

A hand holding a glass of champagne against a background of bokeh lights and a sequined dress.

The Noisemaker

A NEW YEAR'S EVE
HOT HOLIDAY HOOKUP

DANIELLE ALLEN

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Danielle Allen

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Editor/Proofreader: Virginia Carey

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THE NOISEMAKER

WE WANTED TO MAKE IT A MEMORABLE NEW YEAR'S EVE.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, WE ENDED THE YEAR WITH A BANG.

PROLOGUE



“*M*y hot holiday hookup wasn’t with a random stranger. He was my boyfriend at the time. Does that count?” I asked the beautiful woman in the stylish white coat.

“That counts. That’s fine,” Zola Patterson assured me, waving her hand emphatically. “Some of the people who have submitted their stories were random hookups that were just for the night. Some were hookups that turned into more. Some were relationships that just got hot on that particular holiday. And some were the rekindling of an old sexual flame.” She shrugged. “As long as the hookup happened on a holiday, I’ll take it!”

I nodded. “Well...” The smile stretched across my face as I got comfortable in my chair. “Let me tell you what happened on New Year’s Eve.”

CHAPTER 1



Staring through the glass shower door, I watched him enter the bathroom. I turned off the water, wrapped a towel around my damp body, and strolled over to my boyfriend of fifteen months. Kissing his back, I peeked around his broad shoulders and eyed him in the foggy mirror. Chiseled jawline, full sexy lips, and enviably long eyelashes, Desmond Porter's face was as mesmerizing as his body. My hand slid across his muscled chest and my fingers danced over his defined abs.

We fell asleep last night before we could have sex and I wanted to right that wrong.

"Desmond," I cooed, dragging my nails over the waistband of his boxer briefs.

He stared back at me in the steaminess of the bathroom. "Aria."

And his voice was as deep as his soul.

"Do you remember the night we met?" I asked innocently.

"Yes. One of the best and luckiest nights of my life," he answered.

"I love that response," I cooed in his ear. "That makes me happy."

"I love seeing you happy."

His body tensed in anticipation as I outlined his growing erection. He stopped sponging his hair and looked down at my hand.

“What are you doing?” he groaned.

I slipped my hand inside his waistband and wrapped my hand around the base of his dick. I stroked him, feeling him grow with my touch. “Hopefully you in a few minutes.”

He licked his lips and let out a sexy grunt. “I would if I could, but I have somewhere I have to be in thirty minutes. But I’ll be right back.”

My brows furrowed and my hand froze as I was just about to round the head of his thick dick. “What? It’s eight o’clock in the morning on New Year’s Eve! Where are you going?”

“To pick up something. It’s a surprise.”

I took my hand out of his boxer briefs and moved to his side. “I thought we were spending the whole day together.”

“We are, we are,” he assured me.

Confusion pursed my lips. “Um do you want to tell me where you’re going and what you’re going to get?”

“It’s a surprise. I just have to pick something up for tonight and then”—he turned to fully face me— “we can do any and everything you want to do today.”

My scowl turned into a smirk as his eyes hungrily checked me out. “Fine,” I relented when our eyes connected again. Lifting my finger, I poked him in his bare chest. “But just so you know, I was going to suck your soul from your body and make you my famous omelette.”

“Does me running out to get something you’re going to love disqualify me from that treatment?”

“Are you going to tell me what it is you’re going to get?”

“It’s a surprise,” he repeated.

“Then yes, disqualification.” I turned on my heel and sauntered out of the bathroom to our bedroom.

“What?” He chuckled, following behind me. “Damn, you’re cold.”

Dropping my towel low to expose my breasts, I cocked my head to the side. “Just like your omelette will be.”

His deep chuckle warmed me as he approached me. “Don’t be like that.” He encircled my waist and pulled me close. “I’ll be back in less than an hour.”

Grinning up at him, I wrapped my arms around his neck and nuzzled against him. “You know we don’t play about food. Your omelette will be hot, cheesy perfection, just like you like it.”

“That’s my girl.” He leaned down and kissed my forehead, my nose, and then my lips. “Now what about the other thing you were going to do?”

“Oh? You mean the head?”

He waggled his eyebrows. “Yes.”

I shook my head and frowned. “Nah, the dick sucking window has closed.”

Amused and trying not to smile, he grabbed my ass and pulled my toweled body into him firmly. “When will the window open back up?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Laughing, he playfully pushed me out of his arms and grabbed the pair of sweatpants from the bench in front of our bed. “I’m going to be late fooling around with you.”

“You could’ve been late because you had your world rocked, but you declined.” I shrugged. “Let’s not carry that poor decision making into the new year.”

He pulled on a white t-shirt and when his head burst through the neck, he had the biggest smile on his face. “I love you.”

“Good. Because I love you.”

“Oh, and the groceries you ordered were delivered right when you got in the shower.”

“Yes!” I squealed, doing a little dance.

Drying off, we continued teasing each other until he ran out the door ten minutes later. I caught a glimpse of myself still grinning long after he'd gone. That was often the case. Being with him was effortless because we got along so well, and we were so compatible. But we put forth lots of effort because we believed we were worth it.

We were good together.

We had fun together.

We built each other up.

My relationship with Desmond was easily the best relationship I'd ever been in.

It was sexy and silly. It was meaningful and magical. But most importantly, it was healthy.

I slipped into a cute pair of silky pajamas with the matching robe my sister got me for Christmas a week prior. Starting a mix of R&B hits, I danced my way into the kitchen and pulled out the ingredients for our breakfast. I sang my heart out as I set the table and put the directions I'd printed on the table.

Before I started cooking, I pulled out the bags that were delivered and pulled the items out. My excitement built with each ingredient that I put away.

"This is going to be fun," I whispered to myself as I placed everything I needed for lunch on the counter.

Next, I started on breakfast. I chopped pineapples and filled a small bowl. Before long, the menu of fluffy blueberry pancakes, crispy bacon, creamy yogurt, and fresh fruit were on the table. Finally, I prepared for lunch. I took out the necessary pots and after a thorough cleaning, I added black-eyed peas to one and collard greens to the other.

"I'm home," Desmond called out.

"Hey!" I covered the pots and grabbed the pan I'd put to the side. "Breakfast will be ready in five minutes," I responded to him as I poured the beaten eggs mixture into the pan and began his omelette.

“Okay, I’ll be right down.”

I heard his heavy footfalls as he ran up and then back down the steps. He’d removed his hoodie when he walked into the kitchen. “It smells good in here.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Thank you. And it’s almost ready, too.”

He pointed to the paper on the table. “You made a menu?!”

I laughed, waiting until after he planted a couple quick kisses against my lips to answer him.

“No.” I added sea salt, parsley, crushed red pepper flakes, and a good amount of cheese and then I smiled. “It’s the list we have for today.”

“Okay, explain what we are doing again.” He scratched his forehead. “Explain it like I’m five.”

“There are New Year’s Eve traditions that people do all over the world and I found a list of fifteen that we can knock out.”

“And what happens when we do these traditions?”

“Well, some of them are for good luck as we end this chapter and move to the next. Some are for prosperity. Some are for love. Some are for blessings.” I shrugged and gestured to the list. “I wrote them down for a reason.”

He kissed my cheek. “Okay, okay, I’ll check it out. But how are we supposed to fit all the stuff in?” He held up his hands. “I’m going to do it no matter what,” he assured me. “But I just want to know how...” He let the sentence trail off.

“There’s some stuff we have to do today and some at midnight and some before bed. But we’re going to do the whole list before we go to sleep and our next year will be our best year yet! And it’ll be a cool way to push ourselves outside of our comfort zone.”

“Outside of our comfort zone? What the hell is on this list?”

I laughed. “What the hell was on your to do list this morning?” I narrowed my eyes. “You left to go do something secretive and important and we don’t keep secrets. So, what do you have up your sleeve?”

He pulled the sleeve of his shirt away from his bicep. “Nothing.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever. I’m going to remember this.”

“Come here.”

I pretended to slide away from him as he planted kisses all over my neck and shoulder. “Stop! I’m trying to flip the omelette! Go wash your hands,” I giggled.

He gave me one last squeeze before making his way to the sink. “So I’ve been thinking about what you said last night,” he started. I glanced over at him, and he continued. “We’ve been working real hard these last six months. I haven’t had the opportunity to take you out and show you off in a while.”

Finishing the omelette, I nodded. “Yeah, it’s been a while.”

“When was the last time we went out again? The movies last month? No, we went to dinner at the beginning of December.”

“No, I mean. I haven’t taken you *out* out since—”

“Warren’s birthday party in D.C.,” I finished the sentence as I plated his food. “That was the last time we really stepped out.”

I handed him his plate and then made my own.

As he carried them both to the table, he responded, “I know I said I just wanted to chill tonight. And I know you planned a day of stuff for us to do. But”—he placed our plates down— “I have something in mind.”

He pulled my chair out for me and I eyed him warily as I sat.

“What’s going on?” I wondered.

He smiled. “I want to take you out.”

“But last night you said—”

“Last night I was just thinking about how tired I’ve been. And you got that look you get when you’re disappointed. Even when you tried to deny it, I could tell. But then you came up with this”—he lifted the paper with the list— “and you seemed excited again.”

I cocked my head to the side. The breath left my lungs gently. I loved how he could read my face, my tone, and my body. He knew me so well.

“Yeah, I was a little disappointed,” I admitted. “But you’ve been working your ass off this year, and I don’t know if you’ve actually taken more than twenty-four hours off at a time. So, it makes complete sense that you’d want to spend New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day chillin. You deserve rest, baby.”

He leaned forward and placed his hand on top of mine.

“You do,” I reiterated. “And after the research, I got really excited about us doing all these things. We don’t have to go out to celebrate the new year. Being together is enough.”

“Well...” He brought the back of my hand to his lips. “Maybe we can do both.”

I bit my bottom lip. “What do you have in mind?”

He sat back in his chair and stared at me. “Everything on your list and then...the Black Hollywood Masquerade Ball at the Tully Museum of Art.”

My jaw dropped. “What?” He stabbed at his plate and then put a forkful of omelette in his mouth. “Desmond! What are you even talking about?” My excitement built as he chewed. “It’s been sold out since Thanksgiving. There’s no way.”

He swallowed. “There’s no way unless your frat brother is dating one of the organizers and was able to pull some strings.”

My eyes felt like they were going to bulge out of my head. “So, you’re serious?!”

He nodded. “I’m serious.”

“Oh my God!” I squealed, no longer hungry. “This is going to be so much fun! We haven’t been out, and I’ve been dying to wear the shoes you got me for my birthday. And I—” My sentence stopped abruptly, and my hand flew to my mouth. I mentally went through my closet.

I don’t have anything to wear.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing in the closet is formal enough for it.”

I knew in my heart that if I didn’t have anything that I felt comfortable in, I wasn’t going to the masquerade ball. I didn’t know if he had planned to take me shopping at some point during the day, but he knew me well enough to know I wasn’t going anywhere that I didn’t feel comfortable. And there was no way in hell that I’d show up at the biggest, hottest, sexiest, exclusive event of the year in just anything.

But I trusted him.

I believed him.

Loading his fork with more omelette, he winked at me. “I got you.”

“But—”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yeah...”

“So, you trust that when I tell you I got you, I got you?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay then. The only thing you need to worry about is how we’re going to finish the list.” He picked up the paper and waved it. Catching a glimpse of the back, he turned it over and frowned. “What does hop John’s pork for lunch mean? Because I know it ain’t what I think it is.”

I burst out laughing. “On the back of the paper I wrote down some stuff that we needed to order or get throughout the day to complete the tasks.”

He shook his head. “You’re mine, you understand me? Mine! I’m not letting you get next to any dude named John.”

“It’s abbreviated about the first thing on the list—which is eat Hoppin’ John.” My body shook with laughter as I turned the paper over and pointed. “We’re starting with Black traditions and Hoppin’ John is like a garlicky, black-eyed peas dish,” I explained. “It has rice and bacon. It sounds like it could be good.”

“Now I’ve heard of eating black-eyed peas for the new year, but I’ve never heard about Hoppin’ John.” He made a face. “And the way you have it written sounds suspect.” With a straight face and amusement in his eyes, he flipped the paper back over and jabbed his finger at the first note. ““Hoppin’ John, need pork’ sounds like you fucking somebody name John at lunch today.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Over my dead body.”

I cackled loudly. “Why are you like this?”

CHAPTER 2



Desmond cleaned the dishes and straightened the kitchen up while I cleaned collard greens. I put the pots on the stove to prepare our lunch and kick off our New Year's Eve celebration.

"I'm going to need to lay down," Desmond yawned as he finished wiping down the table. "When do you want to start on the list?"

"Lunchtime," I told him. I glanced over at the time and then the instructions. "It's nine o'clock now so... I guess... twelve."

"Aight cool. What can I help you with so you can come lay down with me?"

My lips turned upward into a smile. "I got it. Just go upstairs and keep the bed warm for me."

"I can do better than that," he murmured, coming up behind me and kissing my neck.

I giggled. "Give me thirty minutes."

I finished cleaning and preparing the ingredients for our meal, but I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that I didn't have anything to wear to the ball. I tried to put it out of my mind but as I thought about everything in my closet, I mentally ran through my formalwear. There was nothing that I felt like fit the occasion.

"It's been thirty minutes. Where you at?" Desmond asked as he reentered the kitchen.

Leaning against the counter, I looked up at him. My eyes flicked over his shirtless form. The basketball shorts hung low on his hips and as a few nasty thoughts flashed into my mind, my lips curled into a smile. “I literally just finished setting the timer.”

He silently assessed me before walking closer. “What’s on your mind, baby?”

“I really don’t know what I’m going to wear tonight. I don’t know how I’m going to style my hair. I don’t—”

“We’re doing your thing during the day and I’m trusting you and taking your lead,” he interrupted, taking my hand. “And tonight, we’re doing my thing and I want you to trust that I got you.”

“I know and I do trust you. But you asked what I was thinking about and that’s what was on my mind.”

He smirked and pulled me into him. “Are you done in here?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay, it sounds like maybe it’s time for me to put you at ease.”

I cocked my head to the side. “What does that mean?”

He put his arm around me and led me out of the kitchen. “It means I have something for you,” he answered. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“What are you up to?” I wondered when I saw our bedroom door was closed.

“Go inside,” he instructed.

I opened the door and froze. “What is this?”

“Open it.”

I walked closer to the white box on the bench in front of the bed. I let my fingers dance across the satiny material of the red bow before I looked up at him. “Des...”

“Open it,” he repeated.

I opened the box and I gasped. “Baby!”

The gold sequin gown looked like something from a movie set. Even before I lifted it from the box by the spaghetti straps and recognized it, I was in love with it.

“You like?” he asked, a slight nervousness in his tone.

“I love,” I confirmed. “This looks like the dress that was on the mannequin with those shoes I bought.”

“It is.”

My heart, stomach, and pussy clenched in unison. “This is the dress I said I liked.”

It wasn’t just that he’d gotten me a gorgeous, expensive gift. It wasn’t even the fact that he’d gone back to the store and found the dress months later. And it wasn’t even the fact that he had arranged for us to have a night out at the hottest event of the year since we’d been working so hard. It was the thoughtfulness of his actions, the care he provided me, and the love that he consistently showed me.

“This”—he removed it from the box and held it up in front of me— “is the dress that you’re wearing to the masquerade ball.”

My eyes pricked with tears as I stared at it. “Desmond...” I checked the size and then scanned the entire floor length garment. “It’s gorgeous. Thank you.”

“I did good?”

“Yes.” I nodded, taking it from his hands. “Yes, you did.”

“And if you check the bag in the corner, you’ll find two black and gold masks.” He grabbed a hanger and handed it to me. “So, if you want to hang it up, it’ll be ready to go tonight. And you can rest your pretty little head and not worry about anything for tonight.”

My heart felt like it might burst. “Baby,” I whispered hoarsely. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He kissed my forehead. “I told you; I got you.”

“I love you.” I planted a kiss against his lips before carrying the dress and hanging it in the closet.

“I love you, too.”

When I returned, there was a gleam in his eye. “You know I’m always going to make sure you’re good, right?”

I stood in front of him completely turned on. “Yes,” I murmured.

“So are you feeling better now?”

I bit my bottom lip. “Yes.” I shook my head in awe. “I don’t know how I’m going to thank you.”

“Well how about you get in the bed with me for starters.”

“I think that could be arranged.”

He placed his hands on my shoulders and pushed the robe from them. “Then let’s get you out of these clothes.” He tugged my shorts, allowing them to pool at my feet. And then he slipped his hands under my camisole, pulling it over my head. He let out an appreciative whistle, tossing the shirt to the side. “You know I didn’t want to leave you this morning, right?” His hands slowly skated over my skin. “This is what I wanted to do when you were just in that towel this morning.”

My nipples hardened. “I wish you would have.”

Brushing his fingertips over my belly, my breasts, and then my neck, Desmond’s eyes bore into mine. “Can I make it up to you now, Aria?”

A bevy of butterflies spread through my chest and belly. My heart rate spiked when I saw the lust in his eyes. A flash of heat radiated through my body.

“Desmond...” I licked my lips and glanced down to his mouth.

“Yes?”

“How do you want to make it up to me?”

A smile played on his lips. “I have a few things in mind.”

“I like the sound of that,” I breathed, placing my hands on his bare chest and sliding them over the hard ridges and bulging muscles.

“Good.” He grabbed my face and brought his lips close to mine. “I’m going to make sure you’re good. Over and over again.”

Toying with the waistband of his basketball shorts, I tipped my head up to kiss him in response.

“But not yet,” he murmured against my lips.

“What?”

I pouted.

“I’m going to take my time,” he informed me.

I made my eyes wide. “You have me naked in front of you and you want to take your time?”

He licked his lips before his signature smirk graced his lips. “I’m going to take care of you.” His hands slid around my neck. “But I’m going to give you a little payback first.”

“Payback? For what?” I tried to sound indignant but his hands around my throat always made me putty in his hands.

“Payback for how you teased the fuck out of me and then told me that the dick sucking window had closed,” he baited me, lowering his voice. “Do you remember how hard you got me? And then letting your towel drop and flashing me? Do you know how long it took for me to calm down?”

I let out a heavy breath and closed my eyes momentarily. I didn’t know what to say or how to respond so I didn’t. My heart thumped in my chest as he got close but restrained me, keeping me from kissing him.

“The entire drive there all I could think about was you.”

“Good,” I breathed.

He trailed his hands down my neck and over my shoulders and down my arms. When he clasped my hands, he started walking backward until he reached our bed. His hand swept

across his erection and then he sat down. “Come here,” he commanded.

I took a step forward, attempting to sit in his lap when he spun me around and draped my naked body across his lap. “Oh!”

He adjusted me so that my breasts rested against the outside of his thigh and my arms were on the bed. He moved me up a little more, so I was on my tiptoes and my ass was in the air. I felt his dick against my belly each time I squirmed.

I went from damp to wet.

His right hand massaged my breasts gently before tweaking each nipple. His left hand ran down my back and over the swell of my ass. I trembled at the light touch. He coasted down one thigh and then the other. When he got to the back of my knees, he traced his fingertips up my inner thigh—one and then the other—stopping just short of my pussy. By the time he did it for a second time, I was shaking.

His right forearm rested against the middle of my back while his left hand continued to seduce me.

His hand moved to my ass, massaging each cheek, and then his fingers slipped to the apex of my thighs. Just barely, hardly, almost imperceptively grazing my pussy.

“Des,” I moaned.

“Not yet,” he warned.

I felt his hand lift from my body and when it connected with my skin, smacking my ass, I grabbed the comforter and squeezed my legs together. He did it again, a little harder and I cried out wantonly. His hand popped both cheeks, making them shake.

“Baby,” I cried. “Yes!”

He gently rubbed my ass before spreading my legs apart. Dipping his fingers into my wetness, he sucked in a sharp breath.

“Aria,” he groaned, rubbing my slick lips. “I’m trying to punish you, but it feels like you’re enjoying it.”

I nodded even though my head was against the mattress.
“Mmmm.”

“I can’t hear you. Are you saying you like being punished for teasing me?” One of his fingers parted my wet lips and brushed my clit.

“Yessssssssss.” I squirmed in his lap, but I couldn’t move because of his arm placement.

He moved his finger in a circular motion against my clit as soft moans escaped me. Without warning, he stopped and delivered two firm smacks against my ass that brought out a guttural response in me.

“You know what this pussy does to me, Aria...” He slipped a finger in me and then pulled it out slowly. “You know I can’t get enough of you... your pussy... your mouth... You know this and you still tried to deny me?”

A chill ran down my spine. “Yeah,” I whispered.

He slapped my ass with a loud pop. “You think it’s okay to keep this pussy away from me?” he chastised me, causing me to cry out. His breathing was as labored as mine. “Do you know what this pussy does to me? Do you know how bad I want you?”

“Yes,” I cried out, feeling my orgasm building as he rubbed my clit before slipping his finger back inside me. My wetness was almost as loud as I was when I started panting. “That feels so good.”

He added a second finger as he dipped deep into my wetness and then pulled it out to spank me again. “That’s for denying me.” He struck again. “And that’s for teasing me.” He smacked my ass again. “That’s because I love you.” He hit me twice on each cheek before massaging out the sting. “And that’s for not immediately coming in here and sitting on my face.”

I moaned loudly. My pussy throbbed with desire at every word he uttered.

“So don’t do it again.” He spread my legs and slid his fingers inside me again. “Do I make myself clear?”

“God yes,” I panted as his fingers teased me, my climax building.

The hand that was on my back grabbed my fro, gripping it at the root. “Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” I panted.

“Do you want me to keep playing with your pussy to make you come?”

“Yesssssssss.” I was getting wetter and wetter with each question.

“Tell me.”

“Please,” I begged.

He growled, seeming to read my body’s reaction to him. “Are you getting close?” he rasped sexily.

“Mm hmm,” I intoned affirmatively, my body starting to quiver as he changed strategies and added his thumb against my clit to bring me close to the edge.

“Good,” he growled before removing his fingers and helping me to my feet. “Stand up.”

“Baby!” I whimpered. My body was on fire. “You stopped before I could come!”

Lust, disappointment, and confusion whipped through me as he helped me to my feet. My legs were shaky. I was so horny and in need of a release.

He stood, forcing his shorts to the carpet. “What was that?”

I was going to repeat myself, but the way he looked at me temporarily rendered me speechless.

“Aria…” His eyes dropped to my lips as he licked his. “I asked you to tell me what you wanted, and you didn’t.”

His chest rose and fell faster as we watched each other.

My mouth opened and then closed. I wasn’t sure if he was testing me because he wanted to spank me again or if he really wanted me to tell him what I wanted. I needed to choose my

response carefully because I needed to say whatever was going to get me to my release quickest.

“Tell me what you want,” he demanded.

My breathing was ragged but I held his gaze. “Make me come.”

He was the first to break our trance, slowly moving his body was flush with mine.

“Say it again.”

Before I could get the words out, he crashed his lips against mine, kissing me with enough passion to take my breath away.

Butterflies spread across my belly as his full lips overpowered my own, devouring me.

I wanted him bad.

I always wanted him.

But there was something about the way he kissed me in that moment that made me crave him.

I melted into him. My body buckling as I gave into every emotion I felt.

When he pulled away, he sat down on the bed and looked up at me. With his legs spread, his hard dick heavily hung between his thighs. He licked his lips and scanned my body with a heated gaze.

“You want to come?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I whispered.

He laid back, never taking his eyes off me. “Sit on my face.”

My stomach flipped as I looked at his thick dick protruding from his body. I wanted to climb on his face, but I wanted to come on his dick.

Seeming to read my mind, he smirked.

“Don’t worry,” Desmond interrupted my thoughts. “After I eat you, I’m going to fuck you long and hard. You’re going to

come on my face and my dick.”

Wasting no time, I crawled onto the bed and straddled his handsome face. The moment I got in place, he wrapped his arms around my legs and flattened his tongue.

“Yes! Des, yes!” I cried out.

I rocked my hips, rubbing my pussy all over his face until I came hard.

It took approximately two minutes.

He had teased me so effectively with his hands that it didn't take much time at all for him to get me off. My stomach quivered as pleasure rushed through my entire body until I collapsed beside him.

Desmond rolled over on top of me. Caging me with his arms, he studied me for a moment. I reached up, letting my fingers move over his chest. His muscles flexed as he balanced himself above me. I caressed his shoulders and up his neck. When my hands moved to his face, I pulled him closer until our lips touched.

He kissed me slowly, setting the tone. Every time I tried to kiss him harder, deeper, faster, he pulled away. He didn't let me control any aspect of it. I just had to take it and savor it as he took control. His kiss sent chills through my entire body and incited the fire between my thighs. The pull deep in my belly caused me to clench tightly and throb with anticipation.

“I want you so fucking bad, Des,” I whined.

“You want this dick, baby.” His voice broke sexily as he moved his body forward.

“Yes. I want to come on your dick.”

He groaned, putting my right leg on his shoulder. “I want that too.” He rubbed his dick against my wetness. “I've been thinking about how good you feel...” He rubbed his dick up and down my slit. “Sliding into this tight, wet pussy...” He held my hips still and applied pressure, opening me up. “How you feel when I'm deep in your guts and you're all stretched out...” He let my wetness suck the head of him in and we

moaned in unison. “And how you sound when you’re about to come.”

I moaned loudly.

With each inch, he filled me, stretching me out deliciously. My hormones were in overdrive. Hearing his voice break with lust as he played with me made my body vibrate.

“Des...”

He took his time and eased into me gently but I knew what was coming. We made love. He could be gentle. But whenever he spanked me, I knew he was going to give it to me rough.

And that’s exactly what I needed.

He leaned forward and kissed me, simultaneously filling me as deep as I’d allow him. When he pulled back, he stared at me like I was the sexiest woman he’d ever seen. I knew it wasn’t going to take much to get me off again. I was already primed for it. But the look in his eyes while he was that deep in me nearly did me in on the spot. Once he was buried inside of me, he paused. Running his hands over my breasts, he played with my nipples with his thumbs.

“Fuck,” he swore before moving his hips slowly, pulling out of me. He let out a rumbling noise in the back of his throat.

The sexiness of that sound and knowing I caused him to make it made my heart flutter. He pushed my legs open wide, grabbing my ankles, he watched himself move in and out of me. He rotated his hips, giving me a firm thrust and I gasped, clenching around him.

“Desmond,” I whimpered. I dug my fingers into his shoulders. “That feels so good.”

His eyes flew up to meet mine. “Yeah, it does,” he grunted. “But it’ll feel better when I make this pussy cream all over my dick.”

“Oh shit,” I panted as he started rocking.

Using my wetness to glide in and out of me with a steady rhythm, he started giving me long, hard strokes. With each

one, I got louder and more responsive. The more my body reacted, the rougher Desmond's breathing and strokes became.

He let go of my ankles, grabbed my hips and quickened his pace. He hit something deep inside me and pleasure rippled throughout my entire body.

"Oh shit," I panted as I started writhing beneath him.

Incoherent words rolled off my tongue as he slammed himself into me repeatedly. I didn't know how he managed to always give me what I needed, but he did. He knew my body so well. Reaching between us to strum my clit with his thumb, my orgasm snuck up on me. I climaxed hard, clamping down around his dick.

"Yeah, give it to me," he growled, fucking me through my orgasm.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head and my body became rigid.

Leaning down to cover my body with his, our lips met, and we moaned into each other's needy mouths. The kiss broke as I yelled out in pleasure. Rapid bursts of air from his ragged breathing cooled my heated face.

When he pushed his body off me, I wrapped my legs around his waist and locked my ankles. He held onto my hips and worked himself to a steady tempo and I met him thrust for thrust.

His voice was low and thick with want when he uttered, "This pussy is talking to me."

"Yes," I murmured, my hands roaming over his chest.

He drove into me harder. "What's it saying?"

"That it's yours."

"Fuck," he swore, closing his eyes for a second. "Say it."

"I'm yours. My pussy is yours. My heart is yours. I'm yours. I'm yours. I fucking love you."

He growled from somewhere deep in his soul. "I fucking love *you*."

“Then fill me up.”

“Shit, Aria.” Ramming into me, the sound of my wetness invited him to release. “Is that what you want?” His speed increased as he started to speak again. “You want me to come in you?”

Just the idea of him filling me up was about to send me over the edge.

He hit a spot deep inside of me, causing me to clench tighter which caused him to groan loudly.

“I *need* you to come in me,” I begged wantonly.

“Fuck!”

Another orgasm was on the brink as he drove himself into me. I felt him struggling to hold back as he gripped the fleshiness of my hips. Increasing his pace, he delivered each stroke harder than the last.

“I’m about to fill this pussy up.”

Just grunts and moans poured out of me as he continued taking care of my needs while succumbing to his own. Feeling him lose control pushed me over the edge.

A lustful wail left my mouth as my toes curled and my back arched violently. I had no control over my pulsating body. The intensity of my orgasm complemented his as he bucked against me. Cursing under his breath, he started to come inside me. He stiffened and shuddered as he filled me up.

My heart was pounding in my chest and both of us panted, completely exhausted. He collapsed beside me in bed and after a couple of minutes, our breathing had slowed. I reached over and intertwined my fingers with his as we recovered.

CHAPTER 3



Representing good luck, new beginnings, and wisdom, the black-eyed peas mixture stewed in a pot on the stove. The collard greens, to represent folded money, cooked in the pot next to it. Cornbread, to represent riches, baked in the oven. It was only right to start our celebration with three traditional African American New Year's Eve dishes.

It had been ninety minutes since he blew my back out. And ten minutes since I woke up from a much-needed nap.

"It smells like my grandma's house," Desmond commented as he entered the kitchen.

I laughed lightly. "Hopefully, it'll taste as good as Grandma's."

Wrapping his arms around my waist, he kissed my neck. "I'm sure it—" His sentence stopped abruptly as he peered over my shoulder into the pot of greens. "You don't have any meat in there?"

I sucked my teeth and bumped him away from me with my hip. "Yes! There's fatback in there," I retorted.

He twisted his lips and eyed the greens suspiciously. "Where?"

I laughed. "It's in there, now move!" I put everything on a low simmer and then pulled the cornbread out the oven. "This is our little appetizer to get us started."

"Okay cool because after that work we put in earlier, I need something hearty." He looked around dramatically. "And

I don't see no meat.”

“We can grab something when we go up the street if you're still hungry. But this'll hold you over.” I bit my bottom lip as I took two plates from the cabinet. When I handed him his, I caught him checking me out. “And you're right. You did put in that work this morning,” I agreed.

“I wouldn't be surprised if the neighbors left a note on the door again.”

I stopped cutting into the butter and honey coated cornbread and groaned. “Don't remind me. Every time I leave for work on Monday mornings, that lady always leaves at the same time. And every time, she grits on me.”

“Like I told you before, we're grown, and she's grown.” He scooped a spoonful of food onto his plate. “She's just mad because nobody is greasing her yams.”

I stared at his profile as he put a scoop of Hoppin John on my plate. “She filed a noise complaint.”

“Well, you are *quite* noisy,” he admitted as he gave me a scoop of greens.

“Des!”

He chuckled. “It's true! But I love that about you. You know I love making you scream.”

“Yes, but you making me scream is going to get us evicted.”

“They're not going to evict us on New Year's Eve.”

Rolling my eyes, I gave us each a piece of cornbread. “Baby, that's not what the letter said.”

“Well, we're moving in March anyway.”

“Yes, but we live here now.”

“And if they try to evict us because that lady is mad she's not getting fucked, their sex life will be dry all next year.”

I laughed, following him to the table. “Whose sex life?”

“Everybody. Our neighbor. The people in the leasing office. The corporate office. Everybody!”

“You’re so extra,” I told him between giggles.

“For you and about you, I’m always going to be extra.” He winked. “What do you want to drink?”

The butterflies he caused rippled across my belly as I smiled. “Um a water is fine. Thank you.”

“Anything for you.”

He sat down next to me and stared at the list I’d created.

I waited until he looked up at me and quirked an eyebrow. “It’s noon and we have no more than eight hours. Are you ready?”

He rubbed his hands together. “Let’s go.”

“Okay, so I rearranged some things so it would make more sense with the flow of our day since we have plans tonight,” I explained.

“Big plans,” he added.

“Big plans for which I still can’t believe we have.”

“Well believe it. Once we finish this”—he pointed to his food— “it’ll be my turn to show *you* a good time.”

I nodded. “And I can’t wait.” Pointing around my plate, I said, “We’re starting off with new beginnings, wisdom, and financial abundance.”

He nodded profusely. “Oh yeah, we’re definitely starting off right then.”

“Here’s to us getting a running start on the blessings of the new year,” I started, holding up my bottle of water.

He grabbed his and raised it in the air. “Here’s to us doing everything we planned to do today.”

“Here’s to new adventures.”

He leaned forward. “Baby...” He pressed his lips against mine. “The adventure is just getting started.”

“Oh?”

He sat back and nodded. “Oh yeah.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter where we’re going or what the adventure is. As long as I’m with you, I’m ready.”

The smile on his face made me feel warm inside.

“Cheers to that,” he uttered.

Our bottles touched and then we took a sip.

Dipping our forks into the Hoppin’ John first, we took a bite at the same time.

“Oh, that’s good,” Desmond gushed. He put another forkful in his mouth and nodded. “Yeah, I like that. Where’s this from?”

“They say South Carolina.” I took another bite. “I can’t believe I’ve never had this before.” I licked my lips. “This is really good.”

We ate in silence for a few minutes, tasting everything.

I watched him chew. “What do you think?”

“You killed this Hoppin’ John and the cornbread.”

He had just tasted the collard greens.

I laughed. “So does that mean you’re not feeling my greens?”

“Are *you* feeling them?”

“I can’t stand you!”

“I’m serious.” He pointed at my plate and how I’d eaten everything but the greens. “You know something ain’t right with these.”

I covered my face. “They are bitter.”

“I thought I was eating spinach.”

We snickered through the rest of the meal, getting seconds of the Hoppin’ John and cornbread. Just as we were finishing, there was a knock at the door.

“Oh, that must be something I ordered,” I said in a sing-song voice. “Can you get that?”

Desmond got up and went to the front door. I put our plates in the dishwasher and washed my hands.

“What is this?” he asked as he returned, placing the box on the kitchen table.

“It is something I ordered,” I reminded him.

He made a face. “What specifically?”

“You’ll see.” I grinned as I took the box from his hands. Tucking it under my arm, I carried it upstairs. “But first, we need to get dressed. We need to wear all white.”

“All white?”

“Yes. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, they believe that wearing white attracts peace for the coming year. And it wards off bad spirits and bad vibes.”

“Isn’t it bad luck to wear white in the winter though?” he asked.

“No, but it’s a fashion faux pas to wear white shoes.”

He made a face. “A fashion faux what? Come on now, Aria. You know you could’ve just said it was a fashion no-go.” He opened his arms. “Ain’t nobody here but me. You don’t have to do all that.”

I laughed hard. “Shut up! Oh, and you need to put on red underwear.”

“What?”

“Just wear those burgundy ones. You don’t have *red* red.”

“What’s that about?”

“Italian tradition says red underwear is for *allegria*.”

He made a face and gestured with his hands in confusion. “And *allegria* is...?”

“Joy. And the red is for fertility,” I answered.

I saw him freeze. “Fer-fertility? I thought you wanted to wait until after marriage to have a kid.”

“Fertility of mind, body, and soul.” I got in front of him and searched his eyes. “This is more about being fertile in mind, body, and spirit.”

He grabbed my waist. “Between telling me not to pull out and then these fertility draws, what are you trying to tell me? Because if you want to have my baby—”

With a giggle, I rolled my eyes. “Be serious!”

“No, but seriously...” He licked his lips slowly. “You want me to keep coming inside you? Or do you just like the idea of me coming inside you?”

There was a distinct throb between my thighs at the thought of him filling me up again. His fingers flexed against me as he stared into my eyes. Heat crept up my neck and flushed my brown skin. I knew the right answer, but my body was saying something else. The sensation he created within me caused a slight hesitation.

Even though I was smiling, I shook my head. “The pull out method has been working well for us.”

He looked at me with the sexiest expression, a small smirk on his lips. “You didn’t answer the question.”

I pushed myself out of his arms and turned toward our closet. “You play too much, and we have somewhere to be, baby.”

“I’m just saying...” He started following me across the room. “Say the word and I’ll fill you up. Every time.”

I closed my eyes briefly as his words washed over me.

Stay focused.

Going into the walk-in closet, I searched for the white tank dress that I loved to wear in the summertime. Pairing it with a leather jacket, tights, and knee-high boots, I made it into a wintertime look. But the entire time I was getting dressed, I couldn’t stop looking at the gold gown.

“What’s on your mind?” Desmond asked as I checked myself out in the mirror.

I looked over at him in his white polo shirt, dark denim jeans, and white sneakers. “You look good,” I complimented him.

“So do you.” He whistled, looking me up and down. “Turn around for me.”

I grinned, spinning in a slow circle. “You like what you see?”

“You already know I do.”

“Good.”

“Don’t bite your lip like that or I’m going to have to bend you over and spank you.”

I made a show of bending over at my waist to pick up the box that had been delivered. Predictably, Desmond eased up behind me and gently thrust against me.

“You better stop playing,” I warned as I opened the box. “We don’t have much time and you’re trying to start stuff.”

He slapped his hand against my ass with a firm pop. “I’m going to try to be good. You just look so—what the fuck is that?”

Laughing, I pulled the rest of it out of the box. “Bear masks. In Romania, they do bear dances where they dress up in bear costumes and dance to keep evil away. So, when we get back, we’ll dance around the apartment. But because things may be closing early today, we have to do the stuff we need to go out for now.”

He eyed the masks warily. “I should’ve read the list more carefully because I definitely didn’t see this shit,” he joked.

“Well, if you didn’t spend breakfast time pretending like I wanted to hop on John’s pork, you would’ve seen the whole agenda for the day,” I retorted as we left the bedroom and headed downstairs.

He laughed at his own ridiculousness. “That was a good one.”

I shook my head.

We jumped into his car, and I gave him the directions to our first stop. “Sak Pase Haitian Cuisine,” he read the restaurant signage. “What are we doing here?”

“We are getting soup joumou,” I told him.

As we entered the restaurant, the woman behind the counter looked up with a big smile. “Bonswa! Welcome to Sak Pase!”

I matched her smile. “Hi! We’re here to pick up an order.”

The older woman turned and looked behind her. “Name, please.”

“Aria Taylor.”

“Ah, yes.” She let out a little laugh and then turned back toward us. “An order of soup joumou. Good choice.” She looked between us and then focused on Desmond. “Are you Haitian?”

“No ma’am,” he answered her.

She put her hand on her hip. “Do you know the history of soup joumou?”

“No ma’am,” he replied again.

“During the period of colonization, enslaved Africans were forced by their oppressors to cultivate squash for the soup, but they weren’t allowed to eat the soup,” she explained as a bell dinged. She turned around and grabbed the container and placed it in a plastic bag. “So, on January 1, 1804, when we won the battle against the French army and declared our independence, our first president’s wife prepared the soup joumou and shared it with everyone.” She handed us our bag with napkins and spoons. “And that is why we eat soup joumou to bring in the new year as a celebration of freedom, bravery, and resilience.”

“Oh wow,” he responded in awe. “I had no idea.”

I only knew because I'd read that information last night when I was compiling the list. But seeing the pride on the woman's face as she discussed her culture with us was better than anything I read on the internet.

I placed some cash in the jar next to the register. "Thank you so much for the soup and the history lesson."

"You two come back in the new year, okay?"

"We will!"

With a wave, she called out, "Babay!"

Hand-in-hand, we walked out of the restaurant and back to the car. Checking the time, I made a face. "Okay we have to make it to the Richland Market before they close today."

"Let's go," Desmond said as he pulled off to the outskirts of the city.

We talked about our goals for the new year as we headed to the indoor marketplace. A lot of his goals were focused on work and our move in March.

"...and I think the promotion is coming in February," he concluded.

"That's what's up! I'm so proud of you," I gushed.

"I'm getting this money," he asserted, hitting the steering wheel for emphasis. "And what we ate for lunch solidified it."

I reached over and rubbed his arm. "I know that's right. And there's something else on the list for money that we can do while we're out."

"What's that?"

"We just gotta get something round or eat something round like they do in the Philippines. They say the circular shape represents money and wealth so eating cookies or bagels or having coins or hoops would mean we're boosting our bank accounts next year."

"Do the pancakes from this morning count?"

I thought about it and my eyes widened. “I didn’t even think about that but yeah probably.” I was quiet for a second. “But just in case, we need to find something else that way it’s intentional.”

“Got it.” As we got to the red light, he slowed to a stop and opened his middle console. “Grab that silver dollar.”

I picked up the coin and rubbed my thumb over it. “And now we’ve checked another thing off the list.”

“We’re killing it.” He looked over just before the light turned green. “We’re a good team.”

I grinned. “Yeah.”

We made it in twenty-five minutes and some of the shops were already starting to close. Running to the Dutch bakery, we got to the back of the line. Searching what I could see of the display case, I didn’t see exactly what I was looking for.

“Well at least we have time to taste this,” I said as I opened the bag with our soup.

He reached in and pulled out the container and a spoon. I removed the lid and watched him as he stirred the squash, beef, potato, and vegetable mixture.

“To freedom,” he said.

“To resilience,” I returned as I grabbed the second spoon.

At the same time, we gathered a big spoonful of the soup and tasted it at the same time.

“Mmm.” I nodded, taking a second bite.

“Yeah, that’s some good shit,” Desmond agreed, eating more.

We moved forward in line, finishing half the container.

“I’m done,” I told him, putting my spoon back in the bag it came in. “I like that.”

“I like it, too.” He took a couple more scoops before putting the lid back on the container. “I wish it was spicier though.”

“That would be good.”

“Oh, I’m going to go grab me some of that popcorn over there since there’s no one in line,” Desmond told me, rubbing my back. “You want something?”

“If they have the caramel popcorn, I’ll take some of that. Please.”

He leaned down and dropped a kiss on my forehead. “Of course. I’ll be back.” He glanced at the six people in front of us. “I should be back before you get to the front.”

“Okay, baby.”

I watched his tall, muscular frame as he moved across the marketplace with a smile. By the time he came back, there were still two people in front of me.

“This must be the hot spot,” Desmond observed, looking around at the twelve people gathered behind me. “What are we getting from here?”

“Oliebollen,” I informed him.

His thick eyebrows furrowed as we moved forward. “Oliebollen?” He repeated the word as if he were tasting it.

“It stands for oil balls. And that’s basically how you make doughnut balls.”

“So, we’re getting Dutch doughnuts?”

“Yes sir. And we’ll eat them so that the attacks of our enemies will fail and slide right off of us.”

He gave an appreciate nod as we stepped up to be next in line. “That’s what’s up.”

“Or that’s my interpretation of it, anyway.” I shrugged. “In the Netherlands, they’d eat oliebollen so that when Perchta the Belly Slitter tried to cut their stomachs open, the fat from the dough would cause her sword to slide right off.”

“How can I help you?” the woman behind the register greeted us.

“We’d like protection from the opps, please,” Desmond joked.

The woman, confused, looked between us. “I’m... sorry?”

Holding in my laughter, I shook my head. “Ignore him. We’ll take half a dozen oliebollen, please.”

CHAPTER 4



We ate the Dutch dessert on the way to the river where we tossed in a penny for good fortune like the Romanians do on New Year's Eve. It took us an hour to get home and that's when we went into overdrive.

We threw old clothes we weren't wearing anymore out the window to represent that we were letting go of the past as the Italian tradition called for. We threw the old toaster out the window to symbolize a fresh start as they do in South Africa. We ran around the apartment complex with empty suitcases to usher in a year full of travel and adventures like they do in Colombia. In order to cleanse the previous year's past sins, we took a page from the Buddhist temples in Japan and rang a bell one hundred and seven times—knowing the one hundred and eighth time would have to be at midnight. And then we danced for five whole minutes with the bear masks.

“Okay, that's it for now,” I promised Desmond as laughter shook my body.

He sat on the couch next to me, looking at me like I'd lost my mind. “You said you were worried about us being evicted because of how noisy you are in bed and then you got us ringing bells, throwing shit out the window, running around the block with carryon bags.” He threw his hands in the air. “Fucking we can explain, but you about to get us evicted for some bullshit we can't explain.”

I was in tears.

“Stop,” I screeched, collapsing my body into his as the laughter weakened me.

“Next thing I know, your ass is going to have us setting something on fire.” He looked around dramatically. “Where’s that list?”

“Stop!” I wiped my eyes. “I promise there’s only three more things for us to do and we have to do them at midnight anyway.”

Grinning, he stood up. “Good.” He looked at his watch. “All these activities made me tired. But now it’s time for my portion of New Year’s Eve.”

I wiggled my eyebrows. “Yes, it is.”

“You want to get to the ball at nine-thirty? We can leave here at nine.”

My eyes widened as I realized the time. “It’s almost eight o’clock?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my God,” I panicked, eyes wide. “I’m going to have to rewash my hair! I have to start getting ready!”

“Okay well I’m going to let you do your thing and then I’ll be up in a minute to get ready,” he called behind me as I rushed up the stairs.

At 9:37pm, thirty-seven minutes later than we planned to leave, I walked down the stairs fully dressed.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized as I got halfway down the staircase. “I couldn’t get my hair to do what I wanted it to do so I had to try something new and...” My sentence trailed off as I took the last step and found Desmond there staring at me. “What?” My voice was soft.

He stared at me with a look of awe and adoration. My stomach fluttered as he took me in. “Wow.”

My makeup was shimmery but light. The gold flecks in my eyeshadow made my brown eyes shine. The deep crimson lipstick was matte and smear proof. My hair was braided on

the sides and corkscrew curls graced the middle. It took an hour and a half to achieve the look, but it was worth it. My gold hoops, gold bangle bracelet, and gold hair clips were the only jewelry that adorned me. My makeup and hair made me feel regal and beautiful. But the dress made me feel sexy.

The gold sequin gown fit me like a glove. The color complemented my brown skin and, in some places, looked painted on. The material highlighted my full hips and rounded ass, but also showed off my back. The neckline wasn't too low, so I went braless. The material rubbed against my nipples, causing them to stay hard. The length covered my shoes when standing, but each time I took a step the sexy, metallic gold pumps with the five-inch stem heel showed. The leather strap around the heel looped around twice and had chain detailing. Holding the skirt of my dress up, the shoes stole the show.

Grinning, I slipped on the crystal black and gold Venetian mask with black feathers that stuck out from the top left side of the mask. It was elegant and complemented my hairstyle and my dress. I turned in a circle so he could see my entire look in full. "You like what you see?"

"You already know I do."

I touched the side of my hair, the opposite side of the feathers, waiting for him to make his usual sexually charged comment. "Good."

"Aria."

He said my name so soft that I almost didn't hear it.

My eyes flicked up to his.

He wasn't quite smiling and there was a slight tremor in his voice. "You look beautiful."

I searched his eyes, and I couldn't read his expression. "What's wrong?" I wondered.

"Not a thing." He looked me up and down as he approached. "Not one thing."

"You look incredible, baby," I gushed, eyeing him in his black tuxedo. I ran my hand over his lapels before I pushed up

on my toes and planted a kiss against his lips. “I’m sorry I took so long.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me close. “It was worth the wait.”

I tilted my head and gazed into his eyes. “Well, I’m sorry I made you wait.”

“I’ve waited my whole life for you.” He brought his forehead to mine. “What’s forty-seven more minutes?”

Heat spread through my entire body. “Des...”

I swooned.

Letting me out of his embrace, he took a step back and intertwined our fingers. “You ready to go?”

“Yes.”

He hit a button on his phone. “I got us a ride, so we don’t have to worry about driving. It’ll be here in five minutes.”

“Oh nice! That means we can enjoy the open bar.”

“My thoughts exactly.” He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed it. “Even though I hate to cover you up, where’s your coat?”

We grabbed my heavy black peacoat and he helped me slip in it. When I was bundled up, he ran his hands down my arms. “Okay, let’s head out.”

“Oh! I just got to get one more thing.” I went to the kitchen and grabbed the little bag of twenty-four seedless grapes and placed them in my black clutch. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Desmond had on the masculine version of my mask when I returned. There were no feathers or extra adornments, the gold crystal mask covered the entire top half of his head. But lucky for me, his sexy mouth was still fully visible.

His lips spread into a smirk. “You know they have food there, right?”

I giggled. “But they might not have grapes and we need them for one of the things on the list.”

“Okay what do we have to do? Juggle the grapes or some shit?” he asked as we left out of our apartment.

“No!” Laughing, I shook my head. “It’s a Spanish tradition. You’re supposed to eat twelve grapes starting after the clock strikes twelve. You have to eat them in twelve seconds.”

“What’s the significance of that?”

“The twelve grapes are for good luck for the upcoming twelve months. Sometimes people will try to eat them in tune with the twelve bell strikes at midnight,” I explained as we made our way to a black car waiting for us.

We pulled off, heading to the Tully Museum of Art. And at ten forty-five, we had just dropped our coats off at coat check and we were strolling into the Black Hollywood Masquerade Ball.

“Oh wow,” I gushed as I took in the environment.

The museum was breathtaking.

Everything was breathtaking—the décor, the lighting, the setup, the people.

The music that pulsed through the main foyer and traveled down the halls of the museum had a great beat. The array of food that lined the walls looked incredible and were being served by staff wearing domino masks. There were people dancing in the middle of the floor, people eating and talking in small groups at the tables, and people checking out the exhibits and observing the art. There was so much vibrancy in the air. It didn’t just look like a good time. It felt like a good time.

“I hope this makes up for me not taking you anywhere nice the last six months,” Desmond remarked, slipping his arm around my shoulders.

“This more than makes up for it.” I looked around in wonder.

“What do you want to do first?”

The throbbing beat of a classic hip-hop song came on and almost everyone in the building reacted.

“Oh shit!” Desmond’s head started bobbing in tune with the music before he started rapping the lyrics.

Spinning out of his grasp, I grabbed his hand. “Let’s dance!”

We made our way through the crowd and when we found a good spot, the song changed to the upbeat song we did the bear dance to.

I gasped. “I love this song!”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “As long as you don’t do that dance you did at home.”

I let my head fall back and I cackled. “You didn’t like that?”

“It was... unique.”

We danced for a bit before heading to the bar to get drinks. After spotting grapes on the fruit tray and listening to Des give me a hard time, we made our way back to the dance floor.

“Ay yo, Desi Des!” a deep voice called out before grabbing Desmond from behind. “What’s up, boy?”

Desmond pushed the good-looking man with the fade and the warm smile off him. “Yo!”

“I see you made it finally!” he cheered jovially, running his hand down his goatee.

The man was 90s R&B fine and the woman beside him looked like a supermodel. Her straightened hair was styled in a high ponytail. Her dark brown skin glowed against her expensive looking white gown.

“Of course we made it,” Desmond responded. Looking over at me, he extended his arm until I came and took my place at his side. “This is—”

“This must be your lady,” the man interrupted excitedly, holding his hand out to me. He had the biggest smile on his face. “I’m Braxton.”

I reached for his hand and shook it. “Aria.”

Desmond squeezed my shoulder. “Brax, this is my girlfriend, Aria. Aria, this is Braxton—my frat brother. And this”—he gestured to the woman— “is Jamila. Braxton’s girlfriend and one of the organizers of the event.”

We shook hands.

“Hi,” I greeted her.

“Okay Gold Dress!” she exclaimed, beaming at me. “You are working this whole look! When I said I wanted to do Black Hollywood Masquerade Ball”—she gestured to me— “this is exactly what I had in mind.”

“Thank you! This is a great event you put together,” I told her. “Everything looks amazing. *You* look amazing!”

She posed a little and then tossed her ponytail back and forth. “My philosophy is to always go into the new year looking your best. If you start the year looking good, you’ll look good all year.” She gestured around us. “I think everyone here has that covered.”

I looked at the hundreds of people milling around, dancing, having fun. “Absolutely,” I agreed.

When I looked back at her, she was grinning. “I cannot get over how good you look!” she squealed. “The dress, the mask, the hair—ohmigod the hair! With your hair like that, you look like royalty. You legit look like a goddess. Absolutely perfect for tonight.” She clapped her hands together. “I’m so excited!” She looked at Braxton who had grabbed her arm. “What?”

“Calm down,” he told her, giving her a look and then a quick kiss. “You’re real hype right now.”

She kissed him back and then shook him off. “New Year’s Eve is always filled with so much excitement, so much hope and promise. The energy is palpable.” She held her hand up. “You can feel it.”

“Yes you can.”

“Oh! Sylvia is right there,” she gasped. “I’ve been trying to catch her for the last hour. It was good seeing you,

Desmond. And Aria, it's so nice to finally meet you! I've heard so much about you!"

I'd never heard of her a day in my life.

I prayed my expression didn't give that away.

"Oh! It's nice to meet you, too!" I tried to match her enthusiasm so that she didn't notice that I had no idea who she was before our meeting a few minutes prior.

But it was unlikely she noticed since she walked away, cutting through the crowd like a blade.

"I told them about you when I picked up the tickets this morning," Desmond explained before turning to his frat brother. "Brax, is that Marco DJing?"

"Nah, but it looks just like him, doesn't it?"

They talked for a few more minutes, another frat brother joining the conversation. Desmond held me close and included me in the conversation the whole time. I laughed along with them and added my two cents. But just before they went their separate ways, I found myself gazing up at my man in complete infatuation.

I'm so in love with this man.

I was intrigued by his opinions, impressed by his intellect, amused by his humor, and drawn to his energy. It had been a long time since I'd seen him in his element.

"Are you okay?" he asked, turning toward me.

"Yes." I put my hands on his chest and slid my way to his neck. "I was just thinking about how nice it is to see you like this."

"Dressed up?"

"Extroverted." I bit my lip and gave him a look. "But dressed up is nice, too."

Laughing and enjoying our time together, we danced to four or five songs in a row. Our bodies moved in sync as we grooved to the music. When a sexy song came on, I found

myself grinding my ass against him as if I wanted to reenact the lyrics.

He leaned down. “You better stop,” he whispered in my ear.

Even though I felt his reason, I still gave him a look over my shoulder. “Why?” I asked innocently.

He gripped my hips and narrowed his eyes. “You play too much. You know why.”

I turned in his arms, creating enough space between us to glance down at his crotch where his semi-hard dick was hidden. “And if I don’t?”

He yanked me forward and scooped me up in his arms. Before I could register what was happening, he had me off the ground.

“Des!” I squealed giddily.

He held me so we were eye-to-eye, and he kissed me. Then he slid my body down his so I could feel all of him. “You play too much but I can play too.”

As soon as my feet touched the ground, I swatted at him and laughed. We immediately started dancing again.

And then suddenly the record scratched, and the DJ made an announcement. “Thirty minutes until the new year rolls in! Make sure you pick up a noisemaker so we can ring it in loud!”

And then he started playing a song I didn’t care for.

“Thirty minutes,” Desmond repeated. “Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

I nodded. “Both.” I gestured to the hot bar near one of the exhibits. “Can we get something to eat and check out the work down that hall?”

A smile played on his lips as he slid his arm around my waist. Resting his hand on my ass, ready to guide me through the crowd. “Let’s do it. Let’s go.”

“And we have to scope out a good spot to actually ring in the new year.”

He kissed my temple. “Your wish is my command.”

We grabbed some hors d’oeuvres, champagne, and napkins and then made our way down a hallway with sculptures. There was a good amount of people around, so even though we were further away from the speakers and the dance floor, it wasn’t quiet.

“These are cool,” I remarked, chomping on the mini quiche.

“The quiche?”

“No, that sculpture.” I pointed with my head since I had a drink in one hand, a plate in the other, and my clutch tucked under my arm.

We walked around, finishing our snack and making comments about the art.

“I’m glad we did this,” I sighed as we headed back to the main lobby to get another glass of champagne. “Thank you, baby.”

“I’m glad you’re having a good time.” He looked around the room and then checked his watch. “It’s almost midnight. We have to find our spot. Where do you want to be to ring in the new year?”

My eyes bounced around the lively room. “As long as I’m with you, I’m good with anywhere in here.”

I felt his grip tighten on my hand. “Okay, let’s go.”

We went to the bar, grabbed champagne, and then made a beeline to the opposite side of where we were. The short hallway spilled into a gallery with scarcely anyone in it.

“Are we allowed back here?” I looked around. “This is looking like VIP.”

“Are we not VIP?”

I pursed my lips. “You’re right.”

We walked through the gallery, but we weren't taking in any of the art. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll see."

There were double doors hidden behind a display wall and we walked out onto a small balcony. The city of Richland was lit all around us and the midnight blue sky hovered above.

"Oh wow, this is beautiful," I remarked. "Cold, but beautiful."

"Oh shit!" Desmond swore, eyes widening.

He took my drink from my hand and placed both of ours on the stone ledge of the balcony. Taking off his jacket, he draped it around my arms and pulled me in and hugged me tight. "Come here." He rubbed me to generate warmth. "We have five minutes to midnight, so we won't be out here long. I just heard this is the best place to see fireworks."

My mouth popped open. "Fireworks!"

He nodded. "And we have the best seat in the house."

Shivering, I looked around. "It is pretty out here. And we snuck behind an exhibit to get out here so"—I wiggled my shoulders—"hello adventure!"

He let out a little amused sound before clearing his throat. "Speaking of adventure..." He rubbed my arms and then my hands. "You warm?"

I nodded. "I'm getting there," I answered as he fiddled with his jacket and then took a step back.

"Earlier we toasted to new adventures. And do you remember what you said?"

I thought for a moment. "As long as I'm with you, I'm ready?"

With his fist clenched, he checked his watch and nodded. "Did you mean that?"

"Of course I did." I gestured to where we were. "Exhibit A, I snuck out to catch pneumonia and have a private moment with you. That's adventure."

He chuckled under his breath but didn't acknowledge what I'd said. "You said as long as I'm with you, I'm ready. And that's how I feel about you, too." He paused. "I want to do life with you. I want to spend the rest of my days taking care of you. I want to make sure you're the happiest you've ever been. Because you make me the happiest I've ever been. And I want that for us for the rest of our lives."

Realizing what was happening, a soft whimper escaped me. "Baby..."

"I know we haven't been having much adventure lately. I know I've been working a lot. Working for us. Grinding for us. But it's worth it because you're worth it. We're worth it. And no matter what, I always make time for you. Because I'll always make time for you." Dropping to one knee, he unfurled his fingers and a ring sat in his palm. "And I want to spend the rest of my life making time for you." He picked up the diamond and held it up to me. "Will you marry me?"

CHAPTER 5



*M*y mouth opened and closed a few times as the words lodged in my throat. Tears pricked my eyes, and a soft puff of air left my lungs. “Yes,” I breathed. Nodding as he slid the ring on my finger, I felt like my heart was going to beat out of my chest. “Yes!”

Standing, he stood and grabbed my face. “You’ll marry me?”

“Yes!” I cried out. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“You’re going to be my wife?”

Before I had a chance to respond, he crashed his mouth into mine. He pulled away and rested his forehead against mine just as the fireworks started.

“Happy New Year,” he whispered.

“Happy New Year, baby.” I pressed my lips against his again. “Oh!” I opened my clutch and took out the bags of grapes. I handed him his. “We have to eat twelve in the next ten seconds.”

He looked at his watch. “Let’s go.”

Each of us grabbed a handful and stuffed them into our mouths.

With our cheeks puffed out as we chewed, we cracked up. Bumping into each other, we were able to swallow the twelve grapes of luck through our laughter. He put his arms around my waist, beneath his jacket, so we could physically feel the amusement pass through each other’s bodies. His hand eased

up my back and as soon as his fingertips swept across my bare skin, I inhaled sharply. Our eyes met and the humor evaporated from the moment.

“I love you,” I murmured.

“I love you, too.” His mouth brushed against mine before capturing my bottom lip and sucking softly. “And I love that you said yes.”

“I love that you asked.”

Another round of fireworks exploded in the sky.

Desmond checked his watch. “Let me get you inside and get you warm.”

I’d forgotten all about being cold from the moment he proposed. But I let him guide me inside.

He put his finger to his mouth to indicate we were supposed to be quiet as we approached the edge of the display wall. He took his jacket from around my shoulders and slipped it back on. “Do I look okay?” he whispered.

I nodded. Looking down at my outfit, I gestured to myself. “Do I?”

He licked his lips and nodded. “Beautiful,” he mouthed.

I grinned.

He peeked around the corner and then stepped out. Looking back at me, he extended his hand. “The coast is clear.”

Relief flooded my system.

I was not trying to be kicked out of the museum.

Intertwining our fingers, I stepped out to find Braxton, Jamila, a photographer, and a ton of other people waiting.

“She said yes,” Desmond announced proudly.

Blowing noisemakers, ringing bells, and clapping uncontrollably, everyone went wild.

I couldn’t help but laugh joyfully at the small crowd that had gathered to celebrate our good news. Even though half of

them didn't know who we were, the genuine happiness and excitement was palpable.

"I secured this space for twenty minutes for an engagement shoot," Jamila informed us. "Use the time wisely."

And we did.

We posed, showed off the ring, danced, and kissed for the camera. By the time we were being ushered out, I was convinced we were shooting a docu-series.

"Did you do all that?" I asked as we headed to the main party in the lobby.

His lips curled upward. "I had some help from Brax and Jamila—mostly Jamila. But yeah. I did. For you."

"We're engaged and we have engagement photos." I let out a giddy squeal. "Baby... this was incredible."

He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. "Did we finish everything on your list?" he asked as we made our way to the dance floor.

A smile played on my lips. "Technically yes."

"What didn't—"

"Aria!" a voice called out, interrupting what I was saying. "Aria!"

I turned around to see a familiar face barreling over to me. My eyes widened and my arms flew open. "Jordyn!"

We hugged and squealed excitedly for a minute, gushing over each other's outfits and talking over each other's compliments.

"Wow, I haven't seen you in years," I pointed out. "I want you to meet someone."

I reached over to a grinning Desmond who had taken a step back when we were jumping in a circle.

"Jordyn, this is Desmond. Desmond, this is Jordyn. We went to Hamilton University together. She was my suitemate junior and senior year."

He stuck his hand out and shook hers. “What’s up, Jordyn? It’s nice to meet you.”

Her round face made her look young. But the ecstatic expression on her face made her look even younger. “Oh my God! Nice to meet you!” She put her hands on her cheeks. “Y’all look so good together.”

“Thank you!”

“And your boyfriend is a cutie,” she added, winking at me.

I held my hand up. “My fiancé,” I corrected.

Jordyn gasped loudly. “Fiancé?!” Grabbing my hand, she started jumping up and down again. “Oh my God! And look at this ring! It’s gorgeous!” She stopped her sudden movements and put her arms around us both. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you,” we said in unison.

“It just happened,” I told her.

“New Year’s Eve proposals are good luck,” she informed us. With her hand on her hip, she gave me a look. “I want to know everything! We’ll have to do lunch one day soon.”

“Yes, text me.”

We gave each other a big hug.

“That ring is fucking huge,” she whispered in my ear.

I giggled as we pulled apart. “Bye girl!”

Looking down at my hand, I bit my bottom lip and stared at the ring. She was right. It had to be three carats. The elegant solitary stone was flawless.

Just like my man, I thought as I shifted my eyes to him.

He winked at me. “May I have this dance?”

The R&B song that played was a familiar love song. We reached the dance floor in less than ten steps and then I was in his arms. We swayed to the music with my head resting on his chest. Maybe it was the fact that I could hear Desmond singing the lyrics or it was the alcohol in my system, but as the words

of the song started to resonate with me, I found myself getting teary-eyed.

“Are you okay?” he wondered gently, tipping my chin and analyzing my face.

I nodded. “I’m okay.” Unable to blink back the rogue tear that slipped down my cheek, I looked down.

He placed his hands on my face and forced me to look at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I assured him. “Nothing at all is wrong.” I bit my lip to prevent myself from choking up. “I’m just... happy.”

“Good.” He brought his face closer to mine. “I like seeing you happy.”

Our lips met and what I thought was going to be a sweet, chaste kiss turned sensual and sexy.

His hands roamed down my neck and shoulders before he encircled me. He dragged his fingers down my back until they stilled on my ass.

I didn’t want him to stop.

And from the bulge I felt in his pants, I knew he didn’t either.

My heart thudded in my chest as our kiss deepened. Each time his tongue grazed mine, the pull deep in my gut tightened. He pulled out of the kiss and with a heavy-lidded stare, he took me in. “Let’s go home.”

The desire in his voice was so sexy.

I nodded. “Let’s go home.”

With our hands clasped, we practically ran to coat check. Instead of calling a rideshare service, we flagged down a waiting taxi and hopped in. As soon as the driver started the meter, I kissed Desmond. The electricity crackled between us, and things heated up quickly.

Being as discreet as possible, I placed my hand on his dick and felt how hard he was. Softly, he groaned as I stroked him through his pants. As the kiss became more passionate, I felt

myself imagining how I could ride his dick in the backseat of the car.

The driver cleared his throat. "I think we're coming up to your stop."

We needed to stop.

Breaking the kiss and removing my hand from his lap, my chest heaved.

He stared at me in awe. "You are beautiful."

"So are you."

He smirked. "I can't wait to get you home. Especially with you looking at me like that."

I lifted my hand, wiggling my finger with the large diamond on it. "Looking like your fiancée?"

He leaned forward, pressing his lips against mine. "Looking like my wife."

"Here's your stop," the driver announced loudly, clearly annoyed.

"Thank you." Desmond handed him a big bill and insisted that he keep the change for a tip. He got out of the car and then walked around to the other side to get my door. "I am a lucky man," he commented, looked me up and down.

Giggling, I took his hand and allowed myself to be escorted. "Thank you."

We walked to our apartment and when he pulled out his keys, it hit me.

"After you," he said, swinging the door open.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "First footing!"

He frowned. "What?"

"It's one of the fifteen traditions for the day. In Scottish tradition, good luck apparently comes in the form of a tall, dark man." I winked at him. "So the New Year's tradition is that in order to ensure good fortune for the household, the first person to cross the threshold of the house needs to be a tall,

dark man.” I gestured to him. “You are tall, dark, and handsome so you need to be the first to enter our home.”

He snickered to himself as he walked in. “We do all this wild stuff all day and then end the night with me being the good luck charm. Ain’t that some shit?”

I walked in after him and slid off my coat. With a suggestive look, I smirked. “Who said the night was over?”

He pulled at his bow tie, unraveling it. “If you aren’t on the list of fifteen things we need to do today, I don’t want to do it.”

I cackled. “Let me get a shower first and I’ll put myself on the to do list.”

“Can you be naked and on the bed in fifteen minutes?”

I usually took a longer shower after a night of dancing and sweating, but Desmond unbuttoned his pants and I could see his erection.

I nodded. “Fifteen minutes.”

A ghost of a smile played on his lips as he eyed me. “Let’s go.”

I took my shoes off and ran up the stairs. Stripping out of my dress, I placed it on the hanger and then ran to our bathroom. I grabbed a towel and washcloth before turning on the shower.

I stepped inside.

“Yes,” I mumbled as the hot water met my skin.

Forgetting about the time crunch I was working with, I let the water massage me. I rinsed myself off before I started to lather myself with soap. The washcloth moved over my skin as I imagined how being rubbed down by my man after a long day would feel. I thought about the last time Desmond gave me a massage. It went well until it deteriorated into some of the hottest sex we’d ever had.

“You need some help?” His deep voice startled me.

As I turned around, I almost slipped as I saw that he was naked. I threw my hand against the back wall to balance myself. “You scared me.”

“I’m... I’m sorry about that.” His gaze dipped down to my pussy before locking eyes with me again. “Do you need some help?”

We were inches apart yet not touching.

As if he heard what I was thinking, he waited until I finished rinsing the soap off of me before stepping into the shower. With his broad shoulders and tall frame, he blocked the showerhead, so nothing was getting on me, and water poured on him.

He went from dry to wet in seconds.

And as sexy as he was clothed and dry, he was undeniable naked and wet.

My nipples were hard, and his presence only stimulated them more.

“You were taking too long,” he stated as he held up his own washcloth. “I needed a shower, too. I also worked up a sweat on the dance floor.”

I tried not to smile as I narrowed my eyes at him. “We have another bathroom.”

He licked his lips as he began lathering up his washcloth. “Yes, this is true,” he pointed out. “So, I had a choice...” He started scrubbing his body. “I could take a shower by myself, or”—he ran his fist over his hard dick— “I could take a shower with the woman who did this to me.”

“Well, that’s not fair.” The knot in my belly tightened. “You come in here teasing me and distracting me.”

His dick twitched and I had to pretend not to notice.

“How am I teasing you?” he asked, continuing to wash himself and intermittently stroking his dick. “I’m just trying to get myself clean.”

“Yeah okay.” I rolled my eyes.

His gaze swept down my body and then lingered on my chest. “You don’t believe me?”

He took a step closer. His wet body just grazed my wet body.

“No,” I murmured, massaging my breasts. “I think you want to tease me.”

My nipples ached from his nearness.

I wanted him to touch me.

I needed him to touch me.

Licking his lips, he replied, “I think you’re the one doing the teasing.”

“Me?” I let one hand slip down my body until I got to the apex of my thighs. I started rubbing that hand over my waxed pussy. Staring up at him, I whispered, “I’m just showering. Letting the body get massaged by the water. Getting myself nice and wet—”

Desmond crashed his mouth into mine, pulling my body into his. His erection hung heavily between us, pressing against my belly. He broke the kiss and just stared at me in awe. “You said yes.”

“And I’ll keep saying yes. Over and over and over again.”

As the water pelted his back and sprinkled on me, he brought his lips close and hovered over mine. I waited for his mouth to cover mine, but when it didn’t, I opened my eyes.

As if that was what he was waiting for, he smirked.

Nibbling and sucking on my lower lip, he aroused every sexual urge in my body. I felt my clit throbbing, begging for that same type of attention.

His hands coasted down my back until he palmed each ass cheek. His dick seemed to get harder as he kissed along my jaw and made his way to my neck. He kissed and nibbled his way to my nipples.

“Oh my God,” I moaned as he sucked each hardened peak, owning my body.

“You like that?” he grunted against my skin.

I moaned affirmatively.

Sucking harder, he seemed driven by my pleasure.

“Tell me,” he growled.

“Yessssssssss.”

I had goosebumps by the time he kissed his way back to my lips.

I loved the feeling of his wet body sliding against mine. “I love the way you touch me,” I moaned into his mouth as his hand moved down my belly.

He pulled away slightly and stared at me as the pads of his fingers slipped over my waxed flesh. “I love touching your body. I love tasting you. I love hearing you moan. I love watching you come. I love making you scream.”

“Desmond...” I dragged his name out as he found my clit.

“Not yet.” His eyes sparkled and the look he was giving me caused a familiar ache to reemerge. “You look so fucking good right now, you know that?”

“You’re going to make me come,” I moaned as he played with me.

“Not yet,” he warned, gently running his fingers up and down my slit.

“I can’t help it.”

“You better not, baby.” Staring into my eyes, he leaned down so his nose was against mine. “You’re not going to waste that cream on my fingers”—he brushed his lips against mine— “when you can put it on my lips.”

“Des,” I whimpered.

Supporting me with one arm, he lifted one of my legs and placed it on the rim of the tub. He took my hand and wrapped it around the metal bar of the glass door. He took my other hand and placed it on the back of his neck. “Don’t let go,” he demanded as he lowered himself into the tub. “Hold on.”

As soon as he bent down, water rained down on me.

“Baby, I—yessssssssssssss!”

When his tongue replaced his finger, it felt so good that I damn near screamed. His arms held me securely behind my thighs as he licked me from the top to the bottom of my slit. Using his mouth, his tongue, and his talent, he ate me into hysteria. Loudly, I let myself succumb to the sensation.

“Desmond,” I panted as he tilted my hips and suctioned his mouth to my clit. “That feels good. That feels so good.”

He groaned.

Taking long, lush licks before sucking on my clit again. My body tensed and he zeroed in, focusing on the spot that caused that reaction out of me.

“Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes Desssssssssss! Oh! My! God!” I screamed in complete lust.

My entire lower body started to quiver, and my head lolled back, hitting the shower wall as I came on his face.

“God, I love the way you sound,” he murmured.

“I wasn’t too loud?” I wondered.

“You’re always too loud.” He stood and held my gaze. “And I love that shit.” His dick stabbed me in the belly. “And I want to hear how you feel, what you like, and when you come. Do you understand me?”

“Yeah, but the neighbors—”

“First of all, it’s New Year’s Eve. Second, you’re my fiancée. And third, fuck them neighbors.”

I snickered until he covered my mouth with his, devouring me hungrily.

“I want to feel you inside me,” I told him softly, wrapping my hand around his dick. “And I want it from the back.”

He nodded slowly. “You know you’re the loudest when I’m fucking you from behind, Aria.” He grabbed a fist full of hair and gently tugged. My head tilted back, and he bent to put

his lips against them. “So, I’ll only do it if you won’t hold back. I need you to let it out. I want to see how loud you can be for me.”

I nodded slightly. “Yes.”

He angled his dick, so it was lined up between my thighs. The water helped it slide over my slit enough to stimulate me. “Oh!” I gasped, gripping his shoulders “You’re going to get loud for me while I fill this pussy up?”

“Yes,” I moaned.

“And you don’t care what the neighbors say, do you?”

“No.”

He kissed me. “Good. Because they celebrated the new year with their little noisemakers, and now it’s time I celebrate with mine.”

HAVE YOU MET ZOLA PATTERSON?

Zola Patterson gathered information from her friends* and fans of her website+ to complete her collection of stories. If you want to know the stories she was told, check out the following hot holiday hookups.

Slow News Day (A Groundhog Day Hot Holiday Hookup) *

Fool In Love (An April Fool's Day Hot Holiday Hookup) *

The Delay (A Juneteenth Hot Holiday Hookup) *

Boo'ed Up (A Halloween Hot Holiday Hookup) +

Spread Joy (A Christmas Eve Hot Holiday Hookup) +

The Dream (A MLK Day Hot Holiday Hookup) +

On The Third Day (An Easter Hot Holiday Hookup) +

The Noisemaker (A New Year's Eve Hot Holiday Hookup) +

Once you're done with the Hot Holiday Hookups, read Zola Patterson's story to find out about her life and journey.

The Single Life with Zola Patterson (Zola Duet 1)

The Single Life with Zola Patterson (Zola Duet 2)

Dating doesn't have to be a disaster. Just follow the rules and you'll be fine.

Rule Number One: Never chase a man.

Rule Number Two: Be honest about who you are and what you want.

Rule Number Three: When you know, you know.

Rule Number Four: Never let your men cross paths.

Rule Number Five: Don't catch feelings.

Dating isn't hard.

Settling is hard.

Faking it is hard.

Finding the one is hard.

But dating? Not so much.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my family, friends, and readers, thank you for your love and support. It means everything to me that you read and connect to the stories I write. I appreciate it more than you know.

www.authordanielleallen.com