



christina c jones

bitter
sweet.

an equilibrium novella

BITTERSWEET

AN EQUILIBRIUM NOVELLA

CHRISTINA C. JONES



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Man... Anika and Royal have been a long time coming. I'm glad to finally get to tell their cute story.

This will probably be my last release of the year, and I love ending on the sweetest of notes.

This is for everybody who's ever sent positive vibes in my direction, sent up a prayer, offered their support, whatever.

This is for you.

Enjoy.

ONE

ANIKA

Being bald-headed in the winter was *not* a vibe.

In fact, it ranked pretty high in terrible ideas, though in my defense, it wasn't planned. That, actually, was part of the problem though – when I'd chopped off all my lush, dense curls in search of *change your hair, change your life* peace, I hadn't been thinking beyond the immediate, terrifying satisfaction of watching it all hit the ground. Then, later in the summer, when it was time to get it all touched up, I was only thinking about fashion, and the ease of merely rocking a flawless cut.

Now though?

I was friggin' *cold*.

I tried to pull my hat down lower over my ears only to discover that there was no more pulling to do – my hoop-laden lobes were simply out of luck. Abandoning my phone in the pocket of my coat, I wrapped my arms around myself a little tighter as I hurried down the street to the coffee house.

This is what you get for being obsessed, I chastised myself.

If my attention hadn't been so focused on the *Urban Grind* Instagram account that morning, I wouldn't have had to rush out to avoid being late. Sure, managing the social media was part of my job as one of the managers at the shop, but damn.

A little less focus there could've made the difference between my scarf being around my neck vs. tossed across my couch.

That scheduling *needed* to be done though.

Getting that out of the way this morning before I even left home meant that I could take little moments here and there throughout the day to get the coffee house ready for the winter holidays. We shied away from focusing on any one, focusing on themes of family and friendship and coziness instead, in the interest of inclusivity. This year, I was going all out with a black, white, and gold color scheme that was elegant and chic, and didn't clash with *UG's* established earth tones.

Which was why I was so surprised to find the door of the still-closed shop decorated with a garish red and green plastic Christmas wreath.

Frowning, I pulled out my keys to unlock the door with shivering hands, anticipating the warmth on the other side. As soon as I opened the door, however, my ears were met with the grating sound of "*We Wish You A Merry Christmas*" – as performed by the damn *Chipmunks*.

"*Did I wake up in Bizarro World?*" I muttered to myself, realizing the music was connected to me opening the door.

"Morning Nik!" Cade, one of the baristas, called to me from behind the front counter. I tossed up a hand in greeting at him and the other baristas, already busy preparing for the rush of customers that would be starting in about twenty minutes.

"What's up with the wreath?" I asked as I pulled off my hat to fluff out the little curls at the top of my tapered cut. "Did one of y'all do that?"

Cade stopped with a canister of fresh grounds in his hands to turn and give me a *yeah, right* lifting of his eyebrows. "And risk the *Wrath of Anika? Hell nah,*" he chuckled, then went back to what he was doing as my face grew hot.

I'd been working double-time to try to get away from that whole *Wrath of Anika* thing here among my peers at the coffee house, but apparently, the idea of it all insisted on hanging around.

It wasn't that I was a *mean* boss – in fact, Roman assured me he'd never received a complaint about me mistreating or

abusing any of the people under my purview as manager. I fully believed in treating people well, in *all* areas of my life, work included.

I just... needed things to be a certain way.

And when they weren't... people felt it.

"It was here when I got here," Cade added to the words he hadn't intended as hurtful – they all used the little nickname to tease me. "And Royal was the one who let us in this morning, so..."

As soon as that name touched my ears, they unthawed, quickly replacing my weather-borne chill with low-level rage. Reflexively, my fingers curled into fists, mauling the soft wool of my winter hat.

It was Royal.

Of course it was Royal.

I swallowed, hard, taking a deep breath before I spoke, lest my disdain for the boss's cousin creep into my tone. "And... where, exactly, might Royal be now?"

Cade shrugged. "Last I saw him, he was headed to the office."

"Thank you," I nodded, already moving. "And great job on the menu board."

Cade's grin over my praise was the last non-red thing I saw as I stalked down the hall to the office. The door was partially open already, so I didn't bother knocking – a courtesy I would've given *my* boss, Roman Taylor, who owned the shop.

Royal Taylor?

Was lucky I hadn't gone upside his head yet.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I asked as soon as I was inside, walking up to push his big ass feet off the desk where he had them propped up.

"Good morning to you too, *A-nik-a*," he trilled, stretching out the syllables of my name in the same annoying cadence he'd been using since I insisted he had no standing to use my

nickname. He pulled himself to a stand, towering over me by a foot as he came in my direction, arms stretched for a hug.

“Don’t you *dare*,” I hissed, putting a hand up between us, even though his ass knew full well I wasn’t hugging him.

He grinned at me, all perfect white teeth and velvety lips and family-legacy dimples.

God he makes me sick.

“Why’re you always treating me like this, huh?” he asked, tossing his hands up. “What’d I ever do to you?”

“*Exist*,” I shot back, crossing my arms. “What’s with the tacky-ass wreath on the door? We had a whole meeting item about it – Roman approved my black, white, and gold palette. Where does that gaudy mess fit?”

Royal shrugged, his broad shoulders filling out the wine-colored knit a little too nicely for my liking. “Why does it have to fit? It’s *fun*.”

“It’s *corny*,” I countered. “We do Donnie Hathaway, Mariah, Whitney, Destiny’s Child, *maybe* a little Ariana Grande around here for the holidays. The friggin’ *Chipmunks*, bruh? I don’t think so.”

He sighed, pushing his hands into his pockets. “Let me guess – Santa didn’t hook you up like you wanted when you were a kid, and that song was playing in the background, so now you’ve got some traum—”

“Could you *not*?” I interrupted, prompting him to bust out laughing. “It’s all fun and games to you, I know, but it’s serious to *me*. I’ve put a lot of time, energy, and *work* into helping establish a brand aesthetic, and your goddamn Chipmunk wreath has to go. *Before* the shop opens.”

Royal’s thick eyebrows lifted. “You asking or telling?”

“*Telling*,” I answered, without hesitation. “I’m the manager, you’re the... *manager trainee*,” I gritted between my teeth, loathe to give him even that much, when all he’d done for the past year or however long was play around. “It’s not up for debate.”

He raised a hand to his forehead, offering a stiff salute before he headed toward the door. “Aiight, *General A-Nik-A*. I’ll take the wreath down. Wouldn’t wanna... bring your wrathful side out.”

There was fire in my eyes as I turned in his direction, but he was already out, closing the door behind him with a definitive *click*.

“*Uggggh!*” I grunted. I knew I shouldn’t let him get on my nerves so bad, but...*uggggh!*

Royal Taylor had taken up residence “under my skin” and didn’t appear to be moving out any time soon.

He would, however, be moving that damn wreath.

“**D**amn he fine.”

“*Wow. Is he on the menu? Cause I’ll take him. RING ME UP.*”

“*I’m supposed to be off caffeine, but goddamn, I’ll have a cup of THAT coffee.*”

Putting down the end of the matte black garland I’d been untangling in the office, I stared at the screen of my phone, wondering what the hell those notifications were about. I rarely posted on my personal account anymore, so I didn’t even have to check to know something had to be going on with the Urban Grind account, which I took great pride in curating.

I may or may not have been a little obsessed, but again... brand aesthetic.

My obsession with the UG social media had led to more than a little great publicity for the coffeehouse. People from all over the world followed, and there was a growing contingent of people who traveled to the Heights just to experience the flagship store.

It may or may not have been *my* idea to start calling it that.

Needless to say, Roman was immensely satisfied with my performance as head manager of his firstborn coffeehouse, and I took it very seriously.

Which was why those errant comments were a cause for concern.

I unlocked my phone to open the Instagram app, navigating to the post where the most recent comments were coming from. My eyes went big as I realized it was a photo *I* had neither taken nor posted, and therefore did not belong on our feed.

It was a goddamn *selfie*.

Of friggin' *Royal Taylor*, with one too many buttons undone, wearing a black and white twist on the classic red Santa hat, sipping from an Urban Grind mug.

A thirst trap.

I squeezed my eyes shut, taking a deep, *deep* breath as I gave myself a little internal talk.

*Anika.... He is Roman's blood. For unknown reasons, one of his **favorite** cousins. You can't kill him. You can't kill him. You **can't** kill him.*

"Ahhh, I see you've already spotted my latest contribution to the Urban Grind brand aesthetic," I heard from way too close behind me, in a voice so impossibly rich that it irked my fucking nerves. "You see how many likes it already has? The numbers on that Sweet Potato Pow latte are gonna be through the roof, watch."

I'm going to kill him.

"As usual, you are out of line," I responded, turning to face Royal, which was annoyingly hard to do. The action itself was fine – it was the psychological toll of looking him in the face that I found a reason to complain about.

Royal Taylor was a damn terrorist.

With his skin and his face and his shoulders and hands and... *ugh*.

“What did I do this time?” he asked, not even bothering to hide his smirk.

I crossed my arms. “*This* time? So you recognize that you are *always* out of line.”

“More like *you* are never satisfied,” he argued. “You wanted the wreath down cause the colors were wrong – cool, I took it down. You’re all about the brand aesthetic, so I made a post that matches the brand aesthetic... but you *still* have a problem.”

“You’re damn right I have a problem with you posting on the Urban Grind social media account. This is a business, Royal, not your personal hoe trap.”

Royal’s eyes went big. “*Hoe trap?* Come on, A-nik-a.”

I shrugged. “Just calling it like I see it.”

“You just don’t understand my marketing style,” he tried to explain, but I shook my head.

“First of all, *you* do not have a marketing style when it comes to *this* coffeehouse. You’re an observer here, that’s all. You shouldn’t even be logged in!”

He sucked his teeth. “Damn, *my bad* for trying to assist. I saw that nothing had been posted today, so I called myself helping.”

“The post is scheduled for this afternoon, which you would’ve known if you’d simply asked. And, for future reference, I don’t consider that post “helping.” All the comments are thirsty ass women, and they aren’t talking about the coffee.”

“So I gotta apologize now for being handsome?” he asked, purposely playing obtuse. “That’s not my fault, it runs in the family!”

“Oh my God. *Oh my God,*” I muttered, pressing my fingers to my temples. His arrogance was just... “It’s not about you being attractive, it’s about you making the business page about *you*. You literally posted a picture of your face, Royal!”

“*Sipping from an Urban Grind mug,*” he argued. “It’s product placement. And I even got a *black* Santa hat to fit your lil color scheme. And did you not see the caption?!”

Oh God, there’s a caption?!

Narrowing my eyes, I picked up my phone and went back to the picture to seek out this caption he apparently thought would offer some sort of redemption. I read it once, then reread it, sucking in a deep breath as my nostrils flared with... something more than anger, but not quite rage, with a little twist of disbelief.

“Nothing like a big mouthful of warm pie. Come fight the cold weather with our seasonal Sweet Potato Pow latte. #UrbanGrind.”

“Warm... pie... *really!*?”

“*I know,* that shit is good, right?!” he grinned. “Attention-grabbing. I’ve got some other ideas too, we can plan out a bunch of these. Like the s’mores latte – you’re close to the color of graham crackers, so how do you feel about having melted chocolate and marshmallows on you?” he held his hands up in front of him like he was framing me in a shot. “In the nude.”

My nostrils flared. “I feel like I’m going to *murder you.*”

“Hola, young people!”

Royal’s ass was saved by Roman’s sudden arrival – an arrival I’d been preparing for, before being sidetracked by these social media antics. In the midst of decorating between the waves of customers, I had numbers prepared, proposals for the next quarter, employee evaluations, all manner of important things to discuss with my boss.

...After he finished dapping up his cousin.

As much as Royal got underneath every last piece of my nerves, seeing him next to his older cousin highlighted just how damn fine he was.

When I first started here as a barista, years ago, I had a little crush on Roman, with his smooth chocolate skin, tall

frame, lush facial hair, and dimples. Finding out about his *wife and kids* had been a great cure for the crush, but hadn't made him any less easy on the eyes.

I was content to excel at my job and be in the presence of a great-looking man who wasn't trying to screw me – which was pretty crucial at this point in my life – but then here came Royal.

He was right.

Handsome *did* run in their family.

In all the ways Roman was attractive, Royal was *that* times ten, with the added dangers of being closer to my age, charismatic, and completely willing to get on my nerves. He openly flirted, he thirst-trapped on social media, and all signs pointed to him being a womanizer.

A fuckboy.

So... pretty much exactly my type.

Good thing I was off men.

Cold turkey.

“Royal, I saw your post on the UG account – it's generating a lot of conversation and visibility, I like that,” Roman said, tapping his fist against his cousin's as my stomach twisted into a knot.

Of course he likes it. Of course he does.

“Actually,” Roman continued, taking a seat behind the desk. “I'm glad both of you are here – I wanted to talk to you about something.”

My eyes widened. “So... this *isn't* about the quarterly numbers?”

“Not today, Nik,” he said warmly, gesturing for me to sit down in one of the chairs in front of the desk. Royal took the other. “Today, I want to let you know that we're officially bringing Royal in as co-manager. I know he's been here observing for months, training. But before we put him in his own location, I think he needs some hands-on experience. And

largely thanks to you, Anika, this store does enough volume that we could use an additional manager anyway, so it works out for everybody.”

THE HELL IT DOES.

“You’re serious?” Royal asked – a question I wanted an answer to myself. Of course, *his* inflection was entirely different than the one I wanted to put on it. He may have been excited, but *I* was mortified.

Roman nodded, grinning across the desk. “Absolutely. Anika has taught you well over the time you’ve been here, and I think you’re ready to take the next step. Ready to push it further. Before you know it, another year will have passed since you first approached me about this, and I think that’s a nice solid amount to put in. How do you feel about it, Nik?”

My mouth opened, but for a second, nothing came out. I cleared my throat, holding my head high as I spoke. “You’re the boss, Roman. I’ll follow your lead.”

That response made him give me a look – he *knew* something was up. “Royal, why don’t you head out front, make sure everything is running smoothly? I need to holla at Nik.”

“Absolutely,” he nodded. “There’s probably a few fans out there looking for me anyway,” he said, winking at me as he passed.

It took everything in me not to react.

His ridiculousness was funny to Roman, but I sat there stone-faced as Royal made his way out of the office, closing the door behind him. As soon as we were alone, Roman gave me the “dad” look again.

“Aaight. What’s up with you? I can’t have the best manager in the world pissed at me,” he said, trying to cajole a smile that wasn’t coming.

“If that’s how you really felt, you wouldn’t be *demoting* me to “co-manager” with someone who has no experience,” I said plainly, not bothering to hold it back. He’d always

maintained that he wanted an environment where his employees could speak freely with him.

Well, here it was.

“It’s *not* a demotion, Anika,” he assured me, propping his elbows on the desk as he leaned forward. “Maybe calling him co-manager is generous, but I need him to have real experience before he moves to a store of his own. I can’t have him flying blind with my brand.”

“I completely understand that. I just don’t understand why he has to be *here*. Send him to one of the franchises or something.”

Roman laughed. “What do you have against my little cousin, man? He swears you don’t like him – and swears he hasn’t done anything.”

I don’t like his ass.

I shrugged. “My personal feelings are irrelevant. On a professional level, I think he plays too much.”

“Are you sure it’s not just that you’re a little more... structured?” Roman asked, stopping short of the adjective he *really* wanted to use – uptight.

And maybe that was true.

That whole *wrath of Anika* thing hadn’t come from nowhere.

Maybe I *was* a little too serious when it came to the coffeehouse, but it was literally my *job*. And I’d proven my uptight self valuable.

“He put a selfie on the Instagram page – completely throwing off the layout I had going so that the feed looked good when people went to our profile. I know it seems like not that big a deal. It’s fun. The followers like it, but... it’s something I’ve worked hard on. Him doing that, without even saying anything to me about it... it’s like a slap in the face.”

Roman sighed – not like he was annoyed, it was sympathetic. “I get that. And if it’s important to you, we can take it down,” he offered, then raised a finger. “*But*... there has

to be room for him to have input as well. If we're training him, we're training him, and he needs to learn to be a team player instead of just acting. And... I know you probably don't want to hear this, but you could probably benefit from it too."

My mouth fell open. "Roman, I'm a *great* manager. I've studied this! I've mastered the balance between friend and authority figure with the baristas, the suppliers love me, I get along great with the customers..."

"All of that is true, absolutely," Roman agreed. "But none of that changes the fact that not being in complete control is... a challenge for you. One you're going to have to overcome, soon, because I wasn't kidding about us having room for a new manager, as we're growing. It's too much work for just you."

"Have I dropped the ball somewhere?" I asked, eyes wide, and Roman was quick to raise his hands in a calming gesture.

"Not at all. But, in order not to, you're here for twelve, fourteen – or more – hours a day sometimes. *Every* day. You're barely thirty, Nik. I can't have you making this place your life."

"But I *want* to be here."

"I'm sure you do," Roman nodded. "But as somebody who did that to build this, I can't support it. I don't want you putting in more than ten hours a day. And even that's a stretch, but I know you're not going to listen. So that's my compromise."

I sat up a little straighter. "What, you mean like... effective immediately?"

"I do."

"Wait, so who is going to take over those extra hours, though? Mila already does as many hours as she can," I said, referring to the other manager.

Across from me, Roman grinned. "I guess you'd better get Royal ready to work then, huh?"

I huffed. "I'd much rather just put in the work myself."

“We’ve already talked about that, though,” he laughed. “Seriously – *what* is your issue with Royal? He’s a good kid.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” I countered. “All I know is that he gets on my nerves. Badly.”

Roman stared at me without speaking for a moment, searching my face for... something. “You sure it’s not... a little crush or something?” he asked, and I curled my nose.

“Ew. *No*. I’m off fuckboys. Off *boys* period,” I added. Seeing the expression on Roman’s face made me amend that to, “Off *anybody*, I mean. I’m on a break. I’ve *been* on a break.”

He shrugged. “Not my business, Nik.”

“I know, but... just for the record,” I explained. “I don’t want *anybody* thinking I want Royal Taylor.”

“Understood,” Roman said, but the half-smirk on his face said otherwise. I didn’t have time to worry about that, though – it was approaching the time for my curated, *scheduled* post on Instagram, which I needed to stop before it went live, thanks to Royal’s impromptu post.

That I, of course, couldn’t delete because of the numbers it had done.

It wouldn’t be *good marketing*.

I excused myself from Roman’s office to get back to work. Heading up front, I let my mind wander about what I could do on the UG social media to build Royal’s goddamn selfie into the fabric of the feed.

Ugh.

He’d only been “co-manager” for two minutes, and I already had to accommodate his bullshit. Like he’d sensed me coming, as soon as I rounded the corner to the primary service area Royal was in my face.

“There’s my co-manager,” he said, rubbing his hands together, giving me that damn dimpled smile that irked me so. “What are we learning first?”

How not to get on my nerves...

“Social media management,” I told him. “So you don’t mess up anything else.”

TWO

ANIKA

“E_{www}, guys, come on!”

I covered my eyes and reversed course out of my parents’ kitchen, trying to prevent myself from seeing any more of what I’d walked in on.

It wasn’t like I was a surprise guest – they’d *requested* my presence at dinner, only for me to walk in and find my father with *both* hands up my mother’s sweater and their mouths very occupied. I didn’t even want to think about where *her* hands had been since she felt the need to wash them now, before she went back to the pots on the stove.

“Don’t be coming in my house talkin’ bout *eww*,” my father scolded playfully, mocking my tone as he wrapped his arms around my neck to pull me into a hug. “If you were me and your wife looked like that, you’d be all over her too.”

My mother looked up to offer him a playful wink, and... I had to admit, my parents were adorable. Quite literal couple goals, and they’d been that way for as long as I could remember, setting a standard that honestly felt impossible these days.

Impossible for *me*, at least.

Seeing them together had been the catalyst for the “break” I’d mentioned to Roman. I was legitimately *exhausted* from trying to contort myself every which way to be the perfect girl, only to end up back in the same place – heartbroken and confused or ghosted. Then, before it was a “thing,” I’d tried to *Hot Girl Summer* my way into something everlasting, and,

well... that was a friggin' disaster too. I didn't even have fond memories to look back on, just a tall pile of insecurities and regrets and anxieties that culminated in me chopping all my damn hair off.

It was hard at first, not slinking back into old habits. But then my cousin Jules moved back to the Heights – moved *in* with me – offering enough distraction and words of affirmation that I didn't waver.

Then Jules fell in love.

And honestly, that didn't make me want to go back – it made my resolve even stronger. Seeing the way her boyfriend *loved* her, so openly, so warmly... it really brought the full wackness of the “love” I'd been chasing into sharp focus.

Now?

If it didn't look like Jules and Troy or Darcy and Will – my parents – I didn't want it.

And none of these new guys were offering that, so... screw it.

The coffee house would get all my love.

“Your mama told you about our trip yet?” My father asked as I joined him with helping set the table.

I looked up from my careful napkin placement to shake my head. “What trip?”

He chuckled. “I guess that's a “*no*” then. We're leaving this snow and ice and all that behind for sunny Hawaii – the week of Christmas all the way through New Year's!”

Even though his words made my heart drop somewhere around my feet, I forced a smile to my face. “Oh, *wow!*” I gushed, gripping the last of the napkins tight. “That's amazing!”

“What's amazing?” My mother inquired, as she breezed into the dining room with a hot platter of food to place in the center of the table.

I swallowed the hard lump in my throat. “Daddy was just telling me about your Christmas trip.”

“Will!” she stepped back from the table, shooting him a glare. “I was *waiting* to tell her.”

My father shrugged as he took a seat, already reaching for a serving spoon until Mama smacked his hand. “Ouch! What are we waiting on? Sit your asses down so I can eat!”

“Anika...” my mother grabbed my free hand as I rapidly blinked back tears. “I know we typically spend Christmas as a family, but your father and I—”

“Deserve to spend it in paradise this time,” I interrupted her, shaking my head. “I’m not a kid anymore anyway – it’s probably a good time for me to start making other plans.”

I was putting on a brave face about it, sure, but I didn’t *want* to make other plans.

I wanted to wear matching pajamas and drink spiked hot cocoa and fall asleep watching Christmas movies and grill ribs surrounded by snow like we’d done every other Christmas since I could remember.

Well.

The *spiked* hot cocoa didn’t happen until I was an adult, but *still*.

I... had *really* been looking forward to it.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” My mother asked as if she saw straight through my cavalier act – and she really probably was.

But I lied anyway, nodding my head like I was sure.

“Of course, mama, I’ll be fine.”

“She can come too!” my father announced, around a mouth full of food. “I’ll pay for your flights and your hotel room. You gotta get a room on a different floor, though, unless you want to hear a whole different side of your mama.”

“Daddy, *eww!*” I laughed, slipping my hand away from my mother so I could take a seat too. “And thanks for the offer,

but no thanks – I don't need to shoulder in on y'all's trip. I'm a big girl. I'm sure I can find something else to do."

My mother sat down at her place, frowning at me over the food. "There won't be a trip if you don't stop lying to me, girl."

"*What?!*" my father and I exclaimed at the same time.

"I plan to spend Christmas Eve buried in the sand with my wife – you better fix this lil girl!" he bellowed, eyebrows furrowed in my direction.

"What did *I* do?!" I asked, stopping with my fork halfway to my mouth. "I said I would be fine!"

Mama huffed. "Which is a *lie*."

"It's *not*," I insisted, shaking my head. "Okay, I'll admit – I'm disappointed about breaking the tradition, yes. But I'll get over it. You two go on your trip, and I will occupy myself."

"That would be a lot easier with a—"

"*Don't*." I interrupted my mother again before she could go too far down a too-familiar path.

"Don't *what?*" Her eyes went all big and innocent, and my father's attention was suddenly laser-focused on his plate.

"Tell me to get a boyfriend," I answered dryly. "I told you I was going to stop coming to dinner if you kept doing that."

She sucked her teeth. "Well, excuse me, lil girl, for wanting you to have some companionship and make me some babies. You're acting like it's a crime for me to not want you to be alone!"

"I'm *very* aware of my relationship status," I responded, trying not to get "disrespectful" in tone. "But you were the one drilling into me to not accept less than I was worth, etcetera, etcetera, well... this is what that looks like. Which is more important – getting your precious grandbabies, or a happy daughter?"

"Oop," my father chimed in, earning stern glares from me *and* Mama.

“Don’t play with me Anika,” Mama scolded. “You *know* which is more important.”

I nodded. “Then... don’t do that. It doesn’t feel good.”

“You’re right, baby.” she reached across the table for my hand, giving it a squeeze. “I’m sorry. Ultimately... I just want you to be happy.”

I returned her squeeze, and the conversation moved on to other things, but... damn.

Talk about a one-two punch.

“**C**ouuussiiinnn,” Jules sang as she breezed through the front door of Urban Grind. It was a slow part of the day, so her greeting only raised a *few* eyebrows as she sauntered toward me, wearing a big smile on her face.

“Hey boo,” I returned her greeting, along with a quick hug before I went back to my task of hanging ornaments in the window. “You seem especially sunny today. Something good happen?”

That big ass grin didn’t waver as she removed her coat, tossing it onto a nearby chair before joining me at the window. “You know Troy’s brother, Malcolm? He and his wife are having a *baaabby*.”

“*Awww!* That’s so sweet!”

“Isn’t it?!” Jules gushed. “They want us to come up and spend Christmas with them, so you’ll have Aunt Darcy and Uncle Will all to yourself this time.”

Before I could stop myself, I’d let out *the* most pitiful of sighs, making Jules’ eyes go wide.

“Wait – what’s wrong?” she asked, hooking an arm through mine. “Did something happen at dinner last night?”

Because my parents lived a little way out, I usually talked to Jules on the drive home – either on the phone or in person, if she’d come with me. Last night though, I was feeling so out of sorts after the revelation of the trip, and then the

conversation shift, that I'd opted to turn up my music and just zone out.

So... Jules didn't know.

"Not really," I answered, when she tugged on my arm after I hadn't immediately responded. "It's just... my folks are spending Christmas in Hawaii this year, so I figured me and you would do something together."

The immediate sympathy in Jules' expression made me feel... like shit, honestly.

"I had *no* idea," she said, hooking my arm tighter. "But, you know you're welcome to spend the day in Blackwood with us, right?"

I sucked my teeth. "Girl, *what?! Hell no!*"

"Nik, you're family too!"

"No," I shook my head. "I'm really not. But you and Troy are damn near inseparable, so *you* are."

"Malcolm and his wife won't care about that. The more the merrier!"

I laughed. "Jules... I so appreciate you for trying, but... no. This is time for you and Troy to connect with his family, and I *refuse* to latch onto that. Christmas Eve will be hella busy here at the shop anyway, so I'll probably be crazy tired. I can catch up on some rest, eat whatever I want, and catch up on my binge-watching. Hell... that actually sounds like a pretty perfect day."

"Nik..." Jules hit me a steady frown. "You're not about to play in *my* face about this. You *love* being with your family on Christmas. You expect me to believe this isn't a big deal?"

I groaned. "I *want* you to believe it's not a big deal because I want to believe it's not a big deal. Because I want it to *not* be a big deal. You never heard of faking it until you make it?"

"I know that shit doesn't *work*," she countered, shaking her head.

“Jules... *please*.” I unhooked our arms so I could get back to hanging the hand painted ornaments Riley had dropped off for me that morning. “You know what I want, more than anything?”

“What’s that?”

“For everybody to go about their Christmas plans without feeling sorry for me. And for Royal Taylor to fall in a muddy ditch,” I added on, as the man himself sauntered through the front door. “Like, I’m not wishing injury on him, you know – just inconvenience.”

Shaking her head, Jules laughed. “You’re not slick changing the subject, but I’ll bite just long enough to tell you – you may as well go ahead and screw him. You know you want to.”

“I do *not*,” I denied. “Well... maybe. But I *know better*,” I told my cousin, who just kept laughing.

“Girl, you have been hate-fucking that man in your head for more than a year now. Get on the dick or let it go,” she chimed.

“I’ll never let it go because he is a terrible person,” I challenged, looking away as he turned in our direction. “I hate his guts.”

“But you *love* that face,” Jules teased, getting right in my ear. “And that beautiful chocolate skin. Can you *imagine*? I bet his dick is—hey Royal,” she said, speaking up as he approached us.

I shook her off me and went back to what I was doing like he wasn’t standing there.

“Juliet, what’s up?” Royal returned her greeting. “I just left Romeo in the shop a few minutes ago, had to get the fresh cut, you know?”

“It looks good! Doesn’t it, Nik?”

I’m a kill her.

My cousin played *entirely* too much.

She knew I wasn't about to blatantly ignore her, so I turned around, sparing the *briefest* of glances in Royal's direction before I shrugged.

"It's aiight," I answered, then turned back around.

Tuh.

It was so much more than aiight.

It was really unfair for somebody *so* annoying to look *so* good.

"Good afternoon, *A-nik-a*," Royal said, leaning to get into my peripheral. "I'm your afternoon relief."

Jules laughed. "For a second, I thought you were about to tell her you were her afternoon *delight*, and I was like, "*oop, let me get my coat and get out of here.*"

"I mean, I could be that too, but your cousin doesn't like me," he answered, and finally, I turned around again.

"You're not my afternoon *anything* except a damn headache," I told Royal, then narrowed my eyes at Jules. "Don't you have other things to do today?"

Jules smirked. "As a matter of fact, I *do* have a shoot to set up for, so I'm headed out. Catch ya later. Bye, Royal!" she called, pulling her coat back on as she moved toward the door.

With Jules gone, Royal turned to me, wearing his usual annoying hint of a smile. "So... what's on today's agenda?"

"You *not* getting on my nerves is number one."

He laughed. "Come on, *A-nik-a*. Don't set me up for failure."

"Can you stop saying my name like that?"

"Like what?" he asked, faux innocence dripping from his tone. Instead of a verbal response, I simply glared at him until his face broke into a potently dimpled smile. "Aiight, fine. I'll stop messing with you – just tell me how you'd prefer me to say it."

"The *right* way."

He nodded. “Got it. So like... *Anika*...?” he leaned toward me and said, in this low, sultry sort of growl that hit me right between the legs.

Immediately, I looked away from him, shaking my head as I gathered up the box of ornaments. “Whatever, Royal.”

“Hold up, did I do something wrong?” he asked, quickly catching up to me and removing the box from my hands. “You don’t want me to say it like *that* either?!”

“*No*,” I hissed, turning on him once we were in the back hallway leading to the office. “I don’t want to hear you saying my name like you’re... like *we’re*...”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Like *we’re*... *what*?”

“You know *exactly* what,” I countered, crossing my arms. “And I don’t understand why you keep messing with me like this!”

“Because it’s so goddamn easy, Anika,” he said – the fact that he was finally giving a *normal* inflection to my name overshadowed by infuriating words. “You have a problem with me, for whatever reason. You’re going to find fault in whatever I do, so I may as well have fun with it.”

With a smirk, he held out the box of ornaments, and I took it.

“It’s *so* unsurprising that you don’t know exactly why I have an issue with you,” I said, tucking the box under my arm.

Royal chuckled, stepping toward me with a little tilt to his head as he looked me right in the eyes.

“Do *you* know why you have an issue with me?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but none came, even though five minutes before, I could have easily aired a whole list of grievances against him. To my dismay, my silence only amused him, and that *damn* smirk grew into a full-blown smile again.

“The decorations look good, *A-nik-a*,” he called as he turned to head in the opposite direction down the hall. “The brand is strong!”

It wasn't until he was out of sight that my voice seemed to come back, just enough for me to let out a growl of the absolute *deepest* annoyance.

Because.

I...

Ugh.

What, actually, *was* my problem with Royal?

Well... he was arrogant, and... fine. Annoying, and... fine. Charming and... fine.

Wow.

If I didn't know better, I'd think my *real* issue with him was that he was fine as hell to go with all that arrogance and charm, which was why he was so annoying to me. Typically, a man like Royal would be... catnip. Only, instead of giving in to my kitty's urge to let him make me purr, I was reacting with my claws out, *because* he was catnip.

Poison.

Not shit, just like the rest of his handsome peers.

But I was holding firm to my decision to not deal with the bullshit anymore. As hard as it had been, I couldn't waver.

I couldn't be *weak*.

I *had* to hate Royal.

Because if I didn't... I might mess around and do the opposite.

THREE

ROYAL

“**W**hoa, cuz! Something on fire?” I asked Roman as he rushed into the office, scrambling to gather things.

At the sound of my voice, he stopped moving, pure exasperation all over his face. “Man... RJ ate some damn slime from Zaria’s science kit, now he’s complaining about his stomach, and the two of them are fighting. Baby India toddling around yelling at everybody and getting into shit, it’s just... it’s hectic.”

“And Monie needs you there,” I filled in the rest for him as his cell phone chimed with what I assumed was a text from the way it grabbed his attention on the screen.

Absently he looked up, then gave me a nod. “Yeah. So... I need you to take care of the shop.”

“I’m supposed to be doing that anyway,” I reminded him, nodding toward the scheduling board on the wall. There was a digital version too, that all the employees could simply check from home, but the old school dry-erase was a quick reference that helped illustrate my point now. My name was up there, *Royal – two to closing (twelve)*. A weekday closing shift – ten hours, just like what Anika had already put in that morning.

And then... Roman showed up.

Not that I didn’t appreciate the backup, because there *had* been a couple of times I needed an assist, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t have simply shot off a text about. The fact

that he'd showed up unbidden was... honestly a little frustrating.

Did he believe I could do this shit or not?

His phone chimed again, and whatever he saw there made his shoulders sink in relief. "I hit up Anika," he explained, holding it up. "She's going to come through in an hour or so to finish the supply order for me, and help with closing, just since you've never done it yourself before."

"But I've watched you, her, or Mila do it a million times," I argued. "I could do it in my sleep."

Roman grinned, but shook his head. "So you think. Just consider her backup – there if you need her, but it's fine if you don't. And besides... I figured you'd jump at the chance to be around Nik again, as much as you enjoy getting under her skin."

Yeah, of course, getting to be around Anika's fine ass was a definite on-the-job perk, but it was beside the point. Contrary to popular – at least for Anika – belief, I *did* actually give a shit about this job and wanted to do well.

Already, more than a year had passed since I approached Roman after my corporate burnout, floating the idea of becoming one of his franchisees. Nepotism wasn't going to be on my side in this endeavor, not with what my older cousin knew about me – in fact, the familial relation seemed to be bringing extra scrutiny down on my head.

I was good with that though.

I *wanted* to prove myself.

How was I supposed to do it though, when every step along the way had somebody holding my damn hand?

"I may have pushed Anika just *slightly* too far earlier today," I admitted, standing from my seat at the smaller desk, where I'd been poring over past inventory numbers, working to understand how to the figures related to certain times of the year, local events, holidays, whatever.

Roman chuckled as he grabbed his coat from the hook near the door. “Don’t end up getting stabbed – I can’t have her in jail over you.”

“Damn, so *she* gets priority in that scenario?” I laughed, shaking my head. “She’s good at her job, but I’m *family*.”

He shrugged. “She’s part of *this* family,” he countered, gesturing around us at the shop. “Listen, Royal... I’ve been watching the interaction between the two of you since you got here. Whatever is going on between y’all, I’m not going to interfere. Y’all are grown, and I’ve got too many damn kids to be getting in your business. But I *will* say – don’t fuck that up. Yeah, you’re my cousin – my damn little brother, may as well be. But Nik is like a little sister. And if it comes down to having to eliminate one of you around here...”

“She’s got the seniority,” I nodded. “She’s helped *build the brand*. I know, Roman.”

“Aiight then – act like it. You know... nobody wants to see you succeed more than I do,” he said, his expression shifting with the line of conversation. “You’ve taken some hard knocks, but you can do this – step by step. I know the process has been slow, but... it’s a major undertaking. There are only a few *Urban Grinds* in the world for a reason. You wanna be a surrogate for one of *these* babies? You’ve gotta be ready.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That... is an interesting metaphor, but I’m a let you rock,” I laughed, trying to break through some of the seriousness of the moment. My heart had already picked up its’ pace, and I was struggling to not show any outward signs of my shift in breathing.

I wasn’t sure if he really thought I needed to hear this or not – if he thought I *needed* this pressure.

Either way, I needed a step back from this conversation.

“You know what I mean, bruh,” Roman chuckled, extending his fist to tap mine before he finally headed out the door to go be with his family.

Once he was gone, I took a moment to myself. Some slow, deep breaths to get my heart rate back in order, and get my

mind right.

Yes, this manager training process had been long, and no, proving myself in this area wouldn't be easy. Which was fine – I preferred it not to be.

I liked a challenge.

A *nika Elliot doesn't mess with anybody anymore.*

That was pretty much the first piece of intel I'd gathered about my fine ass trainer, the first week Roman finally brought me to learn how to manage an *Urban Grind*. One of the baristas told me that, after some light prodding to try to figure Anika out.

I wasn't used to women being immune to my charm.

And really, it wasn't that she was immune – more like... annoyed that I had the audacity to even be in her presence. She was professional, sure, but that could only cover so much deeply rooted disdain, which had started the moment I walked through the door.

I concluded that I must've reminded her of an ex or something. It would explain why she disliked me from jump, and also why she *didn't mess with anybody anymore*. The girl had a broken heart, was grieving a relationship, was just mad at niggas in general... *something*.

But... the longer I stuck around, the more I realized it was – and wasn't – just me.

She *didn't* mess with anybody anymore – I saw her shoot men down regularly, and never caught even the hint of a rumor she was seeing somebody.

Also, though... she just didn't like me.

So much that it was comical.

I sure as hell wanted *her* though.

Especially when she showed up looking as good as she did about an hour after Roman left the reins in my hands. I was out on the floor, so I must've missed her initial entry, cause

when I saw her, she'd already taken her coat and other cold weather gear off, revealing a deep forest green sweater dress that clung to her hips and ass like... *goddamn*.

Anika was banging.

The super-short, tapered natural style she wore her hair in put all the focus on her pretty ass face. Her full lips were painted a deep red that popped against her brown-sugar-cinnamon complexion, making me think of shit I really, *really* probably shouldn't, but... *goddamn*.

"I see you've managed not to burn the place down," she said when I approached where she was standing at the counter, talking to Tory – another of the baristas. Tory smirked, then moved on to help a customer while I made myself comfortable in Anika's personal space.

"I know you think I've spent the last year playing around, but... I may have picked up a thing or two."

"Good. The sooner Roman is satisfied with your performance, the sooner you can go back to... wherever it is you came from," Anika quipped.

I scoffed. "Please. You're *acting* like you'll be glad to see me go, but once I do, who else will you take all your aggression out on?" I asked her. "I've been a nice little outlet for you – somebody for you to focus all your negative attention on. When I'm gone, though... whatcha gone do, *Anika*?"

"I'm going to raise a toast," she replied, dryly, but I could tell my question had her thinking. She wouldn't meet my gaze, shifting to flag Tory down again. "What was that drink you were telling me about that you wanted to submit?"

Tory's eyes lit with excitement. "You wanna try it? I know you don't really drink anymore..."

"Just don't knock me on my ass then," Anika laughed – a sound I heard often with others, but rarely got treated to myself. "You mentioned the Kimble cinnamon peach, right?"

"*Yuppp*," Tory nodded. "One *Spiked Peach Cobbler*, coming up!"

As Tory walked away, I turned back to Anika with a raised eyebrow. “What you know about Kimble Bourbon?” I asked her, surprised. I’d definitely caught the implication in that “*anymore*” with regard to Anika’s alcohol consumption, but even with that, I wouldn’t have pegged her as the type to really be into the different brands and all.

“I know as much about liquor as I do about coffee, which is a lot,” she told me, her tone matter-of-fact. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

I shrugged. “It’s just... not really something I’ve known most women to be into.”

“Wow, with the sexism,” she rolled her eyes. “You’re just a bundle of fun, aren’t you?”

In my peripheral, I saw Tory put a cup down on the counter and then move back to the wall to start preparing another drink as the orders picked up for last call.

“I’m not being—”

“Tell it to somebody who cares,” Anika interrupted, grabbing the cup from the counter. “I’ll be in the office finishing the inventory. Come get me if you need me.”

She slipped easily through the growing crowd at the bar before I could even say anything, without looking back. I pushed out a sigh and turned back to the bar, just as Tory walked up to where I was.

“Nik change her mind about the drink?” she asked, holding up a different cup.

I shook my head. “Nah, she took one – the one you put down on the counter.”

“*No*,” Tory groaned. “That was *his*,” she said, pointing to a guy standing just behind where Nik had been – he was distracted, talking to another patron. “This one is hers. That one *does* have the peach bourbon in it too, but it damn sure isn’t the recipe I wanted her to try. This,” she pointed to the cup in her hand, “is for quiet sipping with a good book. What *she* took is for... hell, pre-gaming.”

I chuckled. “Damn. Well, I’m sure she’ll be back when she realizes the difference.”

“Can you just take this to her?” Tory insisted, handing me the cup. “I gotta remake *his* drink, and take some orders.”

I knew she needed to move on, so I took the cup, but I really wasn’t trying to bother Anika when I knew she was involved in real work. Still... this seemed important to Tory, so I headed toward the back, getting stopped every few steps for small talk from customers or questions from servers, grabbing more supplies for the baristas, whatever. I ended up getting caught up for much longer than anticipated, but it wasn’t like I could exactly brush any of these people off.

I was doing the job.

There was no way that coffee was still hot by the time I actually made it to the office, but I was taking it anyway. I was lowkey with my entry into the office, knowing Anika was working.

Well... assuming.

What I *actually* found was Anika at the desk with that mug she’d taken from the bar tilted *all* the way back, draining every last drop she could get, and the computer screen... not even on.

“Ay – you’ve *gotta* get Tory to make you one of those,” Anika gushed, tossing the empty mug onto the desk with a loud clatter. “That was bomb. Is that what’s in your hand? You’re about to have one too?”

My eyes went wide, eyebrows up, trying to figure out if *I* was in slow-motion, or *she* was in fast forward, as quickly as those words came spilling from her lips.

“Uh... nah, actually – this is what you were supposed to have. You picked up the wrong cup.”

Anika giggled. “Oh. Well. Whatever *that* was, we should sell it,” she declared, hopping up from her seat at the desk. “I’m gonna go tell Tory.”

“Hold up though,” I said, raising a hand. “What about the inventory?”

“Oh, I finished that like twenty minutes ago, and I’m not even tired. I feel *great*. I think I’m gonna go dance. We should *dance!*”

Holy shit.

Before I knew it, Anika was brushing past me in the doorway, headed back out front, toward the music. I followed her, trying to catch up without spilling the damn coffee, but she was already in the crowd by the time I made it out front.

When I spotted her, she was with Greer and Brittany, getting her whole entire life to *Vanity’s “Michelle Obama.”* Now, I’d definitely seen Anika during downtime – she chilled, danced, hung out just like the rest of us did.

But I’d *never* seen “rap along to raunchy ass lyrics and dance moves to match” Anika, so this was... something else. She was sexy before, but *damn*.

Moving to the bar, I finally got rid of the old coffee I’d been carting around and flagged Tory down as she and the other baristas were finishing up their nightly cleanup.

“Ay – what *exactly* was in that drink she took?” I asked, pointing her toward where Anika was now *channeling* Vanity with a level of twerking skill I honestly would’ve never guessed about her.

Tory laughed. “Go *‘head boss lady!*” she screamed across the bar, but of course, Anika was too immersed in what she was doing to hear her. “*What?*” Tory asked, shrugging at what must’ve been some level of disapproval on my face – Anika was obviously lit, and didn’t need any encouragement. “Nik has been on level ten *stick up the ass* for like... *months* now. She needs to blow off some steam!”

“I got no problem with that, it’s just... I’ve never seen this side of her, and I’m wondering how she’s going to feel about it tomorrow,” I explained. She was obstinate enough on a regular day – I didn’t want to see her with the added layer of potential embarrassment.

“Nah,” Tory shrugged. “You’re just a newbie – we’ve all seen Nik let loose, this is nothing. I’m telling you – this uptight stuff didn’t used to be her default.”

“But it is *now*,” I said, shaking my head. “Did you ever say what was in that cup?”

“Uhh... I know it was two or three pretty generous shots of bourbon. Two or three espresso shots. Like six pumps of sugar syrup. Almond milk.”

I frowned. “What the *fuck* kinda combination is that? You trying to raise the dead or something?”

“It’s what he ordered!” Tory defended. “*I* didn’t make it up. And like I told you before, that was a very... get lit before the function type of concoction. That nigga is probably at the club right now, chasing it with more liquor. Nik has been a lightweight lately. If she drank that whole thing, um... she’s gonna have a headache tomorrow.”

“She practically licked the damn mug,” I muttered, pushing away from the bar. “Can you hang around and keep an eye on her while I get everything shut down?”

“Definitely,” Tory agreed, and I gave her my profuse thanks before I went about the rest of my actual duties for the night. Once we got all the patrons out, I sent Tory on home, then finished up everything else.

Then... I had to get Anika’s drunk ass home.

At first, she’d just been wired and kinda goofy, but by the time I got her into her coat and all that, the espresso and all that damn sugar was wearing off, taking her toward the inevitable crash. Luckily, I didn’t have to ask for directions – I knew exactly where she lived, because it was across the hall from my brother, in the *B.Spoked* building.

The sidewalks were an icy mess from a combination of fresh sleet and snow, and by the time we got to her building, another heavy blanket of snow had started.

Just my damn luck.

I managed to get her inside the building but getting the keys to get her actually through the door... another damn issue.

“What are you doin’, Royal?” she giggled as she slumped against the door. “You tryin’ to... you tryin’ to get into my place? Get into my *bedddd*, in my *panntiesss*, aren’t you?” she hummed, holding her bag away from me. “Just admit ittttt.”

I shook my head. “If I say yes, will you get the damn keys out?”

Her eyes went wide – adorably so, honestly – and she nodded. “*Yes.*”

“Okay. Fine. I’m trying to get in your panties, Anika.”

Instead of actually getting her keys, she broke into a peal of laughter. “*Ooooh*, I knew it! I *knewww* it.”

“Please open the door.”

She bit down on her lip, her eyes low again now as she dug in her purse for the keys. “Fine. But make it good, okay?” she murmured, way too sexy for this impossible ass scenario I was in with her.

She fumbled at the lock with the keys for a moment before I took them from her, hauling her inside and locking the door behind us. I didn’t even bother asking her which room was hers – I took her to the first one I saw.

Anika was all giggles as I pulled off her hat and unzipped her – as soon as I had the snowy wool pea coat off her, she threw her arms around my neck, practically climbing me.

“*Whoa,*” I groaned, trying to dodge her lips as she aimed them right at mine. “Anika, come on.”

“*I’m coming,*” she said, then stopped, and giggled in my face. “Well, not yet. But soon, right?”

“Yeah, you’re completely toasted,” I told her, trying to extricate myself from her as she hooked one leg, then the other around my waist – completing that whole climbing thing. Her dress rode up her hips, and thank *God* for leggings, but

damn... my brain may have known better, but my dick was responding to everything she was offering right now.

“Just give me a little bit,” Anika crooned, kissing all over my face until she finally landed on my lips. “I just wanna *see* it.”

“Okay, enough of this,” I declared, managing to pry her off me and drop her into her bed. Her arms splayed out, legs wide as I removed her boots, leaving them by her bed and quickly moving away in case she decided to spring at me again.

No worries there, though.

She was already passed out.

And this is probably why she “doesn’t drink as much anymore,” I thought to myself as I stepped out of the room and closed the door. I would definitely be using *this* shit as teasing material, damn near wishing I’d been recording it, just in case her ass didn’t remember.

Shaking my head, I opened doors until I found the bathroom, which was just as spotless as every other area of the apartment that had come into my view in the few minutes I was here. I relieved myself and washed my hands, then took a moment to clean off all the red smudges Anika had left on my face with those aggressive ass kisses.

I... couldn’t front.

Her lips *had* felt pretty damn good.

For all my flaws, though, I wasn’t *that* guy, to actually go along with her drunken declarations – especially when I knew her state was accidental. In different circumstances, I’d be inside her *right now*, working out every piece of that perpetual stick up her ass.

As it stood now?

I’d settle for teasing the life out of her about this shit tomorrow.

FOUR

ANIKA

Did something die in my mouth?

That was the first thing that ran through my mind upon cracking my eyes open. Heavy drinking – or *any* drinking – certainly hadn't been on my agenda last night, and yet... the feelings coursing through my body were very reminiscent of *those* aftereffects.

Yuck mouth?

Check.

Pounding headache?

Check.

Churning stomach only curable by a stack of greasy bacon and hash browns?

Check.

Missing panties and disappointed pussy?

Actually... no.

Hm.

Strangely enough – *gratefully* – I was in my own bed, fully clothed except my boots, and the socks I'd kicked off at some point in the night as usual.

That was definitely a deviation from *Fast Nights at Urban Grind* like I used to do, so instead of having to wrack my brain for what idiocy I'd gotten myself into the night before, I peeled myself out of bed to go brush my damned teeth.

The yuck mouth was making my stomach hurt worse.

I dragged myself to the bathroom, where I did a doubletake at the sheer horror of my appearance. My hair was smushed into a flattened mess, my mascara was all over my eyelids and even smudged down to my cheeks. The flirty red lippie? Spread all over my mouth and chin.

I... looked like a clown meme.

Accurate.

After scrubbing the remnants of last night's liquor from my teeth and mouth, I moved on, giving myself the full facial cleansing I'd neglected last night before I got in the shower. I pushed the water as hot as I could stand it, letting it soak into my skin and somewhat ease my general feeling of...

grossness.

By the time I turned the water off and grabbed a towel, I was feeling like a whole new woman – one who still needed that bacon and hash browns. The sound of piano keys let me know Jules had come by and was likely entertaining herself while she waited for me to finish in the bathroom.

I quickly went through the process of running product through my freshly washed hair, finishing my skin routine with my moisturizer, and then lotion. When I was done, I wrapped myself in the robe my mother had brought me from the *Reverie* hotel after her last trip to Vegas, then stepped out into my apartment in search of my cousin.

That was *not* what I found.

I hadn't imagined the piano music, but it was much more elegant and effortless than anything beginner Jules could've done. When I turned the corner to the tiny alcove where my little baby was set up...

Royal was there.

In nothing except his boxers.

“Good morning.”

He said that and then flashed me that dimpled atomic bomb of a smile, not missing a single note of whatever it was

he was playing. My feet were planted to the cold wood floor, not moving.

Why is Royal in my house?

Why is he playing my piano?

Why is he almost naked?

This was a dream.

As soon as the thought occurred, it took root in my mind, and I nodded because that was the only explanation here.

“This is a dream,” I repeated, out loud, propping my hands on my hips. “This isn’t real.”

Suddenly, Royal stopped playing. I watched as he pulled all six-feet-something of deep-chocolatey goodness from the seat at the piano, and openly stared at the *prominent* bulge in his black boxer-briefs – it was a dream, why the hell not? – as he padded across my floor on bare feet.

He stopped in front of me, so close that I could feel the heat from him through my robe, could smell the remnants of his cologne. That *bulge* was so prominent that the rest of him wasn’t touching me, but *it* was, and... my nipples were hard. But I didn’t care if the imprint was visible through the robe or not, cause... *dream*.

A prickle of electric warmth rushed through me when he grabbed my hand, holding it up to push the sleeve of my robe up my arm. He met my gaze with a glint of mischief in his eyes, and then grabbed the soft flesh just before the crease of my elbow, squeezing it between his forefinger and thumb.

“*Ouch!*” I exclaimed, pulling away as the smirk he’d settled into blossomed back into a smile.

“See? *Not* dreaming,” he declared, and those words echoed in my head like they’d been yelled into the friggin’ Alps. Over, and over, and *over*, until they clicked. And then...

“Man, what the *fuck* are you doing in my apartment?!” I yelled, backing away from him with my fists lifted and clenched.

Royal's eyes went big, and he glanced around and behind himself, then back to me, obvious amusement written into his features. "You... Anika, are you about to two-piece me?!"

"If you don't give me some damn answers really quick, hell yeah, we're about to box!"

He laughed.

He *laughed at me*.

"Put your fists away, Tori McNabb," he chuckled. "No need for all that. Tory – our Tory, from *UG*, made you a drink last night, but you picked the wrong one up. One that was... a whole ass life and death in a mug. You had that drink, to drink, and you got drunk."

"Did you *seriously* just quote T-Pain...?"

"Glad you're a woman of enough taste to recognize it. But anyway – yeah... you were pretty fucked up."

I shook my head. "No. I don't do that anymore. Not in *years*."

"Uh...*clearly*," he said, smirking. "It was very obvious we saw a side of you that had been suppressed."

My eyes about bugged out of my head, and my arms fell to my sides. "Wait *what*? What did I do?"

He shrugged. "Sang along to some Vanity songs about pussy."

"I do that every day."

"Twerked a bit – you've got skills."

"Oh, that's not too bad either."

"I had to walk you home because there was... whew, there was no way you were getting there on your own."

Okay.

My face got a little hot at that one.

"Shit. I'm... I'm sorry you had to go out of your way."

"Don't be. That's where the fun really started."

I pulled my eyebrows together. “What?”

“*Yeah...*,” Royal nodded. “You were pretty sure I was here to get in your panties.”

“Oh. *No.*”

“Oh yes. And you were with it too, just as a note. You quite literally *climbed* me.”

“Oh, no.”

“Kissed all over my face...”

“Oh *nooooo.*”

“*Pleaded* with me...”

“*No.*”

“To just... give you... just a *peenck* of dick.”

“*No!*” I shrieked, holding up my hands. “*No.* That didn’t happen,” I declared, even though as he spoke, it was all coming back to me in technicolor detail.

“Oh, but it *did*,” he laughed – a deep, full-throated laugh that made me understand how one might be driven to murder. “Now, you did pass out about thirty seconds after that, but still. And you’re welcome for getting you home.”

“*Oh God*,” I groaned, covering my face with my hands – I was so embarrassed that my skin was hot to the touch as I tried my best to hide behind my fingers.

“Don’t be shamed now, you weren’t when you were showing off your knee strength,” Royal teased, only making me *further* want to melt into the floor as the sound of his feet padding across the floor hit my ears. When he was close enough, he wrapped his arms around my shoulders, pulling me in. “In seriousness, though – you just looked like you were having fun. The only person who saw the *really* embarrassing shit was me.”

“And that’s supposed to make it better?” I asked, taking my hands down to look up at him. That was when it really struck me what was happening – I was naked under this robe, in Royal’s arms.

I'd been resting my head on his chest.

I was looking up into his eyes, like... like...

“Why are you *here*?” I asked, wiggling out of his loose hold and putting some distance between us. “You said I passed out, so...”

He shrugged. “You obviously haven’t looked outside yet, have you? There was all kinds of snow and sleet happening last night – I actually got you home as it was starting up. I crashed on your couch instead of trying to get back to my place in dangerous conditions.”

“You say that so casually as if you wouldn’t be bothered by finding out some strange man had spent the night in your living room!”

“*Daaamn*,” he groaned. “Anika, we’ve worked together every day for damn near... two years or something. I’m not even “coworker,” I’m *some strange man*. That’s cold.”

“Yeah, well...” I floundered for a moment, trying to find the words before I shook my head. “Just... put some damn clothes on!”

He gave me a blank look and then turned to do precisely that, which gave me a perfect view of his perfect ass in those boxer briefs. Quickly, I turned my back to him, sucking in a deep breath as I struggled to process... any of this.

From the drink mix-up to him on my piano, to learning I’d physically accosted him, I just...

What the fuck is my life right now?

“Better?” he asked, and I turned to find him in his jeans and sweater from the night before, and honestly... no, it wasn’t better, because he still looked entirely too good to be in my apartment right now.

“Yes,” I lied, not keeping my gaze in his direction too long. “Are we um... are we snowed in, or something?”

“Nah,” he said, dropping onto my couch to re-fold the blanket that was always draped there – the blanket he’d obviously used to sleep, which probably now smelled like him.

“It was bad last night, but the roads are pretty clear, and the sidewalks have probably already been salted.”

I nodded. “Cool. So... you can go now, right?”

Royal’s eyebrows lifted as he returned the blanket to its place. “Damn. You’re really trying to get me out of here, huh?”

“Well... yes. Did you expect different?”

He tipped his head. “Not at all. You reacted... about how I expected you to. As usual.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked, crossing my arms.

He shrugged, reaching for the shoes he’d left by the couch. “Just that you... do things a certain way. Always. So it’s not too hard to predict your actions and reactions. I’ll admit, though – the twerking surprised me.”

“But you’re saying I’m predictable?”

“Most neurotic people are,” he explained, super casual. “You’re nothing if not set in your ways.”

“I’m not *neurotic*, I’m... detail-oriented, and organized, and—”

“*Passionate about the brand,*” Royal interrupted in a tone that was clearly intended to mock my voice.

My arms dropped to my sides, fists clenched. “*You’re an asshole,*” I stated, nostrils flared. “Just because it’s not serious to you, doesn’t mean it’s not – or shouldn’t be - important to me.”

Royal didn’t say anything, his gaze resting on my face for a moment before it dropped lower, in a blatant perusal. “Your robe is open.”

Instant heat rushed to my face as I looked down to confirm that my robe had, indeed, come open from my hastily tied belt.

“*Get out!*” I shrieked, as I snatched the two sides around my body and re-knotted the belt, more securely this time. “Right now.”

“I’m *going*,” he insisted, laughing as I snatched up his ear warmer and gloves from the table beside the couch, shoving them at him. Just like the pest I’d always known him to be, he took his sweet time getting to the door, and no amount of me pushing at him seemed to make him move a millisecond faster.

“If you tell anybody about last night, I will *literally* murder you,” I threatened, drawing more laughter as he turned to face me in front of the door.

“No worries, *A-nik-a*.” he grinned. “Last night is just between you and me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Do *not* make it sound like... *ugh!* Whatever. *Get out*,” I hissed again, unlocking and flinging the door open.

To find my mother standing on the other side, fist raised, poised to knock.

What.

Is.

My.

Life.

“Mrs. Ellis – a pleasure to see you, as always,” Royal said, suddenly wearing the most charming of charming smiles instead of that irritating smirk. “I see mother *and* daughter just looking good as they wanna look first thing in the morning.”

Of course, my mother smiled back, looking between me and him, taking note of my *not dressed* state before she spoke. “Well, aren’t you a sweet young man. You work with Anika at the coffeehouse, right?”

He nodded. “I do. Royal Taylor. I believe I’ve made your oat-milk gingerbread latte more than once this fall – add a splash of pumpkin and a sprinkle of cinnamon on top, right?”

“*Oh!*” my mother giggled, utterly-friggin’-delighted. “You’re very good at this, aren’t you?”

“I’d say it runs in the family. Your next one is on me, okay?”

Mama's eyes went wide. "Well, *thank* you – this one never gives me free lattes."

Royal looked at me and winked. "Anika's a good girl, so I'm not surprised."

Oh, God.

"Royal was just leaving, *right?*" I asked, giving him a pointed look that only amused him more.

"*Royal,*" my mother repeated. "What an elegant name. And *so* handsome."

"Thank you, I—"

"*Go home, Royal.*" I grabbed my mother's hand, pulling her inside and closing the door before any further conversation could happen. I hoped that would save me, but... of course not.

"*Oh, Nik!*" she gushed, way too excited. "That is a *very* nice looking young man – is that why you're so "fine" with us leaving for the holidays?"

I sighed. "He's *not* a "very nice looking young man." He's the one I've been complaining about making work a hellscape for the last two years!"

Mama shook her head. "Baby, you do not have to play coy with me! You're in here looking all flushed, no clothes on, with that man leaving your apartment in the morning – how do you think you got here, lil girl? Your mama knows the game!"

"*Oh my God,* it's not—"

"You do not have to defend or explain – you've got nothing to be ashamed of. I'm just glad you're out of whatever that phase you were in was. *Now* I can feel at peace with going on this trip and leaving you here by yourself – you can have yourself a *Merry Dickmas* too," she laughed, as my eyes went wide.

"What on *earth* have you been watching, Mama?! *Merry Dickmas?! I...*"

“That’s cute, right?! That’s what I’ma be doing with your daddy all in that sa—”

“Okay, *no*. Not gonna talk about *that*,” I interrupted her, holding up my hands. “And Royal and I are...” I let out a sigh, as what she’d said really clicked. “We’re going to spend some time together over the holiday,” I said, not overtly lying, but also knowing exactly how she was going to interpret those words.

In a way that gave her the comfort she needed to enjoy her vacation without being worried about me.

“What are you doing here anyway?” I asked, trying to shift the conversation to one I wouldn’t have to pepper with half-truths.

“Well, the weather was bad last night, and I tried to text and call you this morning, but you weren’t answering. So, as soon as the roads were clear, I drove up to check on you. And see if you’ll have breakfast with me – to make up for our upcoming lost time.”

I smiled, nodding. “Of course I’ll have breakfast with you. I’m already showered, I just have to get dressed.”

“Mmmhmm,” my mother snickered. “Now I *see* why you weren’t answering the phone, too busy getting—”

“Nope. Not doing *that*.”

FIVE

ROYAL

Well, that was definitely worth it.

Whatever inconvenience I'd experienced between getting Anika home last night and waking up entirely too early in the morning had been paid back tenfold, between her reaction to finding me in her place and the completely unexpected *gem* of her mother stopping by.

Now, I easily had enough teasing material to last through the New Year.

A little of the pep in my step faded as my glance fell on the door of the apartment across from Anika's – my brother's apartment. Noble was off living his damn dreams right now, singing his heart out on stages across the country, on a self-funded indie tour. I was his big brother, so obviously, I roasted everything from his wardrobe to his lyric choices as often as I got the chance, but... I was proud of him. He was *doing* something.

While I was here in the Heights trying to prove myself even worthy of nepotism.

Cold world.

I jogged down the stairs, anxious to get out into the piercing December cold. Neither the temperature nor the weather was as bad as they were *going* to get, but it was low enough to shock the system after the cozy warmth of being inside.

Frosty enough to be refreshing, and kick my brain into a different, less depressing gear.

The sidewalks *had* been salted like I thought, but it was still advisable to take care with my steps – another thing to focus on instead of letting my mind wander. I was careful as fuck, all the way to my own apartment, where I wasn't remotely surprised to find my roommate, Dean, sprawled across the couch with a bowl of cereal in his hands, and the TV on.

“Whassup, *walk of shame*,” he chided as I took off my wet shoes and coat at the door. “Walking in the next day in the same shit you left in. Can't *believe* I live with a whore.”

I shook my head, chuckling at his commentary. “Not even like that. What the fuck are you watching?” I asked, caught off guard by the sudden appearance of a line of people in running shoes, hands poised on grocery carts in front of them. Each cart had a kid seated in it.

As I kept watching, a familiar face appeared smiling on the screen, explaining rules to what were apparently contestants. “Ain't that Charlie, from *Pot Liquor*?”

“Yeah man,” Dean confirmed. “This shit is hilarious. They kept it all under wraps somehow, then dropped all the episodes on WAWG. It's called *Don't Touch Nothing*, and these folks racing with the kids in the cart, getting the stuff on the list as the kids read it off. Funny as shit, bruh.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What's funny about grocery shopping?”

“You just gotta see it,” Dean insisted. “I can't explain it.”

I broke my gaze from the TV, shaking my head. “I'll have to catch it another time – gotta hit the shower.”

“But you *haven't* been out slutting it up on a weekday, okay.”

“If you *must* know, I walked a coworker home last night after closing. The weather got bad, so I crashed on the couch over there. Is that an appropriate situation to wash my ass now, or nah?”

Dean shrugged, and laughed. “I got no skin in the game since I was just fucking with you, but *now* I know you were

into some shit. Talking about you *walked a coworker* home. Nigga, I know everybody around this motherfucker, talking about *coworker*. Being all secretive and shit, I see what you're doing."

"Ain't no *secret*, man, chill."

"Nah, I'm putting my detective hat on now, you came through with a mystery and shit," Dean insisted, pausing the TV. "You always got a little story or something from the shop, and they're damn near always about Anika's fine ass, who ain't checking for you. But I know it was a woman, cause you ain't walking niggas home." He cupped his hand in his chin, really thinking about this shit as I crossed my arms. I'd known Dean since high school, and he'd always been nosy as fuck, just like now. "You're trying to be a lil' manager, so I know you're not hitting any of the baristas or servers – and you also wouldn't have stayed at their place. I just... *know*. So. *My* deduction is that you're trying to deflect... cause you finally smashed Anika."

My eyes went wide. "Man, *what?* Where the hell you get that from?!"

"I don't hear a denial, so as far as I'm concerned..."

"I did not *smash* Anika."

He grinned. "But you *did* spend the night at her house, though. Thanks for confirming."

"Nigga, go back to *Don't Ask For Nothing* and out of my business!"

"It's *Don't Touch Nothing!*" he called after me as I headed down the hall to my room. Living with a roommate – especially my annoying ass homeboy – wasn't my ideal, but the money it allowed me to save certainly was.

The possibility of me opening an *Urban Grind* wasn't only dependent on me convincing Roman I was a reliable manager. It required an investment too, which I was responsible for. My corporate marketing gig had been good to me financially, just hell on my mental health. Because of that, I had decent savings put aside, explicitly earmarked for my investment.

I still had to live in the meantime.

Luckily for me, my long-term-temporary position at *Urban Grind* was actually paid, giving me the means to take care of myself until I was able to move on. Ideally, I'd be able to open in Connecticut, near where the *Kings* played, getting in among the other popular businesses. I was a *Blakewood* grad, giving me alumni connections I hoped I could call on to get the space and all that.

But... everything in steps.

I couldn't rush this – I *had* to take it on in small bites to keep the stress low and help ensure the success of the whole endeavor.

I *needed* this.

I couldn't fuck it up.

I spent longer than necessary in the shower decompressing and then climbed into my bed. As far as sleeping on couches went, Anika's had been good *enough*, but it was still a couch, which meant it hadn't been the ideal for actually getting real rest.

And of course... my mind lingered on Anika.

I didn't *think* I was pressed about her, but according to Dean, I'd been talking about her all the time. But... it wasn't like I'd spent my whole time in the *Heights* like a hermit. I'd definitely indulged my share of single women around here, while not taking the plunge on anything serious. It seemed like women were getting more comfortable making it clear they just wanted the dick, and I... wasn't complaining.

I wasn't overboard with it though, I didn't think. So in all my wonderings about what Anika's issue was with me, I never gave too much headspace to the idea that my dating habits might be the problem.

Unless she was making assumptions, which... it was Anika.

So... yeah, she was probably making assumptions.

It was entirely likely that she had me pegged – or *thought* she did – from the moment we met, and had taken whatever narrative she painted into all our interactions since.

And my incessant need to get on her nerves probably didn't help.

That was probably the thing that needed exploring – not her issue with me, but mine with *her*. Why did I get such a kick out of making her mad?

Because she ignores your ass otherwise, my subconscious kicked in, with an immediate, correct answer. And that was really the issue, wasn't it? Women paid attention to me. They flirted, they fawned, they were, *at least*, friendly.

But not Anika.

So I had to get attention from her somehow.

“*Damn*,” I muttered to myself, turning onto my back and propping my hands behind my head. I'd never really thought through the shit before, I just... gave her my natural reactions. Now that I *was* thinking about it, though, I kinda felt like a bad ass kid or something.

I should probably stop.

Yeah.

I probably should.

But... what would be the fun in that?

Those lights aren't supposed to be on, I thought to myself as I passed by *Urban Grind*.

It had become something like a little game for me, looking around the coffeehouse to figure out what was wrong or out of place. I either corrected it before Anika noticed, or planted myself somewhere close enough to see her reaction when she *did*.

Now though, I simply peered through the big front windows of the closed shop. Of course we didn't leave it pitch black at night, but I could see from here that some of the back

and stage lighting were still on – it was just a couple of switches to flip on your way out, which made them easy to forget.

But Anika was the one closing tonight, and *forgetful* wasn't usually her thing.

Usually.

When she wasn't working through a hangover.

Shit.

I was exhausted already, having spent a good chunk of the day watching my nieces and nephews so Roman and Simone could have a breather and do some Christmas shopping, then spending another chunk with Dean at the studio. He was a producer, working almost solely from the basement studio at *Grown Folks Music*, and you never knew what artist, big or small, might be dropping by.

I could spend hours on hours just watching the creation of music, from scratch to finish, and today... I had.

Just this one last thing, and I could take my ass to bed – I had to open the shop tomorrow. Well... in a few hours, actually.

I headed around to the back, keys in hand, to let myself in through the back entrance. I'd barely closed the door behind me when I realized there was music going, but not like the stuff we streamed to create the background ambiance.

Nah... this was the keyboard.

As I made my way to the front, the music shifted – an effortless transition into a different song. Familiar, but not enough that I immediately placed it. Not until she started singing.

I stepped into view of the stage *right* as Anika settled into the first verse of Beyoncé's *Love Drought*. She had herself slanted so that her back was mostly turned to what would have been the crowd as she tackled the verse in a flawless, breathy alto. I was already impressed, and then she moved into the pre-

chorus and chorus, not hitting a single discordant note on the keyboard as she shifted into a clear soprano.

I knew she played, but *damn*.

I had *no* idea she could sing like that.

My continued path toward the stage must've caught her attention because she didn't start the second verse. Her fingers kept moving over the keys, but her mouth remained closed, eyebrows narrowed in frustration.

"What do want, Royal? Why are you here?" she asked, turning back to the keyboard.

"Well, I came in because I saw the lights were on, but it's almost one in the morning. I was going to just turn them off real quick, but then I heard the music and the singing. I had no idea you were a siren, Anika. Using your beautiful music to lure people in and then dash them on the rocks."

Finally, her fingers stopped moving, and she turned to glare at me. "But obviously you saw they were on for a reason, and yet... you still came to bother me."

"I wasn't coming to bother you – I was coming to *admire* you." By this point, I'd made it to the stage, standing at the base of the steps that led up to where she was. "But you stopped playing."

She shrugged, turning her attention back to the glossy keys, but not pressing one. "I don't perform for an audience."

I started up the steps. "Don't consider me an audience then – maybe a duet partner. Come on, start playing again; let me catch the music."

Her gaze shot back to me, features pulled into a frown. "*This* music?"

"Yeah, why not?" I asked, taking a seat beside her. "Let's do it."

"Let's? As in... me and you?"

"Duh. Play it."

She cut her eyes at me, probably because of the “*duh*,” but she did at least start playing. Instead of getting right back to the exact part where she’d been before, she went back to the hook, playing her way into the verse. Her eyes widened in apparent surprise when I started singing – she definitely hadn’t expected me to know the words.

But, I sang them directly to her, making her blush as her fingers glided across the keys. Of course I was singing in a lower pitch than what Beyoncé *or* Anika had, but I committed to that one falsetto note at the top of the verse, then came back down for the pre-chorus. Anika had a full-blown grin by the time I reached the end of it, and burst out laughing when I changed the last line.

“*Ya’ old niggas so wack, I’m so tough. Whassup?*”

Instead of giving me any more of a response than that little giggle, Anika shook her head, then actually sang the chorus *with* me, creating a harmony that had me ready to take her down to Dean at *GFM*.

“So,” she said, once she’d brought the music to a close. “I guess musical talent just runs in the family, huh? Roman, Noble, now you?”

I grinned. “Well, technically, I would be *before* Noble since I’m the older brother, but yeah... I guess you could say that.”

“Interesting.”

My eyebrows went up. “Interesting? That’s all I get? No elaboration?”

“This is already more than I care to talk to you, so...”

“I asked you twice in the song to tell me what I’ve done wrong,” I countered, pulling a fresh grin to her lips. She shook her head, though.

“I am *not* doing this with you, Royal.”

“Doing what?” I asked. She started to stand up, but I caught her hands, urging her back to a seat as I hooked one leg

over the bench to turn so I was facing her. “I thought we were having a moment here.”

She huffed. “Which is *precisely* the problem. I don’t need to be having “moments” with you.”

“What’s wrong with me?”

“*Everything*,” she insisted.

I shook my head. “You know... I don’t think you really believe that. I think it’s what you *want* to believe, but not the reality.”

“And what do you think the reality is?”

I slid toward her on the bench. “That you want me – *want this* – bad as hell. But because of whatever narrative you’ve painted about me in your head, you can’t just give in to the natural flow, and give yourself what you want.”

She scoffed. “*Give myself what I want*. Meaning... you?”

“Yep. Call it self-care.”

“Oh *please*,” she laughed. “Boy, if you don’t get out of my damn face!”

I shook my head. “Nope. Cause in your face is *exactly* where you want – and expect – me to be. This is out dynamic, Anika, this is what you’re used to. Look me in the eyes and tell me you wouldn’t feel some kinda way if I just... stopped.”

“Stopped *what*?”

“Fucking with you,” I replied. “Teasing you. Getting on your damn nerves. You’d miss it if I just suddenly got off your back. Tell me I’m lying!”

She twisted to face me, determination set in her face. “Royal Taylor, I would *absolutely*... I... do you *really* think I enjoy your constant irritation?” she asked, giving the conversation a little shift, probably hoping I wouldn’t notice that she hadn’t been able to force that lie out of her mouth.

“I *do* think that deep down, you enjoy it,” I answered. “But... I think I know something you’d enjoy even more than trying to make yourself hate me.”

Her eyebrow lifted. “And what might that be?”

Instead of offering a verbal answer, I leaned in, brushing my lips against hers. When she didn’t move away or present any resistance, I pushed in further.

And then... her lips were so damn soft, I had to go in for more.

She moaned a little as my fingers sank into the soft coils at the nape of her neck, pulling her into me as my tongue probed the seam of her mouth. That unspoken request made her part her lips, granted me access to tease and explore and taste, to... indulge.

She’d been drinking hot chocolate.

I could tell because she tasted like it, and I had every intention of kissing her until the flavor wore off... and then going in search of what the rest of her might taste like.

She stopped us before I could get that far, though.

“What the... what the hell are we doing?” she asked, pulling away from the kiss.

My hand was still buried in her hair, a position I used for continued access to her skin, kissing along her neck, up to her ear. “Something long overdue, if you ask me.”

“No. No, no, *no*,” she insisted, actually pushing me away this time, so she could get up from her seat at the bench. “We can’t... *I* can’t.”

“Can’t what?” I asked, joining her in standing. “And why not?”

“Can’t... sing duets, and kiss, and whatever the hell else,” she exclaimed, stepping backward to put distance between us. “This isn’t some fairy tale, where you’re my long-awaited Prince Charming. This is... real life. Where I get screwed over by every motherfucker I give a chance to. Even when it’s supposed to be casual. Does that answer it for you?” she asked, and then took one more step back. Only... there wasn’t any room for that.

I darted forward, catching her by the hand before she could topple off stage. She put her hands to her chest as soon as I'd pulled her back onto solid footing, undoubtedly trying to calm her heart down.

"You good?" I asked, wrapping an arm around her to pull her against my chest. "That was kinda close."

"I... I'm okay," she agreed, halfway returning my hug, but not allowing it to linger. "Thank you. I... I need to finish closing up, and go ahead and get home."

"You want me to walk you?"

"No," she answered immediately, shaking her head. "Just... please go."

I nodded. "Okay. I will. Good night."

She offered her own parting words in a mumble that I didn't take personal – because why would I? Sure, she was in a hurry to get away from me now – so much that she'd almost fallen off the stage. But even *that* fed into what had been a theory, but I knew now for sure.

Anika wanted me.

She just hadn't admitted it yet... even to herself.

ANIKA

I still couldn't believe he'd kissed me.

A week had gone by now, and I was still reeling – still didn't know how to act, how to *be* around him. Mostly, I just avoided him as much as humanly possible, not wanting to get caught in conversation, or staring, not wanting to indulge in any of the things I suddenly found so... palatable about him.

He'd broken me.

Even when I reached down deep, it was challenging to find the perpetual irritation that had served as such an impenetrable shield before.

A shield I'd worked hard to build, and was *not* ready to let go of.

“Are you even listening to me Nik?”

I blinked, hard, turning my attention back to my cousin and the steaming mug of spiced chai in front of me. Jules sipped from her own cup, her gaze remaining level with mine as she waited for a response.

“Sorry,” I admitted, shaking my head as I retrieved my drink from the table. “I wasn't.”

Beside me on the couch, Jules laughed. “Well, I at least appreciate the honesty.”

We were perched in Urban Grind; in a moment of leisure I probably should have opted to spend somewhere I *didn't* work, but... that would be too much like right. The truth was, I was still feeling a little bit of a sting from the sudden shift in work

hours. My salary hadn't changed or anything since I wasn't hourly, but I hated the idea that Roman had looked at what I was doing and determined I needed help.

Especially when that help had come from Royal.

Between him and all these extra hours in the day, I didn't know what to do with myself lately. So here I was, at work but not at work, because I was simply so *used* to being here at UG.

"I bet I know why you're so distracted..."

I raised an eyebrow at Jules as I sipped. "Why?"

"Well... I was gonna just wait until you spilled the beans yourself, but since you're taking *so long*... Aunt Darcy told me about you and Royal."

At those words, *too* big of a sip spilled down my throat, making me cough and choke over the hot liquid.

"I know, it wasn't really her business to tell, and you'd have told me if you wanted to, but I... I think it's *great*, Nik," Jules said, offering a pat on my back to help clear my air passages. "I know you were on your whole *real ass bitch give a fuck 'bout a nigga* thing, but that's not... *you*, you know? I know you, and I know how much you enjoy companionship, so I'm glad to see you opening yourself up to that again. And Royal... is *fine*. Like, you really came out the gate with a *ten*, bih!"

I sucked in a deep sigh and then let it back out, not even knowing where to start. There was a definite need to correct what Jules thought was happening – my own fault for not telling her about any of this, but the shit was embarrassing.

And hearing how excited she was about my non-existent relationship with Royal *really* didn't make it any better.

"You don't have to say anything," she told me in a soothing voice, holding up a hand. "Of all people, you know *I* know better than to try to push a conversation the other person isn't ready to have. This is a major shift for you, so it's probably difficult to articulate, and it's confusing and just... a lot. So you don't have to say anything, tell me anything until

you're ready. I just want you to know I'm *so* happy for you. And if you do want to talk, I'm right here."

"Um... I appreciate that," I said, trying to swallow the lump that had built in my throat.

It was true.

I *honestly* appreciated the sentiment she was conveying, even if it was about as opposite my *actual* situation as could be. Jules' sunniness was just one thing I adored about her, and this show of support without any pressure was only one of the reasons I thought of her as a sister.

But... the fact was, if she and I *were* sisters, she would be the sister that had everything she was supposed to, the sister that was on track. The sister who worries about the other, lonely one, who loves that sister dearly despite the fact that she can't seem to catch up.

Jules thought I was catching up.

Only, I wasn't, and that made this whole conversation feel like a knife to the gut.

"Um... are you guys getting Marshall and his family anything for Christmas?" I asked, trying to change the subject to something that would feel lighter.

Jules nodded. "Yeah, like a truckload of diapers and wipes. I've gotta go get more now that I'm not going to have to kidnap you and force you to come with us."

My eyebrows went up. "Huh?"

"Don't you *huh* me," she laughed. "Aunt Darcy *also* told me about their trip, which you failed to mention when we were talking about how you were spending Christmas," she scolded. "I was fully prepared to throw you over my shoulder and *make* you come with us so you wouldn't be by yourself, but then Auntie told me about popping up on you and finding Royal there. She said you would be with him for the holidays, which... whew. That *really* relieved me."

"I'm glad your mind is at ease now," I told her – the truth – without doubling down on my lie of omission. Before I could

say anything else though, we were interrupted by one of the baristas sidling up to say something to me.

“Nik, I know you’re off duty, but... something is wrong with one of the grinders,” she blurted, wringing her hands. “Mila is here, but something is wrong with one of the registers, and *she’s* trying to fix that. I just... I don’t want the grinding schedule to get thrown off.”

Thank God.

“You were right to come and get me,” I told her, relieved for the escape route she’d just inadvertently thrown my way. “Jules, I’ll catch up with you later,” I said, standing to gather my things.

“We’re still on for lunch tomorrow, right?”

“Umm...” I looked at my watch to check the date. “Actually, I open the coffeehouse tomorrow – I forgot about the schedule changing. Maybe a late lunch, early dinner kinda thing?”

“I will meet you at *Pot Liquor* with bells on, babe. Just let me know what time when you can.”

“It’s a plan, cousin,” I told her, kissing her cheek before I rushed off to see what was wrong with the coffee grinder.

We had replacements planned for the first quarter of next year – newer technology that not only offered more varieties for grinding, but simply superior equipment that better preserved the integrity of the coffee beans. The current ones did the job, but they were older and somewhat moody, and honestly... one of the less-experienced baristas had likely overloaded or overworked it.

Usually, having to deal with or fix one irritated me to no end.

Today?

I was glad as hell for it.

It took me about an hour to get it going again, with the interruption of Mila popping through to thank me for taking on the task while she tended to the other managerial duties.

Really though, she would've – and had – done the same thing for me. When we talked about being a family at *UG*, it wasn't just for talk. We really did try to take care of each other.

I lost myself in the work, and when I was done, I went back to the office to get my things so I could go home.

But... as soon as I was alone, the thoughts and emotions I'd been avoiding hit me.

Had I *really* been so bad at being alone that the people who loved me were *comforted* at the notion of me having a boyfriend?

Or was I just overthinking it?

Sure, I wanted to be partnered, just like Jules, just like my mother. I *wanted* to find “the one,” wanted the house, the kids, the life spent next to someone who adored me.

Just not at the cost of my sanity or peace.

Mama and Jules both respected that part – hell, they *demand*ed it. At the first sign of me being mistreated or undervalued, one of them or *both* of them would be right in the mix, ready to go to war on my behalf. There wasn't a single part of me that doubted my mother and favorite cousin had my best interests at the forefront of their hearts, but *still*.

Their relief over my non-existent boyfriend stung.

I thought I'd done an excellent job of presenting myself as whole, and happy, over these years of not dating. I was lonely sometimes, sure, but I filled the space with friends and family and peers, leaving room to get comfortable with my own company as well.

But... maybe they'd seen through my little façade.

Maybe as hard as I tried to be, and seem, okay with it... I just *wasn't*.

“*A-nik-a*,” I heard from behind me and quickly wiped the tear streaks from my face before I turned around.

“Hey. I was just getting some stuff I left in here,” I explained. “I'll be out of your way so you can have the office.”

“You’re not in my way,” he said, his gaze remaining pinned to mine, and not letting up. “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head and started moving to where I’d put my things done. “Nothing,” I lied, before hooking my purse strap over my shoulder.

Before I could get the fingers of my gloves right to put them on, Royal was in front of me, hand under my chin to angle my face left to right. “Red nose, red eyes... why have you been crying if nothing’s wrong?”

“None of your business. Hint, hint.”

“Come *on* Anika,” he pleaded. “We’re better than that by now, right?”

“Nothing has changed between us.”

His eyebrows went up. “*Nothing?*” A little smirk spread across his lips. “So... you’re pretending that kiss didn’t happen?”

“What kiss?”

“Oh, so you *forgot?*” he chuckled.

I shrugged. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Okay... let me jog your memory then.”

Suddenly, Royal’s lips were on mine.

His hands at my waist, pulling me closer.

His heat all over me, wrapping me in warm comfort.

And I... I let it happen.

Let myself get lost in the velvet-softness of his lips, the hot insistence of his tongue, the unexpected sensuality of his teeth nipping and nibbling in between kisses as he devoured my mouth. I let my gloves fall wherever they landed, opting to wrap my arms around his neck as I pushed myself against him. His hands drifted lower, gripping my ass through my leggings, pulling my lower half closer – close enough that I could feel his dick against my stomach.

Then, he pulled away.

“Remember now?”

My lips were still tingling from the stimulation of contact with him as I backed up – *tried* to back up, with his hands still gripping my ass. I shook myself out of his hold, hastily repositioning my purse from where it had slipped down my arm.

“That’s what you’re gonna do every time?” Royal called after me as I made a beeline for the door. “Run away?”

I stopped in the doorway to turn to him, biting down on my kiss-swollen bottom lip. He looked *so* good today, in a blue sweater that matched his name, and clung to arms I knew were tatted and muscled and just... *ugh*.

“Yes,” I answered. “If my options are running away, or...”

“Or *what*, Anika?” He didn’t move. He just stood there, knowing exactly how good he looked, and felt, and *tasted*. “What the fuck are you so scared of?”

I blinked, knowing exactly how to answer that question, but not really wanting to. But then, after a moment... I just told the truth.

“*You.*”

Before he could respond... I was gone.

A good pair of fuzzy socks *always* made things better.

It was a conclusion I’d come to a while ago, but had never been more grateful for than when I found myself half-tipsy from a little too much bourbon in my eggnog, screaming along to Christmas songs at the top of my lungs as I decorated my apartment for... just me, I guess.

After my run-in with Royal, my emotions – and hormones – were high as hell, so I’d stopped by the store and spent *way* too much money buying up a bunch of Christmas décor. Including a tree, a purchase facilitated through *Posh Petals*, and conveniently delivered right to my door.

I took a cold shower, then a hot bath, put on my favorite sweater, favorite leggings, and favorite fuzzy socks... then got right into drinking my feelings.

“*Ooooh*, Donnie! You know you ain’t have to do us like this!” I screeched as *This Christmas* started blaring from my speakers. Noble and Josiah were out on their tour, and Brit and Raf were at his townhouse, which meant I had the building to myself. I didn’t have to consider anybody else as far as my volume was concerned, so I cranked the music up a little louder and sang along like I was putting on the show of my life while I hung the delicate glass ornaments on the tree – another beautiful purchase handmade from Riley.

I was getting my whole entire life to the Temptations’ version of *Silent Night* when a knock at my door interrupted my damn falsetto. I’d only heard it because of a break in the music, and was tempted to simply ignore it until I realized what time it was.

Late.

I frowned as I grabbed the remote to turn the music down, then checked my phone to make sure I hadn’t missed a call with some kind of emergency.

I had not.

Annoyed, I walked up to the door, peering out of the peephole to see who it was.

Royal.

“What the hell do you *want*?” I shouted through the door, not exactly keen on answering for him since there was no telling what *else* I might end up opening without a wall between us.

“I’ll say it to your face,” he called back.

Ugh.

I unlocked and opened the door, but didn’t unlatch the chain. “Fine. Here’s my face. What do you want?”

He held up my abandoned gloves, hat, and scarf, all articles I’d sorely missed when I fled his presence at the

coffeehouse. “I was going to just leave it all outside your door, but... you’ve got the whole building jumping right now. So I figured you were up.”

“Didn’t you close tonight?” I asked. “It’s almost one in the morning, and you just *had* to bring me this stuff?”

Royal shrugged, his movement somewhat camouflaged by his own cold-weather protection. “Don’t you open the shop tomorrow? Can’t have you walking to work cold.”

I stared at him for a moment, then unhooked the chair, opening the door wide enough to actually take my things from him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He peeked past me into the apartment. “You’ve got it looking pretty festive in there, and sounding like a party. You’re expecting company?”

“No.”

He leaned against my doorframe, one thick eyebrow lifting on his entirely-too-handsome face. “Would you like some?”

I opened my mouth to give him the “*no*” he likely expected before he even asked, but... it wouldn’t come out. Whether it was my heightened emotions or the alcohol, or *goddamn* Ariana Grande singing *Wit it This Christmas* in the background, but what actually came from my lips was...

“Sure. Come in.”

It shocked both of us.

His eyes went wide, and hell, so did mine, but I stepped aside to give him room, and he stepped in, taking off his coat.

“Do you want anything to drink?” I asked, once he’d stashed his coat, hat, and gloves, and was just standing in my apartment looking at me like *I* was what he wanted to quench his thirst.

“Sure,” he shrugged. “I’ll have whatever you’re drinking.”

I nodded. “Well, it *was* eggnog, but I finished the last of that. I’m on to spiked hot chocolate now.”

“The one from *Guilty Pleasures*, that we use at *Urban Grind*?”

“Duh.” I grabbed a mug from the cabinet, then went to the stove. “I made a whole pot.”

He didn’t say anything against it, so I filled his mug halfway, then poured a generous shot of bourbon into a separate glass. I handed him both to let him regulate his own liquor intake.

He poured half of it into his hot chocolate and the rest down his throat.

Without flinching.

“It was a little rough tonight,” he explained, handing me the shot glass back. “We got *slammed*, right before closing. Great for profits, not so good for the staff.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve had more of those nights than I can count. But... looks like you survived it though.”

He took a long sip from his mug and nodded. “Yeah, I made it out pretty okay. *And* I got invited inside for a drink? Oh, I’m *good* now.”

“Don’t read too much into it,” I told him, shaking my head. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Like that kiss didn’t, right?”

“Yes, exactly.” I moved out of the kitchen to retrieve my own mug, which I’d left on the coffee table to answer the door. I wasn’t surprised that Royal followed me, nor was I surprised by his over-familiarity in making himself comfortable in my space.

“Make yourself at home,” I said, bringing a grin to Royal’s face before he took a long sip from his mug.

“Don’t gotta tell me twice.”

He reached up, hooking an arm around my waist to pull me down into his lap – only my most *valiant* effort kept me from spilling my drink all over both of us.

“Dude, what the *fuck*?” I screeched, turning to him with furrowed brows.

He shrugged, his face way too close to mine. “You told me to make myself at home... meaning get comfortable. I can’t speak for you, but this is comfortable as hell to me.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But nothing,” he interrupted, shaking his head. He’d already put his own mug down, and now he took mine, stowing it beside his. “Tell me this doesn’t feel good. Doesn’t feel *right*.”

I let out a sigh, but... I couldn’t really front.

It *did* feel good.

One of his arms draped around my waist, the other hanging comfortably over my thighs... it was... *cozy*.

My lack of an answer must’ve been answer enough, because Royal moved in, kissing my neck. Immediately, my eyes fluttered closed, and I silenced all the blaring alarms in my head as his hand slipped between my thighs.

“Just... straight for the goods, huh?” I breathed, barely, as the sensation of his fingers sliding over my pussy through the fabric of my leggings.

“We’ve danced around it long enough,” he grunted into my ear, using his free hand to bury in my hair, turning my face toward his. “Let’s get to the point now.”

Anything I might’ve had to say got swallowed with a kiss. He invaded my mouth first, his hot tongue licking and exploring until he found the right pace. I turned myself so that I was straddling his lap, giving both of us better access to what we wanted. Then, he slipped his hand under the layers of my leggings and panties, dipping into the space between my legs. His grip on my hair kept me in place, kept me grounded as he pushed his fingers into my pussy, using his thumb against my clit to offer throb-inducing pressure.

“You... are *really* wet,” he murmured against my lips, casual as hell as if I weren’t on the verge of tears from how

good it felt to be touched like this by someone else. “How do you want me to make you cum?”

“What?”

I shivered as he ran his tongue down my throat, then licked his way back up.

“Fingers... mouth... dick?” he offered, explaining his question as succinctly as possible as my hips began to involuntarily rock against his hand. I closed my eyes, letting my head fall back as I basked in the feeling, hypnotized by the pleasurable friction of his fingers. The hand that was in my hair, he pushed underneath my sweater, quickly discovering my braless state. My back arched against him as he plucked my nipple, pinching it hard between his fingers, no relief from the pressure as he brought his mouth back to my ear to ask his question again. “*Fingers. Mouth. Or dick?*” he growled, and I whimpered in pain and pleasure as he squeezed me harder.

“All of the above,” I moaned, and the low rumble of his laughter in my ear almost made me come unglued.

“Good choice.”

He pressed his thumb against my clit, flicking it back and forth as his fingers plunged deep, harder. His kissing and nibbling on my neck got reckless, and I didn’t care about whatever marks might be left behind – only the feelings.

Only the orgasm.

After that first one, Royal wasted no time stripping me out of my clothes, with my Christmas mix still playing in the background. Right there on my couch, the same one he’d spent the night on, he spread my legs open wide, greedily eyeing my pussy like he couldn’t wait to dive in. He used his thumbs to spread me apart, getting his face close enough to take a deep inhale before he looked up, meeting my gaze.

I damn near launched off the couch, when he put his mouth over my already-sensitive clit and sucked.

Hard.

My hands gripped the cushions as he devoured my pussy, hands gripping my ass cheeks to keep me in place. He didn't hold back, slurping and licking and fucking me with his fingers again as he commanded another orgasm out of me.

And then... he wasn't done.

Panting, and only half-awake, I laid back and watched as *he* stripped in record speed, only stopping to retrieve a condom from his wallet. Just as I'd suspected, his dick was beautifully thick and more than enough to have me squirming underneath him as he pushed into me as far he could go.

From there, it was on.

He hooked my leg over his arm and leaned in to get close as he stroked me. Deep kisses and deep strokes that had me dripping wet and moaning his name with zero reservations.

Just bliss.

Eventually though, he sat up, pulling me up on the arm of the couch and hooking both of my legs over his arms. His feet were on the ground, firmly planted as he started stroking me again – faster this time, and harder.

Faster and harder.

Harder and faster.

So fast, so hard that I couldn't even hold myself upright, I just fell back, letting my upper body rest on the couch cushion as he plunged into me.

I was *so* glad the building was empty.

Cause there was no chance my neighbors wouldn't have heard me crying Royal's name. Laying back on the couch like I was offered a whole new, deeper angle of entry and Royal took full advantage, slowing down to give me deep, careful, steady-paced strokes that had me feeling like I'd finally discovered life's meaning.

Thighs shaking, heart racing, chest heaving – I was already fast-heading over the cliff, and then he started playing with my clit again as he moved, adding another layer to what was already too much. It felt too good, and I'd drank a little too

much, and I was *so* tired from what he'd already done, but it was *so* good.

“*Fuuuck*, Anika,” Royal groaned, stopping just long enough to pull me back into an upright position, and releasing my legs to lock around his hips. He took my mouth with his again, even though we were both out of breath and panting. “You’re gonna come for me again, right? You’ve got another one in you, don’t you?”

I shook my head. Even twice was an anomaly that had only happened when I was by myself, and that shit always put me straight to sleep. “I don’t know. I don’t think—”

“Nah, I need you to give me another one,” he interrupted, growling the words against my lips as he buried himself impossibly deep, holding there for a moment before he pulled back. “I’ve been good to your pussy tonight, right?”

“*Yes*,” I whimpered, nodding as dick-induced tears started streaming down my face. He’d found exactly the right spot, and somehow he knew it. He was pressing into it, sending my nerve endings reeling as I throbbed and contracted around him.

“Then you can give me on more,” he spoke into my ear, then grazed my earlobe with his teeth. His hands gripped my ass as he finally pulled back, giving me a moment of respite from that intense spot before he stroked me again. “Cum for me, one more time.”

“I *want* to, but I—”

He slammed into me, hard, and I... completely blanked. For a moment, there was nothing in the world except me and Royal’s dick, pushing directly into a button that had to be labeled “*Instant, Overwhelming Bliss*.”

And the button was stuck.

I couldn’t even begin to explain the intensity that ran through me at that moment, sustained by the sudden arrival of *his* orgasm making him pump into me as he growled into my neck. My fingernails dug into his skin, keeping my tenuous grip on reality until that other-worldly feeling passed, allowing

me to collapse onto the couch and slide backward, my feet still propped up on the arm as my hands fell uselessly to my sides.

With a deep, satisfied breath, Royal dropped to the floor in a place where his head was close to being in line with mine. I think the goodness of it all had us *both* a little shaken up, cause neither of us said anything until finally, Royal broke the silence between us.

“So... can I call you *Nik* now?”

SEVEN

ROYAL

Of all the things I expected might happen, waking up to Anika riding me was *not* one of them. The condom between us was the only reason I could immediately identify that I wasn't dreaming – responsible things had no place in my fantasies.

And... well... that condom she'd put on me was the only sign of the Anika I was used to. I'd expected to get put out in the cold in the wee hours of the morning, and instead, here I was, Anika on my dick, taking full advantage of my hardened state to ride me with abandon.

I could get really, *really* used to this shit.

Pushing myself up on my elbows, eyes low from me still being half asleep, I watched her but made no moves to interrupt. Her eyes were closed, mouth open, one hand planted on the bed, the other between her legs. She was in a zone, and I was more than content to be used like this so I let her go on.

Patience paid off.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes and met my gaze, holding it for a moment before she leaned in a bit more. I met her halfway, making up the leverage she lost by moving her hand from the bed to wrap her arm around my neck. As soon as our lips met, she started riding me harder.

And... *damn*.

Anika's pussy was *exactly* as good as I'd expected, even though *she* was... different. None of her usual fixations, or

bossiness, none of that need for control. She just wanted to feel good, and I had no issues whatsoever obliging that.

In every possible position.

Afterward, though, once we'd caught our breaths, I felt the shift in her. The sexual high had worn off, and now she was *really* coming to terms with what had transpired between us, from last night to this morning... and honestly well before that.

I could tell by the way she hopped out of bed, and sprinted to the bathroom.

So... of course, I followed her.

She was already in the shower when I made my way to the toilet to relieve myself and dispose of the condom. The sound of the flushing was what alerted her to my presence – I was still sorting out what to say when she snatched the shower curtain back to glare at me.

“What the hell are you doing?!” she hissed.

My eyes went wide. “Oh, shit, my bad – that didn't mess with the water, did it?”

“No, *fool*. I mean... what are you still doing here?”

I frowned, looking around for a second before I brought my gaze back to her. “I'm sorry... did I *imagine* waking up with you on my dick, or...?”

Her pretty face flushed with embarrassment, and she let the shower curtain fall back. “I know what we did, Royal. I'm saying... you can go home now.”

Shaking my head, I walked up to the shower, pulling the printed fabric of the curtain aside for me to step in. “So this is how you do me? Use me for my body then send me home without washing up first?”

“*Get your ass out of here,*” she insisted, but didn't offer a single shred of resistance when I wrapped her soapy body in my arms.

“You know you’re not going to be able to pretend *this* didn’t happen, right? Act like nothing changed between us?”

She tilted her face up to me, and I tried my damndest to read her mind as she stared. “And what makes you think that? Cause I’m *really* good at pretending.”

“Not with me,” I said, slipping a hand between her wet legs.

“*Wait*,” she hissed. “I’m... just *no*.”

I pulled my hand back, sliding it up to her waist instead. “Care to elaborate?”

“Do I need to?” her gaze was steady on mine, waiting for a challenge that wasn’t coming.

“No. Do you want me to stop touching you completely?”

It took her a moment to blink, and I was just about to move away from her when she finally answered.

“No. you don’t have to.”

I nodded. “Okay. So... you’re not quite back to completely disgusted by my presence yet.”

Anika raised an eyebrow. “Who said I ever left?”

“The fact that you’ve been fairly nice this morning. Definitely wasn’t expecting to wake up to you on my dick,” I explained.

She laughed at that, shaking her head before she went back to soaping herself with the half-abandoned loofah in her hand. “I wasn’t being nice to *you*. I was being nice to *myself*.”

“Oh, is that how it was?” I chuckled, taking it upon myself to sequester the loofah – she looked like she was struggling a little with her back. So, I did it for her, ignoring the comical way surprised registered on her face.

Probably the same look I wore when she offered to reciprocate.

“You gonna be okay today?” I asked after we were out of the shower, and dressed. It was barely four in the morning

now, and Anika would need to leave soon to open the coffeehouse. I'd shown up just before *one* in the morning. And there hadn't been much sleep since then.

"I'll be heading straight for the espresso machine when I get there, but yeah, I'll be fine. I wasn't the biggest fan of these shorter, rolling shifts when Roman first introduced them, but I have to admit... I do feel more well-rested now," she said, looking up at me as she pulled on a pair of boots.

"Nah... that was this dick," I told her with a wink, and she rolled her eyes.

"I mean in general, not just... *today*. I thought I was going to be swooping in to save your ass a lot, like there would be *something* every day. But... I'll admit that you've surprised me, Royal. You were actually paying attention between getting on my nerves, and you..." she let out a deep sigh, like the next part was just *so tough* for her to say. "You're a good manager, Royal. And you really do bring value to the team."

I frowned, moving to get closer to her as I buttoned my coat. "Wait... what was that now?" I asked, cupping a hand around my ear. "Did you... did you want to see me on a *nude calendar*?"

"Boy, you heard what I said to you!" she laughed, throwing one of her gloves at me, which I caught and tossed back.

"Yeah," I nodded. "I did. And I won't front... that means a lot to me coming from you. I kinda needed a win, and my harshest critic let me taste her pussy *and* thinks I'm good at my job. This is a banner fuckin' day, wow."

"*You* needing a win?" Anika frowned. "That seems like all you do, to me. You just strike me as that type."

I shrugged. "Well, that's what comes of making assumptions," I told her. "Because before Roman took a chance on me, all I was doing was losing."

Her frown deepened. "Took a chance? Your *big cuz* certainly doesn't treat you like somebody he's taking a chance on."

“Just because that’s what you see, doesn’t make it a reality, Anika. Three years ago, I had a fancy-ass corporate job in marketing. I knew it was what I wanted from the moment I hit BSU. I got my Bachelor’s in three years, went straight into their Master’s program. Competitive as fuck. Had my first panic attack – had no clue what that was. I was in the cardiac hospital hooked up to all kinda shit, sneaking to look at my books when I could. I finally got a diagnosis – anxiety – and I ignored it cause I felt like... hell, we’re all anxious to finish this shit and be the best at it, all that.”

Anika shook her head. “That’s... not really how it works though.”

“Oh... trust me, I figured that out. My body and my brain forced me to. I finish my Master’s – finish at the top – after damn near killing myself to do it. I come back, get the cushy internship – still competitive. Still killing myself. Still trying to make sure nobody notices that I look like I’m having a heart attack, *not* taking the meds because when I do, I can’t perform, just... a mess. I got the job though.”

“Well yeah, but at what cost?”

“I didn’t think it mattered. All that mattered was getting to the top. Clawing my way if I had to. That shit all fell apart pretty quick though. It all just became... debilitating, you know? Like my brain was literally shutting down on me. My body would just *refuse*. I couldn’t meet a deadline, couldn’t finish a project, couldn’t think, none of it. Obviously, they let me go. And... here I am.”

Anika’s eyes were wide open, apparently thrown by what I’d revealed to her. “Wow. But... you seem to be managing pretty well now? I never would’ve thought...”

“Yeah, I manage. Try to keep myself out of high-stress environments, and figured out the right dose with the proper meds,” I explained. “I still want to be successful though. And I’m still good at marketing, still good at the things that make a business a business. Which is what brought me to Roman. As long as I take my time... I’ll be good.”

She gave me a little smile and a nod. “I think so too. So... is *that* why you didn’t end up an entertainer, like Noble? I mean... you’ve got the looks, the voice, the personality...”

“You know... maybe so,” I chuckled. “I love people, don’t mind crowds, but the thought of performing, on a stage, with all those people looking at me... that shit makes me want to puke. So you’re probably right.”

“*You* have stage fright? Oh, I don’t believe that shit at all,” Anika insisted, standing up. “All you do is flirt and charm and kick it. I’ve never caught a hint of nerves.”

“I told you – I avoid stressful situations. You’ll never catch me near the stage for karaoke or open mic – I’ll talk a barista into it before I get my ass up there.”

Anika tipped her head to the side, eyes narrowed like she was running over it in her mind. “Wow... I never realized it before, but... yeah. You never get up on stage.”

“I know my limits,” I told her with a shrug. “Now, since I’ve poured all my shit out... you wanna tell me what that was about in the shower?”

“What *what* was about?”

“You not wanting me to touch you...”

“*Oh*,” she said, then diverted her gaze. “I... Um...” she sighed. “It’s been a while, okay? Since I’ve been with anyone. I’m... *tender*, okay?”

I frowned, not initially catching what she was saying, but then... “*Oh*. Shit, my bad.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’m not... bothered by it. I probably shouldn’t have gone in for that final round this morning.”

“Final?” I grabbed her hand, pulling her toward me. “I *know* you don’t think this was just... *it*. Right?”

“Um... why wouldn’t I?” she asked, dead serious. “You’re not exactly the relationship type, and I’m not trying to be in a relationship – *nor* do I want to get wrapped up in a supposedly casual thing.”

My eyebrows went up. “I’m not the relationship type?”

“Well... I’ve never known you to be in a relationship, the whole time you’ve been here.”

“Maybe because the person I wanted wouldn’t stop being mean to me long enough for me to bag her.”

Anika’s lips parted in surprise, eyes wide. “I... I’ve gotta get to the coffee house,” she said, pulling her hand away from mine. “Can you come on out, so I can lock up?”

“So you’re gonna pretend you didn’t hear me?”

“Yes,” she nodded, pushing me toward the door. “Because I can’t think about this right now. Go. Please.”

“Fine,” I told her, turning to face her again once I was out in her hall. “I’ll go, but just so you know?” I waited until she’d actually given me her full attention. “I’m not *going* anywhere.”

“I need to order some flowers.”

Instead of being in my bed, getting the rest I needed from closing the shop – and not the mention my time with Anika – I was out and about in the cold, doing shit I probably had no business doing.

Like ordering flowers.

“Well, this is definitely the right place for that,” August, a new floral designer Simone had recently hired greeted, offering his hand.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing,” I admitted, accepting the handshake. “I do know she likes these,” I said, pointing to a flower she actually had a vase of on her piano. I could tell they were well taken care of, but were still on their last days.

“Calla lilies – classic flower,” August said. “Unless you’re ordering for a wedding, I’d steer you away from white.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, not white. Do the colors mean anything?”

“They do, actually. The white is like... purity, fidelity, loyalty – which is why they’re popular for weddings. Thankfulness and gratitude, that’s the yellow ones. Pink is like... friendly appreciation, respect, admiration. And this dark, blue-black, purple kinda color is for desire, and attraction. And according to some... royalty.”

“Oh, sign me right up for *those*,” I laughed, already pulling out my wallet. “A full dozen.”

“You want me to make a full arrangement around these or just these specific ones?”

“I... have no idea what you’re talking about, man,” I admitted. “I just want to make her smile.”

August nodded. “I’ve got you bruh. I’ll make an arrangement, with a few roses and tulips, and some greenery to give it some dimension. Sounds good?”

“You’re the expert. Just tell me where to sign.”

I walked to the counter with him to pay for my order and had just returned my card to my wallet when Simone came breezing from the back with a box of flower stands in her arms.

“Royal, *hey!*” she gushed, approaching to give me a one-armed hug as she balanced the box, which she wouldn’t let me take off her hands. “I’ve got the box, bruh – what in the world are you doing in here?” She looked at August, who had just slid a receipt and delivery instructions form across the counter for me to fill out. “Are you... ordering flowers for somebody?”

“Nah, chicken wings,” I teased, jumping back when she pinched my hand.

“I mean *obviously* you’re ordering flowers, fool, but... for *who?*”

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m not even putting my name on the card, but you want me to tell you?”

“Duh, or I wouldn’t have asked. Who’s the lucky young lady?”

“Me and you are like a year apart Monie, what are you talking about *young lady*?”

She frowned. “Nigga, if you don’t stop deflecting and tell me—”

“They’re for Anika, alright?” I admitted, throwing up my hands. “Just because.”

“Thought you said you wanted to make her smile!” August called across the counter before he left to start the arrangement.

“*Come on, bruh!*” I laughed with him and Simone.

“Mmmhmmm. And I know August told you what the colors meant too, you ain’t pick the sexy ones *just because*,” she correctly stated. “You’re finally making your move, huh?”

“Wait a minute – *finally*?”

“She is *all* you talk about, and Roman comes home laughing all the time about you getting on her nerves just like a damn kid with a crush. You may as well have been tugging her pigtails.”

“I... am not even going to try to deny that,” I sighed, shaking my head. “So yeah, I guess. *Finally* making my move.”

Simone smiled. “It’s a good one. A *really* good one. Nik likes flowers – she’s in here every other week for fresh ones in her apartment. She’s actually overdue.”

“Yeah, I noticed hers were starting to droop.”

“*Did?*” Simone exclaimed, propping her free hand on her hip. “So you’ve been in her apartment, huh? Doing *what*?”

My mouth dropped open. “I...”

“Boy close your mouth,” she laughed, shaking her head. “You know your cousin used to come by here, night after night, to pull my gate down for me, and walk me home?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he’s told me that story before.”

“Did he tell you how he almost lost me, too?”

“He did.”

“Good,” Simone insisted, finally put the box down on the counter. “Don’t make his mistakes, okay? You know I really like Nik – she’s had dinner at our house, *often*. She’s watched my babies in a pinch. She puts a *lot* into keeping UG up and running, which lets me have more time with my husband. And she’s just a sweet girl, Royal.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You think I don’t know all that?”

“I’m just making sure,” she said. “And... putting you on notice. I’ve watched her have a tough time – watched her get her heart broken more times than anybody deserves. Don’t start any shit with her that you aren’t prepared to continue. Don’t—”

“Play with her, don’t be dishonest—”

“Royal, quote Bryson Tiller to me *one* more time, and I swear—”

“My bad Monie – I couldn’t help it. But seriously... I’m not trying to end up hurting her.”

She smiled. “Not trying to is fine, but it’s better to try not to.”

“I hear you, cousin.”

“Good,” she said, patting me on the arm. “August is excellent – she’ll love the flowers.” She picked up the delivery information sheet. “You’re having them delivered to her at work? You’re not slick,” she laughed. “That’s your way of putting the whole neighborhood on notice, huh?”

I grinned back. “Not just the neighborhood – the woman herself.”

I left *Posh Petals* with a little extra pep in my step, intending to spend the rest of the day doing some last-minute Christmas shopping for the family.

And... I did the Christmas shopping, sure.

But, I couldn’t help myself from somewhat rushing it along so I could get my purchases home and make my way

back out to Urban Grind.

I wanted to be there when Anika got her flowers.

It was a Friday, so the shop was crowded enough even for the early shift that I was able to sneak in without her noticing me. I posted up in a corner that would allow me to see most of the shop without being in easy view of the front counter, which was where Anika usually lingered during the last hour of her morning shift.

Today was no different.

Exactly on time, a delivery person from Posh Petals came bustling through the front door, heading straight for Anika. Initially, she must've assumed they were looking for someone else and had only come to her because she was the manager.

I was glad as hell I'd snuck in here to see it.

The change in her was subtle, but gratifying as hell. She'd smiled just at the sight of the flowers, even before she knew they were for her.

Now that she understood they were *her* gift?

She completely lit up.

I'd seen her attempts to check a smile often enough that I could tell she was struggling, hard, not to break into a full-on beam. She took the card away, stowing it in her pocket as the baristas gave her a good-natured teasing for a few minutes until the novelty wore off.

But then, I watched, when no one else was paying attention, as she slipped the card from her pocket and carefully broke the seal on the tiny envelope. She glanced around her, making sure no one was watching before she unfolded the card to read the words I'd written myself.

“Seriously... Can I call you Nik, now?”

It did more than make her smile – she *laughed*, and blushed, and bit her lip as she folded the card and stowed it away again.

So badly, I wanted to make my presence known, but I chose the path of patience. Yes, we'd been intimate, but I didn't want to overwhelm her – didn't want to come on too strong.

She was into it, though.

She was into *us*.

This was all the confirmation I needed.

EIGHT

ANIKA

I woke up to a bunch of train emojis.

Between Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, my notification previews were *loaded* with them, forcing me to shake off the last of my sleepiness to actually go into one of the apps to see what was going on.

Of course... Royal had struck again.

The caption?

“Need some help waking up? Find your way to Urban Grind for a triple shot of espresso.”

The picture?

Him, Noble, and Roman, all dressed like *Sugar&Spice* cover models, all holding a branded *Urban Grind* mug filled with what appeared to be black coffee.

And now, I understood the train emojis.

I wanted to be mad about it – I *really*, really did.

Instead... I just turned my notifications off.

What I did *not* need was another reason for Royal to consume my thoughts – he’d been on them heavily enough already. Between me not being able to keep myself off him, him showing some vulnerability in telling me about his anxiety, and then the flowers... I was dangerously close to letting down my guard completely.

Was I ready for that?

I gave my best efforts not to dwell on it, but nothing at home seemed to offer enough distraction. Eventually, I stopped trying and instead got dressed to meet Jules at the *Love Notes* gallery – my cousin was always good for putting me in the right headspace.

At least... when she wasn't congratulating me on a nonexistent boyfriend.

When I got to *Love Notes*, the doors were locked, so I shot Jules a text. She responded immediately, telling me to come down to the coffeehouse.

Of course.

Royal had opened the shop today, and Mila had the closing shift. With our rolling schedule, that meant I was opening tomorrow – Christmas Eve – and Royal would take the last shift. I had really, *really* been counting on not having to see him today.

My avoidance game had been flawless since he sent me those *perfect* flowers, which I'd used to replace the old ones on my piano. As incredibly sweet as the gift had been, it was also incredibly scary. The month had started with me wondering if I'd end up jobless and with a record if I gave in to my overwhelming urge to choke his ass.

Now we were coming to the end of the month, and my chest ached a little at the thought of him kissing me again.

When the hell did *that* happen?!

I wanted to see Jules though, so I sucked it up, knowing Royal would be busy because the shop would be busy. It was just my luck, though, that when I walked in and started making a beeline to her usual spot... Royal was there.

Troy was too, and so were Hendrix and Riley, so it wasn't like I didn't have plenty of buffer. The weak *hello* I offered, along with a wave to the whole group, was all I could manage to bring up, because I didn't know how to act, or just *be*, around Royal.

Especially when the others were so *clearly* couples.

Troy and Jules were pretty well established and comfortable. Hendrix and Riley were brand new – had just gotten together over the Thanksgiving holiday, so they were still just... super cute.

And then... there was me and Royal.

“Hey... you good?” he asked, leaning to speak into my ear. “You’ve been kinda ghost ever since...”

“I’m fine,” I quietly assured him, trying hard to swallow the lump in my throat. “Just...”

He smirked. “Avoiding the inevitable?”

“I seem to remember *somebody* offering me a free latte,” I heard from behind me and turned to see my mother standing there bundled up from the cold.

“Mrs. Ellis,” Royal spoke up, stepping around me to take my mother by the arm, “Come right on over to the counter, I got you.”

“Isn’t your flight soon?” I asked, following them.

Royal stepped behind the counter to fix her drink, and I waited for an answer to my question as she took an empty seat.

“It is – I just came to get my latte for the ride to the airport. And to get one last peek at you before we left – you weren’t at your apartment, so I assumed you’d be here.”

“I’m not *always* here,” I tried to argue, only to earn myself a side-eye.

“One oat-milk gingerbread latte, one splash of pumpkin, one sprinkle of cinnamon,” Royal said, handing her the drink in a to-go cup.

We both watched as she took a little sip to taste it first, then smiled. “This one is a keep baby,” she said to me, then turned to Royal. “What are your holiday plans for my daughter, young man. With us gone, and Jules being gone, I’m going to assume you had no intention of her being alone on Christmas, correct?”

Royal's eyes widened, and he looked directly at me when he shook his head. "No ma'am, of course not. I wouldn't dream of letting Nik spend the day alone."

"*Good.*" My mother stood up, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek. "Okay, I've gotta go – your father's waiting for me. See you after the New Year sweetheart," she chimed, breezing off again like she hadn't just upended things for me.

"I'll tell her the truth when she gets back," I told Royal, who'd come from behind the counter now. "I just needed her to know I would be okay, so she can go on her trip. And you should know, she told Jules we were together too. As soon as the holidays are over, and they've done their stuff without worrying about me, I'll get it all cleared up."

His eyebrows went up. "Get what cleared up?"

"This assumption about me and you being together. Before it... spreads."

Royal shrugged. "Or... we make it the truth."

"We've already talked about that."

"No, I told you I wanted you, and you deflected."

"*Because,*" I huffed. "This isn't... it's not realistic, Royal. I'm... the girl who gets kept a secret or a strung along, not... whatever you're trying to bait me into. And I'm sorry, but you're the type to *keep* a girl a secret, and string her along, and ___"

My little tirade got interrupted by Royal's hands on either side of my face, keeping me still as his mouth crashed into mine. Pretty immediately, I melted into the familiar taste and feel of him, clutching handfuls of his sweater as he kissed me deeper... like he was trying to prove a point.

In front of everybody.

I covered my face with my hands as the coffeehouse erupted in wolf-whistles and all kinds of other playful chatter. Royal grabbed my hands, pulling them down to make sure I saw him smiling at me – dimples in such full effect that I couldn't even be mad.

Or... maybe I just wasn't mad.

Maybe... this actually felt kinda *good*.

“Now,” Royal said, still holding my hands. “All that shit you were talking before... you wanna run that past me again?”

I really, *really* wanted to put on matching pajamas with my parents.

As much time as I'd spent trying to convince myself I was cool with their little impromptu change to our tradition, all I wanted when I woke up Christmas morning was to do what I'd *always* done.

I had to adjust, though.

I already had my dinner plans set – Charlie and Nixon were doing a “family style” Christmas dinner thing at *Pot Liquor*, and my body was all the way ready for those candied yams and mac and cheese.

In the meantime though, it was up to me to keep myself from falling into grinch mode just because things weren't going my way.

It was *Christmas*.

No grumpy shit allowed.

So instead of crying in bed – a fairly regular pastime of mine – I got up to go open the gifts my parents and Jules had left for me under my little tree.

Or... at least that was the plan.

I'd barely made it a step away from the bed before Royal grabbed me by the waistband of my pajamas to drag me back down.

“Where the hell you think you're going?” he asked, crawling on top of me before he started tugging my bottoms down.

“To open my presents.”

He shook his head, giving me that grin that had irritated the life out of me for *so* long. Now... it just made me tingly between the legs.

“Not before I open mine.”

I covered my mouth to laugh. “That’s *so* corny.”

“I never promised you I’d be smooth – I can’t be *completely* perfect, can I?” he asked, just before his lips brushed my thigh.

“Well... this might not be a great time for that question. Not when you’re—oh *hell*,” I moaned, letting my head fall back as he covered me with his mouth. His skill level down there made a helluva case for perfection as far as I was concerned.

And when he was done there... he reacquainted me with the *other* thing he was pretty damned perfect at.

“*Merry Christmas, Nik*,” he groaned into my ear, plunging into me so deep I’d swear I could feel it in my chest. “Don’t they say how you spend Christmas is how the next year will go?”

“That’s New Year’s,” I corrected, half-breathless.

“Fine. Let’s spend New Year’s Eve like this too.”

It was... a little crazy to me, that his words didn’t feel like a lie. Usually, there was some part of me that knew, deep down, I was just being played again, setting myself up for another failure.

This was different.

This was... so, so much better.

Never in a million years would I have thought the bitter taste Royal left in my mouth would turn into something this... sweet.

My phone chimed, reminding me that it was still clutched in my hand from when I intended to get up. Instead of looking at it, I tossed it away, fully engaging myself in what I wouldn’t remotely mind becoming my new Christmas tradition.

When Royal finally *did* let me leave the bed, I hunted down my phone so I could send my family members the usual holiday well-wishes. I quickly discovered though, that my mother had already beat me to it, even with the time difference.

“Merry Christmas... or should I say Merry Dickmas - Mommy”

“Oh *God*,” I groaned, shaking my head at not just the text, but the string of eggplant and tongue-out emojis that followed it, intermingled with gift boxes and Christmas lights.

“Everything good?” Royal asked, peeking out of the bathroom door as I came up the hall.

When I looked up, it *really* hit me that this was not at all how I’d expected to spend this day, but... this wasn’t too bad of a turn of events.

Not at all.

“Everything’s great,” I told him with a smile that must have eased his mind. I was still wearing it when I went back to my phone to type my reply to my mother.

“Ugh, Mama. But... Merry Dickmas to you too.”

- ***The end.***

christina c jones 
love, in warm hues

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina C. Jones is a modern romance novelist who has penned many love stories. She has earned a reputation as a storyteller who seamlessly weaves the complexities of modern life into captivating tales of black romance.



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Equivalent Exchange

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I Think I Might Love You

I Think I Might Need You

I Think I Might Want You

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The Culmination Of Everything

Equilibrium

Love Notes

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In Tandem

Frosted. Whipped. Buttered (Holiday Short)

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More Than a Hashtag

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CK #2 *Love on the Highlight Reel*

CK #3 – *Determining Possession*

CK #4 – *End Zone Love* – Love Belvin

CK#5 – *Love's Ineligible Receiver* – Love Belvin

CK # 6 - *Pass Interference*