

agony



monsters
lurk in the city of
angels

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

YOLANDA OLSON

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BLURB

We met under the New York skyline.

None of it was real, but for a split second, it seemed to be.

He was kind to me.

Too kind.

I knew he was hiding a secret—I just didn't know what.

When I found out, New York fell away from me.

Every warm smile and softly spoken word seemed to hurl me
back to reality.

I remembered that I was in the Devil's Den.

What I didn't know was that monsters lurked in the city of
angels.

And it wouldn't be long before I found out exactly who those
monsters were.

CHAPTER

One

“Cut! That’s a wrap, guys! Good job!”

I was standing next to the director looking at the floor.

I listened to him as he told the actor and actress that they could ‘go get cleaned up.’

This was the third shoot I stood through today and all I could think about was how badly I wanted to kill my cousin, Adesynne.

She was the one that got me this job by telling me that I would be working for a major entertainment company; she didn’t tell me that it was a porn production company.

One of Addie’s biggest gripes with me was that I was twenty four years old, still a virgin, and barely went out on dates.

‘You’re such a pretty girl, Neve!’ she would say. Then she would point out my long, wavy brown hair, dark green eyes, slim waist, and somewhat large breasts. “Let’s go out. We can have a good time and we can pick up some guys. You don’t have to screw them, but at least get in a good make out session or two!”

I would always tell her no; that I would rather stay home and sit in my sweats, watch Netflix, and fall asleep on the couch. Sex wasn’t something I felt I needed to be rushed into so I didn’t bother going out to find any. I was a homebody, I was shy, but most importantly, I was happy the way I was.

Now here I was watching people have sex with each other because it was their job and my job to be by the director’s side

in case he needed anything.

Yeah. Paybacks are a bitch, I thought glumly as we all headed to the next location in the studio.

“You look like you need a breather, Neve,” the director observed. I looked up at him and he was giving me a sympathetic smile. “Go outside kid. I don’t think I’ll need you for this set up.”

“Thanks,” I replied quietly.

I practically ran outside. Once I got to the backlot, I made my way through ‘Los Angeles,’ ‘Las Vegas,’ ‘Chicago’ and went straight to ‘New York’ where I sat down on the steps of a brownstone and sighed. Despite the unhappy feeling I had been having all day, I found myself smiling. I was originally from the east coast so being on 5th Avenue made me feel like I was almost home.

I closed my eyes and put my face in my hands. I had already decided that once I had enough money, I was going to make a beeline straight back to the Atlantic side of America. I knew that regardless of what type of ‘entertainment’ company this was, it was still a great opportunity and I was learning a lot about how things worked behind the scenes, especially since my master’s was in entertainment. But I was just so uncomfortable all the time and I was willing to give it up in a heartbeat.

God, I’d give anything to go home, I thought, lying down and curling up into a ball.

Apparently I had fallen asleep on the stairs, and I woke up to someone gently shaking me. I guess I had been in New York longer than I thought. I cracked one eye open and groaned. I heard a voice laugh and the hand that was shaking me moved away. Taking a deep breath, I pushed myself up to a seated position and stretched. I opened my eyes and looked at the young man that was standing at the bottom of the steps, one hand on the rail, and smiling at me.

“I didn’t realize New York was taken,” he said cheerfully.

I smoothed out my hair and pushed the sides behind my ears. I didn't know what to say really; partly because I had just woken up and partly because he was absolutely gorgeous. He had shaggy auburn colored hair, the most amazingly beautiful blue-gray eyes I had ever seen, and a strong jaw. It was taking everything in my power not to reach out and touch his face. I looked at his hand on the rail and raised an eyebrow. They were so smooth but masculine and I could see just a kiss of his forearm peeking out from under his crisp, white sleeve. His t-shirt was meant to be loose, but it seemed to hug his body ever so slightly. The black fitted jeans he was wearing didn't do that good of a job of hiding his muscular legs. Oh yes; keeping my hands off of his gently sun kissed skin was proving to be very hard.

"So do you work here?" he asked.

I reached into my black tank top with the huge white sugar skull in front and pulled out my badge. Eventually I was sure I would learn to speak again.

He reached over and took the badge in his hand, peering closely at it.

"Are you new?" he asked, looking at me curiously.

I nodded.

"Who did you get paired up with? Usually they take it easy on the new girls," he replied with a smile.

"What? No! Hell no!"

I realized that he thought I was the new girl on the *set*, not just the director's go for.

He threw his head back and laughed, "Not into this line of work, huh? It's okay; it's not for everyone. So if you're not an actress, then what do you do?"

"I'm the designated director of the day's bitch," I replied rolling my eyes.

He gave me a sympathetic look and sat down at the bottom of the stairs. He stretched out his long legs in front of him and crossed them.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Neve. What’s yours?”

“Arsen.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said shyly.

Arsen glanced up at my tone change and smiled.

“Yeah, it is. Nice to meet you too, I mean.”

We sat there silently for a moment. I was trying not to stare at Arsen as he looked at the Statue of Liberty in the distance. He cleared his throat but didn’t say anything.

I felt my palms starting to sweat as I was trying to think of something to say. I could just hear Adesynne now; *would you grow a pair and say something to him?!*

“So, what ... um do you do around here?” I asked nervously.

He glanced up at me and grinned. His lips were so full and every time he smiled I felt like I was falling under a spell of some sort.

“There you are! Max has been looking for you everywhere!” a female voice cried out.

We both turned our heads and saw a beautiful, blonde girl with large, fake breasts and impossibly slim waist approaching us on a golf cart.

“You’re holding up the set,” she scolded Arsen as she stopped in front of us.

“Calm down, Jess. I was just sitting in New York, enjoying the skyline with Neve,” he replied breezily.

“You’re Neve?” she asked me.

I nodded.

“Two birds with one stone! He’s looking for you too, hon. I told him I wouldn’t come back empty handed. You’ll have to enjoy the skyline some other time. Get in guys,” she instructed.

Arsen rolled his eyes at me and stood up. I got to my feet and sat in the back of the cart as he took a seat next to her. Jess

turned the cart around and drove us back toward the studio. I felt a small sadness inside of me as I watched New York growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

I want to go home.

When Jess stopped the cart and turned it off, I could feel my stomach turning. I didn't want to watch anymore people having sex but it was my job and I couldn't lose it. Not until I had enough money to get the hell out of here.

She hopped off of the cart and ran up the stairs into the studio and I heard Arsen going up the steps behind her. I sat on the back of the cart and put my face back into my hands. I let out an angry groan into my hands and then leaned back closing my eyes.

"I thought you were behind us," Arsen said cheerfully beside me.

I jumped and opened my eyes wide. I didn't hear him come back down and it scared the ever living shit out of me.

"You okay?" he asked, giving me a concerned look.

"Yeah sorry. I'm just kind of over this whole thing. I've already sat through three sets today. I'm not interested in sitting through another one," I replied glumly.

"If it's any consolation, it's the last set of the day," he replied.

I sighed and hopped off the cart. Arsen laughed and took a step back when I bumped right into him. I was staring into his chest. That's how much taller than me he was; hell I would bet he was taller than most people. I looked up at him and smiled weakly.

"Come on," he said, putting an arm around my shoulders and walking me up the steps.

We walked past the camera men, the production assistants, the boom cameras, Jess, and some other people I could only figure to be more actors and actresses.

"Jesus Christ, man! Where the hell have you been?" Max yelled at Arsen when he saw us approaching him.

“Taking a bite out of the Big Apple,” he responded with a grin.

Max sighed heavily and shook his head. It was obvious that he wasn't completely angry. I let my eyes wander to their usual spot on the floor. I found myself wishing that this job came with noise-cancelling headphones.

“And where were you, darlin'?” Max asked me.

“I fell asleep in New York. I'm sorry,” I mumbled.

“I don't think she's feeling too good, boss. Maybe you should let her get out of here early,” Arsen suggested, giving me a quick squeeze.

Max was silent for a moment. If he sent me home early, I wouldn't get a full paycheck and I really needed the money.

He looked at Arsen carefully and motioned for him to follow him. I stood there and sighed. I had never sighed more times in my life than I had when I started working at this place.

Jess came over and handed me a bottle of water. I smiled at her gratefully and unscrewed the cap. Taking a big swig, I noticed that a couple of new “actors” and “actresses” had just arrived on the set.

She suddenly took me by the hand and led me away from the set. We went outside and sat down on the steps.

“I don't know what's taking so long, but you looked like you could use some air,” she said with a kind smile.

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

She pushed her long blonde hair behind her shoulders and rested her elbows on her knees.

“So what do you think? About Devil's Den, I mean?” she asked.

“Um. Well. I ... um ...”

She let out a tittering laugh and rubbed my shoulder.

“Don't sweat it, honey. Most people think the same thing when they realize what we do here. Of course those same people

also lock themselves in the bedrooms and secretly watch the movies, and jerking off.”

I glanced at her and she had a grin on her face.

Virgin or not, I knew I would never have the same amount of confidence that Jess had, or any of the rest of them for that matter. They took their clothes off for a living in a room full of people, had sex, and got paid for it.

I was having enough trouble just standing there while it happened.

The door opened and closed, and Max walked out with Arsen behind him. They both walked past us and Max crossed his arms.

I noticed that Arsen was looking at him tensely.

“Go home, Neve. It’s the last shot of the day and I’ll be okay without you,” Max finally said gently.

“I’d rather stay,” I insisted looking up at him.

Max put a hand on my shoulder and smiled, “I’m going to pay you for the full day, kid. Go.”

I let out a sigh of relief that Jess to giggle. I got off the steps and went back inside to retrieve my black fabric, kawaii purse and slung it over my shoulder.

“Thanks Max!” I shouted over my shoulder as I made a beeline toward the gates. I wanted to be able to catch the first bus I could take back to my place and take the world’s hottest shower.

“Neve!”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Arsen jogging to catch up to me. I stopped walking and waited for him to catch up.

“Listen, I shouldn’t be in there too long. Just gotta do something for Max. I know you’re dying to go home, but I thought maybe if you were up for it, we could grab something to eat sometime?”

I was thankful in that moment that I was wearing my obnoxiously huge sunglasses. My eyes went through such a

series of emotions that if he saw them all he'd probably retract his offer as quickly as he laid it out.

Arsen nervously chewed on his lower lip, while he waited for me to answer.

“Sure,” I finally replied.

He let out a huge sigh of relief and smiled. “Great! I’ll get your phone number from Max. Give me a few hours to do some work and get ready and I’ll give you a call, okay? Then we can set something up.”

I nodded and Arsen grinned.

In the background, I could hear the bus rolling away from the bus stop.

Even though I knew the next one wouldn’t be along for another forty five minutes, I wasn’t mad.

Just standing there and staring up into Arsen’s eyes was enough to make any feelings of desperation disappear.

CHAPTER

Two

After I scrubbed myself clean, twice, I decided to lie on my couch. I was wearing my gray yoga pants and a ribbed tank top. I was glad I had left the window open because it was a hot day in Odessa Valley.

The combination of the cool breeze and the fresh hot shower knocked me out in no time. When I finally opened my eyes again, it was dark outside and I smiled. I always did love the night sky here.

I got off the couch and went over to the couch near the window and sat down. I looked up at the dark blue sky and saw a small smattering of stars.

I sighed happily.

I didn't mind being in my small apartment here and I didn't mind the city life; hell, I was used to both of those. I just wasn't and never would be used to the daily naked people writhing all over each other.

I stretched my arms high over my head. A small blinking light on the coffee table caught my attention. I reached for my phone and pressed the button on the right side to bring the phone to life.

Two missed calls and three text messages. Huh.

I went to my call log first and dismissed the missed calls when I didn't recognize the phone number.

I opened my messenger and clicked on the new icon.

4:03 pm: Hey, it's Arsen.

5:46 pm: Neve?

7:32 pm: You must be asleep. We can go talk some other time. Sweet dreams, little lady.

I looked at the time at the top of my phone. It was almost nine, but I decided to respond anyway.

Me: Sorry. I fell asleep as predicted. :)

Almost immediately I got a response.

Arsen: It's okay. I thought for a moment there that I scared you off already lol.

I smiled at the text and tucked my legs underneath myself. I wanted to think of something witty to say. I bit my lip with a grin and responded.

Me: I didn't have to watch you have sex (if you even do that) trust me, I'm not scared.

When Arsen didn't respond right away, I set my phone down and went into the bathroom to brush my teeth. I came out a few minutes later and saw the light blinking on my phone. I jumped on the couch like a school girl and grabbed it.

Arsen: You'll never have to watch me.

That's it? It took him five minutes and that's all he said?

Me: Okay.

Arsen: :)

I ROLLED MY EYES. Usually one word from one person and a smiley face from the other killed the entire conversation. Text messaging etiquette told me not to respond. If he had anything else to say, he would send me a message. I put the phone back down on the coffee table and went back to my other couch. After I located the remote, I laid down and turned the TV on.

I settled on the *Investigation Discovery* Channel and glanced at my phone. Still no flashing light. I shrugged and tried to concentrate on the show that was on.

I spent the first ten minutes of the program glancing at my phone, but gave up when the phone never blinked. I yawned when the show concluded. I could easily fall asleep again if I wasn't so hungry.

I grabbed my phone and just as I was about to call my favorite Chinese restaurant, Arsen's number came across the screen.

"Hello?" I answered.

"So. You're still awake. Dirty pool, woman," he replied, laughing.

"Not for much longer. I was just about to call to have some food delivered, gorge myself, and pass out."

"What were you going to order?" he asked curiously.

"Chinese."

"I love Chinese."

I laughed. It was obvious that Arsen still wanted to hang out *tonight*.

"Then tell me what you want and I'll order it. It should get here before you do, unless you're standing outside," I teased.

"No. I was earlier, but I left," he joked.

I laughed again and grabbed a pen and piece of paper and wrote down what he wanted.

"Come over whenever you're ready. And dress comfortably. I'm in my pajamas and don't plan on changing," I warned.

"Maybe I'll just throw on a pair of boxers and we can have a pajama party," he replied.

"Wear comfortable *clothes*," I stressed.

Arsen laughed and told me he'd be over as soon as he could.

I called the Chinese restaurant and placed our order. I used my debit card to pay for it over the phone because to be honest, I had no idea where my cash was and I didn't feel like looking for it.

Fifteen minutes later, the delivery man knocked on my apartment door. Five minutes later, Arsen knocked.

I looked through the peephole and my heart started to beat a little faster when I saw him. I smoothed out my hair and opened the door.

“Comfortable enough for you?” he asked with a grin.

I stepped back and smiled. He was wearing a loose pair of sweatpants, a black muscle shirt, and flip flops.

“Come on in,” I said, shaking my head and laughing.

Arsen dropped a bag on the carpet and looked around.

Is that an overnight bag? He couldn't have been serious about the pajama party.

“What’s that all about?” I asked pointing at his bag.

“Hmm?”

“This isn’t a sleepover party, buddy,” I replied, shaking my finger at him in mock seriousness.

Arsen laughed and followed me as I went over to the tiny kitchen and started to pull containers out of the large brown paper bag.

“If you look in that cabinet, there are plates,” I said, not looking up.

While Arsen pulled out plates for us, I separated our food and reached into the drawer I kept my utensils in. I pulled out two forks and gave him one. I grabbed my container of pork fried rice, dumped half of it on my plate, and went into the living room. I set my food down and went back into the kitchen where he was busy putting portions of his order onto the plate.

“Want a can of soda?” I asked, peering inside.

“Sure. Anything is fine,” he replied.

I grabbed two Cokes and went back into the living room. I sat on the couch and crossed my legs underneath myself, my plate on my lap, and cracked open my can. Arsen walked around the table and sat next to me. He handed me a napkin and sat back.

“Thanks,” I replied absentmindedly as one of my favorite shows came on.

“You’re welcome.”

We sat and ate in silence for a little bit, while the first story came and went. By the time the third and final part of the show had come on, I put my empty plate on the table and Arsen had stopped eating to stare at the program.

“What the hell are you watching?” he asked.

“It’s a show about women killers. It’s pretty cool; my favorite on this channel,” I replied.

I felt his eyes on me as he stared but I didn’t turn to meet his gaze. It was the same look that Addie always gave me when I had this on and all I could do was an internal eye roll.

“Trust me, this sure beats watching people fucking all day,” I said dryly.

He chuckled and went back to eating his food. The program usually lasted a half an hour or so, but since I could tell he was uncomfortable watching it, I made up some bullshit excuse about how these were reruns and that there was a movie on Netflix I wanted to see.

I flipped through the new arrivals section until I found something that looked halfway decent and pressed play.

Arsen finished his food and stood up, grabbing my plate as well, and went into the kitchen. I heard them clink slightly as he placed them in the sink and ran water over them. I glanced over and saw that he wasn’t just rinsing them off and leaving them there, he was *washing* them.

Impressive.

I turned my attention back to the movie, when my phone screen lit up. I leaned over and glanced at it.

“Adesynne Lee,” I exclaimed into the phone.

“How’s it going over in sex world?” she asked with a laugh.

Arsen made his way back to the couch, but stopped and picked something up off the ground curiously. I became mortified when I saw that he was holding the bra I had taken off when I walked in the door earlier and tossed. He turned it around and

looked at the tag curiously, then grinned and set it down on the couch.

“What was the point of that?” I asked him.

“The point of what?” Addie asked in confusion.

“Not you. Hold on,” I said into the receiver, before I put the phone against my chest.

“Well?” I asked him.

“Curiosity, I guess,” he replied with a shrug and a grin.

“Pig,” I said rolling my eyes. “Hello?” I said, putting the phone back to my ear.

Arsen was laughing in the background which immediately piqued Addie’s interest.

“Do you have a *boy* over, Neve?” she asked excitedly.

“Yeah, we’re having a pajama party,” I replied.

“Put him on the phone! I wanna talk to him!”

I glanced at Arsen who was watching the movie with his head leaned back on the couch and his arms crossed over his chest.

“Hey.”

He kept watching the movie without responding.

“Arsen?” I said, giving him a gentle shove.

“Sorry, I didn’t know you were talking to me,” he replied with a sheepish grin.

“My cousin wants to talk to you,” I said, holding out the phone.

Please don’t embarrass me, I prayed silently as he took the phone.

“Hello?” he said with an overly deep voice.

I reached over and gave him a shove and he laughed.

I did my best to tune out their conversation. I knew Addie wouldn’t be able to keep it to herself long anyway, so eventually I would hear about it.

I curled up into a ball and rested my head on the arm of the couch. Five minutes later I heard Arsen say his good-byes and heard him set the phone down on the couch.

“Can I ask you something?” he asked, clearing his throat.

“Sure,” I replied with a yawn. “I hope she wasn’t too embarrassing, by the way.”

He let out an uneasy laugh and I shifted myself so that I could look at him.

“Why did you take the job at Devil’s Den?” he asked, glancing over at me.

“Addie. She tricked me. She told me she found a job that would be perfect for me considering my Master’s. She said she had already spoken to the HR department there and they said they would love to have me on board. She gave them my phone number, I did a phone interview, and here I am,” I replied.

“But if you’re not happy there, then why stay?”

I sighed heavily.

“Because it’s the only job offer I’ve got. Not to mention that they took a chance on me; I’m not going to just jump ship. I’ll stick around as long as they need me or as long as I can stomach this pornography mess. Whichever comes first.”

Arsen scoffed and shook his head before he sighed and leaned back on the couch again.

“Why? What did Addie say to you?” I asked suspiciously.

“Nothing,” he replied.

“She must’ve said *something* if you’re asking me about Devil’s Den,” I replied.

“Where do I sleep?” he asked changing the subject.

I rolled my eyes. Apparently this *was* a sleepover. I adjusted myself on the couch again so that I could watch the movie.

“There’s a door to the right of the kitchen. That’s the bedroom; it’s all yours for tonight. I prefer the couch,” I said.

“I think I’m going to turn in. Good night,” he said getting to his feet.

I reached out and grabbed his leg as he walked past me. He glanced down at me questioningly.

“She’s going to tell me eventually. I love Addie, she’s my best friend, but the girl can’t keep a secret to save her life.”

“Good night, Neve,” he repeated softly as pulled away from me and grabbed his bag. I heard the bedroom door open then close.

I reached over for my phone and sent Addie a message.

Me: What did you say to him? He’s all weird now.

Addie: Told him about your v card.

My mouth dropped open. Of all the things she could’ve said to him, she decided to tell him that I was a virgin?!

Me: I wasn’t going to sleep with him, you know!

Addie: It’s not that Neve. I just feel bad about you working in Pornlandia and I thought he could help you get out of there.

Me: I’m a big girl, Adesynne Lee. I can take care of myself. You don’t need to tell everyone that I’m still a virgin. It doesn’t make me any less human or more fragile than the next person.

She didn’t respond. I decided to turn my phone off, because even if she did, nothing she said was going to make me any less angry at her right now. I sat up and reached across the table for the quilt I slept with. I pulled it up over my head and shut out the world for the rest of the night.

Not that the night cares what a virgin does anyway.

CHAPTER

Three

I woke up the next morning to the sound of the radio on in the kitchen. I yawned and sat up. I wasn't sure why it was on but I was going to shut it off so I could go back to sleep. I finally had a day off and I planned on sleeping all day.

I stopped short when I saw Arsen sitting in the kitchen with a bowl of cereal, flipping through a magazine.

I had forgotten about him being here and I was startled.

He must've felt my eyes on him because he glanced up and a big grin spread across his face.

"That is some seriously cool hair!" he exclaimed.

I gave him a confused look and went straight to the bathroom. I flipped on the light and once I saw my reflection in the mirror I couldn't help but laugh. Part of my bangs were standing straight up and half of my hair was flattened against the side of my face. I looked like I had been chewed up and spit out of a wind tunnel.

I grabbed a brush and began to fix the mess that my hair had turned into, then proceeded to brush my teeth. Once that was all I done, I walked back out into the kitchen and turned on the coffee machine. I yawned again and went back into the living room. I folded my quilt and tossed it back on the couch, before I did my morning routine of opening the front door and taking in a deep breath of the crisp morning air.

I heard Arsen push his chair back followed by the sound of his footsteps as he came into the living room. I felt his curious eyes on me but he didn't say anything. I leaned my head

against the doorway. I liked to do this even on mornings when it was raining, because it had a calming effect on me.

He came over to where I was standing and put his head on my shoulder.

“What are we doing?” he whispered loudly.

I began to giggle and he pulled his face away.

“You know how some people do yoga in the morning or whatever to get ready for their day? This is what I do. A few deep breaths of the morning air and a little bit of time to reflect on the day before and what I hope for the day ahead of me,” I explained.

“That’s actually pretty cool,” he said.

I smiled at him.

The house phone rang and I sighed, walking away from Arsen to go answer it.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Hey, darlin!”

It was Max.

“Hi, Max. What’s up?” I asked, cradling the phone between my shoulder and my ear.

“I wanted to tell you that yesterday was your last day here.”

“What?”

I almost dropped the phone in shock. I knew I shouldn’t have left early; I just knew it.

“Did I do something wrong?” I asked close to tears.

“No! I was just thinking about it after you left, and you seem really unhappy at Devil’s Den. I thought I would just let you off the hook, is all.”

“But ... I ...”

Arsen came over to stand by me. I looked up at him with tears in my eyes and he took the phone.

“Hey, Max. It’s Arsen. What’s going on?” he asked.

I slid down to the kitchen floor and buried my face in my hands.

Whatever you do, don't cry.

I blocked out their conversation. I figured it was pointless to listen since I couldn't hear Max's side. I heard Arsen hang up the phone with a sigh. He sat down on the floor next to me but didn't speak right away.

"It's not all bad news, Neve. He said he got you a job at Golden Hills Media. You know, the big movie production place? He said that was the first thing he did when he decided to let you go," Arsen said softly.

I sniffled and looked at him with a tear-stained face. How Max managed to do everything so quickly was beyond me. It only made sense that he had probably thought of letting me go for a while now.

"That was nice of him," I replied softly.

"See? It's not a total loss," he replied kindly.

"Yeah," I said, getting to my feet. I walked into the bathroom and shut the door behind myself. I just wanted to be alone. I knew that Max had at least found me a good job that I would probably love, but I just didn't feel like faking happiness.

I leaned on the sink and closed my eyes. I heard a soft knock on the door and turned the faucets on. Maybe the sound of rushing water would deter him.

"Neve?" Arsen asked softly.

Maybe not.

"I'm fine," I said through the door.

"Okay," he answered. "Um, I'm going to head out. Max told me he wanted me to come in today to fill in for someone who called off, so I have to go home and shower and stuff. But maybe we can get together later?"

"Sure."

"Alright. Bye, Neve."

“See ya,” I replied.

Arsen didn't leave right away. It took him a moment or two before he even backed away from the door.

I sat down on the toilet seat and waited patiently, until I finally heard the front door open then close.

I waited another minute before I opened the door and stepped out. I went straight to my couch and flopped down on my back.

I was fired from the first job I ever had. I felt like a failure. There had to be some underlying reason that Max wasn't telling me.

I put my pillow over my face and let out a muffled scream. Why was my life so weird? I left my side of the United States to come out to Odessa Valley, California to my dream job, which turned out to be a joke.

I didn't even have any friends out here. I couldn't count Arsen as a friend; I had just met him yesterday, even if he did spend the night.

I blindly reached for my phone on the coffee table and held down the number two button.

“Neve, Neve, go away,” Addie sang playfully.

“I got fired,” I replied.

“What?” she asked in surprised.

“Max called this morning. He fired me. Arsen got on the phone with him after I almost started bawling. He said that Max secured a place for me at Golden Hills Media first,” I explained glumly.

“Arsen was there? He ... Stayed with you last night?”

“In a completely non sexual way. God, Addie, I tell you that I get fired and you're more interested in if I got fucked or not,” I replied angrily.

“I'm sorry,” she said, apologetically. “It's just that you've never had a guy stay with you before and I thought that maybe ...”

“I met him *yesterday*. What the hell makes you think I’d just hand it over like that?”

Adesyne stayed quiet. I could tell that yelling at her wasn’t going to make me feel any better. Hell, all I wanted to do was piss and moan about losing my job and she assumed that I had turned into a whore while I was at it.

“Let me let you go, Addie. I’ll call you later or tomorrow,” I said quietly.

“Okay, Neve. I love you. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. I love you too.”

We said our good-byes and hung up. I put the phone down, feeling worse than I did before. After a few more minutes of just lying there and wallowing my self-pity, I decided to go out for a walk to clear my head.

I went into the bedroom and grabbed a pair of underwear, a bra, my favorite pair of blue jeans and a white t-shirt. I went into the bathroom and put my clothes on the edge of the sink and turned on the shower. Once I got the water temperature to my liking, I took off my pajamas and red panties and tossed them into the hamper.

I stepped directly into the powerful semi-hot stream and began to wash my long, wavy brown hair.

I scrubbed myself to the point of it almost being painful before I decided I was clean enough and stepped out of the shower. I dried myself off, blow dried my hair, and got dressed.

I slid on my flip flops when I got to the living room and walked out the front door.

Straight into Arsen.

“Whoa!” I cried out in surprise.

“Sorry,” he replied with a laugh. “I called Max and told him that I couldn’t make it in today.”

“So you came back here?” I asked, smiling up at him.

“Yeah, I thought we could hang out or something,” he replied with a shrug. “Where ya headed?”

“Nowhere in particular. I was just going for a walk to clear my head.”

“Why don’t we grab some food and go to Las Vegas? We can just hang out and talk,” he suggested.

“I don’t know if I’m allowed in the Devil’s Den lot anymore,” I replied quietly.

“Yeah you are. You’ll be my guest,” he said with a wink.

I laughed and nodded. Arsen grinned and walked me over to his car. He opened the door and closed it after I sat down.

A real gentleman, I thought to myself with a small smile.

“Any idea what you’re in the mood for?” he asked as he pulled his seatbelt on.

“It’s your turn to pick,” I replied.

“Chinese it is,” he said with a grin.

I started to laugh again and directed him to the Chinese restaurant a few blocks away.

CHAPTER

Four

Arsen pulled up in front of the restaurant and looked at me.

“This feels kind of redundant,” he said, making a face.

“Well, there’s a sub shop a few blocks away that makes some really awesome sandwiches. Turn the car off; we can walk from here,” I replied, taking off my seatbelt and getting out of the car.

Arsen jogged around the side of his car and caught up to me. I was enjoying the sunny day and it was kind of interesting to me that Arsen coming back put me in a much better mood.

We chatted on the way to the sub shop. Not a serious conversation, which made me feel better. I had enough shit to deal with when I went back to “real” life.

“After you, shorty,” Arsen teased, opening the door for me.

I stuck my tongue out at him as I entered the shop and waved at the college guys behind the counter. I was on friendly terms ever since I had moved out here, because for a while, all I could afford was this place.

Arsen stood behind me in line and put his chin on top of my forehead. I shook my head slightly and he laughed.

“Just trying to get comfortable while I look at my options,” he said.

“By all means, take your time,” I replied.

I reached into my back pocket for my wallet. Then I checked the other one, realizing that I hadn’t brought it.

“Ah shit. I forgot my money at home,” I grumbled.

Arsen pulled his chin off of my head and stood in front of me, blocking my view of the menu board.

“What are you doing?” I asked, giving him a shove.

“You didn’t bring your money, so I guess you’re not eating,” he said, glancing down at me with a serious face.

“Wow,” I replied in disbelief.

Almost immediately his lips began to twitch and he burst out laughing.

“I’m kidding, Neve! I wouldn’t do that to you. Just let them know what you want; I’ve got this,” he said, taking his wallet out of his back pocket.

I shoved him playfully aside and stepped up to the counter.

“I’ll take the usual, Matt,” I said to the red haired, freckled face young man.

“I figured as much. What about your boyfriend?” Matt asked.

A look of confusion crossed my face. I didn’t have a boyfriend and the only other person in here with me was ... Arsen.

“He’s *not* —”

“I’ll have a twelve inch tuna on whole wheat,” he said, interrupting me with a grin.

“On it, guys,” Matt said with a big smile.

I looked up at Arsen who was still grinning. He draped his arm across my shoulders and pulled me to his side.

“So, still wanna go to Vegas, *babe*?” he asked loudly.

“Stop that!” I hissed.

Matt started to laugh and Arsen leaned down and planted a kiss on the side of my head. My body stiffened. I wasn’t expecting that but at least it wasn’t on the lips; I might have punched him out of sheer reflex.

“Here you go, guys,” he said at the other end of the counter.

I slid away from Arsen's arm and went down to the register. Arsen handed me two drink cups and I went over to the soda machine. I filled mine with a Cherry Coke. I glanced over at him and waved his cup.

"Um, Mountain Dew is fine," he said, grabbing the bag of subs and saying good-bye to Matt.

I slammed his cup down and filled it partially with ice, before moving over to the soda button.

"That was angry," he remarked.

"You're *not* my boyfriend. I barely know you!"

He just shook his head and laughed again. After I secured the plastic lid on his cup, he took it and walked out of the shop. I followed him back to the car and waited while he opened my door.

I sat down and placed my cup in the cup holder before I pulled on my seatbelt and looked out the window. The street was crowded with people. Parents with their children, people having business meetings, and college kids going by on skateboards.

"Neve, it was a joke," Arsen said as he put the key into the ignition.

I didn't respond. Honestly, I didn't know why it had gotten under my skin the way it did. From what I could gather so far, he was just a friendly guy that loved to laugh. What was so wrong about that?

"Sorry," I mumbled.

Arsen sighed and drove us to the Devil's Den lots an hour away. By the time we got there I was so hungry I could've eaten my own hand.

Once the guard flagged us in, he drove to a parking lot designated for the Den employees and parked. I grabbed my cup and got out of the car. I smiled when I saw him tripping over himself to get to me in time to open my door.

I stuck my tongue out at him and he grinned. He held out an arm and I looped mine in his as we started to walk toward the

different city sets. When we walked passed the house in San Francisco, I cringed. Someone in there was getting *railed* and she wasn't shy about it.

"I thought you were sick?" a voice suddenly said.

We turned around and saw a beautiful raven haired, thin girl with big blue eyes and, as per usual with these female actresses, huge fake boobs and tiny waist.

"I am," Arsen said faking a cough.

"Max had to scramble to replace you, you know," she said accusingly, crossing her arms over her chest.

I wonder how she can do that without popping them.

"Yeah, well, I didn't feel like it today," he replied edgily.

Her eyes wandered over to me. She raised an eyebrow at Arsen.

"Trista, this Neve. Neve, this is Trista. She works for Max as one of his film stars," Arsen said, introducing us.

I gave her a tight smile, which she returned. Arsen and I started to walk away, when Trista grabbed his arm.

"Just because you have a girlfriend now, doesn't mean you can just bail on the scenes we need you for," she said quietly.

Scenes?

"I get that," he replied through clenched teeth. "I'll see you later."

"Scenes?" I asked.

"Well yeah. He works here too you know," she said.

"Actually, now that we're on that subject, I never asked you what it is exactly that you do at Devil's Den," I said to Arsen, pulling away from his arm.

"You're kidding me. She doesn't know?" Trista scoffed.

Arsen shot her a dirty look.

"Arsen?" I prompted.

Something told me that I wasn't going to like his answer. Something deep inside of me was begging me to stop asking. But I needed to know.

"He's one of the biggest stars here! He's won awards for his work," Trista said.

"Awards for what?" I asked, my body beginning to tremble.

"Can we talk about this later? Please?" Arsen asked.

"Awards for *what*?" I asked again.

"For his movie roles," Trista said quietly.

"You... you're a... Oh my God. How could I have not figured that out?"

I dropped my soda cup and it exploded on the lots gravel. I turned around and started to walk away from Arsen, who swore at Trista. I could hear him running to catch up to me, but I refused to stop. I was so angry and so hurt that I walked faster than I ever had before.

I couldn't believe that I was actually starting to possibly *like* a porn star. I had never liked *anyone* that quickly before. What the hell was wrong with me?

"Neve! Neve wait!" Arsen yelled as I pushed open the security gate.

But I didn't want to wait. I didn't want to stand there and listen to his reasons or his excuses or anything he had to say.

I want to go home. I need to go back to New York where nobody hides what they are. I want to see my friends and family. I'm sick and tired of being surrounded by people who fuck for a living.

The angrier I became, the faster I walked. I could hear Arsen faintly behind me still calling my name, so I turned left on the first block that I could and ran faster.

I didn't know where I was and I didn't know where I was going, but I just needed to get away.

My phone rang as I ran down another block. I wouldn't have answered it, but I knew it was Addie just by the ringtone.

I answered and sat down on the city street. I leaned against a dirty wall until I was able to calm myself enough to speak.

“Neve, Arsen sent me a text message. He said you ran off of the lot and he’s worried about you,” she said.

A text message? How does even have her phone number?

“Addie, he’s a porn actor. He fucks people for a living and he never told me!” I shouted into the phone.

“But I don’t understand why that bothers you. You guys aren’t dating. Unless ... Neve, can I ask you a question without you getting mad at me?”

“I don’t know if I like him,” I said cutting her off, “I was going to try to figure that out. I’ve only known him for a day but he makes me laugh and when he’s around I feel this weird happy vibe. But I can’t be serious about someone like him. What the hell does it matter anyway?” I shouted in frustration.

“I’m coming out there. I’ll see what I can find flying out today and I’ll catch a red eye if I have to. Just go home and wait for me,” she said.

I started to cry. Addie was the one person I could always count on. She told me that no matter how far away we were from each other she always made a phone call or a plane ride away.

“Go home, Neve. Okay? I’ll be there as soon as I can, I promise,” she said before she hung up.

I put my phone back in my pocket and took a few shuddery breaths. I plucked myself off of the sidewalk and looked around. I had no idea where I was.

My phone beeped a few times letting me know that I had a new text message.

Maybe Addie forgot something, I thought as I brought the screen to life and clicked on the messaging icon.

Please let me see you.

It was Arsen.

Fuck off. Or better yet fuck Trista.

I turned my phone off before I put it away again and began to walk down the street. A few blocks away I saw a police officer, so I figured I would just get directions from him.

The cop told me I'd be walking for a few hours if I didn't have a car. He offered to call me a cab but that's when I remembered that I didn't have my wallet with me. I thanked him but declined.

There was only one way I'd be able to get home and I really didn't want to go that route, but I didn't have a choice.

I powered my phone back on and waited for a few seconds, while it fully loaded everything.

I saw that I had three new text messages. I knew they were from Arsen without even having to look at them.

I took a deep breath and opened my call log, pressing down on his name.

"Neve? Where are you?" he asked frantically.

"I need a ride home. I don't have any money on me."

"Where are you? I'll come get you," he said.

I looked up at the big awning I was standing underneath.

"Nick's Hardware Store. Kind of ironic," I replied sarcastically.

He let out a long sigh, "Just stay there. I'm on my way."

Five minutes later he pulled up to the curb and jumped out of his car. He came over to me and tried to hug me, but I brushed past him and got into the waiting vehicle.

I glanced over in time to see his shoulders drop. I turned my face away and waited. Arsen finally got into the car and started it. Instead of putting it in gear, he ran his hands through his hair, turning to face me.

"Neve, I was going to tell you. I really was. I... just wasn't sure how I felt about you yet," he said quietly.

"Are you going to take me home now?" I asked coldly.

“As soon as you can honestly tell me that you don’t feel something is happening here,” he replied stubbornly.

“There’s nothing happening, Arsen. And there never will be. Now *please* take me home.”

He didn’t reply. He didn’t even react. He just put the car in gear and drove us the hour back to my place. I got out of the car without so much as a backwards glance and went into my apartment. I flopped down on my couch and waited there until I heard his car pull out of the driveway.

Eventually I heard him drive away. That’s when I threw my phone on the charger and closed my eyes. Today went from being bad to good, then to great, to what the fuck.

I glanced at the time on the clock. It was 1:04 pm. Hopefully Addie wouldn’t take too long.

CHAPTER

Five

I woke up to the sound of someone knocking rather incessantly on the door. I pushed myself off the couch groggily and looked at the time.

Who the hell is knocking at one in the damn morning?

I walked over to the door and put the chain on before I opened it.

“Oh my God!” I shouted.

I closed the door, undid the chain, and yanked it open. Addie was standing on the other side with a big smile on her face and her bags by her feet. We immediately hugged each other tightly and I started to cry. Just hugging her made it feel like all of my problems were millions of miles away.

I loved Addie like a sister, even if she could be a pain in the ass. Even when she teased me for being a virgin and even when she tried to push me to go out with her to “get guys,” she was always there when I needed her. Not to mention we looked very much alike, the only major differences being that she was about a foot taller than me and had bright blue eyes.

Addie was definitely my rock.

“I am so tired,” she said when we pulled away. “I’ll need you to stop crying soon, because in New York it’s really four in the morning and I plan on sleeping for the next three or so days.”

I laughed and wiped the tears away from my face. I stepped aside so she could come in. I went out and grabbed all of her bags and brought them into the house before I locked the door again.

I carried her stuff into the bedroom and walked back out into the living room. I sat on the couch across from her and tucked a leg under myself. Addie took a deep breath and reached into her purse, pulling out a couple of wrapped gifts.

“I want you to wait to open these until I go into the bedroom. Neve, I know you well enough to know that you’re going to be angry when you see this,” she said holding up the small rectangle shaped package, “and probably embarrassed when you see this,” she said, putting down the rectangle on the table and holding up a cylindrical package. “But I think once you get over the anger you might be able to put these to good use. With that being said, I’m going to sleep. Bitch at me in the morning about it, okay? Love ya!”

Addie disappeared into the bedroom and locked the door. I went over to the couch she had been sitting on and I grabbed both of the packages. I didn’t know which feeling I wanted first; anger or embarrassment.

I decided anger would be first. Only because with as easily as embarrassed as I could get, there was a good chance I could wash it away with the second package.

I picked up the first package and started to pull the wrapping paper off. I rolled my eyes when I saw the back. Addie had purchased an adult movie for me. Maybe she figured it would be easier for me to accept Arsen’s line of “work” this way. I flipped the movie over to the front and looked at the actor and actress on the cover.

“Oh Jesus Christ, Adesynne Lee!” I shouted.

It wasn’t just any movie with just any actor on the cover. This was one of Arsen’s movies.

I could hear the muffled sound of her laughter and I tossed the movie angrily onto the other couch.

I heard Addie’s footsteps as she walked to the door and cracked it open.

“Open the other one now, Neve,” she said mischievously.

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed the second package and ripped the wrapping off. It was a vibrator; bright pink, had multiple

speeds, and was water resistant according to the information on the box.

“I figure if you open the movie and use that on yourself when you see Arsen doing his thing, maybe you won’t be so uptight about it,” she explained casually.

I turned slowly to look at her. She was completely serious, I could tell by the look on her face.

“Addie, I love you for coming out here. I really do. But if you came out here to make me watch a movie and vibrate on myself, then you should’ve stayed in New York. I’m not going to open either of these, so you can take them with you when you leave.”

She just rolled her eyes and came over to sit next to me on the couch.

“Not everything ends up the way you want it to in life, Neve. Wanna know why I really got these for you? To see how you would react. If you laughed and opened it, it was because you honestly didn’t care. But you got angry like I thought you would, because you do care. I’m not sure if you care about Arsen, but something about this new friendship with him is making you care. You don’t have to watch it but I’m leaving it here. If you ever get to the point where you can watch it, then you’ll know how you feel about him by the reaction you have,” she said, putting an arm around me and giving me a squeeze.

I sighed unhappily. It was true; everything she just said was true. If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t be angry. I wasn’t sure what had made me so upset but I wanted to find out.

“Goodnight, Addie,” I said softly.

“Goodnight, kiddo. I’ll see you in the morning and so you know, I want to meet him before I leave,” she replied as she got off the couch and disappeared into the bedroom a second time.

I lay down on the couch and pulled my blanket up to my neck. I rolled onto my side and closed my eyes. I let out a heavy sigh and opened them again. I reached for my phone, which was

sitting next to the vibrator, and powered it on. It was almost three in the morning, so he probably wouldn't get my message until the morning, but I knew that Addie would hound me about meeting Arsen until it was time for her to leave.

Me: Adesynne is in town. She wants to meet you before she leaves. If you're not "working" tomorrow, let me know.

As soon as I put the phone down and got comfortable, the screen illuminated the room. I raised an eyebrow and reached for it.

Arsen: I don't "work" tomorrow. I'd love to meet her.

I bet, I thought rolling my eyes.

Me: She can meet you at Berkley Park.

Arsen: Aren't you going to be there too? What time?

That was a good question. I didn't wake up Addie too early and I didn't know how long she would sleep for. As for the first part of his question, I didn't know how I felt about being around him knowing what he was now.

Me: I'll let you know in the morning. She just got here a couple of hours ago.

Arsen: Okay. I hope you make it tomorrow...

I didn't respond. Instead I shut my phone off and closed my eyes. I'd let him sweat it out.

There was no way in hell Adesynne would let me stay home. She had obviously come out here with more than one purpose.

I woke up to the sound of the radio blaring in the kitchen and the smell of bacon. I sat up and rubbed my eyes before I went to join Addie who was shimmying to the song on the radio and throwing another round of bacon into the pan.

"Good morning, sunshine!" she said when I sat at the island. "How'd you sleep? Have you talked to Arsen yet? When I do I get to meet the man?"

I shook my head for a moment. Too many questions were being tossed at me already. I went into the bathroom and went

through my morning routine. I brushed my hair, then my teeth, and then washed my face.

Addie was leaning on the counter ready to barrage me with me more question, so I held up a hand as I went into the living room to retrieve my phone. I headed back into the kitchen, sitting on one of the stools behind the island and double tapped the screen. I opened my messages sent him a text.

Me: We're awake. What time is good for you?

Instead of a text response, my phone almost immediately rang. I looked down at it and contemplated sending him to voicemail, but Addie came over to me and swiped the answer button.

“Hello?” I asked giving her a dirty look.

“Hey, I’m ready whenever you guys are,” Arsen said.

“Hold on.”

I put the phone to my chest and looked at Addie who was watching me with serious eyes.

“Arsen wants to know what time,” I said to her.

“Why doesn’t he come over and have breakfast with us? Then we can all go together,” she suggested carefully.

“No,” I hissed.

“Neve, ask him to come over for breakfast. You’re being too stubborn. It’s just breakfast. Then you can decide if you want to go with us. I can tell by the way you’ve been carrying yourself so far this morning, that you’ve been trying to figure it out anyway,” she said, turning back to the stove.

I cleared my throat and tried to sound pleasant when I got back on the phone.

“You can come over and have breakfast with us if you want. If you don’t die from Adesynne’s cooking, maybe I’ll join you guys today,” I said, my voice dripping with fake sweetness.

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” he replied with a chuckle.

I hung up without saying good-bye and put the phone down.

“Well?” she asked without turning around.

“He said he’ll be here in ten minutes.”

“Then I guess I better make more bacon,” she said, heading to the refrigerator.

Exactly ten minutes later there was a knock on the front door. I was busy reading news on my phone so I didn’t move. Not to mention that just because I had invited him over didn’t mean that I had to be the one to answer the door.

Addie sighed heavily when Arsen knocked again. She wiped her hands on a hand towel and walked to the front door. I opened one of the drawers in the kitchen and looked for a hair tie. I heard her open the front door and rolled my eyes as they greeted each other brightly. I pulled my hair into a tight ponytail and went back to my news.

I heard the door close and the sound of footsteps as they walked into the kitchen.

The silence that followed would have been uncomfortable had I been a willing participant in it.

Arsen jingled his keys in his hand.

Addie cleared her throat.

I swiped to the next news story.

“You can sit next to sour puss,” Addie told Arsen. “She’s been a grouch all morning, so don’t worry about it.”

I could sense the hesitation in his steps as he walked over and sat down in the stool next to me.

“Hi,” he said softly.

“Morning,” I replied curtly.

“There’s no reason to be such a bitch, Neve,” Addie said.

“You’re right. There isn’t. So if you’ll excuse me, I think I’m going to head out now. Have a great breakfast guys! Try not fuck each other,” I said brightly as I went into the living room and slipped on my flip flops.

“Neve Grace Dutton! You stop right there!” Adesynne yelled as I got to the door.

I had only ever heard her that angry one time before. It was the first and last time I went out with her. Some guy had been aggressively hitting on me and I kept trying to shove him away. When he grabbed my ass and tried to kiss me, all hell broke loose in the form of Addie. She freaked out on the guy so bad that he and his friends left.

I turned to face her and she grabbed me by the arm and dragged me back into the kitchen.

“I never expected you to be the kind of person that would make assumptions based on what someone does for a living. You were raised better than that. You don’t have to be accepting of what Arsen does but you don’t have to be condescending either. Apologize. Now,” she said, scolding me.

I hung my head. She was right; I was raised better than this. I was always told to never judge a person by what they did or a book by its cover. I glanced at Arsen with tears in my eyes and he was looking down at his hands on the counter.

“I’m sorry, Arsen,” I whispered.

He cleared his throat before he talked, “I don’t want an apology, Neve. I wouldn’t be here right now if I didn’t feel so strongly that something great could happen between us; I’ve already told you that. What I do want is for you to try to put what I do in the back of your mind and not think about it.”

“That’s a fair request, Cuz,” Addie said, putting an arm around my shoulders. “Besides, it’s obvious that you two like each other. And you look damn cute together,” she whispered into my ear.

I laughed and she grinned. I took a deep breath and let it out before I went back to sit next to Arsen who was still looking at his hands. I turned myself so that I was slightly facing him and he turned to look at me.

I crossed my eyes and stuck my tongue out. He laughed and stopped fiddling with his hands.

Addie placed two loaded plates in front of us before she fixed herself a plate and leaned against the counter.

“You should probably tell me your full name too, in case I ever need to yell at you,” she said playfully to Arsen.

“Arsen Caldwell,” he replied with a laugh.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Addie replied with a grin.

I sat quietly eating my breakfast while the two of them talked. Addie asked him how long he had lived in Odessa Valley and she told him what New York, the real New York, was like.

The house phone suddenly rang and I got up to answer it.

“Hello?”

“I’m looking for Neve Dutton,” a deep voice said pleasantly on the other end.

“Speaking,” I replied curiously.

“Neve, my name is Jareth Vance. I work for Golden Hills Media. I was told that you would be helping out on my set once we’re ready to start rolling, which will be very soon actually, and I wanted to set up a time to meet with you. Possibly a business lunch,” he explained.

“Yeah that would be perfect, Mr. Vance,” I replied excitedly. I recognized the name immediately. He was one of the hottest directors in Hollywood.

“Jareth, please. How does today sound? Around noon?”

I looked over at Addie and Arsen who were looking at me curiously.

“Unfortunately I can’t today, Jareth. I have family in from out of town and we have plans today,” I replied.

I mentally crossed my fingers hoping that wouldn’t make me look irresponsible.

“Understood,” he replied kindly. “Why don’t you take down my phone number and give me a call later on this week. We can set something up then,” he suggested.

“Okay!”

I took his information and hung up the phone.

“Who was that?” Addie asked.

“Jareth Vance. *The Jareth Vance* and I’m going to be assisting him on his new movie set!” I squealed jumping up and down.

Addie screamed and Arsen’s mouth hung slightly open.

“Wow, Max really took care of you on that one,” he remarked.

“Have you seen that man? He’s super sexy,” Addie said excitedly.

I rolled my eyes.

My moment was instantly killed. I could already tell what she was thinking. If Arsen and I didn’t build anything, I could try it with Jareth.

“Actually, I already happen to know someone who’s super sexy and funny,” I replied matter-of-factly.

“Oh?” she asked with a grin.

“Yup!”

“Who’s that?” she prodded.

“I can’t tell you right now. He’ll hear me,” I said to her in a loud stage whisper.

Arsen started to laugh and I glanced over at him with a grin. His face was bright red and Addie gave me an encouraging slap on the back.

Good job, she mouthed approvingly.

I smiled at her and went back to sit next to Arsen.

“Thanks,” he said with a shy grin.

I nodded with a smile.

Addie smiled at us and I felt myself flush. I turned my attention back to my phone and swiped it back on. I clicked on my browser icon and went back to the news. Arsen leaned over and put his chin on his arm, reading along with me.

One of my favorite songs came on the radio and I started moving around in my seat to the beat. Once the hook came, I

sang along softly with it causing Addie to guffaw.

“Every touch ... it would bring me to life ... I can only imagine what it'd be like”

I looked up at her curiously and she wiggled her eyebrows. I gave her an odd look and she cut her eyes toward Arsen. I glanced at him and saw him giving me the same grin that Addie was.

What the hell are they grinning about? I wondered in frustration.

I retraced my words and felt my face turn bright red. I finally got why they were grinning like hyenas.

“Grow up, guys,” I grumbled.

They both laughed. Arsen grabbed our plates and went over to the sink. He grabbed Addie's plate while he was there and proceeded to wash them, then the pans she had used for the bacon and eggs.

“Let's get out of here,” Addie said when Arsen put the last dish on the dish rack.

“Sounds good. You gals still want to go to the park?” he asked, pulling his keys out of his pocket.

“Nah. I want to go to the beach. Come on, Neve. Let's throw on some bathing suits and get dressed. We can stop by your place on the way there so you can change,” she said to Arsen as she pulled me off of the stool and dragged me into the bedroom.

“Why the beach?” I asked her suspiciously once we close the door.

“Because there aren't any in Manhattan,” she replied digging through her luggage. “Get dressed.”

I sighed and went over to my dresser and pulled out a one piece bathing suit.

“I knew you were going to be boring,” she grumbled. “Put this on.”

I took the two piece bathing suit from her and looked it over. The top was dark blue with white stripes and the bottom looked like boy shorts with a white anchor right on the rear.

I pulled on a loose white t-shirt and denim shorts while she got into her bathing suit and clothes. She grabbed some beach towels and slung them over her shoulder, following me out of the bedroom. Arsen was patiently waiting in the living room.

The living room! Oh God, I hope he didn't see the vibrator and movie!

He was actually watching TV, the movie still laying where I tossed it on the other couch. The vibrator, however, was sitting on the coffee table still.

I felt my face turn red, but Addie saved the day, as only she could.

"I was wondering what I did with this," she said with a laugh, tossing the beach towels on the couch where the movie sat.

She gave me a look to tell me it was my opportunity to hide it. I casually walked over and bunched up the towels, the movie tucked safely inside, and went back into the bedroom shoving it into my underwear drawer.

"I don't think he saw it," she said quietly as she shoved the vibrator in and closing the drawer.

"Let's just go," I pleaded.

She nodded as we went back into the living room where Arsen was still sitting.

"Ready to go?" she asked him brightly.

"Yeah. I was just watching that show you like," he said to me with a smile.

I looked at the television and laughed. The same show that he thought made me crazy was the same show he was watching now.

He turned everything off and stood up. The three of us walked over to the door and he held it open over our heads to let us pass through. I turned around to lock it and he brushed a finger

gently against my hip while he stood there. I looked up at him curiously and he smiled.

I blushed.

Again.

CHAPTER

Six

The beach wasn't very far away from Arsen's house. In fact, he pulled into his driveway and told us we could walk from there if we wanted.

"I'm gonna go inside and change. You guys wanna come in?" he asked, unlocking his door.

"Sure," Addie said, falling in line behind him.

"No thanks," I replied quietly as I sat down on his stairs.

Addie shot me an angry look but Arsen understood why. He knew that I didn't know what to expect walking into the home of a porn actor. For all I knew, he had blow-up dolls all over the place and huge framed photos of his sex scenes.

"We'll be right out," he said softly.

I nodded and leaned my head against the rail. I straightened my legs out and let the California sun start to slowly roast me.

Ten minutes later they walked out.

"Thank God you didn't go in there. All the debauchery was almost too much for me to handle," she said sarcastically.

"It's okay, Adesynne. Really," Arsen said quietly.

I looked up at them both and stared at Arsen. He wasn't wearing a shirt and I was pretty sure that I instantly started to drool. I mean the body on this man was something that they probably fashioned the old Roman god statues off of.

"Get up, Neve," Addie said with a laugh. She could tell that I was dumbstruck by his chiseled body.

“What?” I asked, looking at her in confusion.

Arsen laughed and reached down for my hand, pulling me up off the stairs.

He threw an arm around Addie’s shoulder and held my hand tightly as the three of us walked two blocks up the street before we found ourselves on the beach. Addie picked a spot close enough to the water where we would get some of the surf spray, but not get soaked by the waves. She pulled off her shirt and pulled off her denim shorts and made a beeline for the water.

In a matter of moments, men swarmed her. I laughed and shook my head. Adesynne never had any trouble in the man department.

“I think that could be more dangerous than sharks,” Arsen remarked with a chuckle.

“Oh, Addie can take care of herself,” I assured him with a grin.

He smiled and leaned back on the towel giving me a curious look.

“Do you plan on leaving that on?” he asked, giving my shirt a tug.

“Arsen, I’m sure you see enou—” I took a deep breath proud of the fact that I was able to stop myself from making a crude remark. “What I meant was, sure,” I said, getting to my feet.

I pulled off my t-shirt and adjusted my bathing suit top so that I wasn’t spilling out. Addie did this on purpose and I knew it. Then I pulled down my denim shorts and stepped out of them.

“Happy?” I asked, sitting next to him.

“Hell yes,” he replied with a grin. “Why would you hide that body?”

“You’ve already been hanging out with Adesynne for too long,” I remarked, rolling my eyes. I pulled my legs up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. “I don’t know. I just don’t feel the need to walk around parading myself, I guess.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being confident,” he said.

“Well, when I get some confidence, maybe I’ll walk around in a bikini all day,” I replied simply.

“Do you have a boyfriend back home?” he asked, sitting up. I shook my head. “How come, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Because I won’t randomly have sex. I mean I’ve been on dates with some really nice guys, but at the end of the night they all wanted sex, and I wasn’t willing to hand it over,” I replied with a shrug.

“Yeah, a lot of guys can be douchebags,” he said with a chuckle.

“Tell me about it,” I said with a laugh. “Anyway, that’s the main hindrance in my not having a relationship. That I won’t drop my pants.”

“You shouldn’t have to. Not until you’re ready.”

Word vomit. Oh God, here it comes.

“Then why do you?” I asked him quietly.

Arsen gave me a sidelong glance. He was searching my face for judgment of some sort, but I had already promised Addie that I would do my best to tuck that away.

“I didn’t have any plans of doing this, if that’s what you’re thinking. I was out with some friends one night and Max was in the bar. He approached us because he needed someone to fill in a spot and he pulled me aside. He asked me if I wanted to do it, told me how much it paid, and I agreed. I planned on it being a onetime deal, but the movie was a hit and he asked me if I wanted to keep working for him. I was fresh out of college and I didn’t have a job at the time so I said yes. I just kind of kept doing it to pay the bills. It’s not like I have sex every single day of the week. Hell sometimes, I don’t have to shoot for months because the money is so good,” he said, picking up a hand full of sand and tossing it.

“Does it make it hard to have a relationship?” I asked quietly.

“I don’t know honestly. I never tried to be serious with anyone, because I don’t think many women would understand

or appreciate what I do,” he replied with a shrug.

“Doesn’t that get lonely?” I asked.

“Yeah, sometimes. That’s usually when I ask Max if he has anything for me.”

I nodded and looked over at Addie who was playing tackle football in the water with about three guys. It was so easy for her and that always made me a little jealous.

I looked over at Arsen who was also watching the “football game” and moved a little closer to him.

He scooped up another handful of sand and I moved closer. I wasn’t exactly sure what the hell I was planning on doing, but if I didn’t think of something, pretty soon I’d be sitting on his lap.

Suddenly, Arsen put an arm around my waist and pulled me against him. I looked at him with wide eyes and he smiled.

“I was getting tired of you taking your time,” he replied.

I smiled and my heart began to race when his beautiful, blue-gray eyes wandered down to my lips.

“Hi,” he said softly, looking into my eyes.

“Hi,” I replied shyly.

“You’re so pretty,” he said, pushing my loose bangs off of my forehead.

“So are you.”

He smiled.

I smiled.

Arsen slowly began to move his face toward me. I took a deep breath, trying to keep from shaking. Because he had his arm around me and my hands were on his chest, I knew he was able to feel my trembling body. His lips were a breath away from mine and he hovered for a moment, before finally pressing them to mine. I froze at first. I couldn’t help it; I had never kissed anyone as gorgeous as him before. He pulled his lips away from mine, leaning his forehead on mine.

“I’ll need a little participation here,” he said with a chuckle.

Alrighty then, I thought to myself.

I slid my hand around his neck and pulled him close. I pressed my lips to his. His arm tightened around my waist when I gently parted his lips with my tongue.

“You guys look way too serious,” Addie said suddenly appearing in front of us.

I gave her a dirty look. She had just interrupted the best daydream I ever had.

“We were just having a conversation,” Arsen said, letting go of the second handful of sand. He put his hands over his eyebrows to shield the sun so he could look at her.

“You can talk later. Water. Now,” she said, pulling me to my feet.

Arsen laughed and got to his feet. He put an arm around my shoulders as we followed Adesynne back to her man harem. Addie introduced us to everyone and I noticed that one of the guys was giving me a very approving look. Arsen must have noticed too, because he moved behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders in a possessive way.

“Arsen!” a familiar voice yelled.

We all turned to see Jess jogging down the beach toward the water.

I reached up and clenched Arsen’s hands. He wasn’t the only one who suddenly felt possessive.

“Hey, Jess,” he greeted her.

“Hey! Hi, Neve!” she said brightly to me.

“Hey,” I replied as kindly as I could.

There was nothing wrong with Jess. She had been nice to me from the very beginning. The only fault I could find with her was what she did for a living.

“This is my cousin, Adesynne. Addie this is Jess. She, um, works with Arsen,” I said.

“Nice to meet you!” Addie said with a smile.

“Yeah, same!” Jess said. She pushed her long, blonde hair behind her shoulders and put her hands on her tiny waist. “So what are you all doing?”

“Just kind of standing here at the moment,” Arsen replied.

“Neve? I forgot something on my beach towel. Come with me,” Addie said, prying me away from Arsen.

She looped an arm in mine and practically dragged me up the beach.

“What did you forget?” I asked her when we reached the towels.

“Nothing. I just want to see how they interact,” she said, sitting down and turning her full attention to Jess and Arsen.

“Why?” I asked her.

“I’ll tell you later. Just sit down,” she said.

We watched Arsen and Jess, looking for signs of... I wasn’t sure what. He had his hands crossed over his chest and she had her hands on her hips while they talked.

Finally, after another ten minutes of mindless chatter, Jess waved good-bye to Arsen and made her way back to the part of the beach she had come from. He looked around for us and when he saw us sitting on the towels, he left the water and walked over to us.

“Find what you were looking for?” he asked Addie.

“Actually, I did,” she replied, giving me a secretive look.

“Cool,” he replied with a smile, sitting down next to me.

I looked toward the water and burst into laughter. Addie’s harem was wandering around looking completely confused.

“I think your fans miss you,” I teased her.

“A girl’s work is never done!” she said with a labored sigh.

I just shook my head and laughed. I wrapped my arms around my legs and watched Addie play with her harem. She was so

good at being flirtatious without looking like a slut. Not that she was a slut, I just... I admired her in a lot of ways.

“Hey, you wanna go to dinner tonight? Just the two of us?” Arsen asked suddenly.

“Depends on if Addie has plans or not,” I replied. “Only because she did fly all this way to see me; I don’t want to just leave her at home alone, you know?”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” he answered.

We were quite for a few moments. I was desperately trying to think of something to say while he seemed to just be happy sitting there.

“So. Did you ever shoot anything with Jess?” I asked curiously.

“Do you really want to talk about that right now?” he asked, giving me an odd look.

“No, but this silence is getting awkward,” I admitted.

He smiled and turned his attention back to the water.

“So, have you?” I prompted.

“Yup.”

“Oh.”

I moved away from him a little bit. I didn’t know how to react. I mean, I still liked Jess and everything, but...

“Now it’s awkward,” he said.

“Not completely,” I lied.

“Hmph.”

Suddenly he got to his feet and stretched. He looked down at me and held a hand out. I took it and let him pull me off the towel. He intertwined his fingers in mine and we started to walk down toward the water. Instead of rejoining Addie and her boys, he turned and we just walked down the shoreline silently.

It was actually quite nice, walking along quietly with someone like Arsen. When we reached the rocks, he put his hands on

my waist and lifted me up. I stood on the rock and Arsen pulled himself up behind me and took my hand in his again.

“Where are we going?” I asked curiously.

“I wanna show you something,” he replied with a mysterious smile.

I narrowed my eyes at him and he laughed. We carefully walked over the rocks until we reached the lighthouse that was sitting alone. Arsen walked up to the door and pulled it open.

“Come on,” he said, pulling me in and closing the door behind us.

We walked up the winding staircase to the top door that he pushed open. He climbed up and reached down for me, easily pulling me up behind him.

“What do you think?” he asked, leaning on one of the rails.

“It’s... beautiful,” I breathed.

It really was. The beach looked so different from where we were and the ocean looked even more massive from up here.

I put my hands on the railing and smiled as the breeze went by. The air even smelled crisper up here.

Arsen left his spot and moved behind me. He leaned against me and put a hand on either side of mine on the railing.

“Like it?” he asked softly.

“Yes. Thank you for bringing me.”

“You’re welcome.”

I watched one of his hands leave the railing, and then felt it brush my hair off of my shoulder. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply when he put his head on my shoulder.

His other hand left the railing and wrapped around my waist, pulling me back tightly against him. He shifted his head on my shoulder and grazed his lips against my neck.

I felt the oddest, most amazing sensation from that simple action. I opened my eyes and turned myself around. It amazed

me how big Arsen truly was and it also amused me that I only came up to his chest.

“Look at me, baby doll,” he said, lifting my chin with his hand.

I looked up into his eyes and he smiled. I instantly returned his smile and wrapped my arms around his shoulders.

“Arsen,” I said softly.

“Hmm?” he asked, pushing my hair away from my neck.

“How is that you’re so friendly?”

He shrugged, “It’s just how I’ve always been, I guess. I mean, I don’t go on first night sleepovers with just anyone.”

I laughed.

He grinned.

By the time my laughter had subsided, his grin had slowly faded away.

“Neve?”

“Yes?”

“Can I kiss you?” he asked in a whisper.

“Yes.”

Without hesitation, he immediately brought his full, soft lips to mine and held me tightly. I ran my fingers through his hair as he opened his mouth slightly. I felt his tongue as he gently pried my lips apart. Our tongues touched softly at first. My body felt like it caught fire as our tongues danced together.

When he finally pulled away, I was left gasping for air. I looked up into his eyes and smiled. He returned the smile and put his forehead against mine.

I pushed myself onto my tiptoes and pressed my lips against his. I wanted another kiss. Another body melting kiss that seemed to stop time itself. Arsen didn’t disappoint. His hands gently moved up and down my back while still holding me close. We explored each other’s mouths like it was our first kiss all over again, only more passionate.

“Wow,” I whispered when we broke apart.

“Seriously,” he agreed with a chuckle.

“I think we should get back,” I said to him.

“I think we need to, honestly. Being up here alone with you... Kissing you, watching the wind blow through your hair, holding your perfect body so close... I’m not going to be able to keep... my hands to myself if we don’t get back down to civilization,” he replied seriously.

Interesting.

“Lead the way then!” I said cheerfully.

Arsen smiled and leaned down for the hatch door and hopped down. Then he raised his hands up to catch me. Grabbing my hand, we walked quickly down the spiral staircase and out of the lighthouse. He pushed the door shut firmly and we made our way carefully, but quickly, back across the rocks toward the beach.

I could see Adesynne in the distance with her hands on her hips looking around in frustration.

“There you two are!” she yelled when she saw us approaching.
“Where did you guys go?”

“Lighthouse,” Arsen replied.

Addie looked at him suspiciously before she turned her attention to me. She pulled us away from each other and turned me around to inspect me. I felt her hands go into the back of my bathing suit top before she pushed me forward a little, no doubt inspecting my bottoms.

“Just checking,” she said.

“For what?” Arsen asked curiously.

“Signs of sex. I mean if you guys are gonna do it, I would hope it would be in a way better place than a lighthouse,” she replied.

“What’s wrong with the lighthouse?” Arsen asked.

“Nothing! I just hope that her first time is in an actual bed,” Addie replied.

“Maybe I like the view up there better,” Arsen said.

“But you guys didn’t have sex because I don’t see any blood.”

“Maybe we washed her up.”

“But she’s walking just fine.”

“Maybe I carried her.”

“But... But... Oh my God, Neve!” Addie said looking completely alarmed.

I raised my arms to stop them from going back and forth, “The barrier is still in place. You can calm down and *you*,” I said to Arsen, giving him a playful shove, “are not helping!”

“I couldn’t help it!” he replied, laughing. “Lighten up, Addie. If we ever go to that point, it won’t be outside in a lighthouse. I mean I’d like to be in a relationship with her first, you know?”

“Um, I’m standing right here,” I said to him.

“I know,” he replied with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“So what are you saying then?” I asked, putting my hands on my hips.

“Wanna be my girl?” he asked with a nervous laugh.

“Yes! She does!” Addie shouted.

I looked at her and laughed; so did Arsen.

“Answer him!” she insisted.

“Well, it’s been only two days really,” I said thoughtfully.

“And I was just kidding,” he said with a laugh.

Addie looked completely deflated.

Arsen laughed and pulled me over to him giving me a tight hug. I hugged him back and stuck my tongue out at Adesynne.

“Hey, Addie, would it be alright with you if I took her out to dinner tonight? Just the two of us?” he asked over my head.

“Yeah, that’s fine. I was going to go out with the boys anyway,” she replied breezily.

“No way! You’re not going out alone with seven guys,” I said, pulling away from Arsen and giving her an incredulous look.

“I’ll be fine!” she said with a laugh.

“I kind of have to agree with Neve on this one,” Arsen said seriously. “Hey, I have an idea! Why don’t we have a cookout tonight at my place! We can go to the liquor store and get some stuff to drink. I have plenty of food and I’ve been dying for a reason to use my grill. You can invite them over and I’ll call some friends. It’ll be fun!”

What kind of friends?

“Okay, I’ll let them know!” she said excitedly, running off to tell her harem.

“What do you think, Neve? Sound like a good idea?” Arsen asked me.

“Um. Yeah,” I mumbled.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. I agree, it’ll be a good time,” I replied, forcing a smile.

“Awesome, let’s get Addie and go home. I can start calling some people when we get there and start pulling food out of the freezer,” he said happily.

Arsen took me by the hand again and we went over to pick up our towels. Adesynne ran over to tell us that her harem was game. I decided I would send Matt a message and tell him to bring Drew, the other sub shop kid, to come to Arsen’s tonight.

We walked back to his place laughing and talking. Or rather they were; I was silent most of the way.

When we climbed the stairs to his doorway, I hesitated and Addie blew out her breath impatiently.

“Be careful in there, Cuz. You don’t want to trip on the dildos inside.”

I rolled my eyes and let Arsen lead me inside. I kept my eyes straight ahead at first because I didn't know what to expect.

I glanced around the living room and smiled at a picture he had next to his huge flat screen television. I let go of his hand and walked over to it. I picked it up and my smile widened a little when I saw that he had his arm around an older woman who was smiling his exact smile.

"That's my mom," he said, appearing next to me.

"You have her smile," I remarked, setting the picture back down.

"Yeah. She's a good woman," he replied.

I stepped away from the picture and looked around the opulent room. It really wasn't what I expected. There was no sex paraphernalia anywhere and there were no signs that he was anything other than an ordinary guy. Pictures of his family and friends were scattered all over the living room.

Arsen left me in the room to look around. I noticed Addie was sitting on the obviously expensive leather couch, smiling at me.

"I'm proud of you, kid. You've been out here for four months, and you're already growing up on me."

I blushed at her praise. I knew what she meant. My answer to being Arsen's girl was a big decision for me and she was probably expecting me to say no, which is why she answered for me.

"I like him," I finally admitted.

"I knew that already. You wouldn't have had a "pajama party" with him if you hadn't," she said, grinning and making air quotes. "You just need a push, is all."

"Thanks, Addie," I said softly.

"Hey, that's what I'm here for!" she said with a laugh.

"You guys ready to hit the liquor store?" Arsen asked, reappearing.

"Let's do it!" Addie said.

We walked out of the house after I pulled on my denim shorts. We piled into Arsen's car and he backed out of the driveway.

"I told everyone to start showing up around seven, so we've got two hours," he said as he put the car in drive and made his way toward the liquor store.

"Perfect, I told the boys eight," Addie said from the backseat.

I reached into my purse and grabbed my phone. I sent Matt a message, giving him Arsen's address and telling him to bring Drew.

He replied with a "hell yes" and I smiled.

"Matt's in. And he's bringing Drew," I said to Arsen.

"Cool! I hope they have a good time," he replied with a grin.

We pulled into the liquor store parking lot and got out of the car. Addie was walking around in her two piece bathing suit and I stuck close to her, feeling completely protective. Eventually we all found our way back to the front of the store and at the cash register. Arsen picked up the three hundred dollar bill and we all walked back out to the car.

"Mind dropping me off at home? I wanna change," I said to him.

"Yeah, let me just take this stuff home first," he replied.

I waited in the car while him and Addie unloaded the car and took everything into the house.

They came back out and we were off to my place. I climbed out of the car when we arrived and was suddenly struck with the realization of how small my place really was. After being in Arsen's living room, I was sure it was bigger than my entire damn apartment.

I unlocked the door and the three of us went in.

"I'm gonna take a shower quick," I called back to them as I disappeared into the bedroom.

I grabbed a sundress that I had specially made when I lived in New York. It was lightweight and had vertical white strips toward the bottom. The rest of it was black with a giant white

skull in front. I knew what Addie was going to say. *Don't you wear anything besides black and white skulls?*

I turned on the water, hopped in, and washed myself up in record timing. I blow dried my hair and reached for some mouse. I had been thinking about flat ironing my hair but decided I'd rather accentuate the natural waves.

When I was done, I gave myself one last look over in the full length mirror on the door and blew a kiss. The dress hugged me in all the right places without being too tight.

Hopefully he thought I looked as hot as I felt.

"I'm ready!" I said cheerfully, walking into the living room.

"*Wow,*" Arsen said appreciatively.

"Not bad, Neve!" Addie agreed with a nod.

Arsen stood up and came over to where I was standing. He took one of my hands and raised my arm, looking me up and down.

"*Very nice,*" he said with a grin.

"Let's get going, guys! We've got a party to host!" Arsen said, leading the way out of my apartment.

CHAPTER

Seven

It was 9:00 pm and the cookout was in full swing. Addie had opted to go in a yellow halter top and white flair skirt. She wore white flip flops and looked absolutely amazing.

I was standing next to Arsen who was happily grilling away with a beer in his hand, looking around at a *lot* of familiar faces.

I had seen most of the people that were here have sex and I was feeling highly uncomfortable.

That was only deepened when Jess came over to chat with me.

“You look hot!” she exclaimed.

“Thanks, Jess,” I mumbled, looking down.

The truth was so did she. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a sleek bun and she was wearing a black tube top and electric blue jeans. On her feet, she wore clunky sandals that made her a bit taller than me.

“So Arsen tells me that you guys are hanging out a lot,” she said with a friendly smile.

“Did I?” he asked, glancing over at her.

“Yeah.”

“And when did I say that?” he inquired.

“Um... a little while ago. I thought you said...,” her voice trailed off into a giggle. She gave him a playful shove and he laughed before he turned his attention back to his grill.

“It’s awesome that you’re cool with what he does,” she said with a kind smile.

I swallowed hard.

The truth was that I wasn’t. And I never would be. I only hoped he wouldn’t feel lonely enough to go back to fucking random girls.

“Hey, Jess, wanna go inside and grab something for me?” Arsen said.

“What do you need?” she asked him.

“I don’t care. Just *go* and grab anything,” he replied meaningfully.

Jess looked confused for a minute, but when she saw the sullen look on my face, she understood and gave my arm a quick rub before leaving.

“Sorry about that,” Arsen mumbled. “Jessie’s a good girl, she just talks too damn much.”

I just shrugged and looked at the ground.

“Neve,” Arsen said putting his spatula down. “You don’t have anything to worry about. From *anyone* here. If you could see the look on your face right now, you’d know why I’m saying that.”

I glanced up at him and nodded. I believed him but it was still hard not knowing if he’d slept with most of the women here.

“Neve!” Addie yelled, jogging toward me.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

She grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away from Arsen’s side, “These boys over here are bragging about their beer pong skills. It’s time that we show them how it’s done.”

“Hold on. I can’t do this in a dress.”

I walked back to Arsen and asked him if he had some shorts that I could borrow and possibly a muscle shirt of some sort.

“Is this a game I should be betting on?” he asked mischievously as I followed him into his house.

“You might want too. I hate beer; can’t stand the taste. It makes me a great player,” I explained with a laugh.

Arsen led me up the stairs and into his bedroom where he handed me a pair of black basketball shorts and a white muscle shirt.

“I feel like we should put some shoe polish under your eyes,” he said with a laugh when I walked out.

“Maybe a sweatband too?” I asked, sticking out my tongue. “Got anything that I can tie my hair up with?”

“Yeah, actually. Check the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. The last time my sister was here she forgot a bunch of those hair tie things,” he said, pointing to a door.

I went into the bathroom and opened the mirror. I grabbed a black, elastic hair tie and looped my hair into a tight ponytail.

“Hey, Arsen?”

“Yeah?”

“Shoe polish me?”

I heard his loud laughter as he approached the door and knocked before coming in.

“Step aside, woman,” he said in a fake macho voice.

I rolled my eyes and giggled as he produced the shoe polish from a different cabinet and uncapped it. He placed his thumb in it and with two quick, firm swipes, gave me some war paint.

I leaned over to look in the mirror and flexed, making a fake game face. He laughed again as he gently moved me so he could wash his hands in the sink.

“Come on,” I said to him cheerfully as I walked out of his bathroom, through his bedroom, and down the stairs to the main floor.

Once we got outside, I ran over to the set up table where Addie was standing and nudged her. She laughed and we high fived.

This game was going to be fun.

“Ladies first,” one of the guys said. I eyed him for a moment. His body had a similar build to Arsen’s so it was obvious what *he* did for a living. I didn’t know his name, but his long blonde hair and crystal blue eyes reminded me of someone.

“Give it here, Tarzan,” I said dryly.

He laughed good-naturedly and tossed the ping pong ball toward me. I caught it with ease and looked at Adesynne.

“How do you want to do this? Quick and painless or slow and make them suffer?” I asked loudly.

“How about you just toss the ball and try not to get hurt,” Tarzan asked with a grin.

I raised an eyebrow at him, sized up the cups, and let the ball fly through the air.

Plop!

It landed in the middle cup in the last row. Everyone was quiet for a moment; everyone except for Addie who was giggling wickedly.

“Drink up, Blondie,” I said casually.

I put my hands on his hips as he fished out the ball and drank. He tossed the cup aside and blew me a kiss. Then he let the ball fly and did the same thing that I had just done.

Oh shit. This might not have been a good idea after all.

I looked at Addie who was staring at the cup with the same expression I was.

“This made be harder than I thought,” she mumbled, reaching for the cup.

“Um, excuse me! I believe that cup belongs to her,” he said to Addie.

“There’s no designation here,” Addie called back.

“Well, if she can’t handle it, then maybe she shouldn’t play,” he replied simply.

I shot him a dirty look and snatched the cup from Addie. The smell of the beer alone was making my stomach turn. I fished

out the ball and stared at the red cup's contents.

Arsen suddenly snatched the cup out of my hand and drank down the beer.

"Hey, man! What gives?" Tarzan yelled to him.

"I was thirsty," he replied with a shrug. He gave me a secret smirk and walked back to the spot that he had been watching the game from.

Tarzan rolled his eyes. Addie grabbed the ball and let it fly. She sunk it easily and Tarzan's partner, with the short black hair and big brown eyes laughed as he fished out the ball and drank.

"I have a feeling I'm going to be seriously drunk at the end of this," she grumbled as Brown Eyes sunk his shot.

Three hours and more than enough games of Beer Pong later, mostly everyone was starting to leave. Tarzan and Brown Eyes were passed out under the table and I couldn't find Adesynne anywhere. I became frantic until Jess assured me that she had safely passed out in the living room alone.

"I guess I should grab her and get going," I said to Arsen after I helped him clean up.

"Nah. Let her sleep. We can go upstairs and hang out on the balcony," he said with a smile.

"Are you sure? I mean, what about them?" I asked, pointing to my adversaries.

"They'll be okay. Trust me. It's not the first time they've 'slept' there," he replied, laughing.

I nodded, "Okay, then let's go."

After we checked on Addie, we walked up the stairs and back into Arsen's bedroom. He led the way to the balcony doors and sat down in one of the folding chairs that were there.

"Did you have a good time, Neve?" he asked, glancing at me.

I nodded shyly.

"Good. I was hoping that you did."

He took one of my hands and held it in his lap while he looked out into the night sky. My body was trembling so hard in that moment that I was sure he could feel it. When he chuckled, I knew I was right. Arsen gave my hand a gentle squeeze and sighed. I didn't know what the sigh meant, but he reached over and moved my chair closer to his. I glanced at him and he gave me a small smile. I held his gaze for a few precious seconds before I looked away shyly.

“Hey,” he said quietly.

When I turned to look at him, he pressed his lips gently against mine. My heart was beating wildly but the trembling stopped as I felt him part my mouth slightly with his tongue. It honestly felt like time had come to a standstill. My hand slipped out of his and pulled him closer to me as we probed each other's mouths; our tongues dancing together in perfect harmony.

Arsen was the one that pulled away. I could have sat there and kissed him forever if he'd let me.

“Just as sweet as I thought it would be,” he said with a small grin.

I desperately wanted another kiss, but I wasn't going to make any moves for it. If Arsen wanted me to kiss him, I'd let him initiate it.

“Thanks for taking tonight. I really needed it. Addie had fun too and that's important to me,” I said softly.

“I can tell you guys really love each other,” he said, leaning back in his chair.

“Yeah, we don't have any brothers or sisters so we've been really tight since we were kids.”

He nodded but didn't say anything.

I sat there for a moment silently contemplating where the night could potentially take us.

Addie had always told me that losing your virginity was a big deal. She said it should be with someone you loved and wanted to be with for a long time; possibly forever. I didn't

know if that's what this was because I had never fallen in love before, but I knew in my heart that it wouldn't be a bad idea if it happened with Arsen.

He leaned over again suddenly and I took a sharp breath, when I felt him kiss the side of my neck. It gave me a sensation that I had never felt before.

Yeah, he'll give me anything I want, I thought euphorically to myself as he gently reached his hands over and squeezed my breasts.

I reached my hands up and ran my fingers through his hair as his hands explored my body.

"We need to get inside. Now," he whispered, his breath labored.

He stood up and scooped me out of the chair, cradling me in his arms. He used his foot to push the bedroom door open and carried me to the bed.

We fell onto it, tangled in each other. We kissed a yearning kiss, as if though we would never have the chance to be together again.

Arsen pulled away long enough to pull his black t-shirt over his head and toss it to the side. My hands went to his muscular chest almost immediately. I wanted to feel his body with every sense that I could possibly use. He picked me up and laid me down on my back, letting his body weight drop onto me.

"Do you really want to do this?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied without hesitation.

"I just needed to be sure. And so you know, until the moment I'm inside of you, I'm going to keep asking," he replied before he moved his lips to my neck again.

I wiggled under his kisses. Every time that Arsen asked me if I wanted him, from this point on the answer would always be yes.

The moon had risen enough that slivers of light were coming through the window. I watched as he pulled himself off of me and unzipped his jeans.

“Take your clothes off, Neve,” he said softly as he pulled his pants off.

I did as he asked. He sat there for a moment looking at my body with hungry eyes. I let my eyes wander down his body, taking in the ripples on his taut stomach. I took a shaky breath as I noticed the rock hard erection in his boxer briefs.

There was no question about the fact that Arsen wanted me.

As he began to lower himself down on me again, I pushed him back. He looked at me in confusion until I began to run my hands over his desire. He sat back on the bed and sighed softly.

“Neve,” he whispered.

Before he could ask me the question, I boldly reached a hand into the opening of his underwear and wrapped my hands around it.

Since I had never had sex, only seen it multiple times happen in front of me, I knew that Arsen was ‘porn star’ size. It was long, smooth, and thick.

I began to run my hands slowly up and down it as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. I leaned my body forward and kissed his neck, causing his body to start quivering.

I tightened my grip on his now throbbing member and began to move my hand a little faster. Arsen moaned and I felt myself starting to pool in my dark blue, lace boy shorts.

I took my hand out of his underwear and reached for the sides, pulling them down and off of him. I let them fall to the carpet next to the bed as he watched me with labored breaths.

“You’re so beautiful, baby doll,” he whispered.

I smiled at him as he ran a hand down the side of my face.

I moved my hand away and ran it up the length of his body, allowing a teasing sensation to ripple through him.

“Oh God, Neve,” he moaned.

I lowered my hands back down and began to rub him again, but he pushed my hands away.

“You have to stop or I’m going to blow right now,” he said with a soft laugh.

I looked up at him and grinned.

“I’m an old pro by association,” I replied, making a face.

Arsen laughed and stood up. I was sitting on the bed, almost eye level with his spit covered desire. When I reached for it again, he moved my hand away.

He looked at me for a moment and took a deep, steadying breath before he got back onto his bed and laid down next to me. He pushed my legs open and started to rub me over my panties. I could feel the small pool becoming larger as he ran my fingers over my labia. I leaned my head back against the board and moaned softly when he moved my fingers up to my clit and began to circle it slowly with his finger.

I squeezed my one of my breasts as he continued to fondle me.

“How does that feel, Neve?” he asked.

“Am...a...zing,” I stammered.

“I’m going to stop now. Take off your bra and your panties. Lay flat on your back and keep your legs open,” he instructed.

With trembling hands, I did as he said. There were only two options left. Either he was going to use his mouth on my wet sex or he was going to put his dick inside of me.

Arsen moved on the bed and looked at me before he moved his face down and began to suck on my nipples. First one, then the other, while he gently used his teeth to nibble them in between suckling.

I closed my eyes and moaned loudly. It was an amazing feeling and I loved every nibble, every suck.

I felt him position himself on the bed and move himself so that he would be between my open legs. I felt the head of his dick as he rubbed it gently against my wet pussy lips. He leaned up and kissed me while he teased me.

“Last chance to back out,” he whispered into my ear.

I opened my eyes for a moment and ran my hands through his hair as he continued to tease me.

I want this so bad right now.

But before I could tell him that, I caught a flash of his latest movie go through my mind. Even if I had never seen his “work, all I could see was him on top of some blonde girl, ramming her like no tomorrow.

“No. I... I can’t do this. Please get off of me,” I whispered.

He didn’t hesitate. He pulled his naked body off of mine and sat on the bed next to me. I turned my back to him and wiped tears away from my eyes.

I couldn’t believe that, despite my feelings for him, I almost gave a porn actor my virginity. It wasn’t right. He had more than enough pussy to fuck on a daily basis.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Is it because, you know?” he asked quietly.

I sniffled and nodded.

“I’m sorry that I never told you. I just ... I’m not ashamed of what I do, Neve. I want you to know that. But I also want you to know that I didn’t tell you because of your reaction to the industry when I first asked you what you did at Devil’s Den. God, I felt like I got struck by a lightning bolt when I saw you sleeping in New York and I never felt that before. I knew you were special and I... kind of fell for you right then and there. I didn’t want you to think any less of me because of what I do; that’s why I didn’t tell you. A lot of it is fake anyway,” he said.

“Which part? The part where you fuck three girls or the part where you cum all over them?” I asked bitterly through fresh tears.

“Yeah, I guess that’s all you *would* see. But because of what you said, I know you didn’t even watch it,” he replied unhappily as he got off of the bed.

“Why would I want to watch it?” I asked incredulously, sitting up. I reached down for the blanket and pulled it up over my naked body.

Arsen put his hands on his hips and looked at me before he answered.

“Do you still have it? The movie?” he asked.

“Unfortunately. Adesynne made me keep it since she paid eighty bucks for it.”

“Get dressed and meet me outside please,” he said as he walked out of the bedroom.

I rolled my eyes and went out to his car where he was waiting for me. We drove in silence all the way back to my place and when we got there, I went straight to my dresser that the television was sitting on. I grabbed a fresh pair of panties and threw a tank top on. I moved the rest of my underwear to the side and grabbed the movie.

Addie told me to hold on to it and “use” it one day along with the vibrator she gave me with it. She thought it was funny until she saw the crushed look on my face when I saw Arsen on the cover with a beautiful brunette.

I cringed at the name of the movie. *Snow White and the Cuntsman*. It was so damn cheesy but Addie told me that porn companies usually took big name movies and remade them.

I closed the dresser drawer and went into the living room where he was sitting on the couch, waiting in his boxer briefs.

“Put the movie in, Neve,” he said seriously.

I tossed it on the couch, “*You* put the movie in.”

He shook his head and grabbed it. I stood next to the couch with my arms crossed over my chest while he unwrapped it and turned the TV and the game system I used. He put it in and scrolled over until the disc icon was ready and he pressed the button to activate it.

“Come sit next to me please,” he said quietly.

“I’d rather not. I don’t want to watch this Arsen. I don’t even care anymore,” I replied stubbornly.

“Yes you do. I can tell you care, because you’re hurt. If it didn’t hurt, you wouldn’t care,” he replied softly. “Please,

Neve.”

I let out a long suffering sigh and sat down as far away from him as I could while the title screen came on. He pressed the button on the controller again then set it on the coffee table.

For the next two hours, I sat there watching *Snow White and The Cuntsman*. Arsen pointed out which parts were “fake” and which parts were “real.” Since he was the male lead, I missed most of it. I refused to watch him having sex with anyone and I could tell he was becoming frustrated.

When the movie was over he looked at me.

“Do you understand now Neve? Yes, I have sex with women for a living, but it’s really only ten minutes of actual work and the rest is looped. I need you to understand,” he pleaded.

“And I need you to leave,” I replied coldly. “I can’t believe I almost gave you my virginity. I can’t believe that I fell...” my voice trailed off as I caught myself.

“You fell what?” he prompted.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said quietly shaking my head.

“It matters to *me*,” he said.

“For *you*. It must be obvious, Arsen. If I didn’t feel strongly for you, I never would’ve let this get this far. You know what? I have a great idea! Why don’t I get into porn too and then we can both be happy,” I suggested sarcastically.

“No way. I wouldn’t share you with anybody,” he said, shaking his head.

“Likewise,” I replied through gritted teeth.

Maybe now he would understand where my feelings were with his “job.”

He looked at me with hurt eyes. I knew that essentially I was asking him to quit his job for me, but I couldn’t be involved physically and emotionally with an adult movie star.

“So where do we go from here?” he asked quietly.

“You go home. And I will too,” I replied with a heavy sigh.

“What do you mean?” he asked curiously.

“I mean, I’m moving back east. I can’t do this anymore. California is beautiful, but I miss New York. I’ve been wanting to go home for a while now.”

“Neve, you can’t just leave!” he exclaimed.

I turned my head slowly to look at him.

“Why not?” I asked quietly.

Arsen moved to sit next to me, closing the wide gap that I had left during the movie. He took my hands and intertwined his fingers in mine.

“Because we just officially got together. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us not to see where this could go,” he repeated, looking into my eyes.

My heart was screaming ‘*I’ll stay with you,*’ but my mind was also screaming at me. It was saying, ‘*Can you really stay with a man that has sex with other women?*’

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for a moment.

I had never had a man tell me that he loved me before and for some reason he sent shock waves through me.

I opened my eyes again and looked at Arsen. He looked completely hopeless and somewhat broken.

“I need time to think about this. I need to know if this is something I can live with.”

“I’ll give you all the time you need so long as you promise that you won’t leave without telling me what you decide,” he said.

I nodded and he pulled me into a tight embrace. I put my head on his shoulder and a tear escaped down my face and onto his bare chest. He reached up his hand and lifted my chin to look at him.

“Can I stay tonight? I promise not to try anything sexual. I just want to be able to hold you in my arms and watch you fall asleep.”

I sniffled and nodded again. He leaned down and kissed me softly on my lips. Arsen pulled me off of the couch and we went into the bedroom again. I laid down on the side of the bed closest to the window and he laid down behind me. He pulled the blankets up over us and pulled me close to him. I wrapped an arm around his waist and closed my eyes.

I fell asleep to Arsen's soft lips against my forehead and his hands gently caressing my back.

CHAPTER

Eight

I woke up the next morning still wrapped in Arsen's arms. I smiled at him as he slept. I was more than a little shocked that after only a few days of getting to know each other we agreed on the fact that this was something worth trying for, but to be honest, it felt *right*.

I shimmied out of his arms and went to check my phone. With any luck Adesynne was awake and not freaking out.

I saw that I had five text messages waiting for me and they were all from her. Primarily she was making sure I was okay.

And still pure.

I sent her a three page text message of what happened when we got back last night and put my phone down.

I smiled when I heard Arsen yawning in the bedroom.

"Baby doll!" he called out tiredly.

"I'm in the living room," I yelled back.

"Come here," he said.

I got up from the couch and went back into the bedroom. He was on his back and his hair was a mess. He had one arm over his forehead and his eyes were closed.

"Get back into bed with me," he said.

I didn't hesitate. I walked over to my side and climbed in. Arsen immediately rolled over and wrapped his arms around me.

He cracked one eye open at me and I couldn't help but giggle.

“How’s Addie?” he asked.

“Checking in on my virtue, as always,” I replied as I nuzzled into his chest.

“Did you tell her what we did?” he asked.

“Well yeah. If I tell her the truth she won’t give me another pat down,” I replied with a giggle.

He chuckled and began to run his hand up and down my back. I closed my eyes and smiled. I loved the feeling of his hands against my bare skin.

He moved his head a little closer and brushed his lips against my neck. I instantly began to feel my body reacting to his lips. I squirmed a little as he began to gently kiss my neck.

A quiet moan escaped my lips when he slid his hand under my tank top and began to gently squeeze my breasts. He took one of my hands and guided it under the blanket, placing it on his erection.

I closed my hand around it and began to slowly move up and down, tracing the length of his hardness. I loved being able to have him so vulnerable in my hand and I think he loved it too.

Our lips met and we became tangled in a steamy, passionate kiss, as I rubbed him faster. He began to pinch my nipples; pulling on them gently. He had a hand full of my hair in his other hand and he had it balled up tightly.

I moaned into his mouth and his breathing was starting to become ragged.

A loud pounding on the door broke us apart.

“What the hell?” I asked letting go of Arsen.

“Are you kidding me?” he groaned unhappily. “I was so close.”

I threw the blankets off of us with a heavy sigh and went to the door. I peeked through the peep hole and started to laugh as I opened the door.

“You look like hell,” I remarked to Addie.

“Yeah well you weren’t the one playing drinking games,” she said, reaching up to flatten her wild hair.

She stepped into my apartment and looked around. Her eyes fell on Arsen’s clothes and my dress on the living room floor and she narrowed her eyes.

“Hope I’m not interrupting anything!” she shouted.

“God, Addie. Stop yelling,” I complained, covering my ears.

“Too late!” Arsen yelled back.

Adesynne gave me an odd look. She reached for me, but I stepped back and swatted her hands away.

“Back off, Cuz. It was just a hand job and some nipple pinching this morning. I’ve still got my virtue,” I replied.

“Well aren’t you awfully sexual all of a sudden,” she replied with a smirk.

I shrugged. The truth was that I felt incredibly comfortable around Arsen. To a certain extent anyway.

Addie looked past my shoulder and grinned. I turned around and saw Arsen leaning against the doorway in his underwear, watching us curiously.

“Bad timing, Adesynne. Bad timing,” he said, shaking his head.

“Perfect timing if you ask me,” she replied, giving him a pointed look.

He chuckled and came over to me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders.

The phone in the kitchen rang and I sighed.

“Now what,” I muttered under my breath as I pulled away from Arsen.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Dutton? This is Jareth Vance again. I really hate to be disturbing you so early in the morning, but the movie has been pushed up and we’re going to be shooting next week. I was calling to see if we could get that business lunch in today.”

“Um, sure! What time and where?” I asked, scouring the kitchen drawers for a pen and pad.

“How about noon at DiMarco’s? We can eat outside while we talk,” he suggested.

“Alright, I’ll see you then, Mr. Vance,” I replied.

“Jareth,” he said.

“Jareth,” I echoed with a smile.

We hung up and I went into the bedroom. Noon was an hour away and I looked like a mess. I turned on the water and hopped right in. I washed myself especially carefully today, only because I didn’t know if I would smell like Arsen so to speak or what the hell I would smell like if I didn’t get everything twice over.

I ran back into the bedroom and threw on a pair of fitted black jeans, a loose soft pink top that came off the shoulders, and ran into the living room to find my pink flip flops.

“Where are you going?” Addie asked curiously.

“That was Jareth on the phone,” I explained, getting to my knees and looking under the couch. “The movie got pushed up to next week so he wants to meet today to discuss what I’ll be doing. Ah! Got ‘em!”

I slid my flip flops on, ran over to Arsen who was still sitting in his underwear on the couch and kissed him quickly on the lips. Then I ran over to Addie and gave her an even quicker hug. I grabbed my cell phone off of the coffee table, and my purse from its usual spot by the door, and ran out of the apartment.

DiMarco’s was a beautiful and expensive restaurant that I had never been too. I had walked past it plenty of times, envious of the people who would sit around with their glasses of wine.

It was about a ten block walk from where I lived. Normally, I would’ve taken a cab, but I didn’t walk to risk being late and it was a beautiful day out so I didn’t mind the walk.

When I rounded the corner, I saw DiMarco’s sitting in the middle of the block. I picked up speed when I checked my

phone and saw that I was five minutes late.

Figures, I thought rolling my eyes.

I walked up to the host who was standing outside with his little stand. I smiled as I tried to catch my breath and looked at me with slight disapproval.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Um, I’m meeting someone here. Jareth Vance,” I replied, pushing my hair behind my ears.

He ran his finger down his list and nodded, “Follow me please.”

I walked with this snotty host through the old style, packed restaurant, through the side door and out into a bevy of round glass tables and iron wrought chairs. I didn’t know what Jareth looked like so I just followed the host until we stopped in front of an empty table and he pulled out the chair for me.

“Thanks,” I said with a smile.

He placed a menu in front of me before he walked away, “Enjoy, Miss.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. I leaned back in my chair and started to scan the menu, not knowing how I was going to be able to afford anything more than a glass of water and some breadsticks.

“Neve?”

I looked up at the sound of the deep voice and almost dropped my menu.

“Jareth?” I asked.

He smiled and held a hand out. I got to my feet and shook his hand hoping he wouldn’t notice how hard I was shaking.

Addie was right; this man was damn sexy. Almond shaped, light blue eyes, fair perfect skin covered with scruff, and black straight hair that stopped below his ears. His eyebrows were naturally arched to give him a somewhat permanently serious look, but when he smiled, I was sure the moon would fall out of the sky just so the sun could see it too.

“Please,” he said, motioning toward my chair.

I sat down and continued to stare at him. How was it humanly possible to look like that? Did they grow such beautiful creatures in a laboratory somewhere and then unleash them into the world full grown?

“Thanks for meeting me on such short notice,” he said, taking the menu from the snotty host.

“Um. Yeah. Definitely,” I mumbled.

Read your menu. Just sit here and read your menu. Focus on that and maybe you won't sound incompetent.

“I remember you saying that you had family in town so I felt bad about pulling you away from that,” he said in his smooth-baritone voice.

“She'll be okay,” I said into my menu.

“Cool,” he replied.

A young girl came over and introduced herself as Mandy and said she would be our waitress. Jareth ordered a glass of Pinot and I told her I'd be fine with water.

“Hold on,” he said telling Mandy to come back. “I'm paying for this. Get anything you want.”

“Oh, um. Can I have a Cherry Coke then, please?” I asked. She nodded making a correction on her pad and walked away.

“When I said business lunch, I thought you knew that I would be paying,” he replied with a grin.

“Well this is my first ever business lunch,” I said with a nervous giggle.

“So I'm popping your cherry then?”

“Huh?”

“Your business lunch cherry,” he said with a laugh.

Oh. Oh I thought you meant ... Focus, Neve. You've already got someone lined up for that job.

“Tell me what you did at Devil's Den,” he said as Mandy placed our drinks down. He gave her a small wave and a smile

to let her know we hadn't even looked at the menus yet.

"I pretty much got assigned directors to assist. I worked with four; Max was my favorite. He wasn't as demanding or dickish as the other three. I guess he noticed I was a little more comfortable being around him, so he fought to keep me," I replied, sitting back in my chair.

"What do you consider 'dickish'?" he asked, taking a sip of his wine and leaning back in his chair.

"You know what they do at Devil's Den, right?" I asked. He nodded. "Okay well, the first director I worked with, Chad? He would have me, in the middle of shoots, clean up the male actors. I mean seriously, any reason they couldn't just grab hand towels and do it themselves? I went home and cried myself to sleep. It was embarrassing and unnecessary."

"I can see where that would be considered dickish. So what did you do about it?" he asked.

"Nothing. It was my first job since college, so I just kept my mouth shut. The next day when I went in, the same thing happened again. I got pretty numb to it after the third day. On the fourth day, I was moved to a different director, and finally I got shifted to Max," I answered.

"And what did he have you do?" he asked, sipping his wine.

"Worst thing I had to do was stand there while the actors and actresses did their jobs. Max never asked me to do anything gross or disgusting. Hell, there were days that he'd let me leave early because he could see how miserable I was. Anyway, the day he fired me, he told my friend Arsen that he got me a job with Golden Hills Media and here I am," I finished with a shrug.

"Max is a good guy," Jareth said. "I went to high school with him. We even went to the same college together. He just decided to go a different route with his degree. Not that I'm judging him; he must make good money or he wouldn't keep doing it. I'm more personal than that, so I stuck to Hollywood," he said with a laugh.

I laughed along with him, feeling myself finally becoming comfortable.

He looked around and waved Mandy over. We ordered our food, I took the fish and chips lunch portion and he ordered a steak, medium and white garlic mashed potatoes.

I did some mental calculations. Something as simple as what we ordered put us already at around fifty dollars.

I saw him raise an eyebrow behind me suddenly looking rather curious. I turned around and shook my head. Adesynne was standing on the other side of the gate and she was waving me over. I saw Arsen sitting in his car parked right next to the gate. His eyes were locked intensely on Jareth.

“Excuse me,” I said, my face turning beet red. I walked quickly toward Addie.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I hissed.

“I had to see him with my own eyes,” she said looking over my shoulder. “And that one wanted to see the competition. I swear we just got here though. We’re leaving too. We’re gonna go shopping so I can get some souvenirs for everyone back home. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” she said with a wink.

I shook my head as she walked back to Arsen’s car and hopped in. He finally tore his gaze away from Jareth and smiled at me. I blew him a kiss and waved at them as they drove away.

As I walked back to my table with Jareth, I saw him watching the car leave.

“Sorry about that. My cousin can be a little overzealous sometimes,” I explained sitting down.

“It’s okay,” he replied with a grin.

Mandy reappeared and placed our plates in front of us. I grabbed my napkin, undid it, and placed it on my lap. I grabbed the knife and fork and cut a piece of my fish off. The fork was hovering a few inches away from my open mouth when I noticed that Jareth was still leaning back in his chair watching me with a smile.

I raised my eyebrow and put my fork down, suddenly feeling very self-conscious.

“Ever think of stepping in front of the camera? Instead of just standing behind the scenes?” he asked.

“What? No, hell no. I wasn’t going to strip down for anyone there,” I replied, my face turning red.

“I wasn’t talking about Devil’s Den,” he said laughing. “I meant for me. I’m sure I could find a part for you in this movie.”

“That’s more Addie’s speed,” I replied, making a face. “I like being behind the scenes. It’s what I went to school for.”

Jareth’s smile widened and he finally leaned forward and started to eat his lunch. Between bites he told me about what I would be doing. For once I wasn’t going to be a go for; I was actually going to do something with meaning that wasn’t degrading.

Jareth said that as his assistant, I had to be sure to always be on time and if there were nights that he needed me to stay late I would have to do so. I agreed to that; I didn’t have much of a life anyway, so working fourteen hour days would make me feel like I was actually doing something. He also said I would be on call a lot, too. When I asked why, he said because there would be nights, he was sure, that he would stay up going over the footage from the day before and he would want an extra pair of eyes. He also said that once I got used to going over the raw footage and understood what I was to look for, he’d leave that job entirely to me.

I felt like I was going to overdose on the amount of pride going through my veins. He seemed so confident that I would do a great job, that he was willing to leave a lot in my hands.

Afternoon turned to dusk, while I sat there across from Jareth. He was on his fourth glass of wine and I was filling up nicely on my soda. I had my face in my hands on the table top while he told me some funny stories about being a director. I told him some of the horror stories of what I had seen at my last job.

“Where did the time go?” he asked, suddenly looking up at the sky.

I pulled my phone out of my purse.

“Oh wow, we’ve been here for a little while,” I said giggling at the time. It was almost seven p.m. I also noticed that I had about five text messages waiting for me to read, but I swiped to dismiss them. “Addie and Arsen are going to kill me if I don’t get home soon.”

I dropped my phone back into my purse and smiled at Jareth.

“You can blame it on me,” he said with the wave of a hand. “Considering I’m your boss now, you can’t exactly have just run away.”

I grinned and put my purse on the table. Jareth put his face in his hand and looked at me curiously.

“Tell me about your cousin and your boyfriend,” he said.

“How’d you know Arsen was my boyfriend?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Neve, even from over here, I could see the look he was giving me,” he replied with a laugh.

“Oh. Sorry. Um, well I’ll start that since that’ll be the shorter story of the two. Met him three days ago, became ‘official’ less than twenty four hours ago, and I’m probably gonna be single again if I don’t get home soon,” I said meaningfully.

Jareth threw his head back and laughed.

“That’s a pretty fast relationship there. You guys gonna move in together tomorrow?” he teased as he got up from his chair to look for Mandy.

She handed him the bill and he took money out of his wallet, handed her one hundred dollars and told her to keep the change. She looked shocked and very happy.

I followed Jareth through the ritzy restaurant to the front door and out onto the city streets.

“What time do you need me on Monday?” I asked him.

“Shooting won’t start until six a.m., but if you can get there by four, that would be awesome.”

“Will do. See you then, boss!” I said walking away.

“I can give you a ride if you want,” Jareth called out.

I turned around and looked at him for a moment. I would much rather not walk back if I didn’t have too. I smiled and followed him to his car.

“Very nice,” I remarked when he hit the disarm button on his key chain. I saw the lights on a sleek, charcoal gray Porsche blink.

He grinned as he opened the driver’s side door and got in. I let myself into the passenger side and pulled on my seatbelt. Once I was comfortable, I pulled my phone out again and checked my texts.

They were all from Addie.

12:32: God he’s so hot. Jareth, I mean.

1:50: Are you coming home soon? I think Arsen might be jealous.

2:43: Okay he’s definitely jealous. Get your ass home.

3:11: Neve Grace Dutton! I’m sick of answering questions, come home!

5:02: This had better be the most amazing “lunch” in the world. Your boyfriend is driving me apeshit.

I giggled and put my phone away. Jareth glanced at me curiously before he pulled away from his parking spot.

“Addie. Apparently Arsen has been hounding her with questions,” I explained.

“Which way do I go?”

“Left at the second light.”

“What’s he asking her about?”

“When I was coming home I guess,” I replied.

I watched a small smile cross Jareth's lips, "Yeah. I guess I can see where that would come from."

Ugh. He's conceited. Minus 1,000 hot points.

"And why is that?" I asked, giving him a sidelong glance.

"Think about it," he said turning left when the arrow turned green. "It's a brand new relationship and you're already having lunch with another guy. You're not responding to text messages. Not to mention you're a beautiful girl, Neve. Who wouldn't be jealous?"

Oh.

My face turned bright red. I looked out the window as the streets went by. We were only three blocks away from home and I wasn't sure what to expect when I got there.

"You can pull into the driveway in the back," I said to him, pointing to my small apartment building.

No sooner did Jareth pull in and put the car in park, did the front door of my apartment fly open and Adesyne walk out. She put her hands on her hips and started to tap her foot impatiently.

"Just like a mother," I said to Jareth rolling my eyes. "I'll tell you all about her on Monday. Thanks for lunch. And for the ride."

"No problem. If you want, I can go inside and introduce myself to your boyfriend. Kind of put him at ease you know," he offered.

"That may not be a good idea. I don't know. Sadly, I don't know Arsen well enough to know what a good idea is," I replied with a laugh.

"Well, if he's upset, give him my number. I'll talk him down for you," he said with a lopsided grin.

"Thanks, Jareth," I said, getting out of the car.

I had to get out. Immediately because that was the first time I saw that lopsided grin and it almost knocked me over.

I walked over to Addie who looked like she was ready to strangle me. I turned and waved at Jareth as he pulled out and drove off.

“How much trouble am I in?” I asked her quietly.

“With Arsen? None; he went home two hours ago. With me? There’s hell to pay. Get inside,” she said, stepping aside to let me in.

I sighed heavily and walked into my apartment, dropping my purse by the door. I went over to my couch and plopped down, tucking my legs underneath myself and Addie sat down across from me with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Tell me all about him!” she squealed suddenly with a big smile on her face.

“What?” I asked in confusion.

“Is he even hotter when you’re that close to him?” she asked, leaning forward.

“Wait a second, before we wander off into Jareth Land, is Arsen mad?” I asked her.

“No. He was just worried really. When we pulled up and he saw Jareth he asked me if that was him and when I said yes, he gripped the steering wheel so hard, I thought he was going to snap it. It was like instant jealousy. I told him he has nothing to worry about, but I don’t think he was listening,” she said.

“Then what were text messages about?”

“OH! He was just asking me a million and one questions about your previous relationships. Like why they ended and stuff. Then when I finally got to the point where I was going to rip my hair out, he called Max and launched into a game of fifty questions about Jareth.” Addie looked at me uneasily for a moment before she spoke again. “I, uh, I think Max offered him some work at the end of their call. Arsen said something like, ‘No thanks. Some other time. I don’t need any money’ or something like that,” she said.

I stared at her for a moment. Arsen turned down the opportunity to screw some chick while I was out for five hours

with another man. Impressive.

“Hand me my phone please?”

Addie reached for my purse and fished out my phone. She tossed it to me and sat back.

I opened my recent call log and pressed on Arsen’s name.

“Hey, baby doll,” Arsen said when he answered.

“Hey! What are you up to?” I asked cheerfully.

“Just laying here watching TV,” he replied. “How was lunch?”

“It was okay. I got the low down of what I’m going to be doing. I have to be at the studio at four in the morning on Monday,” I said.

“Is that when everyone’s gonna be there?”

“No. Just Jareth will be there, I think. The cast and crew should be there by six though.”

I looked at Addie who was shaking her head. I raised an eyebrow at her and she just sighed.

“Oh, alright. Well, I’ll let you go. I’ll call you this week,” he said, hanging up the phone abruptly.

I looked down at the phone in my hand and stared for a moment. I didn’t understand what I had said that was so wrong that I garnered that reaction out of him.

“Neve, help me out here,” Addie said, putting her face in her hand. “Why would you tell your boyfriend that you’re going to be alone with another man for two hours? Before anyone else gets there?”

“I don’t get it.”

“Okay, look at it this way. How would you feel if Arsen said he was going to a set two hours before everyone else got there and it would just be him and some girl? Alone. Together. For two hours.”

I grabbed my phone and sent him a message.

Hey. I hope I didn’t upset you.

He answered a few minutes later.

No. Not upset.

I bit my lip thinking of what I could say that would put him at ease.

You can come if you want. I'm sure no one would mind.

I'll think about it.

Okay. Missed you today. xx

I missed you too. <3

I smiled and set the phone down, confident in the knowledge that Arsen was now okay with my being alone with Jareth on Monday.

“When do you leave, Addie?” I asked settling back on the couch.

“Friday night,” she replied.

“Well, considering it's Wednesday, I declare that there will be no more boys until you leave!” I exclaimed, pumping my fist in the air.

“N... none?” she asked, looking completely crestfallen.

I couldn't help but laugh. Addie did love her boy toys.

“What I meant was no more interruption from my boy,” I explained with a grin.

“Boy? I'm pretty sure you said 'boys' earlier,” she remarked wiggling her eyebrows.

“Oh, shut up,” I grumbled.

CHAPTER

Nine

Thursday came and went and before I knew it, it was Friday morning. Addie didn't have to be at the airport until ten that night, so we just spent the day walking around, shopping, and going to the local ice cream shop.

It had been quiet on the "man" front, which I actually found to be nice. Nothing from Arsen and no word from Jareth, either.

When the sun fell and we went back to my apartment, I found myself fighting tears. I'd give anything to have Addie stay here with me until I moved back to New York, but that would I knew it would be selfish to take her away from our family, too.

At eight o'clock, I drove Addie to LAX. At eight fifteen we hugged each other good-bye. I held in my sobs until she disappeared from view and sat down in a chair, crying like my heart had just broken.

At 9:04, I finally collected myself and walked out of the airport.

I was still wiping my eyes when I ran right into Arsen.

"Hey, baby doll," he said quietly.

"Arsen, what are you doing here?" I asked.

"Adesynne sent me a message and told me she had just left. She said she thought you might need me," he replied, using his thumb to gently wipe away a tear.

I looked up into his beautiful, hopeful eyes and fresh tears started to spill over. I threw myself into his arms and he held me tightly against him.

Now I was crying for two different reasons; my broken heart over Adesynne leaving and my healing heart at Arsen being in the right place when I needed him the most.

“Shh. It’s okay, Neve,” he whispered softly, running his hand over my hair. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

“I know. I don’t understand why I’m so sad. It’s not like she died; she just went back home. I wonder if this is how she felt when I left,” I said softly.

“I’m sure she did. Come on, I’m going to take you home,” he said, guiding me out of the airport.

Arsen drove me straight home. He sat with me when we got there to make sure I was okay, but I really just wanted to be alone.

It had been at least a half an hour and he didn’t show any signs of leaving. I stretched out on my couch and pulled the blanket up to my chin.

“Thanks for coming tonight,” I said, closing my eyes.

“You’re welcome,” he replied.

I started to become a bit frustrated when I didn’t hear any signs of him getting up to leave. I opened an eye and looked at him. I sighed internally when I saw that he was laying on the other couch, eyes closed, and his arms crossed over his chest.

He has no plans of leaving, I thought to myself.

I closed my eyes and rolled over on the couch so that my back was facing him. I guess this would be the part where most girls would feel “taken care of.” A guy that genuinely wanted to be with them, showed up like a super hero when you needed him, made sure you were okay, and planned on staying the night to make sure would wake up as okay as you were when you went to sleep.

Not me.

The frustration was slowly turning into anger and I was doing my best to contain it.

I was almost completely asleep when I heard my phone vibrate. I opened my eyes, unsure how it had been taken off of silent, but I rolled over and reached for it in case it was Adesynne.

It was a multimedia message from a phone number I didn't recognize.

Curiously, I rolled flat onto my back and pushed the icon.

A second later, there was a picture of Jareth making a super sad face; pouty lip and all.

I pressed down on the picture to make it fill the screen and used my thumb and forefinger to make it bigger. Since it was pretty dark wherever he was, it made it hard to see his arm, but I was pretty sure he had some decent muscles going on.

Must be a California thing.

Wherefore art thou, Juliet? was the caption of the picture.

When I was able to get my giggles under control, I turned the camera on myself and snapped a picture. I looked at it and saw my hair was standing up so I deleted it, smoothed my hair, and did it again.

I sent the picture of myself sticking my tongue out and captioned it: **Certainly not Verona!**

I almost dropped my phone a few moments later when Jareth's phone number started to blink across the scene. I pushed my blanket off and ran over to the door, slipping into my house flip flops and stepping quietly outside.

"Hello?"

"I guess I should've told you that I'm an insomniac," he said with a laugh.

Well that answered that question.

"What's up?" I asked softly.

Jareth was quiet for a moment.

"Why are you whispering?" he asked in a loud whisper of his own. "Ohhh. Never mind. I know why."

“Why?” I asked curiously.

“Pseudo boyfriend is there, isn't he?” he asked. By the tone of his voice, I knew that damn lopsided grin was plastered across his face.

“Yeah. So what?” I replied.

“Did you do him yet? You can tell me, it'll stay between us girls,” he said changing the pitch to his voice.

“No, I didn't do him,” I replied laughing.

I jumped when I heard the door open behind me. I glanced over my shoulder at Arsen who was giving me a groggy smile.

Addie? he mouthed.

I lied and nodded.

Arsen stretched his arms over his head, his shirt rising slightly to reveal his lower abs, and he yawned loudly.

Jareth immediately started to laugh. I used my thumb to push a button on the phone while it was still next to my ear to get him to stop.

“Sorry, but that's the universal sound of ‘there's a man here in case that's really a man on the phone.’ I've used that sound before.”

“I'll see you later,” I grumbled into the phone as I hung it up, said good-bye to Arsen and went back inside.

CHAPTER

Ten

I woke up about six weeks later and rolled flat onto my back, my arms and legs spread out. I hadn't heard from Addie lately and I had done my best to avoid Arsen and Jareth so far. I was honestly just trying to get my head back together. I was pretty sure from all the missed phone calls that I had probably lost my job at Golden Hills Media, but it was for the best. I was sick and tired of watching people fuck all day and night, and considering that he and Max were high school buddies, I was sure there would be sex in his film. Real or not, I was sick of it.

I spent the time trying to get ahold of Adesynne to no avail, and decided that it really was nice just to sit down near my kitchen window and look out into the city streets.

I was honestly tired of Arsen's jealousy and Jareth's constant come-ons, so I hid myself as best as I could and hoped for the best. So far, it seemed to be working.

I was happy that I had decided to take some me time finally and skipped out on the new job with Jareth. I wasn't sure what the production was, but after spending so much time at Devil's Den, I didn't really feel like being the director's bitch anymore. I hoped he would understand and not hold it against me, but if he had to let me go, then I would understand.

I got up and went into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face, before heading into the kitchen, grabbing an energy drink out of the fridge, and sitting down on the window sill, my feet propped up onto the chair in front of me.

Addie's silence was making me wonder about her. I hadn't heard from her for the past few weeks and I just assumed that she was busy with work or with a new guy. Addie usually holed herself up too and hid from the world for a while when she wanted to.

I cracked open the can and took a healthy swig before glancing down to the street below. That's when I saw a familiar car and sighed heavily.

"We're closed!" I shouted down when Jareth stepped out of his car. He looked up, using his hand to shield his eyes from the sun, and grinned.

"Open the door, I'm coming up!" he called back as he disappeared into the building. I rolled my eyes and left my chair near the window to unlock the front door, before I went back to my spot and sat down again.

A few moments later, there was a soft knock on the door, before Jareth pushed it open and walked in. I didn't turn to look at him. I was too busy watching the world go by outside again.

"You know I had to fire you, don't you?" he asked as he came over. He gently swatted my legs off the sill and sat down across from me in the window.

"Sorry," I replied with a shrug.

"I didn't want to, but you didn't show up and there was nothing I could do. Production couldn't be halted. But, I do have another offer for you," he said.

I sighed. I didn't know if I wanted anymore offers from anyone here. I wanted to go home and at the end of the month, I planned on breaking my lease and leaving.

It would be nice to have some money when I get back though.

"What is it?" I asked quietly, finally turning my attention to him.

"Max and I are working on a couple of side projects and were wondering if you wanted to help out. We'll pay you double," he said with a kind smile.

“What is it?” I asked again.

“Arsen will be there too. He’s agreed to help out.”

“*What is it?*” I all but screamed at him.

“It’s kind of a secret project, but it’ll rake in a shit ton of money,” he replied, crossing his hands behind his head. “We’ve done a couple of joint projects before and it’s definitely good income.”

“What kind of project would you and Max do together? You work on totally different spectrums of the film world,” I said, raising a curious eyebrow.

“A secret one. Anyway, do you want in? We’d start tonight, only because I need to take a break from the motion picture I’m shooting. Left in the hands of my assistant director and praying he doesn’t fuck it up,” he said with grin.

“Is it going to take long? I plan on going back to New York at the end of the month.”

“Nope. Couple of nights at the most,” he replied.

“How much money are we talking about, Jareth?” I could feel myself breaking down slowly and if he said the right amount, I knew I would be there in a heartbeat.

His kind smile returned as he reached into his right pants pocket and pulled out a folded check. He put it down and slid it toward me, which I promptly made a grab for. Jareth used his forefinger to hold onto it for a moment, and a small game of tug of war ensued, before I slapped his hand away and he laughed, relenting.

A chuckle escaped me as I opened the check and let my eyes wander over to the amount it was made out for. *Fifty thousand dollars?*

“This can’t be right,” I said, looking up at him in shock.

“Oh, it’s right,” he replied, draping one arm on the kitchen table. “I told you these special projects bring in a ton of money.”

“What exactly would I be doing?” I asked, looking down at the amount again. *Fifty fucking thousand dollars?!*

“You’d be in front of the camera this time. With Arsen.”

“Doing what?” I asked incredulously.

“Helping,” he replied with a mysterious smile. “Up for it?”

“I’m not fucking him on camera, am I?” I asked, feeling a little sick.

“No. I promise it won’t get that far. So I’ll see you tonight. This is the address,” he said getting to his feet, and dropping another small piece of paper on his desk.

After Jareth left, I got up from the table and went to my room to retrieve my cell phone. I double tapped it to bring the screen to life, and went into my messages. I scrolled through to find the last message I sent to Arsen and hit compose.

Me: You there?

Not even five seconds passed before he responded.

Arsen: Hey stranger!

Me: What’s this special project about?

I was expecting as an immediate response as the first one, but instead of getting a text, my phone began to flash. Arsen was calling.

“Hey,” I said when I answered.

“How do you know about it?” he asked, with a nervous laugh.

“Jareth just came by to recruit me,” I replied.

“What did you say?” he asked, his voice rising.

“I said yes. They’re giving me fifty grand to do it; it was a no-brainer.”

“Back out, Neve. I’ll give you my check too, if you back out,” he said quietly.

I rolled my eyes for the second time in less than an hour. Between Arsen and Adesynne, I was pretty over having people tell me how to live my life.

“Can you pick me up on the way to the set tonight?” I asked.

“Did you hear what I just said? You can walk away from this free and clear right now.”

“I heard you, but I’m really curious about it now, so please pick me up on the way there, okay?”

Arsen was quiet for a few moments. I even said hello once or twice to make sure he was still there.

“Alright,” he finally said before hanging up.

I tossed my phone onto the table top and went into my room. I went to the closet and pulled the doors open and looked over my clothes with a critical eye. I was pretty sure there would be wardrobe there, because there always was, but I had a sneaky suspicion that it might be “used” so I wanted to wear my own stuff.

After an hour and a half of pulling out everything and trying it on, I settled on a blue and white sundress. I figured if there would be any almost sexual parts, that would make everything easy access and less uncomfortable.

I went into my underwear drawer and pulled out a brand new bra and panty set, before I grabbed the dress and headed toward the shower. Hopefully I could stay in there long enough to pass the majority of the time, and keep my mind off of whatever it was that would be expected of me.

CHAPTER 11

8:00 Pm

Arsen showed up at eight on the dot. I had been impatiently leaning out my window to watch for him. Now he was here, stepping out of his car to pick me up.

“Hey!” I called down, with a wave.

He jerked his head up toward me and gave me a tight smile, returning my wave, before he got back into his car, closing the door behind him.

I walked over to the front door and slid on my white flip flops before I pulled open the small closet door next to it. I reached down and grabbed my purse off the floor, double checking to make sure that the check was inside, before I walked out and locked the apartment door behind me.

Exiting the building, I went over to Arsen’s car and pulled open the passenger door. I leaned in and tossed my purse into the backseat before I sat down and pulled my seatbelt on.

“Hey,” I said again, leaning over to give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Yeah.”

That was his response.

Not a “hello” or “hey yourself,” just “yeah.” I looked at him and shook my head. Something was obviously bothering him, but I had a feeling he wouldn’t tell me until it was the right time.

I watched him glance at his side view mirror, before he pulled away from the curb. For the first half of the ride, there was a

stony silence in between us, but as we seemed to be leaving town, he put his hand on my leg. I glanced down and saw that it was open and he was expecting me to hold his hand, so I did.

“Still not gonna tell me what this is about?” I prodded.

His response was a gentle squeeze. It was almost as if he had been sworn to secrecy or some shit and I was contemplating jumping out of the car. I wasn't sure why, but my survival instincts were starting to kick in and I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“How long do you think this will take? Jareth said something about a couple of days?” I asked nervously.

“It won't take that long. I promise,” he said, squeezing my hand again.

Today seemed to be a day filled with promises. Jareth promising this wouldn't be pornography and Arsen promising that this wouldn't take as long as Jareth said.

The one thing I hadn't been promised was that I would be safe.

CHAPTER 12

9:07 pm

“Who the hell shoots in an abandoned building?” I asked, more to myself than Arsen, wrinkling my nose.

He held my hand tightly as he pulled open the dilapidated door and walked in. I could almost swear his hand was sweating, but I chalked it up to the sudden humidity that seemed to smother us as we walked through the building. I was happy that Arsen came to get me because he seemed to know exactly where he was going.

We walked down a long hallway with doors on either side; some were missing, somewhere boarded up, and others were just sitting on their hinges.

“Kinda feels like walking into a nightmare, doesn’t it?” I asked with a nervous laugh.

“Sometimes,” he replied softly.

Okay?

If all Arsen had to offer me were one word answers for the most part, I was seriously starting to regret letting the money get the better of me.

In the distance, I heard the unmistakable sound of Max’s laughter.

“Haven’t heard that in a while,” I said to Arsen.

He didn’t respond. He just continued to lead me down the hall to the only dimly lit room on the left. I stepped in behind him curiously and looked around. We were in a huge space in the

abandoned building that had props set up and other things strewn all over the place.

I noticed Max sitting on a director's chair watching a small screen, with Jareth behind him, arms crossed over his chest. They both broke into laughter this time, causing Arsen to clear his throat loudly.

"Hey Neve! Glad you came!" Max said, turning off whatever was on his screen and walking over to give me a quick hug.

"Can someone tell me what this is about now?" I asked, pulling away from him.

"You're gonna be the star of the film, sweetheart," he said with a grin. "For once, this one takes a backseat to someone."

I glanced up at Arsen who refused to meet my eyes.

"We thought you would be more comfortable with Arsen. Or at least Jareth did. I didn't know anything about what was going on between the two of you until he told me," he said, with a smile.

"But all good things come to an end, right?" he continued.

"I'm confused," I said slowly. "What kind of film is this exactly?"

"Dark and gritty."

CHAPTER 13

9:32 pm

It took Arsen almost half an hour to calm me down. I had a dangerous understanding of what was going to happen now. This was a fucking snuff film and one of us was going to die.

I thought these things were an urban legend, I thought to myself as fresh tears spilled down my face.

“I can’t do this,” I said to him frantically.

“Sorry kiddo,” Max interceded. “You took the check, you’re here, and you know what we’re doing. You have to go through with it now.”

“Or else what?” I asked, wringing my hands.

“Or else neither of you walk out of here,” he replied in a serious tone.

I started to sob again and Arsen pulled me close to him, holding me tightly.

“Can you both fuck off for a second and let me talk to her?” he asked irritably.

“Sure. You’ve got ten minutes before we start rolling, though,” he agreed as he left the room with Jareth.

“Neve, listen to me. I’m going to get us both out of this in one piece, okay? I’m not sure yet who’s supposed to be the fucking aggressor but if it’s me, I won’t hurt you, okay? Just go with it and we can both walk out of here; I promise.”

If I hear I promise one more fucking time today, I’m going to kill everyone.

“Wait. If you don’t know who’s supposed to do what, is it possible that this is fake?” I asked, a small glimmer of hope rising within me.

“The last one wasn’t,” he replied quietly.

The last one? Fuck.

“How do you know?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Because I was in it.”

CHAPTER 14

9:42 pm

My hands were folded in front of me as Jareth and Max took their places in the chairs. It had been decided that Arsen would be the survivor again, which provided a modicum of comfort to me. I just had to follow his lead as he said and everything would be okay. But how far into his “lead” would I have to follow before it became too much for me to bare?

“Here’s how this is gonna work, sweetheart. You act as naturally as you can. Obviously the two of you have a thing going, so it shouldn’t be hard, right? Right. Anyway, he’s got a few choices on how to ‘end’ your scene. Do us a favor and put up a fight; it works better with our clientele. Ready guys? Of course you are; now let’s roll,” Max said from behind the camera.

I glanced up quickly and saw that Jareth was the one watching the screen for any potential fuckups that might happen.

I took a shaky breath as I walked over to the curtain that looked out into the “neighborhood” below. It was supposed to be a violent breaking and entering where I would end up the victim of Arsen’s “rage” and “lust.” I guess it was what was hot on the black market these days and I fit the picture of what they needed to sell.

Desperate for cash. Alone. Broken. Confused. That was me and because of that I was going to die.

From behind me I heard the door to my “bedroom” creak open slowly. I closed my eyes tightly and hoped he would give me the easy way out. Even though he promised me that he

wouldn't hurt me, he didn't promise he wouldn't kill me and that was sticking out in my head; screaming at me to run out of the room or jump out of the window. A broken leg would be the worst of it, but at least I would have a head start.

I heard his footsteps as he approached and opened my eyes to look out the window up at the night sky. *Please don't let this take too long.*

I felt his breath hot on my neck, as he stood behind me. Then winced when his hand went around my throat.

In an instant it was gone again.

I turned around to face him curiously. Arsen looked almost hopeless. He understood now what was expected of him more than ever before. He knew there would be no way out of this. As he looked into my eyes, it became clear that he knew I had to die at his hands, but his face told me a different story.

"I don't think I can do this," he said quietly.

"Cut!" Max yelled.

"What's the fucking problem?" Jareth barked at us.

"I don't think I can do this. Not to her," he repeated.

"I told you that using Neve wasn't a good idea," Max grumbled to Jareth.

"Everybody take a fifteen. Arsen, come with me. Neve stay where Max can see you," Jareth commanded as Arsen sighed heavily and disappeared with him from the room.

CHAPTER 15

10:16 pm

When Arsen and Jareth returned, I noticed that the demeanor had changed on both of them. Jareth was more confident and Arsen seemed to look more tortured.

“What’s going on?” I asked him when he approached me.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” he said quietly.

“No, he doesn’t,” Jareth interrupted loudly. “Now enough horseshit. Let’s get this done before I decide to star in this fucking film myself.”

“Neve, go back to the window. Arsen put your hand around her neck, we’ll pick it up from there,” Max said, settling into his chair again.

“Turn around,” Arsen said. I did as I was told and felt his hand grip my neck from behind again. “I’ll make it quick,” he whispered.

My body began to shake. It was obvious that he had changed his mind or had his mind changed drastically for him. I think it was safe to say that I was happy I had stopped him the few times he tried to fuck me. Giving myself to someone who’s sole purpose now was to end my life for the viewing pleasure of some sick fucks wasn’t a memory I’d want to replay in the last moments of my existence.

I took a deep breath and Arsen tightened his grip, cutting off my air supply. Instinctively, I started clawing at his hand with my fingers, trying to pry them off, but it was no use. He was a hell of a lot stronger than I gave him credit for. With a sudden

jerk, he threw me onto the bed and stood at the end, an odd look settling on his face.

I felt a bitter shame wash over me as Arsen climbed onto the bed and pressed his body down against me. It was the money that made me become part of this freak show against my better judgment. I knew it was going to happen now and even though I had watched enough people do this to each other, knowing that I wouldn't survive only made it that much worse.

CHAPTER 16

10:29 pm

My lungs felt like they were on fire. Arsen hadn't eased his grip around my throat and now he was using a serrated knife to cut my clothes from my body. But with each slice of clothing being torn away, he also cut into my body.

I closed my eyes tightly and tried to wriggle out of his grip but the more I struggled, the worse the stinging pain of my newly opened wounds and the sudden flame in my lungs.

When he had sufficiently inflicted enough pain with the knife, I felt his lips start to graze over the exposed parts of my body. The bloody, raw parts that were begging to be left to heal.

He used his knees to push my legs open and I used what was left in my will to fight to keep them closed. Arsen moved the knife down my body almost as if warning me against stopping him and I jerked myself to the right.

It was the worst decision of my life, second only to coming with him to this place. I immediately saw explosions of lights before my eyes, followed by the world starting to go black.

My body was going limp and I felt myself losing consciousness. I decided to stop fighting, to let the darkness take me when I heard Max say something that brought me back to life.

“You know that Addie girl lasted longer than she did.”

CHAPTER 17

11:01 pm

I had managed to fight Arsen off. I don't know where the strength had come from, but I chalked it up to adrenaline.

I threw him onto his back and subdued him by holding the knife I had wrestled out of his hand to his throat.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?" Max asked curiously.

"What happened to Adesynne?" I asked Arsen, ignoring Max.

He looked up into my eyes, a tear slowly slipping down the side of his face.

"What did you do to my cousin?" I screamed at him, pressing the blade down.

"What he was paid to do," Jareth said, coming over to the bed. "Now let him up. It wasn't his fault and we shouldn't have talked about her right now. We need to finish this movie before shit keeps going downhill."

I felt his hands on my arm as he attempted to pull me off of Arsen, and before I knew what I was doing, my arm swung around.

"Ugh!"

His eyes traveled down his body. I looked curiously at my hand wondering what I had just done when I saw the knife had been deeply embedded into his stomach.

"Fuck, Neve! Fuck!" Arsen yelled, trying to push me off of him. I quickly pulled the knife out as Jareth sank to the floor holding the gaping wound in his stomach and put it shakily back to Arsen's throat.

“What did you do to my cousin?” I asked again. “Tell me!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, holding his hands up in surrender. “I killed her, but I didn’t mean to! I swear!”

“How?” I asked, through gritted teeth.

“I snapped her neck,” he admitted.

I pulled the knife away from his throat and turned my attention to Max.

“Are you still rolling?” I asked.

I saw him nod before I turned my attention back to Arsen. I took a deep breath and looked into the beautiful eyes that for a brief time meant something to me. The eyes that kindly greeted me when I sat alone in New York on the Devil’s Den lot and the eyes that jealously watched me having my business lunch with Jareth.

Then I thought of Addie. My cousin, my best fucking friend, dead all because of these jackals looking to make a quick buck.

In an instant I turned the knife around and held it by the blade. I brought it over my head and brought it down as hard as I could against his Adam’s apple. Blow after blow, each strike I foolishly hoped would bring Addie back to life, until there was almost nothing left of his neck.

The gurgling sounds would haunt me for the rest of my life as would the desperation in his eyes as I started to crush his throat, but if it was good enough for Addie, then it would be good enough for him.

I pushed myself off of his body, leaving him struggling for air and went over to Jareth who was still gripping his stomach trying to stop the bleeding.

I crouched down and raised his face to mine with the hilt of the knife. My fingers were aching from the pain of being cut over and over, but I was going to make a fucking point.

When our eyes connected, I drove the knife back into the open wound in his stomach and twisted it around, his screams louder than anything I had ever heard in my life.

I finally decided that he had lived long enough and pulled the knife out of his stomach and drove it into his neck. Once, twice, three times, until he fell over as robbed of life as Addie was.

CHAPTER 18

12:14 am

Max told me that the money he would make on the ‘film’ we had just shot would rival anything other. He picked up the bodies and told me to wait where I was while he took them to an incinerator that was off the property.

I sat on the dirty floor of the makeshift bedroom, covered in blood and sweat, wondering what I had just done. Foolish actions had just condemned me in ways I wasn’t prepared to handle or deal with.

I’d never see New York again, but worse still, I would never see Adesynne either. Max returned thirty minutes later and began to break down his camera equipment, while I sat on the ground watching him, the knife still firmly gripped in my hand.

“Max?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah, babe?”

“Whose idea was this? These murder films?”

“Jareth. He said there was good money for them on the black market and he was right.”

“And how do you pick who’s going to be in the films?” I asked, getting to my feet.

“Usually it’s actors that have aged out in my company. We don’t do it very often,” he replied with a shrug. “Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering who chose Addie.”

“Jareth again. He said he didn’t like the way she could potentially take your mind off of your work so he sent her an invite for a job. Got her phone number off of your reference list,” he explained, leaning on his camera.

“Are you going to make any more now?” I inquired, moving closer to him.

“Probably. Why?”

“I have someone I think we can use,” I said.

“You wanna work for me?” he asked with a grin.

I thought of Jessica, the busty, voluptuous blonde, who had the pleasure of screwing Arsen for a living. I thought of how she got to have something that I didn’t and the fact that he must have cared more for her if he decided it was okay to kill my cousin.

Even though he was dead now, I wanted to hurt him further. To send her screaming into death after him and I wanted her to know that Arsen was the one that made it possible.

“One more film,” I said, holding out my hand.

“Deal,” he replied shaking it. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and held it out to me.

I had never smoked before, but I had never killed before either. I took one, inhaled as he lit it, coughed a few times, and nodded in thanks.

I was different now.

I was going to become an entirely new Neve Grace Dutton and Addie would be proud of me. Wherever she was now.

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About the Author

Yolanda Olson is a USA Today Bestselling and award-winning author. Born and raised in Bridgeport, CT where she currently resides, she usually spends her time watching her favorite channel, Investigation Discovery.

Occasionally, she takes a break to write books and test the limits of her mind. Also an avid horror movie fan, she likes to incorporate dark elements into the majority of her books.

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