pupils. Yeah, she liked it when he got a little rough with her.

“Fuck your face with my big, thick cock, and you’ll swallow it down, won’t you, babygirl?”

“Yes, Teddy.”

“You gonna swallow every drop when I come down your throat? Show Teddy how much you like your mouth being stuffed full of dick? Think about how good it’s going to feel when I fuck your ass like that while you’ve got that plug to remind you?”

“Uh-huh, yes, Teddy, please.”

Bianca reached for his waistband, and he wrenched her hair to the side, making her mewl. She looked so fucking pretty on her knees with his hand in her hair, nipples hard, still lunging for his cock. A few weeks ago, he never would’ve dreamed...

“Hands behind your back, babygirl.”

Once she’d obeyed and was blinking up at him with wide, hungry eyes, he freed his erection and dragged her forward.



There was something about being moved that just did it for her. Sent a feeling of arousal screaming through her system at top volume. From the grip in her hair all the way to the hard buds of her nipples and down to the wetness she knew was flooding her cunt to the tightening of her ass around the plug. Everything, everything, felt soft and needy at the same time. There was a whole lot of yes, please, in her head as she crawled on her knees far enough to take Theo's cock into her mouth.

She surrounded the spongy head, tasting his clean, human musk on his skin, as well as a couple beads of salty pre-come that leaked from his slit. Slicked her tongue over his tip, making sure to suck and lave the underside where he was most sensitive. He let her play and draw circles, lick with broad strokes up his shaft before he tightened his grip in her hair even more and shook her lightly.

What was it about that? It should have been unsettling, and maybe with someone else it would've been, but the way her Teddy handled her—there was no other word for it—was both rough and gentle. Meticulously applied force that she'd agreed to, that she wanted because she knew he would never really harm her. It was his fucking job not to, but she would've trusted him anyway.

“Take Teddy's big fact cock in that prissy little mouth of yours, babygirl. Show me how sweet you can be as you swallow me. I want to feel how deep you can take my dick in this hole, want to feel you gag when you can't take anymore.”

Fuck, his dirty talk made her wet. Wet and horny, and desperate to touch herself. She wanted to touch him too, circle the base of his shaft with her hand so she could take him entirely. He was too big to get her lips to his base, she knew. But she'd do what he asked; no hands.

Like she did when he plugged her, she breathed and tried to relax, make herself soft and accepting as he rocked his

length into her mouth and over her tongue.

“Open your eyes, princess. Teddy wants to look at you while I feed you my cock. I want to see the tears on your lashes when I fuck into your throat.”

He did then, rocking his hips forward until she felt her air get cut off and she choked. Just for a second, and then he was withdrawing before doing it again, and again. She knew she could always tap his thigh and he'd stop, but there was something edgy and exciting about feeling legitimately like her very air was being rationed. Felt like walking on a tightrope across skyscrapers knowing only Theo was waiting at the bottom to catch her if she fell. But that was the thing, wasn't it? He *would* catch her. If he had to kill himself to do it, he would.

He shoved his other hand into her hair and gripped both sides of her head. She wouldn't have bet on getting face-fucked being so hot but she hadn't seen Theo coming. The way he watched her like a hawk even as he handled her roughly. Made her felt seen and cared for even as he thrust mercilessly into her mouth.

“Spread your legs, babygirl. Widen those knees while you suck Teddy's cock. Now play with your tits while you swallow my dick. That's it. If you suck Teddy real good and go rough enough on your tits and your nipples, I'll let you fingerfuck that empty, aching pussy. Be a good girl, honeybee, and I'll let you come.”

He hadn't had to finish talking before she was cupping her breasts, squeezing and kneading the flesh before pinching, rolling, and tugging her nipples.

“Fuck, Bee, you're so fucking hot.”

He was hot, and she'd tell him so except her mouth was stuffed full of his cock and she was gagging with every thrust, the tears that had formed at the corners of her eyes dripping down her cheeks. But the way his abs rippled as he pushed deep in her throat, the flex of his arms as he pulled her hair, the intense concentration and arousal that simmered in his expression were so sexy.

Bianca was about to start fucking the air she was so turned on between deep-throating her daddy and the naughtiness inherent in playing with herself because she'd been told to because he wanted to watch. Luckily, Theo seemed pretty on edge too and took pity on her.

“Push a couple fingers in your pussy, princess. I want to see you fuck yourself until you come. I want you to come all over your hand and then you're going to lick it off. Aren't you, babygirl? Gonna come for me while I fuck your face so hard and deep.”

Angling her hand so she could slip fingers into her channel and rub her clit on her palm for that delicious friction, she was thankful Theo was controlling her mouth so she couldn't neglect him for her own pleasure.

Between the stimulation of her mouth, her tits, her clit, her pussy, and her ass, she was almost finished before she began. A few rocks of her pelvis in time with Teddy's forays into her throat with his cock, and she was there.

“Yes, honeybee. I see you, you horny little girl, all ready to climax. Get it. Come for Teddy, come on, do it now.”

Bianca had never been one to come on command, but she did now, her interior walls clamping down on her fingers while she rocked her hips to the pulse of her orgasm. She hummed and moaned around Theo's throbbing erection, she heard him from what sounded like far away saying he was going to come, and then he was spurting that thick salty liquid down her throat, spilling pulse after pulse onto her tongue for her to taste before she swallowed it.

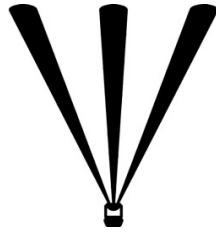
It was a feast for all her senses, made everything feel bright and vivid and the smell of sex was thick in the air. Her knees were sore and her thighs shook but she didn't want to stop tasting him even as he softened.

Finally, Teddy withdrew from her mouth and knelt on the floor with her, helped her ease her hand away from her pussy and held it up to her mouth. She looked him in the eye as she licked her arousal and climax off her palm and he met her gaze

before leaning forward and taking the fingers that had been inside her into his mouth to suck and lick clean.

Once he'd cleaned her to his satisfaction, he kissed her deeply, and the musky salt taste of their sex mixed between their mouths. It was so hot and so sweet, especially when he pressed his forehead to her own and murmured, "Such a good girl for me, babygirl. Yes, you are. Teddy's sweet honeybee."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Finally, Teddy was back! It was their last night in Clover City, and he'd been invited to a small party at Braeker and Ashby's house. He'd said he didn't have to go—even said he didn't *want* to go—and she'd been tempted to take him up on his offer to stay, but in the end she'd insisted. It was good for his job to know more famous people, and his boss would have been super suspicious if he'd passed.

She didn't like hiding their relationship but she also understood why it had to be done, for now. The idea of not having Theo as both her bodyguard and her daddy made her want to claw her eyes out.

Bianca bounced from the couch where she'd been scrolling some social media accounts of autistic people and over to the door where Teddy was shrugging off his coat. He gave her a hug, and a kiss on the top of her head, but he didn't seem quite like her Teddy. Instead of tossing her over his shoulder or sliding a hand into her hair and making a fist he'd use to steer her into a bedroom, he stepped back from her and scrubbed a hand through his hair and over the back of his neck. That was not good, not good at all.

“Can you explain something to me?”

“What?”

This is what she'd been afraid of, what she had known would happen. Braeker and Dane and Halliday and Ashby would say mean things about her, and she wouldn't be able to

defend herself because they were true. And now Teddy wasn't going to want her anymore. Why did she have to ruin her own life by being this way? She should just crawl into bed with Pickle and stay there forever. Pickle understood her.

“You know I went to Brae and Ash's house tonight.”

Not Braeker and Ashby, Brae and Ash. Because they were besties now. There was no way Theo would be on her side now. Because Braeker was cool, and people seemed to like him. Ashby was shy, but people seemed to like her too, and she didn't understand how they got to be likable and she didn't.

“Yes.”

Teddy took a deep breath and his brows crunched together. “You know you've got a reputation for being difficult on set, that's not news.”

“That's because I'm difficult on set.”

“No, it's not. It's because being on a superhero movie set is a fucking nightmare for someone with sensory issues and it's a wonder you weren't having meltdowns constantly. It's better now, right? Not a hundred percent, but like 50 percent? Maybe?”

“More like 75 percent.”

Teddy shouldn't lowball what he'd done for her. It wasn't easy to be on set and there were still a million things she needed to deal with but he was right that it was better. So much better.

“Okay, 75 percent. That's great, and we're gonna figure how to make it even better.”

They were? She was pretty sure he was about to break things off with her because she was a terrible human, and she didn't totally understand why he wasn't.

“I get that stuff, I do. What I don't understand is why you would be catty and rude with your co-stars and their spouses. I heard some of the things you said to them when they were asking me what it was like working for you.”

Yeah, she'd been pretty awful. Insulting Clover City when she knew Dane's girlfriend—now wife—was from here, purposefully getting Ashby's name wrong, slut-shaming Dane, insinuating Braeker had married his wife as a publicity stunt... the list was long.

Nausea gripped her. What was worse? Letting Theo think she was a terrible person or trying to explain to him that she didn't know how to people and never had? Neither one made her look good. He knew some of it, but she really didn't think he understood the extent to which people baffled her. So far he'd been incredibly supportive and understanding about the ways in which she was different, but at some point, he'd decide it was too much. Wouldn't he?

"I guess I'm just mean," she told him, crossing her arms over her chest.

"That's the thing, Bee. I don't think you are. You can be snippy and seem like a spoiled diva, but every time I've come up against a behavior like that from you, there's some perfectly rational explanation underneath. And once we address the underlying issue, I feel like you get to be more who you truly are. So if you're for real telling me that the gossip and the insinuations and the shit-talking are the real you, that's one thing. To be honest, I wouldn't want to be with a woman like that."

That was the frustrating thing. No one wanted her when she was mean, no one wanted her when she was nice. No matter what she did, it seemed like the wrong thing. She could tell Theo that, but why would he want to be with someone like that, either? It was so maddening, she shoved her fingers through her hair and made fists on the side of her head, tried to cover up her ears, hide away from all the distress and the hurt and feeling less than human.

Bianca knew in some ways that not being like everyone else was good. She could do things a lot of people couldn't. She had a career because she could memorize lines in a snap, imitate any damn accent or emotion, train hard as hell, and work hard until even her other co-stars were ready to drop.

But in some ways being different really, really sucked. And all those people who said being different wasn't a bad thing didn't know shit. Or maybe they did and they had managed to find their own little band of weirdos who made them feel included and understood while she was a bizarro alien trapped in a leading lady's body who literally no one could relate to.

Now she had to explain all that to the only person who'd ever seemed to believe in her? To give a shit about her? To genuinely believe that she deserved good things and wasn't rotten at her core? No wonder she felt sick.

“Honeybee? Can I touch you or will that make things worse? You can always take a break if you need one.”

Sometimes she couldn't stand to be touched, it felt like her skin was being peeled off or like she might suffocate. But right now, there wasn't much she wanted more than to be hugged by Theo. It wouldn't solve everything, or anything, even, but it might be nice.

Everything hurt so much she couldn't even look him in the eyes, it was too intense, too much, and she couldn't let go of her hair even if it hurt. All she could do was say, “Please, please,” and then her Teddy was there, wrapping his arms around her and holding her tight, rubbing her back and kissing the top of her head.



He knew it. Still didn't know exactly what was going on, but he'd known it wasn't as simple as Bianca being a first rate bitch. It's not that he'd thought the other people would've lied—why would they?—but it wasn't that simple. Bianca was a lot of things, but simple wasn't one of them. At least he could touch her this time. The absolute worst was when he couldn't do that. Made him feel so fucking useless and helpless, and he could only imagine it was worse for her. She seemed pretty miserable right now.

He held her tight for as long as he could, was relieved she dropped the grip on her hair. That had to mean something good, right? It could be overwhelming for him to try to keep track of all her triggers, especially since they could change day to day, and he was on the outside of her body, her head. Inside it must feel like constantly walking through a minefield no one else could see.

“Can you talk to me, Bee?” he murmured into the part in her hair, wishing he could look at her but knowing she probably couldn’t handle that right now. Eye contact was something she struggled with, but only when she was already beyond stressed. Most of the time it was totally fine. “Or are you not ready yet?”

“I...I can, but I can’t look at you.”

“I can live with that. You want to stand right here like this? Or would something else be more comfortable?”

“Will you lie down with me and Pickle?”

Poor little girl and her fragile heart.

“Course, babygirl. Come on.”

He led her over to the bed and she climbed onto the mattress and snuggled Pickle to her front while giving him her back. If she needed to be spooned while she talked to him, that was fine. He would be the spooniest spoon that ever spooned. He would spoon the demons away, spoon the ever-loving hell out of her.

It took a few minutes of cuddling before Bianca heaved a sigh, and he could feel her fiddling with her fingers on Pickle’s underbelly. He wished not for the first time that that crocodile could talk. That would be so handy. Alas, she was your run of the mill, garden variety saltwater crocodile plushie and would not be volunteering any information—helpful or otherwise—anytime soon.

“Talk to me, honeybee,” he urged, trying to be patient but also wanting to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible.

“It’s hard to explain.”

“I bet. Kinda like a shark trying to talk to a dolphin, huh?”

“...What?”

She sounded perplexed but curious and he had to laugh.

“It’s maybe not the best metaphor, okay? But think about it. They look kinda the same. They both live in the ocean, they both swim, they both eat fish. But they experience the world pretty differently. Sharks breathe underwater, dolphins can’t. Dolphins are warmblooded, sharks aren’t. I’m not a marine biologist or anything so that’s all I’ve got for now but you get me.”

“I grant your premise. But what does that have to do with us talking?”

This. Even if she was now wondering what the hell he was talking about, she was at least talking to him. He felt like he’d broken a chain that would’ve almost certainly led to a meltdown and he felt pretty good about that, even if she ended up thinking he was nuts.

“Well imagine if a shark and dolphin could talk. They’d assume they had most things in common, right? But they don’t. They have to do things really differently otherwise shit goes sideways real fast.”

“Okay?”

Theo draped an arm over Bianca’s waist and Pickle, threaded his fingers through Bianca’s. “So it’s kinda like how people assume their brains all work in basically the same way, but they don’t. Someone who’s autistic or has ADHD or whatever has a really different experience of the world than people who are neurotypical. Is a shark better than a dolphin? Nah, they’re both rad. But they’re not the same, and you can’t treat them like they are and expect things to go well.”

Theo waited a beat, hoping she understood what he was trying to say. It was maybe convoluted or kind of a reach but he was just a guy who’d barely made it out of high school who was better at fighting than anything else.

“I am obviously the shark in this scenario.”

Yeah, he'd got her. Bee was so cute when she was playful, he loved it.

"Oh yeah? I thought I'd be the shark. I'm obviously extremely dangerous and intimidating."

She giggled.

"You don't think so, huh? Is that right, babygirl?"

He tickled Bianca's ribs, and she squealed and wiggled against him and the mood lightened even more.

"You're a teddybear!" she shrieked as he darted his fingers into her waist and she wriggled and kicked.

"But a really, really scary teddybear. Who gives terrifying tickles!"

So much of his life was serious. Hopefully he wasn't literally protecting people in life or death situations, but for most of the clients he had, the threat of harm was very real. Not constant, but that was one of the worst parts. You never knew when the threat would show up, and in some cases who was doing the threatening.

It reminded him that for all the fun and lightheartedness they'd experienced in Clover City, that they were about to go to New Orleans where the set would be even more vulnerable, and he'd have to keep his guard up more. Probably tighten the reins on Bianca too and she wasn't going to like that. Probably fight him tooth and nail, to be honest, and he couldn't blame her. Wasn't going to budge him from insisting, but she had his sympathy. He'd feel like a shark in captivity living under the restrictions she did. He'd see what he could do to keep her life as normal as possible but he wouldn't make any promises.

"Teddy, stop, please! Please, please, ah!"

Now that his babygirl sounded breathless and happy, he did, planting a kiss on her cheek and then one on her neck.

"Dolphins can be dangerous too you know," he told her. "Total assholes. But people think they're all cute and clever, so it's like stealthy dangerous. You're so tiny and gorgeous people wouldn't see the threat coming."

Theo snuck his arm between Bianca's midsection and Pickle, and pressed more kisses to her neck. Maybe snuck a nip in there because he was a shark, and sharks bit. Everyone knew that. "Oh. I like that," she breathed.

"Being a dolphin or what I'm doing to your neck?"

"Both," she told him, shifting her hips to nestle her plump backside against his hardening dick.

"Both is good."

Theo continued to mouth the smooth skin of her neck, nipping and kissing his way down to her trap where he bit down hard and held on, sucking on the mouthful of flesh, applying pressure upon pressure until she mewled and gasped. Then he let her go and licked the worst of the pain away, canting his hips to rub his thickening erection into her cleft. The talking could wait.

He might've said he wouldn't want to be with a woman who would be so catty and rude, but he knew that wasn't who Bianca really was. There had to be a good explanation for her behavior, and he'd get to the bottom of what it was. For all his tough talk, he couldn't imagine giving up his honeybee. More like abandoning her. Nah, there was no way.

"Teddy wants to fuck you, Bee. That okay?"

Now that they'd been together for a while, he wouldn't usually ask. It wasn't like Bianca was subtle with her signals. But this was different.

Her breath caught, and he kept kissing her. It would be fine if she said no. Maybe she'd say she wanted to talk first and he'd welcome that. But for now he held his breath, eyes wide open, and tasted her skin like it might be the last time.

"Promise you won't leave?"

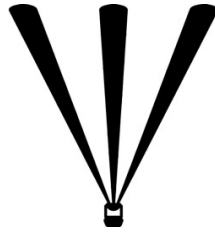
Ah, fuck. He shouldn't have planted that idea in her head. He'd meant to make it clear that that kind of behavior wouldn't be tolerated, and that being a catty bitch wouldn't fly. He'd meant for her to understand that he'd do everything he could to fix her, not that he would leave. He was a dumbass, and shit at being a daddy.

He stopped kissing her, because he didn't want her to think this was about him wanting to get his dick wet. She turned him on like no one else but he didn't fuck women he didn't like. Why would he? And he definitely wouldn't lie about this to get in one last hot lay before he abandoned her.

He supposed he could've been insulted that she could even think that about him, but he knew her well enough to know this was about her and her experiences and wiring, and not him. He wasn't so insecure that he'd let that get the better of him.

“Promise, promise, babygirl. What I said before... I know you far too well to think you're a bad person on the inside. Maybe misunderstood, or being mean as a defense mechanism, but deep down, you're too sweet. You'd never hurt a fly, not if you could help it. I promise I'm not going anywhere. I don't want to be with a woman who's vicious and conniving, but that's not you. We'll figure out how to show the rest of the world that's true. Okay?”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



She knew Theo was one of them, but sometimes he talked like he was the same as her, and it was really nice. He'd promised, and Teddy didn't break promises. Also, an orgasm might help her clear her head from...all this. Worth a shot. She wouldn't be worse off—she might end up in the same place but at least she would've gotten to come.

“Okay, Teddy. Now? Please, please?”

“Nothing I'd rather do,” he said in a way she had to describe as a growl.

He sounded like an animal in the best way possible. Sometimes she felt like a feral little beastie but that was usually when she was feeling on the outside, like everyone had been to some charm school she hadn't attended and she was a gremlin. Not with Teddy, though. The wildness was carnal and playful, not something to be ashamed of, not something that made her feel dirty and savage.

Speaking of playful, though...

There was a game she'd always wanted to play but no one she'd ever wanted to play it with. But Teddy?

“You're going to have to catch me first,” she said, twisting out of his grasp, and pushing Pickle into his arms to distract him before vaulting off the bed and running to the doorway.

Theo looked a bit boggled while she grinned madly in the doorframe, but then understanding lit his face and he picked up Pickle and placed her on the chaise. It was nice that he

didn't toss Pickle around like she was an object, but treated her like the friend she was.

“Challenge accepted, babygirl. Hope you know what you're getting yourself into. I was first in my SEAL class for tracking.”

Oh shit. Not that he would need those kinds of skills within the confines of a hotel suite, but it made her heart race to think of him hunting her through the woods like she was his prey and he was a vicious predator.

He was stalking toward her now, and her mouth went dry even as desire coursed through her. This was *exciting*. And she wasn't so foolish or weak to just stand here. No, she took off, darting into the more public areas of the suite. He would corner her in the kitchen, so she needed to stay in the living and dining areas, put furniture in between them.

Bianca had no doubt Theo would catch her eventually. And the truth was, she desperately wanted to be caught. But that was the thing; she wanted to be caught, not simply hand herself over and wave the white flag. Today she wanted to go down fighting. Be conquered, not surrender.

She ran to the far side of the room and put the couch and a couple chairs and the coffee table in between them. Her nerves crackled as she waited for him to follow, and the casual way he came ambling out of her bedroom—so arrogant—made her indignant but also all hot and bothered. How dare he act like she wasn't a worthy foe? She would show him. But also it was fucking hot that he knew his own power and capabilities, and also that he wasn't going to insult her by pretending she was going to win.

“You should just give up now, princess. Make it easier on yourself.”

“Never!”

“All you're gonna do is tire yourself out. May as well surrender. You know you're gonna like what happens when I catch you.”

She could tell what he was doing with this casual line of conversation. Trying to tone down her flight response but she wouldn't be tricked into giving in so easily. It might be inevitable that he would win, but she didn't have to make it easy on him.

“Who says?”

“You always do,” he pointed out, dragging a blunt finger over the back of a chair as he got closer and closer.

The tension inside her was winding up tight, and she tried not to let her eyes give her plans away. But that was the thing about playing this game with a real life soldier, wasn't it? And not just any soldier. Theo might call himself a meathead, but he was a finely honed hunting and killing machine. She just played one on screen.

“And when I catch you—which I will—I'm going to claim your ass.”

Oh shit. She'd been wanting him to; it got her so horny when he played with her bottom hole. He hadn't yet though, and the higher stakes made it more exciting. Also, while she knew he wouldn't hurt her, the idea of him being rough while he fucked her up the ass made something buzz and snap inside her.

Catch me, force me, top me, make me.

She couldn't mess something up if he was forcing her; he was simply taking what he wanted.

“Ha! You'll never take me. I'm too fast and too clever.”

They both knew she was really just too mouthy and full of bluster, and that's what made her pulse race through her veins. Getting what she wanted while not having to admit it. That was a very fun game. Theo looked so fucking cocky as the corner of his mouth curled up and he reached the couch.

Bianca kept an eye on him as she backed up toward the dining table and the twelve chairs that surrounded it. Who the hell had a dinner party for a dozen people in a hotel room? She didn't even have twelve people who liked her well enough to invite to dinner. At the last wrap party they'd had in Clover

City, Braeker's wife Ashby had pointed out she was the only one of the cast who hadn't been invited to their Clover Hills house.

No time to think about how that had hurt her feelings. Maybe Teddy could help her fix that though? Or maybe she'd already fucked that up beyond repair. She could never tell how these things worked. People were a mystery, but the objective of this game was simple: evade Teddy for as long as possible, and when she got caught, pretend she didn't want to him to sodomize her. Good thing she was well-practiced at reluctance because otherwise she'd just let her actual desires float to the surface. It would be easier if everyone did, she thought, but what did she know about it? Very little, apparently.

They circled each other around the dining table, first slowly and keeping a constant distance like ponies on a merry-go-round, and then lunging and faking each other out. Could this count as cardio? Bianca felt more alive doing this than any chase scene she'd done for Knightstyled.

Didn't hurt that every so often, Theo would snarl and snap and those feral noises sent bolts of arousal straight to her pussy. They should definitely play this again sometime. Could she find someplace where they could play in the woods, her in an adorable bunny or fox outfit, and Theo set on her like a wolf or determined hunter? She had enough money, she ought to be able to make that happen. In the meantime, playing chase in here would have to do.

After one particularly close sprint, Bianca took off to circle around the living area furniture. She skipped to the other end of the couch, feeling smug for evading him again. That pleased as punch feeling didn't last long because like a wild animal that would do anything to take down its prey, Theo jumped onto the tabletop, leapt across the gap to the couch, and a couple bouncing strides later, was tackling her to the ground.

Because it was Teddy, he somehow managed to twist their bodies in mid-air so he landed on the bottom with his back on the ground and her full weight fell on him. His arms locked

around her waist, and his dangerously blue eyes glinted up at her.

“Got you, honeybee.”

Bianca struggled and kicked and clawed, and even spat. And that fucker laughed at her.

“You want to spit at me? Great. You do that one more time and the only lube you’re going to get when I stuff your asshole full of my enormous cock is going to be spit. Try me, princess. I dare you.”

Theo would never, but that was just such a delightfully dirty picture it had her moaning. Distracted her long enough that he managed to get to his feet and toss her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. A sack of potatoes he spanked with wicked, stinging force.

“What a naughty girl you are, running from Teddy like that. But you’re going to learn, Bee, yes, you are. You mess with the bear, you get the claws. Struggle all you want, I’m still going to be forcing my way into your pretty little virgin pucker. You might want to tone it down while you can.”

“Never! You sick bastard, let me go! You can’t do this to me!”

Bianca pounded her fists on his back and kicked wildly and all she got for her exertions was a low chuckle.

“You’re gonna learn, babygirl. You’re gonna learn, no matter how long it takes me to teach you.”



“Lesson number one,” he told her as he tossed her on the bed. “I’m bigger than you, stronger than you, faster than you, and you can’t win. No matter how hard you try, I will always beat you.”

Before she could escape, he prowled over her and pinned her down, wedging his hips between her legs and pressing her wrists to the mattress.

“Can you feel that, princess? That big fat cock pressing against your sweet little pussy? That’s what I’m going to use to stuff that uptight little asshole of yours. Your bottom is going to get stretched so wide around my dick, you’ll be walking bow-legged for days.”

Bianca whimpered and thrashed her head from side to side. They’d talked about anal before, and he knew she wanted it, bad. He also hoped the fake-fighting wouldn’t make it too hard for her to relax so he could work into her without too much pain. Theo wasn’t a moron, he knew he was hung and that he’d have to be careful with her so there was only the pleasant burning stretch that masochists seemed to relish and no actual harm to her sensitive tissues.

Theo let go of her wrists and leaned up for long enough to flip her over before pressing her head into the mattress with one hand on the back of her head and a knee across the small of her back.

“Look at you, so helpless. You can thrash all you want, princess, if it’ll make you feel better. Tell yourself you don’t want to take it up your ass, but I think we both know better.”

He reached for his bag of tricks and hauled it on the bed. Bee’s hands were too wild and he wasn’t going to be able to capture her wrists single-handedly with her thrashing around like this, so he put a shin across her shoulder blades.

It was a delicate balance to put enough weight on her to hold her still but not so much that he’d hurt her, but given the way she was moaning and panting, Theo figured he was hitting the mark well enough. He managed to get cuffs buckled around her thin wrists and two more around her ankles. Usually he’d use rope to restrain her, but this was quick and dirty and he didn’t have the time or patience to be tying her when she was wriggling like a stuck pig. Luckily, he had just the thing in his toy bag.

The hogtie X allowed him to get her wrists and ankles clipped to the crossed chains at the small of her back, and Jesus, she was pretty like that. Some other time when she was playing tame, he’d do this with ropes but there was something

pleasing too about the roughness and force they were fooling with now. He grabbed the X in his hand and pulled, curling his biceps until her hands and feet were higher in the air and she whimpered. Yeah, that'd make a girl feel pretty damn helpless.

“Are you gonna behave now, princess? Or do I have to tie you down?”

“What do you think, you fucker?” she snapped as she attempted to scoot to the edge of the bed on knees and elbows and belly.

“Feisty, I like it. Not going to help you, of course, but it does make things more fun for me.”

He dragged her back to the center of the bed and grabbed a few hanks of rope from his bag. No time for artistry, not with his little Harry Houdini trying to wrangle her way out of her bonds. Nah, he'd make use of what he had and make something pretty when she didn't feel like going so hard.

Starting with a wrist, he threaded some candy pink rope through the D-ring and over to an attachment point on the underbed system and made a quick knot. It wasn't pretty but it would get the job done. It was a workout to keep his bucking little bee well enough contained to get the tethers in place, but eventually he managed it. At some point, she'd started gritting out invectives, which fit. That's who she was as a superhero after all: Invicta. Powers of a scorpion. She could sting like one, but she would rather not. He was going to have to figure out how to convince Brae and Dane and Ash and Halli of that. A puzzle to figure out some other time.

“I'm going to fucking kill you when I get out of here,” Bianca snarled, hands clenched into fists, and he was glad he always used padded cuffs—she'd definitely be doing some nerve damage if all he had on hand was metal handcuffs. He got the fun of the aesthetic, he did, but aesthetics couldn't come at the expense of your partner's safety.

“I'd like to see you try,” he taunted, laying a smack down on the side of her ass. She'd managed to work her little silk slip up around her waist with all her squirming and bared her silk-panty clad bottom in the process. Jesus, the ass on this

woman. Made sense, given how much money got spent on all her training and nutrition and everything else, but goddamn. Her backside was worth every penny of those million dollars.

If they knew each other better and they'd made arrangements, he would've ripped her panties off and stuffed them in her mouth. Not that Bianca was all that fussy about money but he still felt weird about ruining something that might cost as much as a car payment. Why was women's underwear so expensive anyway? Then again, given how those honeydew colored panties accentuated her plump bottom, it was probably a small price to pay.

He grabbed a couple pillows from the head of the bed and shoved them under her hips, telling her, "The better to fuck your ass with, princess," as he did which riled her up even more.

As much as he was enjoying her cussing him out, he also needed her to calm down some, so he grabbed her throat and leaned in close, his lips a hair's breadth away from her ear.

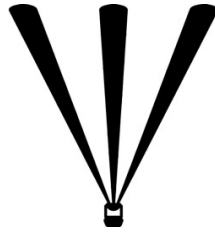
"Unless you want me tearing into that precious little rosebud, you better settle down. I'm going to take what I want whether it makes you scream or not so you might want to think about some self-preservation."

He nipped at her ear, hoping she got the message that he would never harm her even if they were playing that way. But he knew she understood, he wouldn't be playing this way with her in the first place if he wasn't confident about that.

"Who knows," he replied to her hissing, and tightening the grip on her throat. "You might even enjoy it."

Oh, he would make sure of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Being handled by Theo like she was a rag doll was wonderful. There was no expectation of control on her part, she could fight and fuss and scream and snarl, and she didn't have to worry about whether she was doing it right. There was real freedom in this kind of submission, even as there was a feeling of strength too. She'd had him sweating when he was wrangling her into the hogtie, she'd felt it on his skin. If she could do that to Theo, one of the most legit in shape people she knew? Yeah, she was a badass.

She was also wet and horny as hell. Being tipped over these pillows was humiliating but also so hot her brain might melt. And would that really be so bad? She couldn't think so.

Theo smacked her ass again and the sting heightened her arousal.

Then he was rummaging in the bedside table and she sucked oxygen into her lungs. Being choked was an incredible feeling—like she was floating—and she knew he'd be safe, but her body still craved air.

A few things dropped on the bed, and she had to imagine there was lube and condoms but she didn't know what else.

“Let's get this gorgeous little backside ready to take Daddy's cock, shall we?” he mused from behind her. Then he was shimmying her underwear over her hips down to just below her butt cheeks. He wouldn't be able to move them much further given how the hogtie splayed her legs, but it was

all the more filthy and embarrassing for that. Tied up and helpless, on display and at his mercy. *Fuck*.

Theo's weight sunk the mattress behind her and then his breath was warm along her cleft. Before she could protest, he slid two fingers into her pussy and licked over her bottom hole.

"Get your filthy mouth off me!"

The vibration of Teddy's chuckle against her asshole... tickled. He licked her again and again while he pumped his fingers inside her, finding that place on the back wall of her pussy that did more for her than her g-spot ever had.

"You have got to be kidding me," he told her before biting her ass cheek so hard it made her squeal. "I know you think you're royalty, but seriously, princess? You're going to tell me to get my filthy mouth off your asshole?"

Okay, yeah, that was funny and she had to bite back a laugh. But she was a professional. She could hold it together through some butt jokes.

"Yes. Your peasant tongue is too disgusting even for my dirtiest part!"

"Then I'm going to dirty you all up, princess, and you're going to like it. Know how I can tell? Your pretentious cunt is soaking wet and slick from the way I've been handling you, and I bet I can set you off like C4 when I fuck your royal ass with my crude, blunt instrument of a monster cock."

Teddy could never leave her, no one else would be able to dirty talk her the same way and it would just be sad, even if it was one of her favorite things.

"Never!"

"Oh, we'll see, babygirl. We'll just see."

Then his face was back between her legs, licking all the way from where his fingers invaded her up to the peak of her cleft. It felt too damn good when he pressed the his tongue to the tight ring of muscle and managed to poke just the tip inside. So dirty, so wrong, and utterly delicious.

Still fingerfucking her pussy, he managed to snap open the cap of the lube and drizzled some of the cool, viscous liquid over her hole and onto his fingers, slicking the blunt tips first over her hole and then telling her in a secret voice to relax, let him in.

Not actually wanting to be that kind of hurt, Bianca did her best to obey, and was rewarded by one of Teddy's fingers working into her. God knew why, but the stroke of his fingertip against the sensitive tissue was amazing. Felt so good to have him press inside her, claim her everywhere. And when he said, "Two now, honeybee. Be a good girl and push out for Teddy," she did.

The stretch was familiar but still intense and there was a slight burn as Teddy steadily pressed and retreated over and over until she was taking both his fingers deep inside her.

"Ooo."

"That's it, princess. I knew you'd enjoy this."

She could fight back, keep up the charade, but truthfully she was too consumed by sensation to want to fight it too hard. Theo's fingers inside her pussy had stilled, but they made her feel delightfully full as he stroked his fingers in and out of her ass, the sensation of him touching his other hand through only a thin membrane was kind of wild. Probably more so for him, and she hoped it was turning him on as much as it was her.

He spent more time pushing his fingers against her rim to open her further, scissoring his fingers inside. It was so invasive and intimate, and fuck it felt good, better than she could've ever imagined.

"There now. I think you're stretched enough to take Teddy's cock. Don't want to make it too easy, after all."

Even as the tight ring of muscle clamped around his fingers in protest, she had to agree. Something in her brain kept anything too soft from feeling sexual. She could be cuddled and stroked by him all day and love every minute of it, but it wasn't going to get her off. Thank goodness for sadists.

Theo withdrew his fingers from both her holes, and she could hear him open a crinkly pack of wipes, pull out a couple to clean his hands. And then more lube, because lube was the greatest thing. She could understand the urge to have someone claim your ass without it, how rough and dominant it would feel, but that would probably pass her pain-as-pleasure threshold and enter “Ow, that just fucking hurts” territory. Especially the next day. The chafing alone...

She'd take her roughness with the way Teddy gripped her hair and yanked her head back, the way he was doing now. Her hard nipples rubbed against the bed and she could feel the thick, hot head of his latex-sheathed cock against her entrance.

“Let me in, princess. Don't make it too hard on yourself. I'm already going to be fucking you into this mattress, and I plan on doing it again tomorrow. Don't want to be too sore when I plunder this tight little asshole again, do you?”

“No, Teddy,” she whimpered even as she could feel the wetness flooding her pussy because she liked the idea of getting railed while she was sore.

“There you go. Take me, babygirl.”

Theo pushed the tip of his dick against the tight ring of muscle, and eventually she yielded, giving into the hot, determined press of him, allowing it to pop inside her. She cried out as the thickest part breached her, and he soothed her with long strokes of his big hand over her back even as he maintained his grip on her hair.

“That's it. Such a good girl.”

“It hurts, Teddy,” she whimpered.

“Oh, I know it does. But you can take it. Take it for Teddy, honeybee. I know you can. Such a strong, brave girl. Give your ass a minute to adapt to being stretched like this, you'll adjust. Promise, promise.”

She knew he was right but it was still hard to let go when her body was screaming at her to get it out. Good thing she had a will of iron and even if she didn't, Teddy wasn't going to let her fail.

Theo gave her a minute, and then he was moving inside her, rocking back and forth, pushing in and pulling out, adding more lube a few times before she felt his hips impact her backside.

“Fuck, honeybee. You feel so fucking good. You’re so unbelievably tight. Love being inside you like this.”

Now that he’d opened her enough to take him from root to tip, Theo started fucking her in earnest and it was the strangest but most familiar sensation. The pressure and the friction and the building climax were the same, but coming from a different place, like she was in a parallel universe. Best Paladin porn ever.

Teddy grabbed her hip and dug his fingers into her flesh, probably leaving her with marks before he slipped his palm underneath her, giving her clit something firm to rock against.

“Come on, babygirl. I want to feel you come, want your ass to milk my dick while I ream you out. You’re going to come for me while I fuck you. Take my big fat cock in that tiny, precious hole of yours. Yes, Bee, yes, that’s it. Want to feel you come.”

“Oh, Teddy, please. More, more, harder, please.”

“You got it, princess,” he gritted out as he fucked into her ass hard and fast.

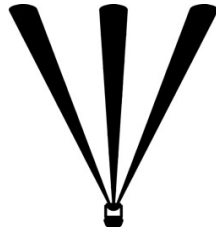
It only took a minute until her body was overwhelmed with sensation and the force of nature that was her daddy, her Teddy. He took care of her so well, but he also just took her, like he was now.

He was forcing a sound out of her with every thrust, and with a final twist of his hand at her scalp, she felt the orgasm overtake her, and saw stars. Like explosives were detonating all along her nervous system, her muscles contracted and released, sending shock waves through her system. Judging by the noises Theo was making, and the way he was driving into her mercilessly, he felt them too.

Bianca felt him come, his orgasm making his cock pulse inside her, and she heard the evidence of his pleasure too. He

fairly roared as he drove into her with a few final thrusts, brutal and with no rhythm because he was simply too consumed to stay on beat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



By the time he'd freed her from her bondage and cleaned them both up, it was way too late to talk. Instead he'd finished getting her ready for bed, and tucked her in with Pickle while he checked in with his guys on their travel plans for the next day. Once that was over with, he'd stripped off and collapsed in bed with her.

Someday he'd get used to having a threesome in a hotel bed with a Hollywood starlet and a stuffed saltwater crocodile named Pickle, but yesterday hadn't been that day, and he doubted today would be either.

Their flight was later in the day, so they had some time for the dreaded talking before he had to make sure she was shipshape and ready to get on a plane. She'd had a reprieve but that was over.

He could tell she was awake and he snuggled closer into her back, pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck.

"Morning, honeybee. How you feeling?"

"Little sore."

"In a good way?" he ventured, dropping kisses along the yoke of her shoulders and she laughed.

"Uh, yeah. Super good. But you're going to have to leave my ass alone today. You really did a number on me last night."

"Fair enough. Sounds like a bath will be in order tonight once we get settled in New Orleans."

"Please, please."

“Know what else is in order?”

“Bathroom?”

“Sure. What else?”

“Breakfast?”

“Of course. Can’t have you passing out in the airport, now can we? But what else?”

“Sex?”

Theo snorted. “I would gladly fuck you from morning until night, but you also need to talk to me, remember?”

Of course she remembered because her mind was like a steel trap. She just didn’t want to. Not like it was his favorite either—he’d absolutely rather be getting her off—but it had to be done.

“Mmm, need?”

“Yes, babygirl, need.”

He hugged her closer, kissed and nibbled at her trap, and rearranged himself so he could use his other hand to brush her hair back from her face and hold her there.

“But you remember I’m not going to leave, right? I believe in you, and talking to me can only make things better and not worse.”

“Easy for you to say,” she grumbled. “Your brain’s not the asshole who doesn’t get any of the fucking memos.”

“I know, honeybee, I know. So let Teddy help. You talk to me and then we’ll get you fed. Is this good or do you want to face me?”

“This is fine,” she muttered.

He waited a minute, rubbing her arm, giving her some space because it could take her a bit to get her thoughts in order in a way that she was comfortable putting them out into the air.

“I...am not good at making friends. Never have been.”

Didn't he know it. She really didn't talk to anyone outside of Anderson. Not her family, not her co-stars. Didn't seem to have anyone who she shot the occasional text to or flew in to visit her when she was on location. Not that he was awesome at friendship, but he had buddies from the service and now from Carcharodon who he could shoot the shit with or give a shout if he was in town or in trouble. But it had always seemed to him guys had it easier than women when it came to making friends.

"It's always felt like everyone else got a manual about how to get along with other people, and I didn't get one. How people talk to each other, and all these unwritten rules about how to be nice and cool and everything else, I just... It's such a fucking mystery."

"I get that. Like, why can't you just tell people you don't want to go to a cocktail party? Instead you have to make up an excuse so you don't hurt their feelings."

"Exactly. And there are some things that I've learned how to navigate like that cocktail party thing but a bunch of it is still a black box. I put social interaction in, and who the fuck knows how it's going to come out on the other side. Because frankly, a lot of times, the rules are really inconsistent and I don't know which ones apply when or with who, and it's exhausting to try to figure it out, especially on the fly."

"That makes a lot of sense," he told her.

He'd never thought Bianca would do well in the military, but maybe he'd been wrong. There were very clear cut rules and you knew exactly how to treat who and when. Maybe being in that kind of super-structured environment would've been good for her.

"So I'm really bad at that stuff. But what I'm good at is imitating people. Maybe because I've spent so much time trying to figure all this crap out? You think it's because I'm super observant or something. I don't know. But whatever it is, I can pull on someone else's personality or imitate their behavior, their demeanor. So that's what I do most of the time. But even when I have some information, it's still kind of

throwing a dart at what's going to work. And a lot of times I get it wrong. Or I get it right for a while and then all of a sudden, I make a misstep I can't recover from. It really sucks," she mumbled into the top of Pickle's head.

"That does suck, babygirl. I'm sorry."

She shrugged as well as she could lying down.

"Anyway, a lot of the women I know in the business are pretty mean. They gossip a lot, and talk shit about people, they're cutthroat competitive, and they don't seem to like anyone. Most of the men aren't much better. They're just awful in different ways. They take advantage of people who don't know any better, and they use people. There's just a lot of meanness. And everyone fakes everything."

Theo had been lucky that for the most part, he'd had Taj in between him and clients and hadn't had to deal with a ton of the fake smiles. He showed up, did his job, and didn't worry about being charming or being liked. And as far as he could tell, while Brae and Dane faced a lot of the same concerns about parts and production schedules, they didn't have quite the same pressure to look or act a certain way as Bianca did. Fucking sexism and double standards.

"I pulled on that persona when I talked to Ashby and Halliday. Dane and Braeker don't expect anything else from me. They see me as the diva who pitches fits on set when I don't get what I want or for no reason at all. I thought gossip and men-suck solidarity might get me in with their wives. Especially since I've heard some things about how Braeker and Ashby got together. It didn't seem nice. But I was wrong. Again. And they don't want to be my friends. It's not surprising, it's just like everyone else. So, that's why. That's why they think I'm mean. Because I am."

No wonder. No fucking wonder. He'd be bitter as hell and never want to talk to anyone ever if he'd had the same experiences as Bianca. Made him want to stand between her and everyone in this world and act like a translator, but he couldn't. There were a few things he could do, though.

“Can I turn you over? You don’t have to look at me, I know that’s hard, but I want to look at you.”

“Kay.”

His honeybee let go of Pickle and he rolled her over so he could pull her into his chest, pet her hair properly. Such gorgeous, silky hair, and on such a beautiful girl. Of course, being so pretty probably hadn’t done her any favors. She seemed world weary now, but had she always been? Probably not, and naive was a dangerous thing to be, especially when you weren’t good at reading people. No wonder that fucker Flint Gannon had been able to manipulate her.

“Would you want me to talk to Brae and Dane?” he offered. “Explain some of this to them?”

“It’s really embarrassing.”

“I know it feels that way, but it shouldn’t be. You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. You’re just wired different, and I think them knowing that would help them understand some of your behavior in the past. Maybe make it easier for you all to get along in the future. And once they’re friends with you, the rest of the cast will follow. Maybe not everyone, but anyone worth being friends with. They’re good guys, I promise.”



“They seem good,” she muttered into Theo’s chest.

It was warm here, and quiet, private. Safe. When Theo was holding her, no one would dare hurt her. Not physically. And he was offering her the chance to have him stand between her and the rest of the world so he could explain that she wasn’t a bad person, it was just hard for her to make her way through the world. What had she done to deserve this? Maybe lived almost three decades getting sucker punched repeatedly.

She did know that Braeker and Dane kept tabs on men who were icky with the younger women on set. Those creepy guys didn’t dare touch her, not anymore, but things hadn’t always

been that way. Maybe if they'd been around during her *Darkstalkers* days Flint would've stayed away from her.

"Okay, fine," she granted. "But keep it quiet, I don't want everyone to know. Not yet. It's...it's not that I think it's bad, because it isn't, but I also know some people are going to weird about it. But if they're as good as you say, they won't be."

"I really think you'll be pleasantly surprised," he told her. "They're not perfect, for sure but if I thought they'd be dickfaces about anyone being neurodivergent, never mind you, I sure as shit wouldn't be putting your feelings at risk like that."

That was true. Teddy was as careful with her as he could be, as much as she allowed.

"And don't make me sound pathetic, okay? Some of this stuff can be really shitty and hard, but I don't want them being nice to me out of pity."

"How on earth could I make you sound pathetic? You out-work them, you memorize your lines faster than lightning, you're a total badass. And while you're not doing it backwards and in heels exactly, you're doing the same job as they are while having to function in a world that's not built for how your brain works and without a copy of the rule book. If anything, those guys are going to be impressed."

She hadn't thought of it that way. Who could say if Braecker and Dane would. It was a weird thing, her relationship with the word "disabled." She didn't want people to treat her like she was incapable—she would throat punch any asshole who was a condescending poop loop—but the truth was that some things were extra hard for her. And she was lucky. She had a ton of resources to make her life easier. She didn't want to be the reason someone not as fortunate didn't get the help they needed. "Why can't you be more like Bianca Lacoste?" said no one ever, and she didn't want it to start now.

"And for the record, because I don't think I said it before, you're not mean."

Bianca scoffed. She had said some super yucky things.

“Shush for a second, babygirl,” Teddy told her. “Listen to me. You said some nasty things, and I understand why you did it, but it still wasn’t okay. You’re going to need to apologize. But you are not a mean person. There are cruel people in this world, there are ruthless and deeply evil people in the world. I’ve come into contact with an unfortunate number of them in my time, so I can tell you with certainty that you aren’t one of them.”

“Okay, Teddy,” she whispered, because if she tried to speak any louder she’d probably cry.

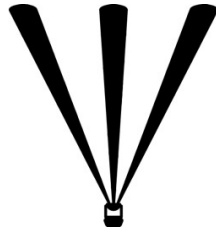
“There, that’s a good girl. Now we’ve gotta get our stuff ready to go to New Orleans. And I’ve got a very important question.”

She caught the twitch of the corner of his mouth out of the corner of her eye, and it made it possible to look at him. It might be an important question, but she didn’t think it was going to be a very serious one.

“What, Teddy?”

“Does Pickle get her own seat on the plane? And if so, is she in coach or first class? I’ve never flown with a life-sized crocodile stuffie before.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“**H**e was in her fucking trailer, Tina. You have to shut it down.”

Theo liked Tina, for the most part. She was smart, worked as hard as she expected her talent to, and she'd been pretty accommodating to his requests to change things on set to make things easier for Bee. To the extent that he wondered if she knew what was up but was keeping her suspicions to herself.

Right now, though? She was standing in the way of keeping Bianca safe, and that was not only professionally unacceptable, but also a personal affront. He'd promised Bee he'd stay out of things that had to do with her job, but this wasn't about a stunt. This was about his babygirl's stalker who'd made a grand reappearance this morning with a slew of pictures from both Clover City and from the past few days in New Orleans.

Apparently the creepy bastard had been stockpiling them after they'd beefed up security in Clover City, and had found an in on this set. Theo had told Tina when they'd first arrived here that it wasn't okay. The hotel was old and not designed to accommodate the kind of security he'd been able to provide in Clover City, the set was so open it was practically a twenty-four hour buffet in Las Vegas.

She'd told him to calm down. He hadn't, he'd just been quieter about his displeasure to stay on her good side and so he wouldn't freak out Bianca who was doing pretty great after a hiccup at the airport. She'd been on the verge of a meltdown because the grinding sound of metal against metal was

attacking her brain in the way sensory stuff sometimes could. They'd solved the problem with some wireless headphones and she'd made it down here in one piece.

The last couple of days had been a strain on his honeybee with the new setting, the strong smells of the French Quarter where they were filming, and the relatively public set. She hadn't been swarmed like that time in Clover City again, but there were a lot more people around in general. He was on edge and he knew she could feel it. And he hadn't even told her about this new fucking letter. He'd found it first and hadn't told her yet.

"I can't do that. We have a really tight—"

"I have had it up to here with your tight schedules and your over budgets and every single excuse in the book as to why you're not willing to keep your people safe." A muscle in his jaw twitched, and that only happened when he was furious. "This set is porous, do you understand me? I can't do my job if you're not willing to do yours, and I don't want to be responsible for one of your stars getting kidnapped and tortured. Because that's what's going to happen to her if this guy sees an opening. And you're telling me you're fine with that."

Tina rolled her eyes and set her hands on her hips.

"I'm telling you that you're being overdramatic. If it'll appease you, I'll book some more rent-a-cops, put up some more barricades. Will that make you happy?"

"No. You shutting this down until I can get my boss here and we work up a plan for better coverage, a more secure set —"

"Can't do it. Won't do it. I operate a business, Theo. A billion dollar business and I can't just put this whole production on hiatus because you want to make the French Quarter into Fort Knox. Never gonna happen."

If he'd had even slightly less control over himself, Theo would've picked up the chair that sat on the visitor's side of Tina's desk and thrown it. Instead, he settled for slamming the

door to Tina's trailer so hard that the whole thing shook as he stormed out.

If Tina was going to insist they go forward with what he could only see as aiding and abetting a kidnapper, he had some calls to make, and some bad news to break to Bianca. No one was going to be happy, and he kinda wished Pickle would come to life and put him out of his misery. It was going to be a long week.

Seven more days. He had seven more days to protect Bianca in this city, and then they'd head back to LA. Yes, that was where the doll-maker had originally contacted her which wasn't a good sign, but he would also have a lot more control when Bianca was in residence at her own house, and when they were on a closed studio lot.

Seven days. He only needed to keep her safe for seven more days and then he could take a breath.



It was a shitty feeling to be a prisoner when you hadn't done anything wrong.

Teddy insisted on someone being with her at all times, and she wasn't allowed to go anywhere except the hotel or the set, even though he said those weren't safe anyway. She felt like she was grounded, and Teddy was being no fun at all. She constantly heard the cast and crew talking about the music clubs they'd gone to, the restaurants they'd eaten at, the sights they'd seen. It's not like she even wanted to do most of that, but there were some quirky shops she wanted to go to, and all Teddy said to her anymore was no.

He was always apologetic and soothed her which was mostly nice, but it also felt like he didn't think she could just buck up and deal like grow-ups sometimes had to. The sweetness and compassion she had adored about her daddy just days ago had started to grate on her already exposed nerves.

Theo and Tina had been getting into it as well, and she hated the way it felt like Mommy and Daddy were fighting. She wasn't a kid up past her bedtime eavesdropping on her parents arguing, she was a grown-up. And she maybe agreed with Tina and thought Theo needed to calm the fuck down.

Yes, that creepy fuck had gotten into her trailer, but that had been overnight, when they weren't filming. There wasn't nearly as much security on set when the cast and crew weren't there, and why should there be? She hadn't actually been at risk. But because of that, Theo had insisted on enveloping her in bubble wrap except in this case bubble wrap was three or four enormous bodyguards every step she took. That could've been hot, she supposed, but they were all as frownie and grumpy as Theo and she was going to lose her mind.

And so they were arguing...again. It was her least favorite thing to do in her hotel suite.

"I'm not trying to treat you like a child—"

"Well you're doing a shit job of treating me like an adult!"

Theo scrubbed a hand across his mouth and jaw, muttered something she couldn't hear. He was probably sorry he'd stayed with her, sorry that he'd gotten involved. Everyone had warned him she was a holy terror, maybe he should've listened.

"I'm not trying to infantilize you. I'm really not. You're a grown-ass woman who is incredibly successful and intelligent. What you're not, though, is an expert in threat assessment and security. I am. It is my job as your bodyguard to make sure you don't get hurt, and it's my responsibility as your daddy to make sure no harm comes to you. I'm sorry that someone else's asshole behavior means your freedom gets curtailed, I really am. That's a shit hand you've been dealt. Some people say it's the price of fame and I say fuck that. You should be able to walk down the street like anyone else and it's a heap of steaming bullshit that you can't."

Whoa. It was tough to ruffle Theo's feathers. She knew, because she used to try. He would get annoyed with her but he

was kind of a big rock and her poking at him wouldn't make him react. He was heated now though, on her behalf.

“That victim blaming crap really grinds my gears. You shouldn't have to hire me. No one should. Unfortunately, the world isn't a perfect place and until people stop being sadistic assholes—in a bad way—I'm your best defense. I will do everything I can with everything I have to keep you safe but there's only so much I can do, especially if you won't cooperate. So please, Bee, I am begging you. Yell at me later or I can take you to the gym to whale on a punching bag if you want, but you've gotta do what I say. I am wide open to suggestions about ways we could make this easier on you but at the end of the day, it's my call. Got it?”

His broad shoulders were heaving, and she felt sheepish.

“I know you're trying to protect me,” she said softly, looking at her fingers knitted in front of her. “And you do a really good job. But sometimes I feel so safe that I don't understand why I have to do all this. And it's hard sometimes, to be a grown-up when I feel like you're treating me like a little.”

She could swear Theo's skin paled, and his jaw worked as he swallowed.

“I can understand how that would be difficult. I'm not trying to take advantage of our personal relationship. But it can be hard sometimes to balance doing things I know will be helpful for you with keeping a professional distance. I would understand if you would want to call things off or—”

“No!”

The idea of not having Theo as her daddy made her sick to her stomach. Now that she knew what it was like to have a real daddy who cared for her and could give her that brain clearing bliss, she couldn't imagine giving him up.

“Then maybe I should resign from my job. I couldn't be your bodyguard anymore, but I could—”

“No!”

Teddy's head looked like it was about to explode and it was honestly a little scary. He would never hurt her, but that didn't mean he wasn't intimidating. And then he laughed, real hard.

"No to that too? I swear, Bee, I'd bend the space-time continuum for you if I could, but I'm just a man, not a superhero. I don't have that kinda power."

He raked his hands through his hair, looking half-frustrated and half-entertained, all amused exasperation, and she couldn't help it. She launched herself at him, and it even sounded as though she might've knocked the air out of his lungs by the "oof" he let out.

"You are a superhero, though," she mumbled into his chest. "You're Super Teddy."

He laughed again, but it wasn't a big one like before. He maybe even sounded kind of sad.

"I fucking wish."

"You can't leave, Teddy. Can't."

"Okay, but we gotta figure something out because we can't keep fighting like this. It's going to tear us apart and I can't stand the thought of that happening. Tell me what you need, honeybee."

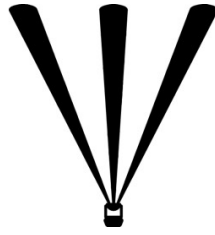
What did she need? What would make her existence bearable? She needed Theo to take a step back, but how far? Where was the place she felt like the lines were most likely to get blurred?

"I...I need you to not run interference with Tina. On the set. I can do it myself now."

She could feel him stiffen, his muscles go rigid against her cheek, her breasts, her belly. Teddy did not like that idea, but he had to give her something because he was right. They couldn't keep butting heads. Maybe if she were smarter, she'd tell him to confess their relationship to Taj, get someone else assigned to be her bodyguard, but she wouldn't feel as safe without Theo on patrol, she knew she wouldn't.

It felt like a hollow victory when he sighed, stroked her hair, and said, “Fine, babygirl. If it’ll give you some breathing room, I can live with that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



On the plus side, Bianca had been much happier for the past few days. On the minus side, happier did not equal safer. And today was the day he'd been dreading the most. They were literally shooting a nightmare sequence. He'd seen the script, watched Tina run Bee through what was going to happen and he hated it with every fiber of his being.

Tons of background talent, the set teeming with people they didn't know fuck all about. It was going to be dark except for flashing lights, and she was going to be distressed. It wasn't *real* distress, he knew that, but sometimes with the intense way Bianca got into her role, it was hard to tell the difference. If physiologically she'd convinced her mind and body that she was in distress, wasn't she? That was part of what made her so freaking good, but it could also make him queasy. Definitely uncertain because how was he supposed to tell how she was doing if he couldn't trust what he was seeing with his own eyes? It was maddening.

He wanted to march up to Tina, demand that they adjust how much the lights fluctuated, narrow the shot so Bee wouldn't have to be surrounded by so many people. What the fuck was the point of CGI if it couldn't be used to fill in some demons so his little girl wouldn't get overwhelmed and have a meltdown?

She'd gotten so much better at not taking off when she was upset but it was a fear that was lodged so deep in his brain, he didn't think he'd ever be able to pry it out. Not when it was

always a risk that the world she'd chosen to occupy, the profession she'd found so much success in, was actually out to jab at all the places she was most vulnerable. Theo understood too her desire for independence, her pushing back at the restrictions he'd put in place for her safety, but that didn't mean he wasn't clenching his fists and muttering to himself, wondering when Bianca would advocate for herself. Why hadn't she told Tina this was too much and they needed to find a different way?

Fuck, he'd be grateful if she had a meltdown right now. It wouldn't solve any problems in the long run, but in the short term Bee might allow him to talk to Tina and he could get a brief reprieve from his heart beating like he'd done a buddy run around Lake Pontchartrain.

Instead, he had to stand there and wait while they set up the shot, placing background talent in concentric semicircles crowding around his little girl. watching his honeybee look increasingly agitated.

"Don't do it, Bee," he grit out, feeling helpless, and regretting every inch of freedom he'd allowed her.

"Stay," he wanted to shout at her from across the set, but no one would understand. And Bianca didn't take kindly to orders. That kind, anyway. Not in front of all these people, not when they weren't Teddy and honeybee.

He could see it in her face and the way her muscles tensed.

It would've been better for her to hate him, for them to not be together, than it would be if something happened to her. These were the thoughts tumbling around in his skull as he saw all those familiar signs: the flicking of the fingers, the pacing, Bee barely restraining herself from clawing at her face and her hair.

She was going to run and there wasn't a goddamn thing he could do about it.

And then she did it. Bolted.



She'd gotten so used to the relatively controlled atmosphere of the sets back in Clover City and how Teddy and Tina managed to tweak the lights, the noise, whatever she needed, that being on location in a much more slapdash setting seemed much, much worse. A suffocating number of people, with lights so bright they were blinding and seemed to shoot lasers into her eyes and shred her brain, plus the ambient noise of the French Quarter and Bourbon Street in particular. The food in New Orleans was good—in the small quantities she could deal with it, there was just so much going on—but the smells of all the spices and the liquor and the humans who were drinking and dancing and fucking were just...a whole lot.

Everything had come to a head with that scene and she couldn't handle it. People yelling in her face, and touching her, so close, it was nightmare fodder. Quite literally. It was supposed to be horrifying, and Tina had done a really good job concocting a scenario that was not only scaring her, but was a fucking hellscape from a sensory perspective. Plus her costume that she'd become pretty accustomed to felt like it was closing in on her and the heat of the lights made her skin feel as though it was on fire. It didn't even get better at first when she started running.

The number of people she had to shove through, the hands trying to grab her, she was honest to god going to pass out or have a meltdown from the overstimulation. Everything she hated was all over, and she was helpless to shut it off. So she got away the only way she could.

People got mad when she fought, so she'd flown.

Teddy was going to be so angry with her, but he'd forgive her. He always did. And maybe letting him deal with Tina wasn't such a bad idea. He never would've let things get this bad. She'd just tried to do her fucking job but ended up just making things awful.

It had taken sprinting the length of several blocks, breaking through security barriers and crowds of tourists who'd gathered to watch the spectacle, plus the usual foot traffic, and then finally, finally, she'd found an alley to duck into that offered some solitude. Space to breathe.

Teddy was going to be so worried. Tina was going to be ripshit. She couldn't do anything right, but she hadn't meant to ruin anything.

With everything that had happened during this production, had she ruined her shot at the next origin story feature in the Paladin universe? She hadn't been surprised Braeker's Hydrostat had gotten the first one, but she'd thought it was a toss up between Dane's Mentallus and her Invicta. But of course they'd gone with Mentallus, of course they had. Would they even give her a film of her own at all now?

Her chest got tight thinking about it, and she tried to force those thoughts aside because she needed to deal with one thing at a time. First things first, calm down enough to make her way back to the set and ask Theo to help her get through this scene somehow, if he even could. Maybe they could at least move back the barriers to keep the lookers-on from crowding them so much? Maybe Tina could narrow the shot so she didn't have quite so many extras crushing in on her?

She leaned up against the building behind her, the brick still warm from the heat of the day, and closed her eyes, trying to gain control of herself. It was anything but easy, but something inside her unwound when she heard a noise at the entrance from the street. That must be Theo because her Teddy had a knack for finding her no matter where she ran off to. She didn't know how he did it, and she didn't care. She would even welcome his lecture at this point. All that mattered was that he'd found her and he'd somehow make this better.

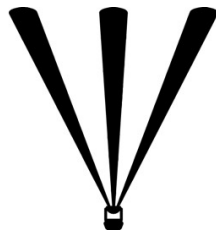
Except when she opened her eyes, it wasn't Teddy's stern glare and balled up fists she saw. No, it was a shape that would fit right in with the gothic creepiness of a lot of the city, the ghost stories people were always telling. Black clothes and backlit so she couldn't make out the person's face, her heart started racing as it came toward her.

Unlike everything a superhero uniform was supposed to be, her costume actually made it harder for her to move and she wished she had time to shed some of the pieces, but the person was coming at her too fast, and she was trapped in a place she'd hoped would be a sanctuary.

She tried screaming when he grabbed her—because she was pretty sure it was a he—but he cut her off with a hand over her mouth and nose, a hand that was covered in a cloth that seemed to be soaked in something and she couldn't claw it away from her face. She tried kicking but couldn't seem to make contact with anything, and she bit down on the hand.

While the guy yelped and swore he didn't let go. All she could do was breathe in the fumes and feel dizzy and sick as he murmured into her ear, "We're finally alone, precious doll. We're going to be so happy together. Just you wait and see."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



He'd been too far behind Bianca and she was too damn fast and more agile than he was, smaller so it was easier for her to make her way through a crowd. He couldn't catch up. The best he could do was try, shoving people aside and calling after her. He shouldn't have bothered, he knew she wouldn't be able to parse his voice from the rest of the noise right now.

If only he'd been closer, if only he'd been more insistent that he be allowed to talk to Tina, somehow figure out how to make this scene work. So many If Onlys, so many What Ifs, and none of it was worth thinking of. The only thing he could afford to focus on was where Bianca had gone.

Somewhere away from the noise, if she could find it. Somewhere dark, and away from people. He jogged through the crowds, ducking into alleys and doorways to see if he could catch a glimpse of Invicta's shiny metallic ruby red and fiery orange costume. At least he had that going for him, Bianca wasn't in her usual black leggings and ball cap.

Theo had stuck his head into yet another alleyway and was about to keep going down the street because Bee wasn't there, but then he saw something that had his heart in his throat. Metallic red streaks on the filthy ground, about the right width and shape to be heels of a body being dragged. *Fuck*. He followed the streaks into the dank alley, looking for any clues, and he found a length of cloth on the ground that had blood on it. When he picked it up, he could smell the sweet odor of chloroform. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*.

He'd do what he could to track those metallic streaks, but this psycho wasn't stupid. Not the way he'd stopped sending those creepy missives when he didn't think he could manage it without getting caught. No way he'd drag her through the streets, especially if he noticed her boots were leaving marks.

The question was, where had he taken her and who the fuck was this guy? He was clearly patient, but also prepared to grab Bianca at a moment's notice, and nearby. How?

Theo also had to make a phone call.

Grabbing his cell from its holster, he rang up Taj.

"How's NOLA?" his boss greeted him.

"Bianca bolted from the set because she was having a meltdown. I went after her, but I think her stalker's been here, watching her, and grabbed her from an alley before I could get there. I think the fucker used chloroform to knock her out otherwise she would've kicked just about anyone's ass, and we've gotta get her back."

"I'll get everyone on the New Orleans team on the horn and we'll figure out what to do. Local LEOs?"

"Can't hurt, this is a manhunt and he's never seemed to care aside from not wanting to get caught. He's not holding her for ransom, he just wants her."

"Got it."

There was a beat and Theo wanted to scream at his boss. Why wasn't he moving faster, why wasn't he calling in the National Guard, any fucking favor he'd ever been owed? He didn't care if Amber Alerts were for kids, Bianca was tiny, get her up on those billboards and find her. How hard could it be? She was an unconscious woman in a superhero costume being dragged around the streets of New Orleans, for fuck's sake.

"I have to ask you something, Theo. And don't you lie to me."

"What?"

"This sounds personal."

“That’s not a question.”

“I was trying to be delicate,” Taj growled, “but we can do this your way. Are you fucking the client? Are you sleeping with Bianca Lacoste? I have one fucking rule, and—”

“Yes, okay? Yes. I’m fucking the client, and even worse I fucking love her.”

There was another beat of silence and Theo’s head was going to explode and send the whole of the French Quarter up with it, given the amount of liquor that was soaked into the streets and the buildings and the people around here. “I get it. I’m a fuck up, I’m fired, I’ll never work in this business again, you trusted me, how could I, blah blah blah. Did I miss anything or can we go get my little girl back?”

“Settle down, Palmer. We’re gonna get your girl back. Keep me in the loop and don’t do anything stupider than you already have.”

“Got it, boss,” he muttered before hanging up and shoving his phone back in his pocket. Now to dust off all those tracking skills and use them for the most important mission he’d ever had in his life: finding his babygirl.



It had been a several hours, and he hadn’t found her. He wasn’t going to be able to live with himself if he failed her. Yeah, he was an expert tracker but that was in places like forests and swamps, not in an urban jungle, especially one as chaotic as New Orleans at night.

Bianca had been filming a nightmare sequence, but he was living one. The longer this sick fuck had her, the lower the chances they’d get her back. But he wasn’t going to let that stop him from combing every single inch of this city.

It was infuriating that in addition to trying to figure out where this asshole had taken his girl and how, his cell was constantly ringing. Made it even harder to concentrate, but what was he going to do, not answer it? No way in hell, not if

someone had something useful to say. Didn't mean he had to be nice about it though.

“What?” he barked into the phone.

“Boss, I think I got something.”

Dex. He'd left the man back on the set to see if anyone had any information that could help. Theo hadn't been optimistic given how little Bee engaged with the cast and crew but he would've been stupid to overlook it. He was a lot of things, but he hoped stupid wasn't one of them.

“Out with it.”

“One of the prop runners is missing. He was here earlier, and the props master doesn't remember him leaving.”

“Maybe the guy just got a headache and went back to the hotel.”

“I thought of that, and called over to ask the manager to check his room. Get this: not only was he not there, but the manager said it didn't even look like anyone had been in the room, never mind slept there.”

“No luggage? Toiletries?”

“Nothing. Toilet paper was still folded over, mints still on the pillow.”

“I want to know where this guy is. Now.”

“On it.”

They'd done background checks on everyone who was working on the film. Aside from some parking tickets, and a couple of old arrests for minor drug offenses, there had been nothing. For guys like the doll-maker, they weren't usually one and done. They tended to have a pattern. Stalking, domestic violence, sexual assault, exposure, those were all the red flags Theo had looked for. Then again, someone had to be their first.

That was good because being new meant this fucker probably didn't have a system in place. He hadn't learned from prior victims because there hadn't been any. It was bad because they didn't have any information on how he might

behave, what he might do now that he had her. Just all those menacing, blackhearted letters that described in gruesome detail what he wanted to do to her, images that had haunted Theo's nightmares for months.

He was going to hunt this motherfucker down, and once he did, there was no telling what he would do.



Theo had been involved in rescue missions before. Soldiers, spies. He was no stranger to the delicate balance of getting your person or people back with the least danger and firepower possible, but also being willing to do whatever was necessary to complete your mission.

Thanks to Dex, Taj, the rest of his team, and some officers from the NOPD, he was about ready to bust the door down of a rundown Central City shotgun house.

That's the house Stuart Allen Ridgewood had rented months ago, but only begun to occupy last week. That's where Bianca was, had to be.

He slammed his shoulder into the flimsy wood door, and it splintered and cracked, sending shards of wood exploding into the first room. A couple of the cops in riot gear swarmed past him and into the kitchen, and tackled a person to the ground.

Hopefully that was the prop runner. Theo would let them deal with it while he smashed in doors along the hallway, looking for any sign of Bianca. She wasn't in the bathroom or either of the two bedrooms, which meant hopefully that monster had her downstairs. The asshole had left the trapdoor open, and Theo thundered down the steps, hoping they wouldn't splinter under his boots.

He hadn't known what to expect exactly, but in the middle of the large room, halfway back to the street, was a bed and some other furniture. It was old-timey and somehow looked like a huge dollhouse. Made bile rise in his throat. And there was his babygirl.

Here she was, in this fucking filthy raised basement. Theo could barely stand up in it without hitting his head, and it felt like a basement even though it was above ground. The humidity, the grime, the concrete floor, yeah, it all said basement.

That fucker had tried to make it nice, but draping a shit hole in pink and lace didn't make it not a shit hole. It was almost more insulting, staining all the pink and white fabric, just like how he'd soiled Bianca.

Theo was used to seeing her all sweaty and pink-cheeked, exertion from her workouts coloring her face, making perspiration bead and slip down the valleys of her tight, fit as hell body. She didn't look ready to fight—she didn't even look fucking conscious. No way in hell would she just be laying there without being restrained. Even though she was tiny, she would've beat the shit out of this guy if he'd tried. Had he *drugged* her? It had been too long since he'd first abducted her for her to still be out from the original dose of chloroform, unless of course he'd continued to dose her.

Theo tried to stay calm as he picked his way across the room, but counting wasn't helping because all he could count were the ways he wanted to fucking murder this guy. The man who'd stalked and kidnapped and god knew what else...

Once he reached the bed, he could see but more so *smell* the puddle of vomit on the floor beside her. Yeah, it was really fucking unpleasant coming up from chloroform and it wouldn't be surprising if she'd gotten sick. And this asshole couldn't even clean it up? How long had he left her to shiver and be sick? His poor honeybee. She was tough as hell but you couldn't defend yourself from something like that.

"Bee," he whispered, his voice tight and anxious, too harsh, as he threw off the pink comforter with its tiny floral print that Bianca would loathe. "Bianca, you've gotta wake up. I'm gonna get you outta here, can you help?"

Mostly he wanted to see her eyes flutter open, look into those dark brown doe eyes, watch a smile curl the corners of her mouth because she'd know she was safe because he'd

found her. He could swear his stomach dropped onto the plush pink rug that had been laid over the uneven floor. Yeah, he'd seen the sweat-matted strands of hair stuck to her forehead, the bright pink flush in her face, but he hadn't been prepared. Not to feel the heat radiating off her skin like she was on fire. What had he given her that had her burning up with fever?

His little honeybee was tough as hell and could deliver quite a sting, but she was fragile, too, like the insect's translucent wings. He had to get her some medical attention and make sure this asshole hadn't given her anything that was going to kill her. And then he was going to take her somewhere far, far away from this monster who was hopefully being dragged into a squad car which was better than he deserved.

Bee was wearing a pastel pink and white dress and it had his blood boiling that this monster had gotten his hands on her. Undressed her. God help him if he'd done more than that. Theo wanted to rip it off her, leave every trace of this horrible place behind, but it was more practical to drape a blanket he found folded on a chair over her and hoist her into his arms.

Theo was about to carry her up the stairs to the main floor of the house when he heard a sweet sleepy voice.

“Know what bears like?”

His little honeybee was a lot of things, but giddy and giggly wasn't her style, even when she was happy. Theo wanted to be charmed because he'd fucking love to make her so jelly-limbed and walls-down, but it wasn't anything he'd done. Bianca was burning up with fever, and she'd be mortified if she remembered any of this. He'd play along though, because he'd never want to hurt her feelings.

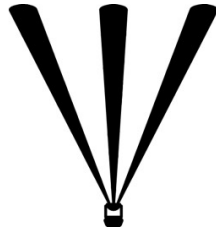
“What do bears like, babydoll?”

“Honey,” she said, her voice just above a whisper, just before letting a cascade of giggles out. “No wonder you like me, Teddy. Get it? Teddy bear? Honeybee?”

“I like a whole lot more about you than that, honeybee,” he told her, struggling not to grit his teeth.

He was going to get her help, and she was going to be fine. That's how things were going to be, because he couldn't stand the idea of losing her. Not as a client either. Taj could shove that concern in a pipe and smoke it. This was about his little girl, his love. He had so much more to do for her, so much more to give, and she was going to take it all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



ONE MONTH LATER

“**T**hanks for coming. Hope we can do this again soon,” Theo told their guests.

Bianca could see Brae’s arms get wide like he was going to hug her, but thankfully Ash elbowed him in the ribs and after a moment of consternation, he held out a hand instead. That was okay. Handshakes she could do.

Good thing, because she got one from each of their four visitors. Brae, Ash, Dane, and Halli were all saying their goodbyes. It wasn’t that she was happy to see them go, exactly—they’d had a nice time, she thought—but she was a bit relieved.

After Theo had rescued her from her stalker, he’d brought her to the hospital which she’d fucking hated. And her Teddy was too worked up to bring her back to the hotel once she was discharged, even though Stuart Allen Ridgewood was in police custody and wasn’t getting released anytime soon.

Brae and Dane had rented a big old house in the Garden District, and offered to let them stay there while she recovered. She’d felt awkward about it, but her daddy convinced her it was the best option. Ash and Halli were in LA but had arrived a couple days later, and they had all been so nice to her. Mostly they stayed away from the big bedroom that looked out onto the spacious garden, but they’d come to say hello and to check in on her a couple times. She couldn’t have asked for anything more and she was eternally grateful to all of them. Plus they’d given Teddy people to talk to when he probably would’ve fretted himself to death without company.

Much to his dismay, Bianca had insisted on finishing filming. After a couple days of outright chaos, Tina had shuffled the schedule and managed to extend their permits and equipment rentals—well, really it had been Isaac who was probably having a nice, quiet mental breakdown somewhere

now—and despite being shaky as hell and on the verge of a meltdown, she'd done it. Well, most of it. They were going to figure out some CGI/green screen shit for the nightmare sequence because it had been way too soon to deal with that.

Now they were back in LA, and they'd wrap up the whole movie after a couple weeks filming at the studio. The closed, secure, tightly guarded studio. Which was now Dex's problem, because Taj had fired Theo's ass. From guarding her, anyway, and he was taking a leave of absence from anything other assignments to be with her. For a while anyway. She didn't want him to give up his career for her—there was no way in hell she'd give up her career for him—but she'd keep him all to herself for a few months at least.

Hopefully after she'd done the neuro-psych eval he'd be able to help her sort out what exactly that meant, maybe find a coach to help her deal with some of the harder parts, and arrange her life so it played nicer with her brain. She'd also need to find a new manager because it turned out Anderson had suspected she was neurodivergent for some time and hadn't brought it up, because it might “damage her brand.” That guy could get fucked.

And now that their company was on their way home, hopefully so could she.

After Teddy closed the door, she walked right into him, smooshing her face against his chest. He was used to her, thankfully, and wrapped his big strong arms around her.

“How you doing, honeybee?”

“Okay. Kinda tired. Do you think they had a good time? They said they did, and I thought they did but...”

But her brain was kind of an asshole and didn't always nail stuff like that.

“I think they did,” he told her before planting a kiss on the top of her head. “I feel like they didn't quite know what to do all the time, but—”

“But neither do I?”

“I wasn’t going to say that, but that works too. You ready for bed?”

“Hell, no.”

She felt him chuckle against her.

“No? I thought you’d be worn out from all that peopling.”

“I am worn out for all those people, not for my Teddy.”

“Ah, I see. What’re you in the mood for?”

“Just put me in some pretty rope and toss me around. Please.”

“I think that can be arranged.”

Then she was getting hauled off her feet and over his shoulder, and he gave her a solid spank.

“Especially the tossing part.”

“I’ll toss you, pretty boy!”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Teddy carried her back to the master suite, and she fought all the way, which was fun. Once they’d reached the bedroom and he’d closed the doors, he set her down and then backed her up with a hand around her throat until her back hit the wall. Fuck that was hot.

Bianca lost her breath and the fight went out of her. She really was tired, but she liked being handled. With Theo’s hand around her throat and him looking down at her, she let her limbs turn to jelly. Yes, her legs were still supporting her, but barely.

“Are you going to be a good girl for me, or do I need to spank the bad behavior out of your ass, princess?”

“I’ll be a good girl, Teddy. Promise, promise.”

“Alright then. Let’s get you all tied up then. Something pretty for my honeybee.”

Still with his hand around her throat, he kissed her and she melted further. This was what she wanted. He was what she wanted.

Theo took some time to undress her and then weave a couple harnesses in black and gold around her chest and her hips. As she'd promised, she was—relatively—well-behaved, and only earned a few swats to her backside. Which she liked. They both liked.

Once he had her all trussed up and had admired his handiwork, Theo used a hand at the back of her neck and a loop he'd built into the back of her hip harness to steer her over to the bed they shared every night. He was a hell of a lot more gentle moving Pickle to the bench at the foot of the bed than he was tossing her onto the mattress and that made her laugh.

Teddy really was very sweet to Pickle, even if he grumbled about her sometimes. She wouldn't want him not to grumble at all; it was kinda hot.

“Had enough tossing, babygirl?”

She shrugged.

“Okay good, I'm beat.”

And then he had the nerve to pretend to fall asleep. At least he'd better be pretending.

“Teddy, wake up!”

“Huh? What? Why?”

“You forgot something.”

“I did?”

His brows crunched together and he stroked his chin. What a jerkface.

“Uh, yeah.”

“No, I don't think so. Pretty rope...”

He slid a couple fingers into the center of the harness he'd tied around her chest and pulled. Somehow that tiny movement sent desire coursing through her.

“Check. Tossing, check. All done.”

Oh, how dare he.

“You’re going to be all done, mister! I demand that you fuck me this very instant!”

She was still training hard but Theo would always be able to best her. She wasn’t sorry about it as he rolled to the side of the bed and hauled her across his lap and began to spank her bottom.

“I don’t think you’re in any position to be making demands, princess.”

All she could do was let out a moan as he peppered her cheeks with swats until her backside was pleasantly warm and stinging. The spanking stopped after a while and she figured he’d just toss her back onto the mattress and have his way with her, but her daddy had something else in mind.

That’s what the bedside table drawer sliding open said. Oh, Bianca knew what was coming and prepared herself for it, breathing and concentrating on loosening her muscles.

“That’s a good girl,” he told her. “Teddy’s gonna plug this pretty little asshole of yours to make your pussy even tighter when I fuck you.”

He didn’t bother with fingers since he plugged her nearly every day, but he did take his time working the lube-slicked metal into her bottom hole. Honestly, as much as she liked Theo fingerfucking her ass, she liked being forced to take the plug with no prep besides lube too. There was something about it that drove her into subspace real fast, made her feel conquered without having to fight back much.

There was some indignity too in the way he tied another light harness around her hips to keep the plug lodged in her ass. He tapped the place where he’d knotted the rope to hold the intruder inside her. “There. Wouldn’t want this coming out when you’re getting fucked to within an inch of your life, little girl. Teddy’s gonna have you rough and hard and deep, and you’re going to take it all, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes, Teddy. Please, please.”

He did toss her then, and she landed in the center of the huge bed. It didn’t take Theo long to divest himself of his

clothes and then he was prowling over her. They'd both had negative STI tests since they'd been seeing only each other, and she was on birth control so no more condoms. She loved how it felt, the warmth of his skin, the thick heat of his erection stretching her pussy as he worked into her.

She was wet already, but there was still delicious friction as he pushed inside, plus the extra feeling of fullness the plug provided, and then he was bottoming out and grazing that place deep inside her that drove her wild.

“Please, please, Teddy. Please.”

“You sure, honeybee? You don't need anything else?”

“No. Just fuck me. Please, please.”

Sometimes she needed more in the way of foreplay, but the chest harness was hugging her tits in a way that made them feel tight and heavy and had her nipples rubbing against her daddy's chest, and the way he'd handled her and the dirty talk had done their job on top of the nerves she'd been buzzing with all evening. Her fuse had been set, now she just needed her Teddy to light her up.

Theo took her at her word—playing coy wasn't really a thing she did—and started snapping his hips, driving his cock inside her so hard and deep she was on the verge of coming within just a few strokes. She canted her hips to meet his thrusts and held onto his thick, rock hard biceps as he worked above her.

She didn't know how she'd gotten so lucky to find a man who was gruff and dominant in all the right ways, but also sweet and understanding in the ways she needed him to be too. And to think she'd hated him so much when they'd first met.

“I-I love you, Teddy,” she blurted.

She hadn't meant to say that for the first time when they were...fucking, but this was the way they made love, too. Rough, yes, but attentive and passionate and perfect for the two of them. He'd told her before, because of course her Teddy had, but the way he said it back, his eyes shining and a

grin on his face as he plowed into her made any regrets she had disappear.

“I love you too, honeybee. Love you, love you.”

Bianca would never call herself sentimental, or even romantic. But maybe her pussy was, because it was right after Theo said he loved her that her fuse started to burn and it was only seconds until she was coming, her muscles squeezing the hard length of Theo’s cock. He followed soon after, shuddering above her while he shot spurt after spurt of thick, hot come inside her.

“Yes, babygirl, yes. God, you feel good. Love you. Fuck.”

“Love you, Teddy,” she confirmed feeling blissed out in both brain and body as he collapsed on top of her and she threaded her fingers through his soft hair. “Love you, love you.”



I hope you loved watching Bianca and Theo fall in love. This is the third and final book in the Bright Lights Little Darlings series, and I so appreciate you coming along on this star-studded journey with me!

If you want to know what’s coming next from me, be sure to join my newsletter The Hive for all the Must-Know updates! You’ll also receive free bonus material when you subscribe: <https://readerlinks.com/1/2889720>



If you jumped in with Bianca and Theo (OMG, I love a redeemed villain and bodyguard romances too!), you’ve got Braeker and Ashby’s book to devour in [*Ashby’s Action Hero Daddy*](#).

Being a superhero on screen doesn't make you man enough to be a little girl's daddy.

And also Dane and Halliday's second chance romance in [*Halliday's Hollywood Heartthrob Daddy*](#).

When they were in high school, it was "I'll have her home by nine, sir." Now he wants it to be "She calls me Daddy, too."



Everyone gets an HEA in Clover City, even Taj Hovick, the grumbly ex-Navy SEAL turned owner of Carcharodon Security. Get the scoop on his unlikely HEA in [*Daddy's Little Wildcat*](#).

A man doesn't know the meaning of "all in, all the time" until he comes face to face with the love of his life.



You can also find out the whole story of Cosima and her Daddy Hudson, Papa Ian, and Sir Ryker in [*Cosima's Club Owner Daddies*](#).

How many daddies does it take to heal a broken little girl?



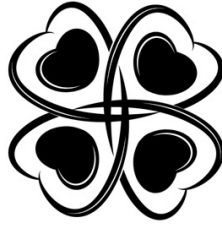
And if you've only glommed the Bright Lights Little Darlings books, you've got the entire Clover City Littles series to enjoy, starting with [*Twyla's Teacher Daddy*](#).

Gunnar doesn't like brats but maybe Twyla's never had anyone teach her how to be good. Maybe he could be that man. Maybe he could be her daddy.

ARE YOU ENJOYING YOUR TIME IN CLOVER CITY?

The fictional Clover City is home to the Clover City Littles series, and parts of the Bright Lights Little Darlings series. While it's most fun to read them in order (hello, cameos!), the books can be read in any order.

A NOTE FROM HONEY



Thank you so much for reading *Bianca's Bodyguard Daddy*! I hope you loved reading Bianca and Theo's story as much as I loved writing it.

If you enjoyed *Bianca's Bodyguard Daddy*, I would love it if you let your friends know so they can experience Theo and Bianca's relationship too! As with all my books, I've enabled lending to make it easy to share with a friend. If you leave a review for *Bianca's Bodyguard Daddy* on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), or your own platform, I would love to read it! Send me the link at honeymeyerromance@gmail.com.

You can find the most up to date list of my books on my website: honeymeyerromance.com.

ABOUT HONEY MEYER



Honey Meyer lives in New England, and loves to watch the seasons change outside her window as she writes Happily Ever Afters for littles and their mommies and daddies. She loves to read and write age play romances, and she can't wait to bring you more stories—always sweet with a little sting!

