

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The woman is on the left, her back to the camera, wearing a light-colored, possibly white, dress. The man is on the right, his face partially visible, wearing a dark suit jacket. The background is dark and moody.

ALL
THAT
HE
WANTS

THE BILLIONAIRE'S SEDUCTION **VOLUME 1**

**OLIVIA
THORNE**

ALL THAT HE WANTS

Volume 1

The Billionaire's Seduction

Parts 1 - 4

Olivia Thorne

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ALL THAT HE WANTS

Part 1

1

I'm writing this because I'm heartbroken.

I'm writing this because I'm in love.

I'm writing this because more amazing, astounding, mind-blowing things have happened to me in the last two months than in my whole life before I met him, *combined*.

I'm writing this because I've lost more than I ever thought I would be able to bear.

And even though I hate myself for doing it, I pray to God I can hold him...

...kiss him...

...make love to him...

...just one last time.

• • •

Okay, enough of mopey beginnings. I'm really not that kind of girl, I swear.

I guess I should say 'woman,' not 'girl.' I am 24, after all, and, well, you know – 'yay feminism,' right?

It's just that I never really felt like I was an adult. In a lot of ancient societies, they had some sort of ritual that women go through where you *know* you're a woman afterwards. 'You passed the ritual? Congratulations, you're a woman by definition!'

In the 21st Century United States of America, getting married or having a baby probably qualifies. Although I've never been married or had a baby, so... problem *not* solved.

I guess the other closest possibility for a single woman is losing your virginity... but that happened for me when I was

17, and I sure as hell didn't feel like a woman with my high school boyfriend. Or my two college boyfriends. Or *any* 'boyfriend,' really.

He was the first one that made me feel like a woman. Entirely. Through and through.

But we'll get to that soon enough.

2

My name is Lily Ross. Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, went to the University of Georgia, got a business degree with a psychology minor, had a horrible time getting a job after college, finally moved out to Los Angeles because my best friend Anh got hired at a prestigious consulting firm and promised me she could get me in, too. She did... although in a terrible position for next to no pay.

But I'm not complaining, mind you! (Not much, anyway.) It was a job, I had my foot in the door, and – Los Angeles! Come on! One of the most glamorous cities in the world!

That much is true, though I never saw the glamorous side of it until waaaaay after I arrived.

Also, Anh had an apartment in *Hollywood!* Land of movie stars, the silver screen, the place where dreams come true! Right?

Wrong.

Hollywood as an idea – the ‘dream factory’ – I guess that’s still valid. But Hollywood the ‘place’? The geographic location you’ll find on Google Maps? All the film studios and movie stars bolted over 50 years ago. Except Paramount Pictures, but they’re right next to a graveyard, so let that tell you something.

Our Hollyweird apartment is down the street from a tattoo parlor and a skeezy-as-hell ‘Thai massage’ parlor.

That was my first introduction to reality versus fantasy.

I know these are all boring details to you, but I guess I bring it up for a couple of reasons.

One: as you’ll see very shortly, my version of fantasy and reality began to blur together quickly and *very* dangerously.

Two: I was intimidated as hell by the women in Los Angeles when I got out here. It’s like the best skin/hair/boob

gene pool dumping ground in the country. (And if you want some extra help in the boob department, the plastic surgeons in Beverly Hills will gladly sell it to you.) Sometimes it feels like every good-looking girl from every town in America comes out here to try to make it... and when you're not in that crowd, it can be rough on your self-esteem.

However, as my dad used to say, sometimes even a blind squirrel finds a nut.

In case you missed it, I'm the blind squirrel in that analogy.

Nothing that happened to me happened because I'm gorgeous. I'm not. In Los Angeles, I'd almost say I'm plain.

At 5'4", I'm fairly short by LA standards. I could stand to lose 10 pounds (maybe even 15... that's it, I'm cutting off speculation at 15). I'm not even in the same zip code (okay, not even the same state) as Sofia Vergara or Jennifer Lopez in terms of, um, assets. Not exactly Victoria's Secret model material.

Guys I've dated tell me I have pretty eyes. My hair's good. I like my cheekbones. I have nice calves, and they look even better in heels. (We're not going to talk about my thighs.)

I'm fairly smart, I think I'm funny (you may beg to differ after you've spent enough time with me), and I have a few interesting quirks.

The point is, none of this happened because I look like a pin-up model. Because I don't.

Hell, I'm *still* not sure how it happened.

3

It was a Friday night at Exerton Consulting, and of course, my boss was being a douchebag.

Excuse my French.

Exerton is a small multi-national consulting firm with offices in a few big cities around the globe – LA, New York, London, Tokyo. But they're not among the biggest fish in the pond, not by a long shot.

'Consulting firm,' you ask. 'What does that mean?'

(If you didn't ask that and don't care, skip down about ten paragraphs.)

It means that other companies think they have problems, so they get Exerton's 'experts' to come in and tell them how to fix said problems. Efficiency problems, human resources problems, hiring problems, blah blah blah, are your eyes glazing over yet?

By the way, most of the problems are things the companies could have solved by talking to lower-level employees, or by trusting good people in their own organization. But they never do *that*. Oh no. *That* would be *craaaaazy*.

Don't mind me, I'm just being snarky because I got hired as a temp secretary. I couldn't even make the cut to regular staff, much less a junior consultant like Anh.

Anyway, back to the douchebag boss.

I work in the Executive Compensation division, which advises companies on how much to offer when they're hiring high-level executives – CEO's, CFO's, and other alphabet-soup positions – in order to be competitive.

So, basically, I make \$20,000 a year (which, in LA, is like \$12,000 a year in Atlanta) supporting a senior VP who makes at least a half million a year, who advises companies on whether they should offer 11 million or 12 million to a

potential new CEO who drove the last company he worked at into the ground.

Sorry, I'm a little bitter.

I'm even more bitter because my boss, Klaus Zimmerman, is... well, he's not the nicest person on the planet. Even more than that, he's disorganized, high maintenance, and wishy-washy. He can't find anything and yells at me like it's *my* fault his office is a pigsty. He is constantly coming up with a humongous list of time-consuming demands that he adds to hourly. He makes a hundred last-minute changes on any big project we send out, which means that I'm constantly begging the copy room guys to reprint and rebind 50 reports at 5:45 PM so I can make the last FedEx pickup. Otherwise I get to drive seven miles through LA rush hour – which is, to say, I get to wait in traffic 45 minutes – to drop off the delivery at the closest shipping office.

And he has the evil, *evil* habit of saving a ton of busywork until 6PM Friday night, which he needs corrected and emailed to him, because he 'has to work at home on the weekends.'

Ah – but I get paid overtime for this!

Which means I make \$12.50 an hour instead of \$10. (Don't forget, the temp agency gets their cut.)

And virtually every Friday night is shot because I'm exhausted by the time I wrap up at 10PM getting Herr Klaus's reports ready.

I don't think he even works from home on the weekends. I think he just likes torturing me.

But I shouldn't complain, because if Klaus weren't such a jerk, I would have never met *him*.

4

It was 5:55 PM on Friday when Anh stopped by my desk and put on her sad, hesitant face.

Anh (pronounced ‘On’) is this adorable little Vietnamese American girl whom I’ve known since I was a sophomore in college and she was a freshman. At barely five feet in heels and a year younger than me, I feel okay calling her a ‘girl.’ She wouldn’t mind.

I envy how thin she is; I like that she’s one of the few people who makes me feel tall; and I love her for getting my sense of humor, for having been my therapist/mom through a couple of wretched breakups, and for generally putting up with me.

Plus, she lets me pay less in rent even though our bedrooms are the same size. I think she does that because, even though she got me the job, she feels bad that I wound up working for Herr Klaus.

I refer to him as ‘Herr Klaus’ because ‘the Exec Comp Nazi’ might get me fired. Yes, I know, I know, I shouldn’t go around comparing my jerk boss to actual, real-life monsters who destroyed millions upon millions of people’s lives.

But if Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld could do it with a guy who sells soup...

Anyway, that’s why ‘Herr Klaus.’ Anh resisted the nickname at first because she’s so sweet and tries to look for the best in everyone, but my continual usage of it wore her down.

“Herr Klaus snapping the whip again?” she asked.

“Yes. And not the type of whip I like, either,” I mumbled.

That was a joke, and Anh knows it. In the bedroom, I’m about as vanilla as they come. (Pun not intended on ‘come.’)

Well... I *was*.

But we'll get to that, too.

She laughed, then put on the sad face again. "Do you think you might be able to come out with us to the club?"

Anh had a bunch of friends who went out clubbing on Fridays to blow off steam. I had been able to join them exactly one night in the last four months.

"No," I sighed, "it's one of *those* Friday nights."

"Awwww," she said, and patted my head sympathetically, sort of like you would a poodle. It's something she started when we first roomed together in college, and it stuck. By the way, she's the only one who can do it and live to tell the tale. "Text me when you get off. I'll slip away, get some Haagen Daaz at the grocery store, and we'll crack open a bottle of wine back home and watch a bad romantic comedy."

I love my roommate. Have I mentioned that I love my roommate?

Five minutes after Anh left, Klaus came out with his briefcase.

He was a short man who managed to be both scarecrow-skinny and yet have a small pot belly going on beneath his pricey suit. Except for a perpetually sour look, he was okay looking. Between that, his money, and the authoritative presence he struck that many women would mistake for confidence, he seemed to do all right with a certain class of Los Angeles gold digger.

"I need those documents for Teramore thoroughly proofed," he snapped.

"Okay."

"Not like last month on the Morings report," he added snidely.

I had missed something minor – which meant *Klaus* had missed something minor, too, since he was supposed to proof all the reports, but would he ever admit to a mistake on his part?

See, that was a trick question. Klaus doesn't *make* mistakes. According to Klaus, anyway.

The client had joked about the mistake in a phone call.

Klaus does not like to be laughed at. Or about. Or near.

So I had been catching hell for, oh, three weeks or so.

Inwardly I seethed. You make twenty or thirty great saves, and no appreciation. You make one lousy mistake, and you hear about it for weeks.

“Okay,” I said, forcing a smile.

“I don't have time to continually look over your shoulder,” he continued.

I had to grit my teeth.

I'll be staying four hours late tonight, when you could have just gotten the work to me earlier instead of dithering on the changes. Meanwhile, you'll be having drinks at the 'hottest new restaurant in LA' with some silicone princess. And not ONCE will you be looking over my shoulder the entire time, asshole.

“Fine.”

“Your continued employment here is dependent on your making a better effort. I hope you understand that,” he said, checking his smartphone.

If nothing else, I have learned self-control in my six months as Klaus's secretary. Because there are many times when I am ten seconds and one letter opener away from a 20-year prison sentence for murder.

I think I could get off on temporary insanity, though.

If I made a video recording of how he treated me, I think it might even be ruled justifiable homicide.

“Understood,” I said in as annoying and chirpy a voice as I could manage.

“And another thing – ” he started in.

Mercifully, that was when my phone rang.

“Excuse me,” I said, relieved to escape a murder rap once again, and picked it up. “Exerton Consulting, Klaus Zimmerman’s office.”

“*Hey, Lily,*” a familiar voice said.

Stanley, the front desk concierge/guard. One of my favorite people at Exerton. Huge black guy, looks like he could benchpress a station wagon, but sweet as a teddy bear.

“Hey, Stanley,” I answered warmly.

“*Mr. Zimmerman there?*”

Stanley had had plenty of joyful run-ins with my boss through the years. He’d taken to using my ‘Herr Klaus’ nickname, too, but obviously he was worried about being overheard.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, he’s standing right in front of me.”

At which point Klaus began scowling and waving his hands in a ‘*no, no I’m NOT*’ kind of way.

“...although he’s on his way out to a very important meeting,” I amended.

With a silicone princess named Natalia or Buffy or Chantal.

Stanley sounded a little strange as he continued to talk. I couldn’t quite peg it, but it was almost as though he were... intimidated.

Which is hard to do with a 300-pound dude who can benchpress station wagons.

“*There’s, uh... there’s this gentleman here who wants to speak to him.*”

“Oh... tell him I’m sorry, but Mr. Zimmerman can’t. If you put him on, though, I’ll make an appointment for him next week.”

“*Uhhh... he says he’s from LMGK.*”

Oh CRAP.

LMGK was one of Exerton's major rivals, a true international behemoth with offices in over two dozen cities across the globe. There had been rumors flying for months that LMGK was going to acquire Exerton, and things I had seen in the upper echelons tended to support those rumors. Like meetings between Klaus and all the other department heads with bigwigs from LMGK.

"Uh... hold on, Stanley." I pulled the phone from my ear and covered the mouthpiece. "There's a man in the lobby from LMGK who wants to speak to you."

Klaus groaned and checked his Rolex watch. His very gaudy, very expensive Rolex watch.

"Oh GOD... of course this happens to me right now... what's his name?" he snarled.

I uncovered the mouthpiece. "What's his name, Stan?"

"A Mr. Brooks. Mr. Connor Brooks."

"Connor Brooks," I said to Klaus – who put on the snottiest expression imaginable, like one of the queen bitches from the old Lindsay Lohan movie *Mean Girls*.

"Who?!"

I shrugged.

"Screw it, he's not messing up *my* Friday night," Klaus sneered.

Versus YOU screwing up every single one of mine, I thought angrily.

"I'm out. Take a message, schedule an appointment, whatever, but I'm out."

With that, Klaus started for the elevators. He was out of sight in three seconds flat.

I sighed and turned back to the phone. "Put him on, would you, Stan?"

"Sure thing, Lily."

There was the sound of the phone exchanging hands.

I don't know what I expected. Maybe a high, nasally voice, the sort of whine that would belong to a guy who didn't have anything better to do on a Friday night except schedule business meetings. Or a boring monotone like the guy who says, "Bueller... Bueller..." in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

But I certainly wasn't expecting what I got.

5

I think I can safely say it was the sexiest voice I'd ever heard.

George Clooney sexy.

Barry White smooth.

Clive Owen without the British accent.

And young. Much younger than the men I just mentioned – but I can't think of any hot actors my own age with a voice like *that*.

Deep. Rumbling. Powerful.

And confident.

You could tell from the first few words that this guy was used to getting his way. Not a demanding prima donna, but just kind of a 'the king has spoken, now make it so' kind of way.

You could also tell he was trouble from the get-go.

"This is Connor Brooks from LMGK. Please put Klaus Zimmerman on."

I just sort of sat there, hypnotized.

If his voice was wine, I'd want to drink it all. night. long.

Pour it all over me, please.

After a couple of seconds of me being a silent doofus, he spoke again, more impatient this time. *"Hello? Is anyone there?"*

I snapped back to reality. "Uh... I'm sorry, Mr. Brooks, but Mr. Zimmerman left just a few minutes ago. I can make an appointment with him if you –"

"Who's this? What's your name?" he asked.

He was forceful, but he wasn't a jerk. He wasn't rude, other than the fact that he'd interrupted me.

Which, okay, I guess is sort of rude, but if you'd heard his voice, you wouldn't mind if he interrupted you, either.

"Lily. Lily Ross."

"And you're his secretary, Lily?"

"Yes sir."

"Ahhh, 'yes sir,' I like that," he chuckled mockingly. *"Lily, you have his cell number, don't you?"*

"Uh... yes, but –"

"I'm going to need that number, Lily."

He kept saying my name again, over and over. Sometimes when people I don't know do that, I get annoyed. It's a fake sales-y way to build intimacy so they can sucker you in for a set of steak knives or comprehensive life insurance.

This guy, though... I really, really wanted to hear him say my name some more.

"I'm really sorry, Mr. Brooks, but I can't give out Mr. Zimmerman's cell number –"

"We're wasting time, Lily. You and I both know Klaus is still in the building. I need his cell before he drives off to whatever frou-frou wine bar he's going to tonight."

Bagging on Klaus.

I liked this guy.

Well, I loved his voice, but now I liked his personality, too.

But I wasn't about to catch a world of hell for a sexy voice. I figured I would be fired at worst; at best, three months of nagging and complaining. I could hear it already: *And don't give out my phone number again to anybody like you did LAST year...*

"I'm sorry, Mr. Brooks, I can't."

"Discretion. I like that. Then I need you to come down here, Lily. And bring your cell phone."

"...excuse me?"

“Come on, Lily, daylight’s burning. Stanley will be here to chaperone, and I promise I won’t bite. But I need to talk to Klaus. Immediately.”

“I’m... not sure I’m comfortable – ”

The voice on the other end sighed.

“Lily.”

Pause.

“Please?”

When he said ‘please,’ he didn’t beg.

He didn’t whine.

He wasn’t even really ‘asking.’

He...

God.

I know you’ll think that everything that happened afterwards is coloring how I’m interpreting it now, but...

...it was almost sexual.

It was the tone of voice a man might use on a woman in the bedroom, when she’s on the verge of orgasm and he wants to push her over the edge.

It was the voice of a man who knew how to get what he wanted from women. A man who knew how to push all the right buttons – and skillfully. Who knew how to ‘ask’ without really asking at all.

A man who could make you want to say yes to just about anything.

I’m blushing as I remember it.

“I’ll be down in two minutes,” I stammered.

“Good,” he purred, and hung up.

6

I was really, really nervous as I rode the elevator down all 23 stories to the lobby.

One, I was nervous that I was about to do something really stupid and get my ass chewed out by my boss.

Two, I was all butterflies about seeing the stranger who owned that golden voice. If he *sounded* that good, imagine how he must *look*...

Let me explain. I'm not great with guys. I don't flirt very well – in fact, any guy I find really attractive, I kind of lose it when I'm around him. Maybe it's lack of practice. I don't get approached that much by really handsome men, even though LA is the capital of pretty boys. I hear most of them are narcissistic and self-involved; I wouldn't know, since they rarely give me the time of day. And when a hot, charming guy does start talking to me at a party, I either give giggly, airheaded responses that make me look stupid, or stilted, one-word answers that make me seem like I'm not interested, when in fact I'm just nervous as hell. After a minute or two of that, most of the hot ones move on.

I tend to end up dating average guys, guys I become friends with first – guys who are sort of cute, not intimidating at all. The type of guy who becomes more attractive the longer you know them. The type that grows on you. Nice guys. Regular guys who are even-keeled and sweet, or at least seem that way for the first several months until the bad things start floating up to the surface.

I *like* that – I like nice guys. But once... just once... I wanted to have one of the *hot* ones.

So I was nervous that he was going to be absolutely gorgeous, and that I was going to make a fool of myself.

Three, I was pretty much positive there was no way he was as good-looking as his voice would suggest, and I didn't want

to ruin the fantasy.

I know, it sounds stupid – “Oh, you’re afraid he’ll be good looking, *and* you’re afraid he’ll be ugly! Make up your damn mind!” Followed by a slap on the back of my head.

But hear me out. Ever see a guy from the back, and you’re like ‘DAMN, break me off a piece of that’? (Not that I would *get* to break me off a piece of that in reality, but I can still dream.) Amazing ass, great shoulders, gorgeous hair, fantastic arms? You’re thinking somebody went back in time and made a clone of Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp at age 27. Or 33. Or 38, even. And then you see them from the front...

And you’re like, ‘Oh, no. No, no, no.’

It’s the ‘glamorous Hollywood is actually composed of tattoo parlors and skeezy massage parlors’ effect.

Or the Monet effect: beautiful from far away, but not so good up close. I think that was from *Clueless*.

Either way, reality doesn’t match up to fantasy.

Sometimes I won’t even try to see what the guy looks like from the front even though his backside belongs in a Greek temple. I’ve been disappointed enough that I treasure my little fantasies.

It’s all about managing expectations. Again, with nice guys, it’s, ‘Oh, he’s kind of cute... I’ll go out with him. Oh, he’s funny... and he’s got a good personality... okay, I’ll give it a shot.’

‘Low expectations’ equals ‘not as much disappointment’ in my book.

And my expectations for Mr. Connor Brooks were sky-high.

If I were going to be disappointed, I would have preferred to hold on to my fantasy.

As it turns out, I was not disappointed.

Far, far from it.

7

The crowd in the marble-floored, exquisitely decorated lobby was thinned out by the time I stepped out of the elevator. In Los Angeles, anybody who has a modicum of power or money jumps ship by 4PM so they can get a head start on traffic. To home, to drinks, to dinner, or maybe out of town to Vegas.

Everybody else pretty much calls it quits by 6PM and accepts their lot in life is to suffer on jam-packed freeways.

The peons, like me, are stuck watching all the other people get on with their lives.

So when I walked out of the elevator, there weren't that many people to get in the way of my seeing him.

Oh.

My.

God.

He was standing at the desk chatting with Stanley. It *had* to be him. No way that one man that gorgeous, and another guy with the voice on the phone, could simultaneously coexist in the same building and *not* be the same person. The odds were too high. Even if they *were* two people, their combined sexiness would pull them together and fuse them into one perfect male, like two stars passing too close to each other in space. Sexiness gravity.

See? 'Sexiness gravity.' Good God. This is the sort of stupid stuff that starts running through my head and why I sound like an idiot around hot men.

And he was *hot*. Over six feet tall, probably six-two. Dark, wavy hair in a fashionable cut, slightly over the ear but not too long. Strong chin, perfect jawline. A strong nose that was just rough enough to make him look more manly than pretty-boy. A perfectly even set of white teeth in a heart-melting grin. And

the lips on that smile... oh my. Those were lips made for long, lingering kisses.

The most astounding, crystal-clear blue eyes. Like ocean water in the Caribbean, the color you see in picture-perfect postcards. They somehow managed to envelope you with their warmth and send a shiver through you, too, like he could look deep inside you to your innermost secrets and desires.

I couldn't pinpoint his age, but I figured it was late 20's to early 30's. He had the very beginnings of wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, a mischievous crinkle that went with the gleam in his eyes when he grinned. The crinkling wasn't the age so much as the tan, though – a beautiful golden brown. Not the type that says, 'I go to a tanning salon,' but 'I just came back from two weeks in Hawaii.'

He was dressed in a dark suit – something exquisitely tailored and *very* expensive-looking – so it was a little harder to see his body, but what I *could* see made my stomach flutter. His shoulders were broad. His chest pressed but didn't strain at his crisp, white shirt. He was wearing a blue tie, one that matched his eyes beautifully. He had loosened it and unfastened the top three buttons of his shirt, exposing a powerful, chiseled neck, more of that tan skin, and the upper edges of well-defined pecs. A few dark chest hairs peeked above the top fastened button.

His thighs looked like they were muscular under the expensive pants, though it was hard to tell. He had on these trendy, kick-ass shoes – probably boots of some sort, with a kind of rock 'n roll embroidering, if that makes any sense. They would have gone as well with a \$500 pair of jeans in a night club as they did with his \$5000 suit.

And I *swear* I don't care about these things, but... I couldn't help notice that his shoes were pretty big. And so were his hands: well-crafted, masculine, and large, like Michaelangelo's *David*. (No wedding ring, by the way.) I also stole a brief, very brief look at his... ahem, below his beltline, and while I'm not very well-versed in judging these sorts of things with all the clothes on, let's just say that I wouldn't be surprised if he filled out his underwear pretty well in the front.

I shouldn't have said that. Oh God. But, hey, I *thought* it at the time, so there you are. Can't take it back now.

If you want the short-hand version, he looked like a model in an ad for a highbrow, extremely expensive brand of scotch. The kind of guy who would have hung with Sinatra in the 50's, or with George Clooney or Kanye West now. Hell, the kind of guy *they* would call to hang out with. The kind of man who would have kicked Don Draper's ass in *Mad Men*. A Young Turk on a break from conquering the world. The kind of man that every guy wanted to be, and every woman wanted to get to know.

'Get to know' is a euphemism, in case you hadn't figured that out.

As I walked up, Stanley and the stranger were finishing talking about sports – the Lakers or something. Then Mr. Movie Star looked over at me and his eyes lit up. He got that gleam I described earlier, and the corners of his eyes crinkled as he grinned.

"You must be Lily," he said, and held out his hand.

My heart was already pounding, but when he said that, it did a triple flip in my chest. Hearing that voice on the phone? Super sexy. But not even half as good as hearing it in person.

The difference was like homemade banana pudding versus the stuff in a packet. Don't get me wrong, I really like the stuff in the packet. But I *loooove* me some banana pudding made from scratch.

Okay, that's kind of goofy (and now you know more than you ever wanted to about my dessert preferences). A better analogy would be real sex versus phone sex. Phone sex can be incredibly hot – but it doesn't hold a candle to real sex.

Um... just to be clear... at that point in my life, standing in that lobby at 6PM on a Friday, I'd never *had* phone sex.

Yet.

One other thing: as I held up my arm to shake his hand, I smelled his cologne.

Ohhhhhh God.

I read somewhere that our deepest and most primal memories are connected to smell. If you think about it, as a baby, you probably responded to scents – your mother’s, your father’s – before you could figure out what the hell sounds they were making, or before your eyes even focused right.

Even now, when I think of Christmas, I smell baking cookies in the kitchen and that clean, pine scent of freshly cut Christmas trees.

Other memories are just as vivid: burning leaves on an autumn day. Clean laundry fresh from the dryer.

When I think of him now, I *smell* that cologne.

Masculine and heady, with the basic layers of musk and sandalwood, and just a tiny bit of sweetness thrown in.

It wasn’t overpowering at all. Just a hint. A tease. I mean, I was right next to him, and I caught the barest whiff.

It smelled classy. Expensive. Exotic, and yet... comforting, somehow.

And *damn* sexy.

Because I was completely tongue-tied (what with the voice and the scent), I looked over at Stanley. He nodded reassuringly like, *Dude’s okay*.

Which was good. I trust Stanley. If he gets a good read off of somebody, I accept his intuition.

“M-Mr. Brooks?” I stuttered as my hand clasped his.

Ohhhhhh God.

His skin was so warm. His handshake was really strong, but unlike a lot of jerks who try to push women (and other men) around, he didn’t try to crush me. He just let his hand envelope mine. Firm but inviting.

I melted a little bit more.

“Good to put a face to the voice,” he said as he hung onto my hand for a second or two longer than was absolutely

necessary. (I didn't mind. Not at all.)

"Yes," I agreed, because that was all I could think to say at the moment.

Then he dropped my hand and got down to business. "Okay. Call your boss for me."

The unpleasant prospect of having Klaus chew me out over the phone pumped a shot of adrenaline into my system. And *that* temporarily overrode all the sex hormones flooding through my veins.

"Ohhhh... I don't really know if – "

"Relax, Lily, *you'll* talk to him first, and it'll be on *your* phone, so I won't even see the number. Besides, he's probably not even out of the parking deck yet, is he?" Connor smiled.

And, no, the truth was that he probably *wasn't*.

I sighed, pulled my cell phone out of my little black purse, and hit 'KLAUS' on my contacts list.

This was *not* going to go well.

But how could I say 'no' to what was actually a pretty reasonable request?

And, even more importantly, with those gorgeous blue eyes twinkling at me?

"*What,*" Klaus's perpetually pissed-off voice answered.

"Um... I have Mr. Brooks here, and he's pretty insistent about – "

"*WHAT THE HELL?! What part of your brain shut down when I left, Lily?!*"

And then he went off on a mini-tirade of profanity and insults that was worse than usual.

Just as my blood reached the boiling point (which was really only 1.5 seconds in, after Klaus dropped the first F-bomb) and I was on the verge of saying something that would get me fired, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and caught that smell again. That sexy, intoxicating scent.

I looked up to see Connor's hand extended towards me, palm outward, right about my shoulder level.

He was looking at me with a bemused expression. Like puppy-dog eyes, but if the puppy dog knew you weren't a very good owner and he had to explain to you how to walk him and feed him, but he still loved you anyway.

"May I?" he asked with that sexy-as-hell smile.

Meanwhile, Klaus's torrent of profanity was still pouring full force into my ear.

What the hell, I thought, grinned wryly, and handed the phone over to him. Connor glanced at the phone screen and then held it up to his face.

"KLAUS!" he shouted in a backslapping, *Hey, buddy!* kind of way. "Connor... Brooks here from LMGK. How's it going?"

First impression: Connor just *commanded* the conversation right from the beginning. He reached out verbally, took hold of Klaus by the neck, and steered him in the direction he wanted him to go.

Second impression: he paused slightly after his first name. At first I thought he was being friendly by saying 'Connor' alone, then realized Klaus might not know who he was, so he included the last name as a formality.

Turns out I was wrong, which I found out later that night.

The torrent of profanity ended abruptly. There was a long pause, and then a single word on the other end: "*Hello.*"

He didn't say it in a friendly voice, but it was a hell of a lot friendlier than what he'd been subjecting *me* to a second ago.

"Here's the thing, Klaus – I'd like to call you back on my phone so I can conference in somebody else. He's expecting my call. You okay with that?"

There was the muffled, Charlie Brown's teacher *wah-wah-wah-WAAAAH* of Klaus's voice complaining on the other end.

“Thirty seconds, Klaus, and I’ll get right back to you. Be sure to pick up, bud – you’re gonna wanna hear this!”

And then Connor hung up on Klaus without waiting for a reply.

Ohhhh CRAP.

Mr. Movie Star had pretty much just signed my death warrant.

8

Connor saw my face and laughed. “You should see what you look like right now.”

“You did *not* just hang up on my boss,” I almost shouted.

I’d gotten my voice back, which was good. Basically, my overwhelming fear of losing my job – and my irritation at *Connor* losing it for me – overrode all the physical attraction that was keeping my tongue tied.

He held out the phone to me and grinned. “You’re adorable when you’re angry, you know that?”

I snatched it out of his hand. “How are you even going to call him when you – ”

And then I knew. When I had initially handed my cell to him, he’d glanced down at the screen.

And seen the number.

CRAP.

He saw that I’d figured it out and winked as he pulled out his own cell. “Yes, I saw it – and yes, I remember it. I have a good head for numbers – 3.1415926, 186,000 miles per second...”

And here he glanced up and down my body with a devilish look.

“...34, 24, 35.”

Then he winked at me with that grin.

I blushed fire engine red.

Those are my measurements. Well, the 34 and the 35 are. He was being excessively nice about the size of my waist.

I guess I should have started ranting and raving about sexual harassment. If anybody else had done it, it would have been creepy and slimy as hell.

But when the guy you're secretly panting over lets you know he's mentally undressing you... well, I guess I chose to interpret it as flirting.

Extremely *sexual* flirting.

Also, if you haven't guessed it, I'm a little nerdy. So his putting me in a class with *pi* and the speed of light kind of turned me on, too.

He wasn't just hot, but *smart*.

There was another thing, though, that passed through my mind: *He wasn't just spouting off the regular 36-24-36 cliché. If this guy can peg my measurements by looking at me... what is he, a fashion designer? And if not that, then exactly how many women has he been with?!*

But by the time I was thinking that, he was already talking into his cell.

"Hi there, Dave, it's Connor. Can you hold one sec? Thanks."

He pulled the phone away, swiped the screen once, then tapped out a number.

As it rang, he looked over at me, grinned, and put the phone on speakerphone.

I didn't realize why he did that until a few seconds later.

He was letting me eavesdrop on the call.

"*Hello?!*" Klaus's angry voice rang out.

"Heeey, Klaus! Connor again. I've got Dave Westerholtz on the line."

My jaw dropped on the floor, I'm sure of it.

David Westerholtz. CEO of Exerton Consulting.

The company where both Klaus and I worked.

And Mr. Movie Star had him on speed dial.

Even Stanley's eyes bugged out.

"*M-Mr. Westerholtz, h-hello,*" Klaus stammered.

“I’ve got you both on speakerphone, hope you don’t mind, but my hands are occupied at the moment,” Connor said with another wink at me.

Which was an outright lie. His hands weren’t doing anything but holding the phone.

But ohhhhhh I wish I could have suggested a few places on me to keep them occupied...

Westerholtz’s voice wasn’t one-tenth as sexy as Connor’s, but it was still pretty darn commanding. “*No problem. Klaus, I want you to give Mr. –*”

“Connor,” he interrupted. “Just call me Connor, Dave.”

For some reason, ‘Dave’ sounded pretty happy to be calling Connor by his first name. “*Sure, Connor. I want you to give Connor any help he needs, Klaus – anything he asks for. Understood?*”

Klaus’s whiny voice kicked in. “*Well, Dave, I –*”

“*Mr. WESTERholtz,*” interrupted the CEO.

Connor gave me a hilarious fake-shocked little ‘o’ mouth, like *Oh no he diii-in’t!*

I almost laughed out loud at his reaction, and had to cover my mouth with my hand to stifle it.

“*Yes, Mr. Westerholtz, sir, you see, I’m actually out of the office –*”

“*Then go BACK to the office, Klaus. Whatever Mr. –*”

“Connor.”

“*Right – whatever Connor needs, you make sure he gets it. Is that clear?*”

Pause.

“*Of course,*” Klaus answered, sounding exactly like a horrible brat who’d just been ordered to apologize by his parents or go without dessert.

“Fantastic!” Connor beamed. “Well, Dave, I know it’s late there in New York, so I don’t want to keep you too long, but

thanks for your help.”

“It’s my pleasure, Mr. – ”

“Connor, Dave, it’s Connor!” he laughed.

Westerholtz laughed in return. *“You got it, Connor. It was a real pleasure talking to you this afternoon, and I’m looking forward to working together in the future!”*

“Absolutely, Dave,” Connor said. “Take care!”

“You too!”

“Goodbye, Mr. Wester– ” Klaus tried to say, but Westerholtz had already hung up.

Point, set, and match, Connor Brooks.

9

This had been an incredible treat, listening in as my despised jerk of a boss got his butt handed to him by the CEO of the company. But I knew Klaus, and I knew what was coming next.

I held up a finger and caught Connor's eye.

"Hold on one sec, Klaus – don't go anywhere!" and then Connor swiped the phone screen, presumably muting the call. "What's up?"

"If you want him to come in, you've got to be nice and *ask* him," I whispered, even though the call was on mute. "I know what Mr. Westerholtz said, but if you order Klaus around, he'll turn it into a... a pissing contest."

Just for a second, I was going to say 'penis-measuring contest,' but that wouldn't have been ladylike.

And I didn't want to give Connor the impression I was thinking about his... uh... you know.

Because I wasn't.

Except for that peek below the belt at the beginning.

And, since I was almost going to say 'penis-measuring'... maybe I *was* thinking about his just a little bit right at that moment. In an abstract, totally metaphorical kind of way.

Totally metaphorical.

Anyway, Connor suddenly burst into a full-on grin. He turned back to the phone, swiped it off mute, and almost shouted, "Alright, Klaus, you heard your boss, get your ass back here right *now*."

My eyes bugged out.

He did exactly the OPPOSITE of what I just told him!

And he was having a great time doing it. Connor looked like a five-year-old boy hearing the funniest fart joke of his

life as Klaus snarled, “*W-well, ABOUT that – what EXACTLY is it you need me for?*”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head about that, Klaus. You just get back over here pronto.”

I glanced at Stanley. If I looked anything like what Stanley looked like at that moment, we were both about to poop bricks.

“*I don’t like your tone,*” Klaus snapped.

“Yeah? Well *I don’t like your attitude.* Dave basically – oh, that’s right, that’s Mr. Westerholtz to *you.*”

I was covering my mouth with both hands by now.

Stanley was shaking his head slowly in that Roy Scheider in *Jaws*, glassy-eyed ‘You’re gonna need a bigger boat’ kind of way.

Connor looked like he was having the time of his life.

“Anyway, Dave basically said that when *I* say ‘Jump,’ *you* ask, ‘How high.’ And you’re not asking ‘how high’ yet, Klaus.”

“*This is – this – Mr. Westerholtz wouldn’t –*” Klaus sputtered.

“Of course, if you want your assistant Lily to handle what I need, we could do that, too,” Connor suggested in a suddenly conciliatory tone.

I almost screamed, *Say WHAT?!*

Stanley looked over at me like, *Girl, you better get your ass outta that water before Jaws gets you.*

Klaus went silent.

“*...is Lily there?*” he asked warily, with definite undertones of fear.

Connor winked at me. “She’s over by the elevators. You want me to go over and let you talk to her?”

“*...yyyyyyes. Yes, why don’t you do that,*” Klaus agreed. The relief in his voice was palpable.

He obviously didn't want me to hear his utter humiliation over the last couple of minutes.

If he only knew...

"Okay, hold on," Connor agreed, then held up a finger *shhhh!* to his lips as he grinned like a madman.

Stanley was looking at me like, *Too late. Here comes Jaws.*

Connor waited about ten seconds, said, "Here she is," and then handed the phone over to me.

"*Lily?*"

"Uh, hi, Kl – Mr. Zimmerman," I quickly adjusted.

Damn it, I almost gave it all away!

Klaus didn't notice, thank God. He was a little preoccupied.

"*Thanks for NOTHING, Lily. Now this little –*"

"Still on speakerphone, Klaus," Connor called out helpfully.

I would have laughed if I weren't so horrified at my situation.

There was a brief pause.

"...ah, situation is a bit more pressing than I originally thought," Klaus course-corrected. "*I need you to take the gentleman back to the office and show him whatever he needs.*"

"Uh... anything?"

"*Well, I don't know about 'anything' –*"

"'How high,' Klaus. I'm not hearing 'how high' yet," Connor spoke up, then choked back his laughter.

Exasperated, Klaus snapped, "*There are too many confidential files, too many sensitive –*"

"We can call Dave again," Connor offered. "Or... *you* can come in and get the files for me yourself."

There was a long pause on the other end. Klaus was obviously thinking about his options: avoid a potential reaming from Westerholtz, or perform a little CYA.

“The CEO has instructed me to give Mr. Brooks whatever help he requires, Lily,” he finally said. *“So do whatever he asks.”*

“Anything?” Connor asked.

“Anything.” I could almost hear Klaus’s teeth gritting together as he said it.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Have a nice – ”

“Is that all, Connor?” Klaus cut me off.

I wanted to throw the phone across the room. I might have, too, if it were mine.

“No, it’s not,” Connor said, crossing his arms. “That was very rude what you just did to Lily.”

I looked up in shock.

Stanley shook his head like, *Here comes Jaws again.*

“W– what?” Klaus asked, equally astounded.

“Apologize to her,” Connor demanded.

“That’s really not necessary,” I said in a squeaky little voice.

“Yes. It IS,” Connor insisted. “Klaus?”

“This is ridiculous – I’m not – ”

“Are you always that rude to everyone, Klaus, or just to the people you can get away with it? Employees, waiters, people you can abuse your power over?”

“I’m not going to take this from – ”

“I think I might call Dave back,” Connor mused. “I know he’s very nice to his personal secretary Amanda. I think he’d be interested to know how you kiss *up* and kick *down*.”

I was about to faint.

My very limited life at Exerton Consulting was flashing before my eyes.

Stanley looked like he was watching a train wreck he was powerless to stop.

There was a loooooong pause on the phone.

“...*sorry*,” Klaus mumbled, the way a stylish woman ‘of a certain age’ might say her age in a crowded doctor’s office.

“What was that? Couldn’t hear you!” Connor shouted.

“*Sorry, Lily,*” Klaus seethed. “*Is that all, Missster Brooksss?*”

“It’ll do, I suppose. Have a good night, Klaus!” Connor called out, then reached over, took the phone away from me, and hung up the call.

10

I must have been staring at him like he'd grown an extra head, because Connor gave me a mystified expression.

"...what?"

"What do you mean, 'what'? What the hell was that?!" I fumed.

"My only entertainment on a boring Friday night," he grinned, then turned around and stuck out his arm. "Stan, a pleasure. Good to meet you."

Stanley just nodded his head in stunned silence as he shook hands.

"Shall we?" Connor asked me as he gestured to the elevators with one hand and put the other on the small of my back.

Oh.

My.

God.

Just that firm pressure there – the warmth of his hand, of his very *large* hand pressed in the curve of my back – sent a pleasurable jolt of electricity up and down my spine.

And his fingers slipped a little farther down as he pushed me gently forward. Just an inch or so.

He didn't touch my rear end or anything, but... it was headed in that direction before his hand stopped and his fingertips pressed a little harder.

My knees got a little weak.

"Okay," I agreed feebly, and we walked over to the elevators.

He withdrew his hand as we moved, and as soon as I felt his fingers move away, I thought about stopping just so he

would touch me again to usher me forward.

I didn't do it, though.

The elevator door opened as soon as Connor pressed the UP button, and we stepped inside.

“What floor?” he asked.

“23rd.”

As the doors closed, the last glimpse I had was the marble foyer and Stanley's stunned face behind the reception desk.

I realized that might possibly be the spot I was standing when my boss decided to fire me.

As the elevator began its quick ascent to the upper floors, the anger rose inside me again.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” I blurted out.

Connor looked over in surprise. “What?”

“I said, who the hell do you think you are?”

He broke into a heart-stopping grin. “Did I tell you before how adorable you are when – ”

“ – I'm angry, yeah, yeah,” I snapped, not about to be put off. “Do you realize you might have just lost me my job back there?”

He looked at me, studying my eyes, peering deep into them. “Tell me something, Lily.”

“What?” I asked, exasperated.

“Do you like Klaus as a boss?”

He was entirely sincere. No snarkiness or anything.

I pulled back a little, surprised at the question. “What?”

“I said, do you like Klaus as a boss?”

I paused.

Something in his gaze was asking for an honest answer.

Against my better judgment, I gave it.

“Not really. Actually, no. Not at all.”

He nodded, satisfied. “Good.”

“Why ‘good’?”

“Because – ”

The elevator slowed down rapidly. I wasn't sure if the butterflies in my stomach were because of the abrupt deceleration, or because of what he said next.

“ – you seem way too smart, talented, and interesting to be working for a jackass like that.”

Just then the elevator doors *dinged* open. He broke our gaze and walked out onto the 23rd floor, leaving me stunned in his wake.

11

But I recovered quickly.

I followed him out into the main lobby, past the receptionist's desk which was adorned with flower arrangements that would be thrown out by the cleaning staff at night. The receptionist was gone for the weekend, so I buzzed us through the main door using the badge in my purse.

Actually, *everybody* had left for the night. The entire floor of cubicles was quiet and half-dimmed.

"You sure do have it in for Klaus," I said, picking the conversation back up.

He grinned. "And you don't?"

"I have to work with him every day. What did he ever do to you?"

"I had to suffer through a couple of conference calls with him." Connor shook his head in exaggerated regret. "Forty-five minutes of my life I'll never get back."

"Forty-five minutes?! Try six months," I retorted.

"Which you'll *never get back*. You really shouldn't be wasting your time as his punching bag, Lily."

"That's all very nice, but a girl's got to eat."

"That she does. But never take bread scraps when you could – and *should* – be dining out on lobster."

"I don't know what world *you* live in, Mr. Brooks –"

He looked over at me like *You did NOT just call me that*.

"It's Connor. My friends call me Connor. *Klaus* calls me Mr. Brooks."

I couldn't suppress my smile.

"Ah, I knew I could make you laugh."

“That was a smile, not a laugh,” I said, intent upon not giving in that easily. He was charming, but he was kind of infuriating, too.

“I’ll get there,” he said confidently, and grinned.

“Yeah, well, I don’t know what world *you* live in, Connor, but in mine, bread scraps are sometimes all you get.”

“We either make our own realities, Lily, or we accept the realities others impose upon us. You’ve got way too much going for you to accept a reality that includes Klaus as a part of it.”

Ooooh, Mr. Philosophy, I thought, annoyed. Mr. Mommy and Daddy Paid For My Education at Harvard and Gave Me My Million-Dollar Business Contacts.

As though he could read my thoughts, he stopped on a dime, caught my arm, spun me gently to face him, and stared into my eyes.

It took me a couple seconds to hear his first few words, because that hand on my arm was making my legs go weak.

“Did I have a lot of advantages growing up? Yes I did. I’m a very lucky guy, and I recognize that. But part of my upbringing was that I learned my strengths, and I learned what I was worth, and I never let anybody tell me differently. When I look at you, Lily, I see a beautiful – ”

I almost collapsed.

Did he just call me beautiful?!

“ – woman who is poised, very intelligent, in control of herself, doesn’t take any crap – oh, wait, skip that last part,” he said, as though making a mental note. Then he started walking again. “Is it this way?”

What a JACKASS! I seethed inwardly as I ran to catch up.

“You know, you talk a big game for a guy who’s here to look at somebody else’s business files on a Friday night after closing hours.”

“Uh oh, did I touch a nerve?” he laughed.

God, he could be so infuriating!

“Why *are* you here, exactly?”

He put his hands in his pockets, looked around the empty cubicles, and shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know... thinking about buying the company.”

I snorted. “Right.”

He gave a little *eh, who knows* look. “Maybe one day. Once I save up my pennies.”

“So you can have a whole company to kiss your ass, huh?”

Oh man, as soon as I said it, I wish I could have taken it back.

But he just roared with laughter.

“I don’t know about other people kissing *my* ass, but...”

Here he cast a sly look down at my backside.

“...I wouldn’t mind kissing somebody else’s.”

Again – beet red. *Fwoosh!* All the blood went to my face.

But this time I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Hey,” I snapped.

He turned around with that surprised look again. “What?”

“You know that’s highly inappropriate, right?” I said, crossing my arms.

I thought he was going to come back with something even more risqué, but he surprised me by putting out his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

“Sorry,” he said, his tone sincere. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. You’re just... sorry. I won’t do it again.”

““You’re just’ what?” I asked.

I wasn’t mildly curious about what he had been going to say next – I was *dying* to know.

“Well, you’re – ” He stopped and shook his head. “Never mind.”

““You’re just’ *what?*” I demanded.

He smiled, but it wasn’t his normal *I’m going to do whatever I want and I’m going to have fun doing it* grin. It was more sincere... and almost vulnerable. “I find you very attractive.”

My heart skipped a beat as he kept on talking.

“I’m used to being a little more... *aggressive*, and I forgot the setting and my manners. I’m sorry.” He went back to kidding around, and held up both arms like *Don’t shoot!* “I’ll stop, just don’t file a sexual harassment lawsuit, okay?”

I stood there, arms still crossed, and pondered my dilemma.

On the one hand, his behavior *was* totally inappropriate for the workplace.

On the other hand, sexual harassment is, by definition, *unwanted* sexual advances.

And I *soooo* wanted them.

I’d basically snapped at him because... well... he annoyed me, he flustered me, he got under my skin, and I wanted to hit back. I’m not the most sexual person in the world – at least, I don’t go around making sexual jokes with strangers – and I had no ammo I could fire back at him after the ‘ass kissing’ bit. So I’d gone the route of least resistance.

I’d had an incredibly gorgeous guy flirting openly with me, and I was about to throw it all away.

So... keep my dignity and throw cold water on all the sexual tension... or admit I was overreacting and look like I was throwing myself at him?

I tried to chart a course through the middle, but it didn’t come out sounding as good as I’d hoped.

“I didn’t say *stop*... just... tone it down a little,” I muttered as I shifted back and forth on my heels.

He burst into a humongous grin, and I felt my knees wobble again.

Damn it, I'm not that easy!

He had the advantage, and he knew it – but he didn't push it.

“Agreed. Now let's go look at those files, shall we?”

12

We made our way back to my desk and Klaus's office.

The silence was a little uncomfortable.

They have a saying in sales: the first person to speak, loses.

Imagine a salesman is making a pitch to an undecided customer. When the salesman finishes his presentation and asks for the sale, he has to stop talking and wait for an answer. If he says something before the customer does, it looks like he's desperate for the sale, and we all know how attractive desperation is. Whereas, if the undecided customer says something first, there's this unspoken balance of power he's bought into and acknowledged. Psychologically, he's given the power over to the salesman, which usually results in the customer signing on the dotted line. Whoever speaks first, loses.

In this scenario, I lost.

"You still haven't said what's so important about these files that you have to waste a perfectly good Friday night," I said, if for no other reason than to get the conversation flowing again.

"Actually, I believe I did," he grinned.

"Oh, that's right – you're thinking about buying the company," I said sarcastically. "How about a *real* reason?"

He kept grinning. "Well... if I were Klaus, I might say something about it not being any of your business. But since we're friends, let me put it this way instead: there are things I'm not at liberty to talk about, but you could say I'm the... advance man on a very important business deal, and I wanted to check out some things before we go through with it."

"The LMGK buyout," I realized.

He looked surprised. "You know about that?"

I blushed. I wasn't *supposed* to know, but...

"Everybody's been whispering about it the last few weeks. And I've seen a few things."

"Such as?"

"...such as things I'm not at liberty to talk about."

He laughed. "Touché."

"But what I haven't seen is *you* before."

Which was true. In all the hush-hush meetings between Exerton and LMGK fat cats, I had never once spied Connor. I definitely would have remembered.

He gestured to himself. "Now you have. In the flesh."

I looked at the tan chest in the unbuttoned V of his shirt and sighed inwardly.

I wish I could see a lot *more* of Mr. Connor Brooks' flesh...

We got to my desk, and I rummaged around for the keys to Klaus's office.

"Hey – "

I turned around. I was kind of bent over as I looked for the keys, my rear in the air, and I was half-expecting another comment about my ass.

I had mixed feelings about whether I wanted to hear it or not.

But Connor was instead peering intently at the monitor, which I hadn't shut off when I went downstairs.

"– are those the numbers for Teramore?"

Oh CRAP.

"Those are confidential," I said, my chest tightening with fear.

He gave me a sideways look as he bent over and starting scrolling through the report. "Remember, both Klaus and your

CEO said you should give me *anything* I want – oh, wait, is that an inappropriate remark?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’ll file it under acceptable innuendos,” I said coolly.

He laughed. “Acceptable innuendoes... that’s good...” he trailed off as he paged through the document.

Then his expression grew dour, and he shook his head as he kept staring at the screen. “Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, shocked.

He looked at me as though trying to make a decision. “Can I trust you with something, Lily?”

“Uh... I guess...?”

“Yes or no. I don’t want this getting back to Klaus,” he said, very seriously.

Ohhhh man...

I was too curious to say ‘no,’ though.

And Klaus was too big of a jackass for me to pretend I had some kind of loyalty to him.

“Yes.”

Connor ran his hand through his hair. “LMGK already did their own appraisal of Teramore. I told – uh, we convinced Teramore to let you guys make a pass at it, too, to see your numbers and compare how Exerton would evaluate the situation.”

“Wait – you mean, this is a test for Exerton Consulting?” I asked as I pointed at the monitor.

He nodded.

“It’s not an actual job – it’s just a *test*?”

“Well, *Klaus* thinks it’s a job, and Teramore will actually pay the bill as though it were an actual job. But yeah, it’s a test.”

“One we didn’t know we were taking.”

“We didn’t want you to go to more ‘trouble than usual.’ Like how the food critic doesn’t want the restaurant to know when he’s visiting or who he really is.”

“But why – ”

And then all the pieces fell into place.

LMGK was considering purchasing Exerton.

And this report was part of their due diligence.

“Oh,” I gasped.

Connor saw that I’d figured it out. “Yup.”

Wow. Just... wow.

Klaus didn’t know he was being evaluated. And that evaluation could potentially influence the entire buyout.

I winced. “I guess we didn’t do so well.”

“No, you didn’t. Your appraisal of the market is waaay off.” He glanced over at me hastily. “Not you, of course – Klaus’s.”

“Well, he always does that,” I said in an off-handed way.

Connor frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve proofed all his reports over the last six months. I have to double-check everything, and, well... he tends to tell the client what they want to hear. Not necessarily reality.”

“Wait – wait, wait, wait,” he said. “Do you know about – ”

And for the next five minutes it was like I was defending a doctoral dissertation.

He asked tons of questions about previous business deals Klaus had done. The thing was, Connor knew details that he shouldn’t have been able to know, and he kept throwing out numbers left and right off the top of his head.

I did my best to keep up. I did okay – when you spend as much time as I do babysitting for Klaus, you have to clean up a lot of messes. I remembered some of them particularly well.

At the end, Connor shook his head. “Incredible.”

“What?”

“That you’re an assistant and not a junior executive, at the very least.”

He looked serious.

I blushed. “Well... it’s nothing really, just what I’ve picked up in the last six – ”

“Stop,” he said, almost angry. “Don’t do that. Don’t be modest; don’t lessen your worth like that. You’re an assistant, but you just showed a better grasp of the big picture than a couple of Harvard MBA’s I’ve hired in the last month. Don’t play it off. It’s damn impressive. *You’re* damn impressive. Don’t ever make yourself out to be any less than what you really are.”

I was about to swoon.

He was looking deep into my eyes as he said all these things... and that scent, that masculine, intoxicating cologne, was making my head swim...

“It’s also a little sad,” he finished up, which jolted me out of my reverie.

“What is?” I asked, taken aback.

“That a woman like you is working for an idiot like Klaus. The situation should be reversed – and if it were, I would hope you’d fire his ass.”

I grinned. “In a New York second.”

He leaned in a little bit. My grin faded as my vision went woozy again.

“I see so much potential in you, Lily... a huge future. Somebody who could really go out there and kick some ass. Smart, capable, funny, charming...”

He paused, and the barest hint of a smile played at the corner of his mouth.

“...beautiful, if it’s not inappropriate to say that again...”

My heart skipped three beats this time.

He leaned in closer.

“It’s too bad you’re such a doofus.” And with that, he broke into a huge grin.

I snapped up straight, totally jerked out of the spell. “What?! I am *not!*”

And then, because I didn’t really know what he meant, I asked, “...what exactly do you mean by ‘doofus’?”

“Somebody who, either out of a lack of intelligence – which isn’t your problem – or a deficit of self-esteem, sells herself short and puts up with crap she shouldn’t. Only doofuses work for douchebags,” he said, with an expression like *I hate to break it to you, kid, but the truth hurts*.

Okay, by that definition, I actually *am* kind of a doofus, but I wasn’t about to admit that to *him*.

I crossed my arms. “I have to pay rent, I have to eat, and if the only way to do that is to work for an asshole, *sorry*, Mr. Bigshot ‘Gonna Buy The Company Someday,’ but I like having a roof over my head and dinner every night. It’s not going to be that way forever. It’s only temporary. Haven’t *you* ever had to put up with crap, *ever*, or is your life so charmed that you never had to overcome any setbacks?”

He laughed as he headed towards Klaus’s office. “Alright, alright... so you’re just a little doofus. Come on, let’s go dig up some more evidence of your boss’s douchebaggery.”

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Connor spent another hour intently examining file after file. He asked for the companies by name, and he seemed to know exactly what he was looking for.

I didn't do much except look for folders as he sat in Klaus's designer office chair, his rock 'n roll boots propped up on Klaus's desk, and read and read and read.

At the end, he tossed the last file on Klaus's desk and leaned back, his fingers steepled in front of his face as he thought.

I looked at him. He looked at me.

"I feel like a cappuccino. You feel like a cappuccino?" he asked.

"Uh... I guess I could go get some Starbucks if you want," I agreed, feeling a little let down. I'd spent the first ten minutes of our acquaintance fielding passes from him, and the last thirty minutes playing Susie Secretary. Now I was demoted to Gidget Gopher.

"Screw that," he said. "Last time I was here, there was a pretty nice machine up in the boardroom. Want to check it out?"

My heart caught in my chest.

Exerton rented the penthouse of the building, on the 27th floor. That was where the Executive VP's had their offices, and where they held all their meetings with multi-million-dollar clients.

Rather than answer the question, I tried to avoid it. "When were *you* here?"

"Oh, long before your august tenure at Exerton began," he teased. "So, what do you say?"

"I don't have access to that."

He held up a badge. *Klaus's* badge. "I found this on your boss's desk. I'm pretty sure *he* has access, doesn't he?"

"I... I don't think we should do that..."

"Oh, come on, live a little. Besides, you're supposed to give me anything I want, remember? And right now, I want a cappuccino, and I want your company."

My heart was thudding against the sides of my ribs.

A cappuccino in the company penthouse with the man of my dreams...

I just *knew* this was going to come back to bite me in the ass.

"Okay," I agreed with a tremble in my voice.

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I felt like we were two kids sneaking out of a slumber party. Or – even better – he was the hot high school jock who convinced me to climb out of my bedroom window so we could go TP somebody’s house.

Sure enough, Klaus’s badge got us through the Italian marble receptionist area and into the board room – a giant open space with sumptuous leather chairs, plush carpet that was so thick it was hard to walk in my heels, and a thirty-foot-long mahogany table. The cappuccino machine was in an anteroom with an expensive refrigerator.

“I have no idea how to work this,” I said as I laid my purse on the counter and stared at the thousand-dollar contraption in front of me.

“I’ll take it from here,” he said, and began expertly preparing the coffee.

“Did you work in Starbucks in college or something?” I asked.

“What? Where did you get that?”

“You know how to work that machine.”

He gave me a bemused smile. “I own one.”

I sighed and shook my head. “Must be nice.”

“Nothing but the best, Lily. You should try it sometime.”

I just rolled my eyes.

After the cappuccino was ready, we went back into the boardroom with our cups. We kept the lights off, the better to see the sights. The entire side of the room was plate glass, and all of downtown Los Angeles spread out before us. The sun had set long ago and the glow of the city lights was like something out of a movie. Headlights and tail lights sparkled like diamonds and rubies up and down the 110 Freeway.

“This was worth the whole trip,” he smiled at me.

“The view?” I asked, hoping he meant something else.

“No, the coffee,” he said as he lifted the cup.

I smacked him playfully on the arm.

He laughed, then grew mock serious. “What? I make a damn good cappuccino.”

“I hear it’s pretty easy when you have a million dollar machine to make it for you.”

“Oh really? Is that why you did such a great job of preparing it for us?” he teased.

“Fine,” I conceded. “You make a damn good cappuccino.”

“Finally, credit where credit is due. But, I have to say, there *is* one other thing that makes the cappuccino absolutely amazing...”

“What?” I asked nervously.

He stared intently into my eyes.

“...the view.”

I smacked him on the arm again.

“Aaah! I’m going to report you to HR for that!” he laughed.

“For what?”

“Physical abuse and intimidation.”

“You don’t even work here.”

“Okay, I’m going to report you to HR after I buy the company.”

“In that case, I don’t ever have to worry about it, then.”

He just grinned at me, then gestured at my face. “You have a little, uh, foam on your lip.”

Wonderful. Here I was thinking this was all playfully romantic, when in reality he was joking around with me like a good ol’ gal pal while I had stuff all over my mouth. Great.

I touched the side of my mouth and tried to wipe it off gracefully.

“Here, I’ll – just hold still, ” he said, and reached out and touched my face.

Maybe it was the darkness. Maybe it was his plan all along... but his finger overshot just the tiniest bit, and brushed ever so softly against my bottom lip instead.

Pleasure jolted my entire body. The warmth and softness of his skin, the scent of his cologne, the intimacy of his touch on one of the most sensitive parts of my body...

It tickled where he touched me, but there was also the incredibly sensual caress of his skin against my lip.

I immediately felt heat build between my thighs. A thrill of pleasure shot into my belly.

Especially when he didn’t move his finger away from my lips.

His eyes locked onto mine. For the first time, the mask fell away. No more joking, no more teasing; I saw the desire on his face, a look of wanting that almost bordered on pain.

He moved his finger the slightest bit more, gliding soooo slowly across my lower lip.

I moaned. Softly, but I moaned.

I blushed furiously as soon as I heard myself – it was entirely involuntary – but it was how I felt. A sound that had escaped from the deepest part of me.

I guess it fanned his fire, too, because he touched the other fingers of his hand to my cheek as his finger traced softly across my lip.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. I wanted him so bad.

I opened my lips, and I took him inside my mouth.

Just a finger – and just the tip. But I began to suck slowly, running my tongue sensuously over his skin.

And oh how I wished it was another part of his body I had in my mouth.

The sensation must have been too much for him, because his expression of desire became an almost ravenous hunger.

He pulled his finger away from my lips, moved in, and kissed me.

Took me.

Possessed me.

His arms enveloped me, one encircling my waist and the other moving up my back.

He crushed me against him – not forcing himself on me, but pressing me tight against him.

His body was heavenly, firm and strong beneath his clothes. I clutched the back of his jacket, feeling the wall of well-sculpted muscles beneath my hands.

And his mouth... ohhhhhh...

His lips pressed against mine, firm but gentle. He brushed them across my skin, the same way he had inflamed me just seconds ago with his touch.

I opened my lips wide, inviting him in.

His tongue met mine... slowly... gently... taking his time. He alternated between using just his lips, then slowly caressing my tongue with his, the most arousing kiss I'd ever had in my life.

His hand around my waist slowly dropped down to my rear end and cupped my cheek, feeling my curves, then pressed me against his hips.

Oh.

My.

GOD.

I couldn't see anything – my eyes were closed and I was completely lost in the kiss – but there was this very long, very

thick, very hard pressure between me and him. He was fully aroused – he had to have been.

Before I slept with them, I had felt several boyfriends' erections through their pants during makeout sessions – but I had never felt something like *that* before.

Nothing that *massive*.

I had to touch it.

I was dying to touch it.

I had to feel it in my hand.

I let my fingers drift down below his belt and grazed my hand along the cloth.

No matter how wet I was before, a couple of seconds later I was drenched.

I was not what you would call experienced. One boyfriend in high school, two in college, and a guy I had dated three months before I left for Los Angeles. All nice guys. All a bit taller than me, all fairly cute, all of average build, and every one of them pretty much the same 'down there.' Sex had ranged from fair to good, and I had just assumed that size didn't matter much. Except for the actors I saw in porn clips (usually viewed with my fingers over my eyes as my second college boyfriend laughed at me and tried to get me to watch), I figured 99% of the male population was built a certain way, and I probably wasn't ever going to run into the 1%.

I had apparently just run into it.

As my fingers traced the amazing length and cupped the substantial girth of the shape in his pants, I let out another moan.

I was *sooooo* turned on it wasn't funny.

I didn't even know why. Porn clips definitely didn't do it for me. Guys in those videos made me go *ewww* instead of *aaahhh*.

I guess it was that I was so wildly turned on by him anyway, that the size of him... it sparked something deep

inside of me. I felt so feminine as I held him, overwhelmed by the sheer masculinity of him.

Then his hand closed around mine and forced me to grip that thick, hard shape even tighter.

He pulled his mouth away from mine and moved his lips to my ear.

“You feel that?” he growled – so low it was a whisper, the tickle of air on my skin exciting me even more.

I nodded silently, because I couldn’t speak. I didn’t trust myself – I was afraid if I tried to answer, I might start moaning again. Continuously and loudly.

“*YOU* do that to me,” he breathed. “*YOU* make me hard like that.”

Yeah... I was right. I moaned again. I couldn’t help myself.

His lips traced the edges of my ears. I was whimpering now, unable to think.

His hand on my ass caressed its way up my spine and lightly gripped my hair. Slowly, gently, he pulled my head back so that my neck was completely exposed – and he began to kiss and lick me. Not wet, just the lightest touch of his tongue as it traced its way across my skin, down my throat, all the way to my collarbones, then back up the other side.

I had to lean myself against the table, my legs were so weak.

Taking that for some sort of a sign, he used both of his hands to grab my ass and lift me up so that I was sitting on the table. Good Lord, he was strong – I felt like a doll in his hands as he just picked me up and moved me at his whim.

My hand lost contact with the bulge in his pants, but I didn’t have time to think about that. As he returned to kissing me on the mouth, his fingers started brushing the curves of my breasts through my blouse.

He would start on the outside edges near my arm and slowly spiral in with the lightest touch, then brush the

backsides of his fingers over my nipples. Normally they don't get that hard unless I'm really turned on; at the moment, I felt like they could probably cut diamonds. He kept playing with my breasts, alternating kissing me on the lips and nuzzling my ear, until I was quivering and moaning.

Then he stepped back and stared into my eyes as he undid the buttons on my blouse. Then he pulled it off my shoulders and arms until I was sitting there in my bra.

It's funny what goes through your mind, but one single thought emerged from the overwhelming wave of desire coursing through my body:

Thank God I wore a lacy, pretty bra this morning.

And matching panties.

Of course, the bra didn't stay on for long.

Neither did the panties.

He leaned in for a kiss, and his arms encircled me. As his lips and tongue met mine, I felt his expert fingers unsnap the bra from the back, and the straps relaxed.

I started to shrug it off, but he stopped me.

"No. I want to do it," he said, his voice hoarse with longing.

I nodded silently. He moved down to my shoulders, kissing and licking as he slowly slid the strap off my left shoulder. Then he switched to the right. Finally he moved down to the swell of my breasts, and he ohhhh so slowly pulled away the bra like he was savoring the moment as his tongue traced my cleavage.

Then the bra fell entirely away. I felt his mouth close hot and wet around my left nipple and suck at it, caressing it with his tongue. His other hand, huge and powerful, cupped my right breast.

I didn't scream, exactly, but I moaned a hell of a lot louder.

I arched my back towards him, my entire body quivering. He moved from one nipple to the other, then back again,

sucking, licking, tracing his tongue around the curves of my breast, pressing them both together so that his tongue could move from one to the other.

Oh God oh God oh God I was about to explode.

I couldn't really say I was *thinking* about anything – coherent thought was beyond my abilities at that moment – but I really, *really* wanted to touch him again.

You know where.

No matter how good it felt, I pushed him away.

He looked up at me, puzzled. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I whispered, and moved my hands down to his belt. “I just want this.”

As my fingers closed on that massive shape in his pants, he groaned and closed his eyes.

I undid the zipper and slipped my hand inside. Through the front flap of his boxers, I could feel scalding hot skin, huge and thick – but it was the base. The tip was quite a ways away, and there was no way I was going to be able to reposition him comfortably – not with his pants on.

I moved my hand up, undid the belt, then unfastened the button at his waistline.

His shaft was so big and so hard, it still held up his pants.

I decided I wanted to get a little bit closer, if you know what I mean.

Actually, I didn't decide. I *yearned* to get closer. I was *desperate* to get closer.

I slid off the table and knelt in front of him, the plush carpet soft beneath my knees.

I gently tugged at his pants until they peeled away from his waist and fell to the ground.

Wow.

Beneath his black cotton boxers, the shape looked even bigger. Almost intimidating as it strained against the cloth.

But there was even more good stuff besides that.

His thighs were muscular and tan, gorgeous and powerful.

I slid one hand up his leg and moved around to his ass.

Ohhhhh wow.

I hadn't seen much of it beneath his suit jacket, but it was definitely round and curvy, a firm, solid mass of muscle.

Oh boy.

My mouth was watering.

He looked down at me, and I looked up and bit my lip. I was suddenly shy.

"Please," he whispered hoarsely, his voice choked with desire.

That was all it took.

I traced my fingernail softly over the shape of his shaft and watched it jump and strain beneath his boxers.

I had to see it. Now.

I reached up, hooked my fingers in the waistband of his boxers, and tugged a little, then moved them around to his ass, tugged a little more.

The waistband slowly descended, and I could see he had an all-over body tan, that gorgeous brown from head to toe (and everywhere else).

I kept pulling.

The boxers slid down over the perfect curve of his ass, but his penis had shifted and was now poking straight down. All I could see was the base of his shaft, a well-groomed thatch of brown curls, and the firmest, tightest abs I'd seen outside of an Abercrombie & Fitch ad.

Wow.

It was... *very* large.

Incredibly thick.

I wasn't sure if I could even get my hand all the way around it.

Both incredible desire and, if I'm going to be honest, a little bit of fear surged through me.

But I had to see the rest of it. I HAD to.

I pulled the boxers slowly down, careful not to hurt him or stretch him too far.

I kept glancing up at his face for a hint as to how he was feeling.

He looked like he was going to go crazy with desire if I didn't move the show along.

That's okay, because I felt the same way, too.

I slowly slipped the boxers off the tip of his unit, and gasped as it bobbed up into place.

It was the most gorgeous one I'd ever seen.

I've already said I'm not that worldly. Of the ones I'd seen, they tended to strike me as... well, not that attractive. Kind of funny-looking. I liked how they felt, but I didn't really like *looking* at them.

This one, I could have stared at all day.

Well, if I could have controlled myself from not *using* it.

It wasn't just the size or the thickness, but the perfect aesthetics of it. It was like a perfectly sculpted piece of pink marble. Gorgeous, smooth, with a curve and heft that made my insides quiver.

Again, I was suddenly shy. I looked up at him and bit my lower lip, like I was asking permission.

He stared down at me with an urgent look on his face, like *What are you waiting for?!*

I reached out and slowly touched it, softly grazing my fingers along it.

It jumped in my hand, expanding with a spasm.

Connor groaned.

His reaction overcame any remaining hesitance I had.

I began to brush my fingers across it, softly, amazed at the burning heat from it – and from the silky softness of the skin over the rock hardness beneath.

I encircled the massive girth with my fingers. I was right – I could just barely get my hand around it.

I began to softly stroke it, up and down, up and down.

Connor was moaning, and every sound he made doubled and tripled my own desire.

A drop of clear liquid beaded at the tip of the massive head. I moved my palm over it and used his natural lubrication to wet my fingers, then began to softly caress him again.

The slipperiness made it even more sensual – the soft pull of his flesh against mine.

Connor was groaning non-stop by now.

I leaned in and kissed the shaft. The heat seemed to scald my lips – but I wanted more.

I began to run my tongue up and down the underside, lightly at first, then wetter and heavier, from just beneath his head all the way down to the base.

He was whimpering now.

I pulled the shaft down away from his body – it was so long! – and hesitantly, a little fearfully, took him inside my mouth.

I almost came just from the touch of his skin on my tongue.

He tasted salty and sweet – far better than anyone else I had ever done this with.

I moved my mouth forward – not far. He was so big, I was a little scared of trying to do too much at once. I just decided to enjoy *myself*, figuring if *I* was having fun, he was pretty much guaranteed to.

I sucked softly, moving my head slowly back and forth, feeling the firm swell of him against my tongue, the silky softness of the head tickling the roof of my mouth. All the while, both my hands ran up and down his shaft, encircling him, sliding softly and sensuously, taking some of the wetness from my mouth and using it to make my touch linger up and down his incredible length, using my fingernails to tease and tickle various other spots.

The more I just concentrated on enjoying him in my mouth, the more and more turned on I got. I could *feel* myself dripping down there as I took him in, enveloping him, possessing him with my mouth.

From his groans and moans, I could tell it wouldn't be long before he lost it.

As I was deciding on what to do – I'm not a big fan of keeping my mouth in place when the guy crosses the finish line, shall we say – I suddenly felt his hands on my shoulders.

I tensed up because I *don't* like it when a guy puts his hands on the back of my head and forces me onto him. I just don't. I want to be in control.

And with a guy *this* big, I was kind of afraid.

But he didn't do that.

He pushed me away from him.

The head of his shaft pulled away from my lips, and it was my turn to look up at him in surprise.

He stared down at me, and I had to catch my breath at how *animalistic* he looked. Almost angry, definitely in pain.

“I need you NOW,” he whispered, deep and rumbling and full of need.

I gasped and nodded as he pulled me up to my feet.

From there it was all kind of a blur. His fingers pulled at my skirt, rough and insistent. I undid his tie and unbuttoned his shirt as fast as I could. As I pulled it off him, I caught my breath. His skin was perfect and flawless. His muscles were sculpted like an underwear model's, from his sizeable pecs to

bulging biceps to his washboard stomach. He had just the right amount of chest hair – and the most delicious happy trail from below his waist up to his belly button.

He kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his pants, giving me a good look at his powerful, athletic legs and perfect calves.

The last thing to go were my panties. He kneeled down in front of me, kissing and licking my breasts on the way down, hooked his fingers through them, and pulled them as fast as he could down my thighs.

I have to say, I was a little embarrassed how wet they were... soaking wet. But I don't think he minded. He was intent on one thing: getting me down on the carpet

He pulled at my hand, and I sank down in front of him, his naked skin pressed against mine. I trembled as he kissed me deeply and cupped my ass in his hands, grinding my body into his. All the while I could feel that massive, thick shaft pressed against my belly, scorching me with its heat.

He gently lowered me onto my back as I straightened my legs. The carpet was soft as a bed beneath me.

He began to move –

“Condom,” I managed to choke out.

He nodded tersely, grabbed his pants like a man possessed, and a few seconds later I heard the crinkle of a wrapper. I watched, hypnotized, as he placed it over the swelling head of his unit – and I couldn't help myself. I reached out and unrolled it, slowly, inch by inch down his giant shaft. It look a little while.

The whole time he was grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

When he was fully covered (the condom was fully unrolled by the time it got to his swelling base – never had *that* happen before in my limited experience), he braced himself on one forearm and gently touched my drenched lower lips with the fingers of his other hand, stroking me softly.

I cried out as an wave of pleasure seized my entire body.

He stopped and peered into my face. “Are you okay?”

I just wanted to scream, *Please, for the love of God, PUT IT IN NOW!*

But I held back.

“Uh huh,” I gasped.

He leaned over and kissed me, deep, slow, and sensual, as his fingers guided the tip of his shaft inside me.

I came immediately.

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I might have screamed. I'm not sure – I wasn't exactly thinking clearly.

It was probably more like a really loud, sustained moan, and a few semi-coherent 'Oh God oh God's' thrown in for good measure.

I'm not a girl who orgasms easily. I had sex for the first time when I was 17, but I never actually had an orgasm until I was with my second college boyfriend. I had them occasionally after that. The few I did have were pleasant and stress-relieving.

They were *nothing* like this.

To tell the truth, I'm not actually sure anymore I'd ever *had* a real orgasm before this.

It was like a wave of sensual electricity jolted me from my very center. My body shuddered from my toes to the top of my head, and contractions in the core of my body filled me with incredible pleasure.

After it was all over and I opened my eyes (actually I think they were rolled back in my head), I saw Connor looking down at me with a grin.

"Wow, you're responsive," he teased. "And that was just the tip."

I blushed a deep red. I was a little embarrassed, to tell the truth. I think I was so incredibly turned on – by him, by the way he kissed me, the way he touched me, by his gorgeous... you know – that just the slightest bit was enough to send me over the edge.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

He laughed. "For what?"

I smiled in spite of myself. If a guy comes quick... eh, not so good. I guess when a woman comes quick, she feels good,

and the guy gets his ego stroked.

Suddenly he looked concerned. “Can you go on?”

I *was* pretty sensitive down there... but the feel of his muscular body on top of me was rapidly making me want more.

I nodded. “Just... go slow at first,” I whispered.

“Okay,” he nodded, and leaned over and kissed me again.

It was wonderful. As his velvety tongue slowly penetrated me, he started to rock his hips backwards and forwards the tiniest bit, so that his shaft did the same between my legs.

Oh my God.

Just the fact that it was bigger than anything I’d ever felt in my life... that was pretty amazing, and an incredible turn-on.

And the pressure – the sense of fullness, the incredible stimulation from his girth – well, I pretty much forgot about wanting it slow.

I just wanted more.

NOW.

I gasped as long, slow waves of pleasure started rolling through me again.

He paused to look at me.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered.

He grinned. “But are you –”

“DON’T STOP.”

He laughed, bent down and kissed me again, deep and soft and probing, and continued to slowly enter me.

Like I said, he would rock his hips back and forth. A little bit more inside me, then pull back the tiniest bit... then a little bit more, then pull back... two steps forward, one step back.

As the pressure increased down there, and as I started to get sensations deeper than I’d ever felt before, I thought, *Okay, surely it’s all the way in now.*

And then he would keep sliding in deeper.

At one point he paused longer than usual and I thought, *Okay, surely THAT'S it. It HAS to be in all the way now.*

But no – he just eased himself out a little bit, then continued further in.

It. was. INCREDIBLE.

The sensations were building and intensifying as his shaft got thicker and thicker towards the base.

Even more than that, I felt this incredible *fullness*, this overwhelming sense of being filled up all the way through my body.

I began to moan and rock my hips against his, angling my pelvis to get more pressure here, more sensation there.

Slowly, slowly, he began to pull out of me – almost all the way.

I whimpered, afraid to lose the sensation.

Then he pushed inside again.

Out, then in. Out, then in.

Wave after wave of pleasure flooded my entire body.

He started to go faster. The gentle rhythm became thrusts – harder, more insistent.

I could feel the tension building inside me again – but deeper. He was touching me in places I'd never felt before.

And all the while we're kissing, with him taking my lower lip in his and gently sucking at it, or moving to my ear and breathing softly, letting me hear the desire and need in his voice.

I don't know what turned me on more – the incredible sensations between my legs and deep inside me, or hearing the urgency in his groans. The utter and complete desire he had to possess me completely.

He began slamming into me, and I began crying out – unbelievable pleasure tinged with the tiniest bit of pain. But I

was so turned on it didn't matter. I only wanted more, deeper, faster, harder.

“Oh God, Lily, oh God, oh God,” he breathed into my ear, a frenzied whisper.

I began calling out his name over and over as my fingernails dug into his back, as my hands cupped that amazing ass, the muscles bucking under my palms as they pumped up and down, driving him deeper and deeper inside me.

A spark began glowing in my belly. It felt different than other times. It was growing and growing, heating up my hips with waves of pleasure I couldn't contain, rippling up and down my spine. Every stroke of his shaft intensified the heat; every touch deep inside me fanned the flames, sending stronger and stronger vibrations out through my entire body.

Then he was slamming inside me double-time, triple-time, and I couldn't contain myself anymore. I screamed for real this time as the dam inside me broke, and that heat burst like a tidal wave of ecstasy through every inch of my frame.

I think my screaming pushed him over the edge, because he lifted his head and bellowed. Through the haze of my deep, throbbing orgasm, I watched his face strain like he was caught somewhere between heaven and hell, agony and euphoria, and then I felt him grow bigger inside me – which I would have said was impossible until I felt it. Spasm after spasm as his thrusts gradually slowed and he came to a halt inside me, the pressure less now, though still more than I'd ever felt before tonight. He lowered his face back down and began kissing my cheek, my chin, my mouth.

My orgasm didn't exactly stop so much as it ebbed away gradually, with tiny contractions continuing for almost a minute afterwards. As I kissed him softly, another little shudder would rack my body like the aftershocks of an earthquake, and I would feel myself involuntarily squeeze his thick shaft.

We continued that way for another few minutes, our damp skin sliding sensually against each other, our tongues brushing

each other's lips, until at last he said, "Don't move." His hand reached down to the base of his shaft – I trembled with another aftershock as I felt the tips of his fingers graze my swollen lips – and then he slowly pulled out as he gripped the bottom of the condom.

I was a little sad as I felt him slide out of me.

He bent down and kissed my breasts, my belly, and licked where my leg joined my body. I gasped.

He grinned. "Be right back," he promised, and disappeared from the room.

He was back within seconds with a small trash can, a box of kleenex, and some bottled water from the fridge we'd seen earlier. As I cleaned myself up, I couldn't help watching him do the same, peeling the condom away and drying himself. By now he was pretty much limp, but even then he was bigger than anyone else I'd ever been with when they were fully erect.

And twice as arousing.

I could feel the heat building inside me again, and shivered the tiniest bit.

After we'd disposed of the trash, he unscrewed the bottles of water, handed one to me, and drank deeply of his. Then he laid down next to me, his warm, muscular frame pressed against my side.

His hands grazed my belly, gently cupped my breasts, played over the little landing strip of hair between my legs. I returned the favor, entranced as I traced the shadowy swells of his muscles beneath his brown skin.

"Turn over," he growled.

I began to get a little worried. I'd seen just enough porno clips to be concerned about where this might be headed.

"Uh... why?"

The corners of his mouth turned up. "Just trust me."

I wasn't sure it was such a good idea... but I flipped over onto my stomach.

He began to caress my ass, to brush his fingers across the inside of my thighs, and to kiss the small of my back. He licked lightly from the base of my spine all the way up to between my shoulder blades, then kissed his way back down.

Aaaahhhh.

I closed my eyes and just let him do whatever he wanted. The post-orgasmic glow was still washing through my entire body, and Connor was slowly stoking it up into a rising flame again.

My brain was mostly mush at this point. I was totally in the moment, enjoying myself more than I could ever remember – and totally not thinking about what I'd just done.

Well, no, that's not exactly right. I *was* thinking about all the pleasure and how amazing it had been.

I just wasn't thinking about *where* I'd done it.

So his next words were like a punch to the gut.

“I bet when you came in this morning, you didn't think you'd be having sex in the company boardroom.”

I could hear the grin in his voice, the naughty side I'd seen at play earlier.

But that's not what hit me like a sledgehammer.

My eyes flew open and I bolted upright like I was in a horror movie.

“OH MY GOD!” I cried out, and not in pleasure this time.

Connor looked like I'd given him a heart attack. “What?! What is it?!”

“Oh my God, I can't believe I did this!” I choked out as I jumped to my feet and gathered up my clothes as fast as I could.

He started laughing and lolled onto his back, his hands folded behind his head, like he was enjoying a lazy day at the

beach.

Even in my state of panic, I couldn't help but notice how incredible he looked – that broad chest, the rippling abs, his very large... uh, member lolling on his thigh.

“Stop. Come here,” he said, putting his hand up in the air and trying to catch my hand.

I wouldn't allow myself to be caught. “I'm *so* going to get fired,” I whimpered as I pulled on my panties and then my bra.

“Nobody knows we're here.”

“There are cameras!” I snapped.

He raised his eyebrows and smiled, like he *liked* that. “Reaaaally.”

“Well... not in here, but out in the receptionist area! Somebody could have seen us go in, and – ”

“And we'll tell them we were drinking coffee. Come here,” he said, grabbing my ankle and trying to pull me to him.

I stepped away and slipped on my skirt. “It's going to smell like – like sex!” I hissed, as though I were afraid someone might overhear me.

Then I went over and felt the floor. There was a wet spot.

“Oh God,” I moaned, and closed my eyes in pain.

“What?”

“It's... it's wet,” I said, barely able to bring myself to say it. “Where we had sex.”

Glug glug glug.

I looked down to see Connor very deliberately pouring out his bottled water on the carpet.

“Ooops,” he said. “Look at that. Spilled my water.”

“Cut that out!”

Connor grinned. “Where's the woman I just had sex with? The wild and crazy one? I want her back.”

“She’s *gone*,” I snapped. “She just got replaced with the woman who realizes she’s probably going to get fired for this, and she still has three hours of reports to – ”

Oh no.

I pressed my palms to my eyes.

I still had to do all of Klaus’s crap and send it off to him.

I was already freaking out; there was no way I was going to be able to concentrate.

This was going to be a nightmare. I was going to be here all night.

Connor sighed, got to his feet, and looked around for his pants.

Even despite how miserable I was, I was able to at least take a moment’s solace in the play of shadows on his muscled body. And how other things... dangled... tantalizingly.

He pulled on his clothes. “You shouldn’t worry so much.”

“Easy for *you* to say. Your job isn’t on the line.”

“It’s a crappy job, Lily.”

“It’s the only one I’ve got.”

“You should get one you like,” he advised.

I wanted to strangle him. Here he was, advising me on a situation *he’d* created.

Well... we *both* created.

But still.

He was so relaxed, so unconcerned – so damn smug!

While he was finishing up, I washed our coffee cups in the sink, dried them off, and prayed no one would notice anything was amiss.

“Lily.”

I turned around to see him slouching sexily in the doorway, his jacket slung carelessly over his shoulder.

“What?”

He looked at me for a long moment, then shook his head.
“Never mind.”

“What?!”

“Walk me down to my car?”

I crossed my arms and hugged myself, trying to keep away the panic.

I had been happier than I could ever remember just five minutes ago.

Now I was dealing with a rising tide of fear.

I had just had sex at work...

...in the company boardroom, where I wasn't supposed to be...

...with a complete stranger I'd only known for two hours.

Not *even* two hours.

A gorgeous, charming stranger... but still.

Two hours.

On the boardroom floor.

For which I was absolutely, definitely, positively, without a question going to get fired.

This wasn't me.

I couldn't believe what I'd just done.

On the other hand... it *had* been incredible...

I think a little smile crept onto my face without my realizing it.

“What?” Connor asked.

I came out of my reverie and looked at him.

“What were you thinking?” he prodded.

I sighed.

“That I wish I wasn't freaking out, because...”

I paused.

“Because what?”

“...because I was having the best night of my life.”

I probably shouldn't have said it.

He wasn't going to call me.

I was just going to be a story he bragged about to his 'bros' at the gym. The chick he 'banged' in some other company's boardroom after hours.

I knew I shouldn't have told him.

But it was true.

A smile slowly crept onto his face as he stared into my eyes.

He held out his hand to me.

“Walk me down to my car?”

16

We walked out to the penthouse reception area. Before we stepped into the elevator, I looked at my reflection in the glossy black of the marble walls, and tried to put myself together so I didn't look like a girl who'd had crazy, wild sex.

I probably looked alright, but to my mind at that moment, anybody who saw me would instantly know. Like there was a blinking neon sign over my head: Just Had Sex On Boardroom Floor.

Oh God, I was going to have to do the Walk of Shame in front of Stanley, and it wasn't even morning.

I sighed and got in the elevator with Connor.

“Still freaking out?” he grinned.

“Yes.”

“Let me see if I can take your mind off it.”

Then he raked his fingers down every single button for every single floor. They all lit up.

Not exactly what I was expecting.

“What did you do *that* for?!” I cried out.

“So I'd have a little more time for this.”

When they say ‘sweep a girl off her feet,’ I always thought it was an expression. I mean, it *is* an expression.

Except when it happens literally.

Which it did in that elevator.

He pulled me into his arms and leaned me back and kissed me – soft and slow at first, then more and more passionately.

As far as taking my mind off things, he succeeded.

I barely even heard most of the *dings* as the doors opened and closed in the empty building.

I wasn't entirely sure if the butterflies in my stomach were caused by the kiss, or by the stop and go of the elevator – because even when the elevator was stationary, I felt giddy and off-balance.

Finally I realized that the door was going to open on the main lobby, and we were going to be in the middle of a lip-lock. I broke it off and pushed him away.

“We have five more floors,” he growled, and came in for another kiss.

I yielded – because I really, *really* wanted another kiss – but then I struggled out of his arms, giggling as I went, and straightened my clothes.

Just in time.

The door opened, and the empty lobby stretched out in front of us. I walked out fast, head held high, not looking back at Connor.

“Hi, Stanley,” I called out nervously – from across the cavernous lobby.

Nice. Way to play it cool, Lily.

Stanley looked up, puzzled, from behind his desk. He lifted one hand hesitantly.

Connor walked up beside me, a huge grin on his face. “Very slick. Very under the radar,” he teased me under his breath.

“Oh, shut up,” I whispered back, then turned towards the elevators that led to the parking deck.

“I'm this way,” Connor said, and gestured towards the front doors of the building.

“You didn't park in the garage?”

“No.”

“But... there's no street parking out front after seven,” I said, suddenly frightened for him – and imagining myself in the same situation. “They might have towed your car!”

“I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

“But – ”

“Lily. Calm down. Just walk out with me.”

I got a hold of myself, nodded, and we proceeded to walk across the lobby. As we went, Connor pulled out his smart phone.

My heart skipped a beat. Maybe this was where he was going to ask for my number?

But that was bad – not in front of Stanley! –

...and then he tapped out a text on the screen, sent it, and popped the cell back in his pocket.

So much for him getting my number.

My heart sank.

“Night, Stan,” Connor said as we walked by.

Stanley smiled and raised his hand again.

Then we walked out of the lobby doors and onto the street.

17

Downtown Los Angeles is a ghost town at night. During the day, it's a bustling metropolis with people walking through the canyons of glass and steel. Once the sun sets, though, it's like all the pedestrians are afraid of vampires, and they mostly just vanish. (Not the cars, though. Cars are omnipresent in Los Angeles, no matter where you go.)

We stood out on the almost-deserted street. I looked in both directions, but the towing people had apparently worked their evil magic.

“Oh no, your car!” I cried out, scanning past the rush of traffic to the empty curbs.

“Quit worrying about it. I have a question to ask you.”

“But – ”

“Lily. Focus,” he said, and touched his fingers to my chin so that I had to look at him.

I suppose I should have been worried about Stanley seeing Connor make such an intimate gesture, but the warmth of his touch – and the memory of what he had done to me earlier – made me go all limp inside. I stared into his crystal blue eyes.

“Did you mean what you said earlier about this being the best night of your life?” he asked.

Oh God.

Lie, Lily – he's just looking to inflate his ego – LIE, dammit –

“Yes,” I whispered.

He leaned forward and kissed me.

I flinched for a split second – *Stanley's going to see! I'm going to get fired!* – and then I thought, *Screw it. This is probably the last time I'm going to see this guy.*

I want to savor every last second.

So I kissed him back.

It was soft, sweet... and romantic. The whole world fell away, leaving only the two of us.

He pulled away first. As I gradually opened my eyes again, I became aware of a shape moving off to my side. A car pulling up to the curb beside us.

“Come with me,” Connor said.

“What?” I asked, still dreamy from the kiss.

“You said this was the best night of your life. So let’s keep it going. Maybe even make it the best weekend of your life. Come with me.”

Two different emotions wrestled inside me: panic... and elation.

“I... I can’t... what are you talking about?!” I asked, confused. My head was spinning.

He took both my hands in his, his skin warm against mine.

“Come with me,” he repeated, more urgently this time.

“But – the reports – ”

“Are crap. A fake test Klaus didn’t pass anyway. Forget them. *Come with me.*”

This is crazy! I wanted to protest, but I was slowly drowning in his sparkling blue eyes.

“The office – I left everything on – ”

“Who cares? Leave it and come with me.”

I couldn’t.

I was already going to be fired for unbecoming conduct, or whatever you call it when you have wild sex on the boardroom floor.

If I didn’t get those reports to Klaus, I might as well leave a letter of resignation on his desk.

I had to finish those reports.

Those reports on a fake account...

...for a boss who belittled and hated me, and went out of his way to make me miserable...

...while the most gorgeous man I'd ever been with was pleading with me to join him.

To do what he asked, I'd have to risk throwing away my job.

A job I hated, true, but the only one I had.

And for what?

To be blissfully, incredibly happy –

For what, another hour?

Another night?

Maybe another two?

“Take a chance,” Connor whispered. “Be that woman I made love to just now. Come with me.”

I shivered when he said ‘made love.’ I thought of us up there in the boardroom, his lips on mine, his body inside me.

The pleasure he had given me.

The amazing connection we had shared.

I could feel that again...

...or I could give it up and be miserable tonight and the rest of the weekend, lose my job anyway, and wonder what I'd missed out on for the rest of my life.

“Screw it,” I breathed. “Let's go.”

Connor burst into an enormous grin.

He turned to the car by the curb and opened the rear door.

I had thought it was a taxi, or – actually, no, I hadn't been thinking about it at all. I'd been too wrapped up in kissing Connor, and then in worrying about whether I should go with him or not.

So when I saw a black Bentley – apparently some sort of limo, since it was shorter than a stretch, but longer than a regular sedan – I was a little bit thrown, to say the least.

I looked over at Connor. He seemed incredibly pleased with himself as he opened the back door for me.

“What the hell is this?” I asked in shock.

“Just get in.”

This guy wasn't just some mid-level executive at a consulting firm. Mid-level executives didn't normally tool around in Bentley limos.

Who is he?

A stranger. A man I hardly knew.

I could feel the fear rise in me... but then I remembered his touch up in the penthouse. The way he had kissed me.

And the fear dissolved.

Who is he, though?

I didn't know... but more than anything, I wanted to find out.

And I wanted what we'd shared up in the penthouse.

Again and again, as much as I could get, in whatever time we had left.

I stepped into the car, Connor got in after me, and he closed the door behind us.

ALL THAT HE DESIRES

Part 2

1

I'd known him for two hours and change when I let myself be seduced by his crystal blue eyes and movie star looks. Then I'd had crazy sex with him on the floor of the boardroom of the corporation where I worked.

In retrospect, not some of the wisest decisions I've ever made.

Certainly not the most cautious.

But when a man looks and acts like Connor Brooks, caution gets thrown to the wind.

He was the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen. Certainly the most confident I'd ever met. He treated life like a game, and acted as though he held all the cards.

He was infuriating... and intoxicating.

And he'd swept me off my feet, both literally and figuratively.

I had, in a moment of weakness, confessed that my brief time with him had been the happiest night of my life.

Yes, he was *that* charming. And good-looking.

And yes, the sex was *that good*.

After I said it, he asked me to go with him: *You said this was the best night of your life. So let's keep it going. Maybe even make it the best weekend of your life.*

Come with me.

When I protested that I had unfinished work that was due in my boss's email inbox at 9AM the next morning (a Saturday morning, no less!), he whispered in my ear, *Take a chance. Be that woman I made love to just now.*

Come with me.

I so wanted to be that woman.

And I *so* wanted everything I'd had for half an hour up in that boardroom.

So I got in the Bentley limo as Connor held open the door.

My life was never the same again.

2

The first thing I noticed was the plush leather of the seats – decadent, sinful, sensual. And the space! It felt like the car was *way* wider than normal. I could have stretched out in here and... uh... done stuff with room to spare.

I scooted across the seat as Connor moved in beside me and closed the door.

He pressed a button on a console in the door and spoke.

“Hey, Johnny, take us up to the Strip, would you?”

The limo purred into action, gliding like oil on ice as it merged into traffic.

The Strip?!

“We’re going to a strip club?” I asked, my eyes wide. I hadn’t signed on for *that*.

Connor grinned. “We can if you want, but I was thinking of the Sunset Strip. West Hollywood? Clubs, bars, fine dining?”

“Oh.”

I felt both relieved and incredibly embarrassed at the same time.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked.

“S-sure,” I stammered, totally thrown off my game – not only by the strip club thing, but by the environment. The only time I’d ever ridden in a limo was for prom, and that was a 20-year-old town car that smelled slightly fusty from all the spilled beer of a thousand bachelor parties.

This? This was pure luxury, from the black leather to the widescreen television set into the wall that divided the cabin from the driver’s area. In fact, I couldn’t even see the driver. There was a plate of black glass that separated our little world from his.

“Champagne okay? Or would you like something stronger?”

“Champagne would be great.”

He leaned over to the wall across from us and slid a small compartment to the side. There was a cold storage unit in there, from which he drew out a bottle of champagne.

Dom Perignon.

I think I’d gotten drunk on Dom Perignon once.

Oh, no, wait... that was Thunderbird in the twelfth grade.

Holy crap, I’m in a Bentley, about to drink Dom Perignon.

To say I was intimidated was an understatement.

Connor pressed another button, and a center portion in the wall across from us opened up to reveal a whole collection of glassware – champagne flutes, wine glasses, all those different fancy cocktail glasses you see in bridal gift sections.

He poured two flutes of champagne and handed me one. I knew nothing about crystal, but I could tell that the glass was expensive just by handling it – surprisingly heavy for its size, but delicate to the touch and incredibly thin.

He clinked his glass against mine. “To an excellent evening so far... and an even better night ahead.”

I widened my eyes and smiled like, *Oh boy... WHAT have I gotten myself into?*

I took a sip.

Damn, that was good.

I’m not a connoisseur by any means, but it was a lot better than any other champagne I’d ever tasted before.

Of course, maybe it was entirely psychological. I’m sure anything drunk in a fancy glass in the back of a Bentley tastes better than average. Champagne... tap water... Kool-Aid...

“I have to make a phone call,” he said, and tapped the door console again.

I just nodded. I was too shell-shocked for anything beyond simple movements and even simpler sentences.

You Tarzan, me Jane.

Actually, it was more like *You Mr. Bentley, me Jungle Jane.*

There was the sound of a dial tone from hidden speakers. Before the second tone began, a very male, very gay voice pierced the air.

A very male, very gay, very *ticked-off* voice.

“Connnnnnnnnorr, this had better not be the kind of phone call I THINK it is.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Sebastian,” Connor grinned, “but that’s why you make the big bucks.”

“Dammit, Connor, why don’t you just skip buck-naked through life with an American Express Black Card taped to your forehead? It’d be easier on me, and it sure as hell wouldn’t crimp your style of torching every single meeting I set up for you.”

Mr. Connor Brooks, skipping naked down the street... huh. *That* was an interesting visual.

I giggled.

“What? Who was that?” the gay voice snapped. *“CONNOR, do NOT tell me you are blowing off the New York meeting to cavort with some random FLOOZY.”*

‘Floozy’?

I sat up ramrod straight, miffed as hell. *“Excuse me?”*

“That’s RIGHT, Ms. Thing, I’m talking to you.”

“Sebastian,” Connor barked.

The speakers went silent.

“Sorry,” Sebastian finally said in a chastened tone.

“The *lady* you just insulted is Lily Ross,” Connor lectured. “Apologize.”

“I said I was sorry,” the voice said petulantly.

“Yes, you said it to me. Now apologize to her.”

“Is she an investor? In that case, I am deeply – ”

“It doesn’t matter if she’s an investor or not!” Connor shouted.

“Okay, so she’s obviously NOT an investor,” Sebastian said, then added under his breath – but just loud enough to get picked up by the phone – *“Floooo-zeeey.”*

I covered my mouth with my hand and giggled. Despite how much of a jerk the guy was trying to be, the bitchier he was, the funnier he got.

Connor glowered. “Sebastian, you are treading perilously close to losing your job.”

“You mean, the job where I make travel plans and schedule meetings that you blow off at a moment’s notice?”

“Sebastian – ” Connor warned.

“I’m SORRY, Ms. Ross. I do hope you will forgive my impertinence and accept my most abject apologies.”

“That didn’t *sound* very abject,” I sniffed – although I wasn’t actually ‘sniffing.’ I was rather enjoying the surreal back-and-forth. If I didn’t have strong evidence to the contrary, I would have pegged Connor and Sebastian as some longtime gay couple who bicker endlessly.

“Well, it’s as abject as you’re gonna get,” the voice shot back.

I laughed out loud. He was just too funny not to.

But Connor was seriously getting angry. “Sebastian – ”

“I didn’t realize you were taking us to a comedy club,” I said, trying to divert Connor’s attention – and get in a little dig of my own. “He’s pretty funny... for amateur night.”

There was an overly dramatic gasp on the other end of the line. *“Oh no you didn’t!”*

“Oh yes I DID,” I said, then snapped three times – *click, click, click*. “In a Z formation.”

There was a pause.

Connor just stared at me. I grinned and shrugged.

“*Oh, I guess she’s alright,*” Sebastian grumped. “*A thousand times better than the last one, anyway –*”

“THANK you, Sebastian,” Connor grimaced.

I looked over at Connor, one eyebrow cocked. “You do this a lot?”

“No,” he said, then added almost as an afterthought, “Not anymore.”

I didn’t believe him.

Of *course* he did this a lot. A pang shot through me.

What, did I think I was special?

Actually, until that moment... I did.

And it hurt to realize I wasn’t.

“*Unh, unh, unh, honey child, I could tell you some stories from back in the day,*” Sebastian clucked.

“THANK YOU, Sebastian,” Connor raised his voice. “Now, onto business.”

“*Oh God, I tremble to ask.*”

“I want my regular. Two nights ought to do it, I think.”

“*You DO realize it’s almost nine on a Friday night, yes? And that they’ve almost assuredly booked it, yes?*”

“Make it happen.”

“*By any means necessary,*” Sebastian groaned. It sounded like he was quoting someone – and I was guessing it was Connor.

“Yup. By the way, I’m hungry – you hungry?” he asked me.

I actually hadn't noticed it because of all the craziness that had preceded this moment – but when he asked, I realized I *was*. I nodded.

“You like filet mignon? Lobster? You're not a vegetarian, are you?”

“Uh... yes, yes, and no,” I answered, a little stunned. I think the last time I'd had filet mignon, it was to celebrate my college graduation. Lobster, I couldn't even remember.

Both of them together at one time? As they say in New York, *fuhgedabboudit*.

Connor went back to Sebastian. “Have room service deliver my usual, times two, ten minutes after check-in.”

There was another labored sigh. “*I don't suppose there's any chance of me persuading you to take the flight to New York.*”

“Nope.”

“*Reschedule?*”

“Yep.”

“*FINE*,” the voice snapped, then switched to a much nicer tone as it addressed me. “*Miss Ross?*”

“Yes?”

“*All former unpleasantries aside, try to keep him from destroying Los Angeles – and himself – this weekend, would you?*”

I looked at Connor with a bemused frown. “Uh... I'll try.”

“*Best effort. If he's intent on something, it's going to happen anyway, so don't throw yourself in front of the bus trying to stop him.*”

“Um... okaayyy... thanks for the warning...?”

“*Goodbye, Sebastian,*” Connor said, not unlike the way a parent might tell an unruly child ‘goodnight’ after the second glass of water and the third ‘tuck me in.’

“*Toodles,*” the voice signed off.

Connor closed his eyes, shook his head, and then looked over at me. “My staff has the tendency to be a little more... *familiar* than they should. It’s something I should have nipped in the bud long ago, but... Sebastian has been with me forever. And he’s very loyal.”

“He must be a grade-A doofus,” I said.

Connor frowned. “What?”

“Nine o’clock on a Friday night and still working? Isn’t that what you told me doofuses do?”

He grinned as he recognized his own quote from earlier in the evening. “You realize, by extension, that would make me a douchebag.”

I let his comment hang in the air for several seconds, not saying anything. Then I took a sip of champagne and peered over the edge of the glass at him. *Your move.*

Connor laughed. “Sebastian makes considerably more than you do.”

“Yeeehaaah, about that... we’re sitting in a Bentley, drinking Dom Perignon, while you talk to your assistant who apparently works all hours of the night for you.”

Connor raised his eyebrows as though to say, *Yes, and...?*

“I don’t know of any VP’s at Exerton who live high on the hog like that,” I finished up.

“Yes, well, I’m a special VP.”

“Special enough to rate a Bentley and bottles of Dom Perignon to impress li’l ol’ secretaries?” I asked, batting my eyes mockingly.

It shouldn’t have bothered me. I should have known better. I mean, really – I had sex with the guy two hours after meeting him. What did I expect, a proposal and a ring?

I should have thought it through before I got in the damn limo – if for no other reason than I wouldn’t have to be thinking through it now. I mean, this guy was gorgeous. He had an incredible expense account. He was driving around in a

Bentley limo, for heaven's sake. He must have had women throwing themselves at him constantly. And any woman who didn't, he probably just turned up the charm on her and she folded instantly.

Like me.

It shouldn't have bothered me.

But it did.

He gave me a tight smile that was more of a grimace. "Sebastian's tales of my past are greatly exaggerated."

"I'm sure," I said coolly.

"Don't do that," he said quietly, his face suddenly very serious.

"What?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"Make it like what we did back there didn't mean something. Because it meant something to me."

I looked away. I had to – my heart was fluttering.

He probably tells every girl who steps in this limo that 'it meant something to me,' I told myself. It's just another line.

But it was a good one.

"I'm just being stupid," I muttered.

"It sounds like you're having a little buyer's remorse."

"No..."

I'm just regretting letting my feelings run away with me.

"It's just that I can see you using all this," and here I gestured to the limo, "to impress women so they'll sleep with you. And I'm kind of wondering if I'm just one in a long line."

He grinned – which was *not* what I'd been expecting.

"I've already slept with you, Lily. If I really was a cad, don't you think that would have been it? Wham, bam, thank you ma'am?"

Well... okay... he DOES have a point...

Then he reached out, took my hand in his, and stared deep into my eyes. My heart fluttered a little more.

He gestured to the limo with his champagne glass, like I'd done earlier.

“All this' is just window-dressing. You're the main attraction. When I'm with you, I'm with you. You have my complete, undivided attention. It's just you... and me.”

“But when it's over, it's over, right?” I said with a trace of bitterness.

I didn't even think about what I was saying; it was like I had just heard a line of dialogue from a movie, not actually speaking the words myself. They just slipped out before I knew it.

As soon as they did, my eyes widened. I expected the limo to slam to a halt and Mr. Connor Brooks to show me the door without further ado.

Instead, he laughed.

Again, totally unexpected.

Then he cocked his head and looked at me, his eyes twinkling. “In order to know that, we have to take the next step, don't we?”

Another line, I mumbled inwardly.

But another good one.

He leaned in close, and I smelled that intoxicating scent of his – that masculine, exotic cologne that made me want his arms around my body. “I want to. The question is, do you?”

I had a choice to make again – but this time I was slightly more level-headed than out on the curb.

He hadn't promised me anything except a night. Maybe a weekend.

And it was stupid of me to think I was the only woman he'd ever swept off her feet.

But I'd chosen to go with him.

Because I really, really wanted to, consequences be damned.

Did I still want to go with him, even though he wasn't promising anything beyond tonight?

Did I still want him to kiss me again?

To make love to me again?

Consequences be damned?

Oh, HELL yes.

I'd gotten carried away before, that was for sure. And I wasn't a girl who got 'carried away.'

But I wanted to be.

Especially if *he* was the one doing the carrying.

"Yes," I whispered.

He smiled and leaned in further.

"Good," he whispered back, then kissed me again, so soft and sweet I could have stayed like that forever, with his lips brushing across mine.

Except a voice over the speaker system broke into the moment.

"Hope I'm not interrupting, boss, but we're here."

Connor leaned back and sighed.

"Damn his fast driving." Then he pressed a button on the console. "Would you get the lady's door, Johnny?"

"Sure thing."

And seconds later, the limo door to my left opened.

3

When I saw the guy who had opened the door, my first impression was *Suit and tie – way EXPENSIVE suit and tie.*

My second impression was *Huh, Asian guy.*

My third impression was *Holy CRAP, he's got a GUN!*

It was just a glimpse, but I saw the holster under the Armani jacket, and the flash of grey metal. Then the jacket resettled and the gun was gone.

I froze on the seat, terrified.

I don't like guns.

I'm especially not fond of strange men with guns.

He looked down at me and extended his arm to help me out of the limo. He was young and handsome, probably Japanese, late 20's, with longish hair that covered his ears and a neatly trimmed goatee with mustache.

When I didn't take his hand, he smiled and looked over the roof of the car. "I think the lady's scared of me, boss," he said in a flat, midwestern accent.

"And well she should be. You're a very scary person," Connor agreed. He sounded like he was already outside the car.

"That's what you pay me for," the man laughed.

I glanced over – Connor's door was open. I could see him standing next to it, his body visible only from the knees to his chest.

"I'll... get out on that side," I squeaked, and quickly slid across the seat.

As soon as I was out of the limo, Connor gave me a disapproving look. "You're not racist, are you?"

"No!" I cried out, shocked. "No. But –"

Here I leaned in, stood on my tiptoes, and whispered as close to his ear as I could. Which was more like me whispering into his shoulder.

“ – he’s got a gun.”

Connor’s head dropped back and he roared with laughter. “That’s it?”

“Isn’t that enough?” I fumed.

“Well, he *should* have a gun – he’s my personal bodyguard. Has been for three years.”

I stared at him, then looked over the limo’s roof.

The driver smiled at me. “Not that I *need* a gun.”

“Lily, let me introduce Johnny Shuto. Not his real name, but that’s what I like to call him.”

I frowned. *Not his real name? ‘Not that I NEED a gun’?* This was terribly confusing.

Before I could get any answers, we were interrupted by new voices.

“Hello, Mr. Templeton! Do you have any luggage?”

I looked over to see two crisply dressed valets in white uniforms standing by Connor’s elbow.

That was when I looked around and gasped.

The Dubai.

It was the newest – and most luxurious – hotel on the Sunset Strip, and it had only been open for a few months. Apparently the rooms had been booked solid for six months. Anh and I had watched some E! Channel special on it so we could see all the starlets and their dresses when they showed up for the red carpet gala opening.

And there was the red carpet beneath my very feet. Velvet. Fifty feet of it, leading to an ornate doorway of gold and glass.

Somebody on the special had said that the red carpet was replaced every six hours so that it was fresh for new arrivals.

Anh and I had scoffed at the time. Rich douchebags and their freakin' overkill.

Now, up close... it just looked glamorous and beautiful.

As did everything else.

The valets' uniforms. The sheltering ceiling over the circular entrance drive, with its softly glowing lights. The beautifully manicured flowering bushes lining the red carpet.

And the guests and their cars.

The circular driveway was filled with two limos, a Lamborghini, a Ferrari, an Aston-Martin, and three BMW's.

The men walking towards or away from the cars ranged from extremely handsome to fat and toadlike, but they all looked quite rich. The younger and more handsome guys could get away with expensive T-shirts and high-dollar jeans; the toad-faced ones were dressed in top-dollar suits.

But the women with them... wow.

A couple of silicone goddesses in low-cut club dresses. A woman I was pretty sure I'd seen on the cover of Vogue. A girl younger than me, slumming it in sunglasses, baseball cap, torn jeans and a T-shirt, who might have been a famous singer (and the new favorite prey of the *paparazzi*).

I was suddenly feeling very insecure, very inadequate, and *very* out of place.

There were also two women 'of a certain age' walking with the older, uglier men – but though they weren't young, they definitely had plastic surgery and diamonds on their side.

Connor was talking to the valets about luggage.

“Actually, yes – Johnny, could you pop the trunk?”

Wait – something didn't seem quite right.

“Did he just call you ‘Mr. Templeton’?” I whispered to Connor.

“I think he has me confused with somebody else,” he whispered back. “Don't blow my cover, okay?”

“Uh... okay...” I muttered, wondering if this was part of Sebastian’s ‘by any means necessary’ directive. Although the name ‘Templeton’ seemed strangely familiar, and I couldn’t quite pin down why.

The trunk popped open and Johnny walked around to the back.

“Let them get it,” Connor said. “Except for the laptop.”

Johnny nodded, grabbed a computer case, and then stepped aside. The valets pulled three suitcases out of the trunk – one in simple black leather, the other two a matching Louis Vuitton set – and put them on a gleaming cart.

Johnny grinned as he approached us. “You’re not going to freak out again, are you?”

As I answered, I noticed that I had unconsciously edged closer to Connor. “I just... don’t normally have men with guns pulling me out of limos, that’s all.”

He shook his head in mock disappointment. “And here I was thinking it was my intimidating good looks.”

“Ha!” Connor said, then motioned towards the entrance. “Shall we?”

Johnny nodded and walked ahead of us towards the lobby entrance.

Connor took me by the hand and pulled me protectively to his side as we followed along behind.

Another smiling valet opened the door. Johnny stepped through and scanned the lobby, his eyes darting quickly across the faces within. Then he nodded imperceptibly and stepped to one side so that Connor and I could move past him.

The entire time, Johnny’s hand was on his abdomen, level with the single fastened button on his jacket.

Never more than five inches from his gun.

I shuddered.

4

The lobby was magnificent. Opulent. Luxurious. Take your pick of over-the-top adjectives.

The floor was white marble inlaid with darker patterns of black – maybe obsidian? I had no idea. But the effect was beautiful.

The chandeliers were round, massive bodies made up of tiny frosted glass cylinders that diffused the light and transformed what could have been cold and imposing into warm and sensual. They looked like grape clusters of long, glass tubes, if that makes any sense. Or a collection of glass Pan pipes (you know, what the little faun guy plays in Greek paintings?) with light spilling out of them, rather than sound.

Throughout the lobby were plush leather chairs arranged in small enclaves around short mahogany tables. Here and there a few people waited, texting on their smart phones or reading their iPads. Others held cocktails and glasses of wine as they chatted and laughed. On all sides were gorgeous arrangements of orchids and exotic plants – real ones. Nothing fake in here (except some of the women's boobs). It was like somebody had transported parts of a jungle into the midst of the most luxurious waiting room imaginable.

Connor led me along the red carpet, which extended into the lobby and all the way up to the reservations desk on the opposite side. As we passed, I noticed a few heads swiveling around to look at us pass. A couple of mouths fell open. Not everyone, but enough to make me wonder. A lot of the less obvious gawkers were women, whom I guessed were checking out Connor (and which sent an unexpected stab of jealousy through me). The ones whose mouths dropped open, though, tended to be men. And not guys who made my gaydar ping. It was like they were seeing an unexpected celebrity walk into the room.

Something is very weird here...

We approached the reservations desk, which was a gorgeous slab of marble trimmed with what might have been gold. I told myself that wasn't possible... but at a place called 'The Dubai,' you never know.

The woman behind the counter was a stunner. With her smart, perfectly white business suit and her flawless olive skin, she looked like she had just walked out of the pages of *Italian Vogue*. Again, I was jealous and felt... well... inadequate, to tell the truth.

The weird thing was, she seemed almost awestruck.

"Mr. Templeton, it's a pleasure to see you again," she said in a very friendly, but slightly panicked, voice.

I recognized that voice. It was the same tone I used whenever I had to interact with the bigwigs at my company when they came in for meetings. Like, the *big* bigwigs – the CEO, the COO, the CFO...

And she called him 'Mr. Templeton' again.

Man, Sebastian sure did his job well... whoever they think Mr. Templeton is, they're about to mess their pants over him.

"Please, call me Connor," he smiled. "Are the rooms ready?"

I frowned. *The rooms? Plural?*

I was confused – but it sure meant something to the bodyguard.

"Connor, no," Johnny protested, his face suddenly set and unsmiling.

Connor's eyes flitted down to me, then back up. "Johnny – yes."

Johnny just sighed. Connor turned back to the supermodel behind the counter.

"Yes, they are," she confirmed a little too eagerly as she slid two sets of plastic keycards across the marble countertop. Connor took one, and Johnny took the other. "Of course, you know about the code to get in –"

“Yes, I’ve stayed here before,” Connor interrupted. His voice was amused, but also a tad bit annoyed, as though he wanted to wrap this up.

She blushed a deep scarlet. “Of course. My apologies.”

I scrunched up my face. *What the heck was this chick apologizing for?*

“And the room service – ” Connor began.

“ – is on its way,” she finished. “As is the luggage.”

“Excellent. Thank you.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Templeton. Would you like a bellhop to show you up?”

“No, we’ve got it from here.”

“Of course. Have a wonderful stay.”

She flashed her smile at him, then at me, and bowed just slightly at the neck. I smiled back at her, and then Connor pulled me away from the desk and toward the elevators.

I’m sure it was fairly normal to get gold-standard service at a super-posh hotel, but her vibe was odd. It was like she was talking to Bill Gates, or the President, or Jesus or something.

Weird, weird, WEIRD.

“Does *everybody* kiss your ass all the time?” I whispered to Connor.

He laughed loudly. “Not you, apparently.”

“Is that why you brought me along? To remind you of what normal human interaction is like?”

“You mean, without a pair of lips puckered on my posterior?”

“Exactly.”

He gave me a sly look. “We’ll see about getting them puckered around something else later on.”

I blushed and smacked him on the arm. He just laughed again.

The elevator door slid open. From that last comment – and from previous experience in the elevator at Exerton about an hour ago – I was a little concerned about what Connor might try inside. But Johnny stepped in with us, and I was relieved.

And a little bit disappointed, to tell the truth.

The interior was gorgeous, with dark, paneled wood and marble flooring. The control panel looked like it was obsidian, except for the 18 buttons for the various floors, which were pearl inlaid with gold numbers.

Connor hit the top one – which didn't have a number. Just the letter 'P.'

The light blinked, and he inserted one of the cards the front desk supermodel had given him into a slot in the obsidian panel.

The light stopped blinking and glowed brightly, and the elevator started moving.

My eyes bugged out. "You've got to be kidding me."

"About what, the penthouse?"

I nodded.

"Nope, not kidding."

I looked over at Johnny, as though asking him to confirm it was all just a joke. He shook his head grimly. "Unfortunately, no."

I frowned. "What do you mean, 'unfortunately'?"

Connor grinned. "Because he has to stay in the little kid's room across the hall."

"The little kid's room?"

Johnny sighed. "Every penthouse in –"

Connor coughed.

Johnny paused, then resumed again.

Okay, THAT was weird...

“...in a lot of hotels have a secondary residence nearby... for security details.”

“For you, you mean,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Why is that a problem?”

“Because Johnny doesn’t want me to wipe my ass without him standing outside the door,” Connor smirked.

Johnny just rolled his eyes.

“*That’s* a pleasant image,” I said sarcastically.

Connor gave me a look like I had something nasty on my face. “I didn’t know you were into stuff like that...”

I hit him again on the arm. “Gross! Shut up!”

He laughed.

“Seriously, Connor,” Johnny said, “I’d feel a lot better if –”

“No. I want my privacy tonight.”

“But – ”

“NO, Johnny.”

His voice was cold, his expression commanding. A chill went down my spine.

Johnny just sighed again. Apparently he was used to losing a lot of battles this way.

“You’re the boss.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

“Be nice,” I said, nudging him.

He looked down at me, amused. “Why should I?”

“Because he’s just looking out for you.”

The elevator door dinged and slowly opened.

“Remind him of that someday when his ass gets killed,” Johnny said to me, then stepped out into the hallway and

looked in both directions.

“What does *that* mean?” I asked Connor, a little worried.

“It means Johnny’s overprotective, is what it means. Coast clear?”

Johnny nodded, and we stepped out.

It was a short hallway, only about twenty feet long, but it was incredibly beautiful. Thick, luxurious carpet... dark wood paneling... another, smaller chandelier casting its soft light from the ceiling... and a massive mahogany door across from the elevator. Next to the door was a tiny obsidian panel, like a baby version of the one in the elevator, with a gold keypad next to it.

“I’m checking out the room first,” Johnny informed us.

“Fine, as long as you don’t stay,” Connor said.

Johnny shook his head like *Why do I put up with this?*, then inserted one of his cards into the panel. A red light blinked, and he tapped out a code on the gold keypad.

The light turned green, and Johnny pulled out the card, opened the door, and stepped inside. He was gone for about fifteen seconds, and then he came back to the door. “Coast is clear.”

Connor led me inside by the hand.

5

The inside of the penthouse was entirely different from the hotel, but no less amazing. Maybe even more.

The first thing that hit me was all the glass. As in, almost every wall had at least one gigantic window that was at least thirty feet long. The city lights sparkled outside like diamonds on black velvet. I walked over and gazed down at Sunset Boulevard. Two hundred feet below, club-goers marched along the sidewalks like little columns of ants, and the jam-packed traffic moved along an inch at a time.

On the opposite side of the massive apartment, I could see the Hollywood Hills. In case you haven't been to LA, just north of Hollywood is a very, very small mountain range that extends for about four or five miles. And on its slopes are some of the most expensive homes in Los Angeles outside of Beverly Hills and Bel Air. A lot of young, hip actors and directors and producers live up there – along with real estate moguls and doctors trying to be young and hip. Plus the occasional drug dealer, from what I've heard. But no matter who owns them, they shine like fairy houses in the darkness, tiny outposts of luxury on curving roads and steeper hills.

I stood there, entranced. Los Angeles can be an ugly place – brown and dry in the summer months, overdeveloped with a thousand grungy strip malls, packed to the gills with way too many people. But seen up here, with the patterns of lights stretching far in the distance... it was magical.

“Want a drink?” Connor called from the fully stocked bar in the corner of the room. From what I could see, it was *all* top shelf stuff.

“Actually, I need to use the little girl's room to freshen up. Where...?”

Connor pointed to the left. “Back through the bedroom.”

I smiled demurely and skedaddled.

I'll spare you the details of what I did in there, but I *won't* spare the details on the bathroom itself.

But first... the bedroom.

It was dark when I walked in. Well, except for the lights from outside. Like the rest of the penthouse, there was a gigantic window. One whole side of the room, in fact, looking out on the Hollywood Hills.

Okay, I thought, that's a stunning view, but it's going to be a pain in the ass when the sun comes up in the morning.

As I was fumbling around for the light switch, though, I figured out that it wasn't going to be a problem. I hit some kind of sliding dimmer switch, and the glass went from transparent, to vaguely translucent, to completely opaque. I found myself plunged into complete darkness.

"Oh... my... God," I whispered.

I was spending the night in a sci-fi movie.

I moved the dimmer up and down several times, transfixed by how the glass went from totally clear to a wall of black. Then I realized I should probably move along before Connor came in and found me acting like a three-year-old playing with a car's door locks.

I moved my hand over and found the lights.

And was transported into paradise.

The room was exquisitely decorated in neutral colors that shaded into darker territory. The dark coverlet on the bed looked so soft and plush I wanted to run and jump on it (again, like a three-year-old). Over the bed hung a billowing, white cloth canopy that made the room look like a tent out of *1001 Arabian Nights*. Little sofas and chairs with overstuffed pillows, beautiful hanging lamps... I was in love. I wanted to stay in there forever... until I finally tore myself away and went into the bathroom. Then my fickle heart found another infatuation.

I'm a sucker for big, beautiful bathrooms, and this one was larger than my apartment.

The décor continued the lobby's theme of black obsidian with gold fixtures. There was a giant jacuzzi bathtub set into the floor that looked almost as deep as I was tall. It sat in front of a massive window overlooking the twinkling lights of Los Angeles. I could imagine relaxing in there, the water bubbling sensually around me, with a glass of champagne and Connor as we...

Ahem.

I'll move on to the rest of the bathroom now.

The shower was gorgeous, a wide open space with two golden showerheads on opposing walls – and a huge one, three feet in diameter, directly overhead! I guess it was for that 'summer rainfall' feel or something.

Oh – you know how a hotel will give you a teensy little bottle of shampoo and another of body wash? Unless they just combine them into one generic mishmash of 'shampoo / body wash'?

Ten different bottles in the shower, all with expensive-sounding names. Three types of conditioner, too.

There were mirrors everywhere. Two sinks set into the obsidian counters with gold faucets. Next to them, an assortment of exquisite-smelling soaps and lotions.

The towels were heaven – thick, luxurious expanses of softest white, with 'The Dubai' embroidered in black thread. Oh, and bathrobes of the same material hanging on the wall.

A few flowers graced the room, arranged tastefully in glass vases. Orchids and – in what I took as a good omen – lilies. There were only a handful, but I figured that was because their scent was already pleasant enough. Any more in such an enclosed space, and it might have been overpowering.

After I'd finished up, I took one last look around, reluctantly tore myself away, and returned to the main room of the penthouse.

6

When I came out of the bedroom, I surveyed the rest of the penthouse: plush leather sectional couches. A widescreen TV bigger (and thinner) than I'd ever seen before. A magnificent dining table. And most surprising of all, a pool of water in the floor that glowed sapphire blue.

That's when I realized that the pool – about ten feet square – extended *under* the glass walls to the outside, where it joined a much larger swimming pool on a private patio. Sumptuous outdoor chairs and more potted jungle plants ringed the glowing blue water. I could start in here, swim under the glass wall, and end up outside with a few strokes.

Johnny saw me looking at the pool. “Yeah, I’m not too fond of that,” he said to Connor.

Connor was over by the sofa taking off his tie and jacket. I had a lovely little flashback to less than an hour ago as he shrugged off his clothes.

“Relax, there’s a gate,” he told Johnny.

I looked closer. Sure enough, a sturdy metal gate extended from the bottom of the tiled pool to the bottom of the glass wall.

“Don’t worry,” Connor said to me, “if you want to go swimming, there’s a button that retracts it. Or...”

He pushed a glass door open to the outside patio area.

“...you could walk outside like jus’ plain folks.”

Johnny shook his head in disgust. “This room is way too unsecured.”

“No, it just *looks* that way,” Connor answered.

“Whatever, I’d still feel better if – ”

Knock, knock.

Someone was at the door.

Johnny tensed up, and his hand reached unconsciously towards the inside of his jacket.

“Relax, it’s room service,” Connor said. “But, just to be sure it’s not a crazed killer, why don’t you check for yourself?”

“I will,” Johnny shot back. He walked past the luggage, which had already been left before we walked in, and opened the door.

A man in a crisp white uniform stood behind a rolling table disguised under a linen tablecloth. On top were two domed metal dishes, a crystal decanter of red wine, two bulb-shaped glasses, and two lit candles on ornate silver bases.

“Room service,” he announced brightly.

Johnny stooped down, peeled up the tablecloth, and looked underneath.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” scowled Connor.

“Better safe than sorry.”

Now it was Connor’s turn to sigh in disgust. He turned to the room service man and said, “Give yourself a hundred dollar tip.”

“Thank you, sir!” the man said with a gigantic smile just before Johnny closed the door on him.

“He gets a hundred dollar tip, I get ridiculed,” Johnny muttered.

“We both know you’re making considerably more today than he is,” Connor said, and lifted up one of the metal dishes. Steam rolled out over a succulent filet mignon, a humongous lobster tail, and a baked potato the size of Idaho. “You want to taste it, too, make sure it wasn’t poisoned?”

The bodyguard shook his head and looked at me. “If he tries to take you someplace, will you promise to call me first?”

“Don’t answer that,” Connor warned me, then escorted Johnny to the door. “Night-night, Johnny. Get whatever you want off the menu.”

“Five pounds of Beluga caviar, coming up,” Johnny said as he exited and Connor closed the door.

“I love that guy, but he’s a damn worrywart,” Connor sighed.

“Well... it sounds to me like there’s a reason for it.”

Connor crossed over to me, looped his arms around my waist, and smiled. “Yeah – women like you.”

He leaned down and softly, slowly, kissed me on the lips.

A surge of warmth fluttered in my belly. But... despite what had happened between us just an hour ago... I couldn’t let go. Not all the way. I couldn’t sink into the kiss.

There was a nagging little voice in my head whispering, *He does this with every girl he meets. You can bet on it.*

Connor seemed to sense my reluctance, because he pulled back and looked into my eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m just... it’s a little overwhelming,” I murmured, which was true. Fifty minutes ago I was pondering working till midnight and going back to my crappy little apartment. Now I was standing in a more extravagant room than I’d ever seen in my life.

With a guy I’d just had sex with.

Who was probably a major player.

The edge of his mouth quirked up a little. “You’ll feel better after we eat.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I *was* starving.

First he fiddled with a stereo system set into the wall. Smooth, light jazz started to play, but he turned it down so it was nothing more than a whisper in the background.

He pulled the room service table towards the window, got a couple of chairs from the main dining area, and pulled one out for me to sit. Once I was established, he poured out a glass of wine for me, then another for himself.

“To amazing beginnings,” he said, and clinked his glass against mine.

We both drank.

Good *Lord* that was excellent. Strong and powerful to start with, but with an aftertaste like vanilla and cherries, and smooth as silk.

“What *is* this?”

“Just... a little something I like. Good, isn't it?”

“It's better than good, it's amazing.”

He smiled. “Glad you like it, too. Now eat, before it gets cold.”

7

We ate mostly in silence.

At first.

To tell the truth, I was incredibly self-conscious. I didn't want to look like a pig, so I took tiny, ladylike bites.

Also, I was obsessing over my table manners. I'm a fried chicken, lick-my-fingers kind of girl. I didn't eat out in fancy restaurants growing up, so I was a little worried about whether I was using the right fork and whatnot. My fears were justifiable, seeing as the food was fancier and more extravagant than anything I'd tasted in years – maybe ever.

Plus there was that whole 'I just slept with this guy and he probably does this with every hot woman he meets' voice muttering louder and louder in my head.

Which made me feel even worse, because I am *so* not hot. Eventually I began wondering why he had even bothered with me.

He sat back and took a sip of wine. "You look absolutely miserable."

I looked up at him in surprise. "What? No. I'm fine."

"Really." His tone indicated he didn't believe me.

"Yes, really," I said testily.

"What's going on in your head, right now?"

"Uh... the food is amazing... the wine is wonderful..."

"Bullshit."

My eyebrows raised the tiniest bit. It was only the second time that evening I'd heard him do anything more than PG cursing.

"You're saying the food's not amazing, and the wine's not wonderful?" I asked, amused.

“It’s fine. But that’s not what’s going on in your head.”

“‘Fine’? You must eat like a king every day if this is just ‘fine.’”

“You’re really good at that.”

“What?”

“Dancing around the question. Outright ignoring it. You should be a politician.”

“You probably know a few, don’t you,” I said with an edge of sarcasm.

“As a matter of fact, I do, and let me tell you, you’d be very good at the evasion part of the job.”

Of course he knew politicians. Judging from the crazy events of the last three hours – things like getting the CEO of my company on the phone and calling him by his first name – he probably knew the President and a couple of Prime Ministers.

I sighed. “What do you want to know, then?”

“What I said before: what’s going on in your head?”

“Yeah? Well, *I’d* like to know a couple of things, too.”

He broke out into a huge grin. “You did it AGAIN.”

“You don’t get to control everything, Mr. Mysterious Big Shot, just because you have a lot of money and last-minute reservations to a penthouse.”

His voice suddenly downshifted into something darker, something sexier. “Oh, don’t I?”

I could feel the blood in my cheeks – and other parts. “No, you don’t.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“Take it however you want,” I snapped, annoyed with myself that I was getting turned on, and took another bite of lobster.

He sat there in silence until I’d finished swallowing a bit of wine.

“How about a game?” he asked.

“What?”

“A game. How about a game?”

I frowned slightly. “A game of what?”

He shrugged. “Poker.”

I frowned even more. All the hot-and-botheredness was quickly departing. “Poker?! Why?!”

“I want something from you, and you’re not willing to give it to me.”

My cheeks flushed again. The hot-and-botheredness was starting to come back.

“W-what do you want?” I asked, crossing my legs.

“You. Naked. Doing the things I tell you to do.”

Oh. My. God.

The hot-and-botheredness was back in full force.

I started to breathe a little heavily. “And what do *I* get?”

He threw his head back and laughed. Then he gave me a wicked grin. “That’s my girl.”

I blushed scarlet. “I didn’t mean money, or – ”

“I know what you meant.”

I crossed my legs again, purely for something to do. “Why do we have to play a game to... to do that?”

“Because I like playing for stakes. High stakes. And if you’re not playing for something worthwhile, it’s not nearly as much fun.”

“This is all just a game to you, is it?” I asked with a touch of anger.

“Everything is.”

“What, just for your amusement?”

He tilted his head a little to the side and looked at me with piercing, ravenous eyes. “That... and so much more.”

The ‘so much more’ part made my heart skip a beat.

Actually, if he *did* look at life as a game – at *everything* as a game – that explained a lot about his behavior since the moment I’d first heard his voice on the phone.

“So?” he asked.

“You still haven’t told me what *I’m* playing for.”

“You *could* play for the same things I want out of you... but that’s not what you *really* want most right now, is it?”

Actually, the idea of him naked, doing what I told him to do, was becoming more and more appealing by the second.

But he was right.

“I want answers,” I said.

He closed his eyes, smiled, and nodded. Like, *Aha, THERE it is.*

“And the truth. I want the truth,” I added.

He opened his eyes and stared at me like he wanted to drink me down like a glass of wine.

“Alright, here’s my proposal: we play poker. You get five cards. You have one draw – you put down any number of cards from your hand and get that number of new cards from the deck.”

“I know how to play five-card draw,” I snapped, narrowing my eyes.

He grinned. “All right, then. The stakes: if I win a hand... I choose what you do. Either you have to remove an article of clothing – your choice of what article – ”

“Strip poker? *Really?*” I interrupted in a *gimme a break* voice, though to be honest, I was a little frightened. And turned on.

“ – or you do what I tell you to do. My choice.”

My heart thudded in my chest.

“I have to do... what you say?” I squeaked out.

“Yes.”

“You’re not going to just say, ‘Come over here and do me?’”

Which I wouldn’t mind, given my current state.

He smiled again, that dangerous smile of his. “Not that fast. Think of it more as... foreplay.”

I’m glad my lips were pressed closed, because I might have moaned a little if they were open.

“And in return, I get...?” I asked – when I finally trusted myself to speak.

“You can either have me take off a piece of my clothing – ”

“Which you’d probably do anyway without playing a stupid game,” I said, though in my head I was thinking *Yum*.

“ – or – which I know you want more – you can ask me any question.”

My eyebrows raised. “*Any* question.”

He tilted his head playfully. “Leaving aside business deals covered by non-disclosure agreements, and anything that might cause me to compromise national security interests.”

“National security interests,” I laughed, like, *Ohhh, that’s a good one*.

He just gave me a little sphinx-like smile.

My laughter faded.

I don’t think he’s kidding about the national security interests...

“And you’ll answer me truthfully?” I demanded.

“Except for what I just mentioned – ”

“Except for those – truthfully?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“I have your word?”

“Do I have your word that you’ll do whatever I tell you to?”

I gulped.

“Do I?” he pressed.

“Within reason,” I choked out, then tried a little humor. “Excluding non-disclosure agreements or – ”

“ – national security, right,” he grinned. Then he grew serious. “What’s within reason?”

My heart was jackhammering in my chest.

“Nothing degrading,” I whispered.

“Depends on what your definition of ‘degrading’ is.”

I gave him a look.

“But I’ll err on the side of caution,” he demurred.

“Nothing goes in ‘the out door,’” I said pointedly.

He roared with laughter. “Agreed,” he said, almost having to wipe tears from his eyes.

“And nothing painful.”

“And what is ‘painful,’ exactly?”

I narrowed my eyes. “What exactly are you planning?”

He grinned. “Can’t let *all* my surprises out of the bag. I’ll tell you what: anything I do, if you don’t like it, use a safe word, and I stop immediately.”

Safe word?

What the hell are you planning to do to me, Connor Brooks?

“What’s the safe word?” I asked nervously.

He considered. “Safe word.”

I shook my head. “‘Safe word’ is the safe word? Seriously?”

“You’ll remember it.”

True...

He looked me up and down, undressing me with his eyes.

I realized that I wanted *so* badly for that not to be a metaphor.

“So... do we have a deal?”

I sat back in the chair and took a sip of wine. “Break out the cards,” I said in my best *bring it on* voice.

If only I actually felt that confident.

8

As it turned out, he had to call down to the concierge for a pack of cards.

“And another bottle of wine. And another table, with a selection of fruit and chocolate,” he said into the phone before hanging up.

My mouth started to water. I had only eaten about half my dinner – not only had the conversation gotten distracting, but I was a little worried about pigging out and then having to strip down naked.

But offer me chocolate, and all bets are off.

Connor looked me over appraisingly. “Thinking of your questions? Or thinking about what I’ve got in store for you?”

Yes. And yes.

Damn it, I hate how he can tell what I’m thinking – especially when I don’t want him to know.

“No, I’m cataloguing how many pieces of clothing I’ve got on,” I lied.

Hey, nobody said anything about lying *outside* of the game.

He chuckled. “Well, most of the clothes will come off before I begin to have my way with you, so...”

Have my way with you.

I crossed my legs again, both from nervousness and being uncomfortably turned on.

I tried to regain the upper hand.

“You’re, uh, at a little bit of a disadvantage there,” I said, wiggling my finger at his shirt. “Sure you don’t want to put on your jacket and tie again?”

“I don’t think so. I’m an excellent poker player.”

My stomach dropped a little in fear... because I'm *not*.

"That confident, huh?"

"That confident," he smiled in that arrogant, dashing, 'makes me want to kick his ass' kind of way.

Someone knocked at the door. "Room service," a muffled voice called out.

Connor got up from his chair. "Think I should call Johnny for protection?"

Ah... THERE'S a good question... why do you have an armed bodyguard in the first place?

"He'd probably prefer it," I said.

"Too bad," Connor answered.

I expected him to look at the little eyehole, but things were a bit more high tech than that. He hit a button on a small screen next to the door, and the image of a man in a white uniform appeared. Connor opened up, and a man in white swept into the room with a rolling table identical to the first: linen tablecloth, silver domed dishes, wine glasses, lit candles, decanter of dark red liquid. The only thing different was a pack of cards still in the wrapper.

He parked the new table, took the old one, and hustled out of the room. Connor murmured something to him before he closed the door.

"Another hundred dollar tip?"

I said it casually, but inside I was like, *Daaaaamn! I wish I worked someplace they gave out hundred dollar tips...*

"Something like that."

"Why the decanter of wine? Why not just a bottle?" I asked as I lifted up the silver dome on my side of the table.

Oh sweet Lord...

There was a gorgeous selection of chocolates within. What brand, I had no idea, but there were spheres dusted with cocoa, wafers black as night, round circles drizzled with some sort of

syrup, and broken pieces – for that artisanal look, I guess, like fancy paper with rough texture and bits of coarse pulp woven into the grain.

Not only that, but there were two types of cherries, ripe and dotted with moisture; green, red, and tiny little champagne grapes; and a bowl of raspberries and blackberries lightly sprinkled with sugar.

Even if I didn't get laid again tonight, I could still have an orgy with what was on that silver tray.

“Is that one of your questions?”

“What?” I said, snapped out of my chocolate fantasy.

“The bottle versus decanter – is that one of your questions? Because we haven't started yet,” he said with a smartass smirk.

“Just making conversation,” I said coolly, “but if you don't know – ”

“You have to aerate the wine to get all the subtleties out of it. There's actual chemical reactions that occur in the presence of air that unlock the flavors. The decanter helps do that.”

“Aren't you just a font of information,” I cooed. “I had no idea you were such a connoisseur.”

“I am.” He smiled and locked his gaze deep into mine. “And I'm *all* about savoring the experience.”

Heat fluttered in my belly, and I held my breath. Which wasn't much of a comeback, I'll grant you.

He ripped open the cellophane package, pulled out the Jokers, and tossed them aside.

“No wild cards?”

I had kind of been hoping they would help me out.

He rolled his eyes. “No. No training wheels.”

I pretended to pout as he shuffled the cards, but then I got mesmerized by his hands sorting the cards. They were so fast, and so capable... so large and powerful...

He slid the deck over to me. “Cut?”

“Uh... what?”

“Cut the deck? Unless you’re not worried that I’m a card shark.”

I took a third of the cards off the top and replaced them on the bottom. “No, I’m not. And it’s technically a card *sharp*.”

“Ooooh... aren’t *you* a font of information,” he said mockingly.

I pushed the cards across the table. “Deal.”

The first hand ended quickly: I won with two pair, aces and nines.

He looked at me expectantly as he shuffled the cards again. “So... what will it be? Question or clothing?”

I looked at his firm chest peaking out beneath the ‘v’ of his unbuttoned shirt, and my mouth started to water... but I wanted to know a few things first.

Plus, I figured, *his shirt’s coming off sooner or later anyway*.

“Question.”

“Okay... just be sure that whatever you ask, you can handle the answer,” he cautioned me with a friendly smile.

For some reason, that filled me with a little dread. But I pushed on anyway.

“Why is Johnny so concerned about your safety?”

“He’s my bodyguard.” He grinned. “*That* was easy.”

“That’s no answer,” I snapped. “You promised you’d give me the truth.”

“I did,” he insisted.

When I continued to glower at him, he relented. “There have been some attempts on me in the past.”

My eyes bugged out. “‘Attempts’? What kind of ‘attempts’?”

“Mostly kidnapping,” he said casually as he dealt out the next hand.

I beckoned with my fingers like, *SPILL it*.

He tilted his head back so it rested on his chair, then sighed and stared at the ceiling. “I thought you were going to ask things like, ‘How many women have you slept with?’”

“I’m not sure I could handle that answer.”

He grinned, which seemed to break his suddenly dark mood, and looked back down at the cards. But not at me, I noticed.

Then the grin went away and his voice dipped lower as he answered.

“My father was kidnapped five years ago in Mexico. I was the one who went to the ransom meeting, not sure if I was going to get killed or kidnapped, and worried sick the entire time that I’d never see him alive again. Even though I hate the old bastard.”

A chill went up and down my spine as he spoke. I hadn’t prepared myself for this.

I don’t think he had, either.

“Is he... is he okay?” I whispered.

Connor looked up with a bemused expression. “He’s fine. Still a total asshole, still making everyone around him miserable. Shortly after that incident, I hired Johnny. He’s never left my side since.”

He paused for a second.

“Sometimes I forget why I hired him... like tonight.” He tapped the table and muttered, almost to himself, “Sometimes it’s good to remember.”

Then he gave a wry smile and picked up his cards. “Prepare to get naked.”

9

As it turned out, I won the next hand, too. Three jacks.

“Damn it,” he swore, throwing down his cards.

“You know what that means,” I said.

“Clothing, right?” he asked in a fake hopeful voice.

I shook my head ‘no.’

He breathed out heavily, then smirked. “Well, I guess I used up all my luck earlier tonight when I got lucky.”

When I got lucky.

Holy crap.

That was something *I* would say about sleeping with him... not something I would expect him to say about sleeping with *me*.

The butterflies were twirling up a storm in my stomach, but I kept to the plan.

“You don’t work for LMGK, do you?”

LMGK was an international consulting firm with worldwide branches – and whom Connor had claimed he worked for. They were supposedly interested in buying out the much smaller company *I* worked for, Exerton Consulting.

“No, I don’t.”

My insides twisted. Though I felt like I had *known* all along – I mean, what VP has a private Bentley limo, a bodyguard, and rents penthouse suites at a moment’s notice in the most expensive and exclusive hotel in LA? – hearing the answer felt like a punch to the stomach.

“Then everything you said was a lie?!” I cried out.

Not only did I feel like a fool, but I was starting to panic. I had just let some complete stranger rifle through confidential company files, never bothering to check out his story.

I might not just lose my job; I might be facing a lawsuit. Or criminal charges. Or both.

He started laughing, which infuriated me. I got up out of my seat.

“Hey – hey,” he said, catching my arm and stopping me. “I wasn’t lying to *you*, ‘Lily Ross’ – I was using a cover story to get past the gatekeepers, that’s all. Some security guard and secretary I’d never met. It wasn’t personal.”

It sure *felt* personal. And there was another, bigger problem.

“But – but I let you look at stuff you shouldn’t have seen!” I cried out in anguish.

“You’re forgetting that the CEO of your company gave me permission over the phone,” he said in a soothing voice. “You heard him. And your boss, when given the choice of doing it himself or pawning it off on you, decided to go get drunk instead.”

Oh yeah... I’d forgotten about that...

I’d heard David Westerholtz, the CEO of Exerton Consulting, give Connor *carte blanche* on looking at internal company files. I was completely off the hook for anything that happened.

Theoretically.

“But... you lied to Westerholtz!” I cried out.

“I think this qualifies as more than one question.”

I shot him a few daggers with my eyes.

“Okay, okay,” he laughed. “Just sit down.”

I lowered back into my chair, my knees trembling.

“I’m actually one of the primary stockholders of LMGK. I also own a small stake in Exerton. Anything beyond that, you’re going to have to infer, since it would violate that whole ‘non-disclosure’ and business deal clause I gave you earlier.”

My eyes grew wide – but it made a whole lot more sense. If he owned a ton of stock in LMGK, that meant he was pretty damn rich. And Bentleys and bodyguards and penthouses made a lot more sense for a pretty damn rich guy than for a VP of a company.

“So you’re involved in the possible acquisition of Exerton – ” I began.

“Ah,” he cautioned, holding up a hand. “Infer it *inside your head*. Not only can I *not* talk about it, but it’s boring, and I’m in the middle of playing strip poker with a beautiful woman.”

Beautiful woman.

My heart thumped again, and I blushed slightly.

“I know why I’m losing, though,” he said as he shuffled the cards. “There’s no room to bluff.”

“What?”

“Bluffing. I’m good at it. In business and in life, I’m good at taking a crap hand and making other people think it’s outstanding.”

Insanely good looks, rich, probably from a moneyed family... well-endowed...

I blushed a little thinking about it.

...I think you got dealt a pretty GOOD hand in life, Mr. Connor Brooks.

“I can’t bluff with the way the game’s set up,” he continued. “It’s a straight ‘best hand wins’ scenario.”

“You made up the rules,” I retorted.

“Well, how about this: before we reveal our cards, we have to decide whether to stay in or fold. If you fold, you automatically lose, but only one piece of clothing...”

“...or one question,” I reminded him.

“Or one question,” he agreed. “But if you decide to stay in and you lose, you lose *two* pieces of clothing.”

“Or two questions.”

“Or one question, one piece of clothing.”

Hmmmm... ask a question, AND get to see some skin... that could be good...

I was learning a lot about Connor, but I *did* want to see him naked again.

“But you’re good at bluffing. I’m not,” I protested.

“You need to give me a chance to catch up.”

“You have just as much clothing on as I do,” I pointed out.

“Come onnnn...” he said, and gave me ridiculously over-the-top puppy-dog eyes, like he was begging for a treat.

I want a treat, too, I thought.

“Fine.”

10

I lost right off the bat. And I stayed in, which was stupid. But I thought I was fine – I had two pair, and I’d won with that earlier.

He, unfortunately, had three of a kind.

“I don’t suppose you want to ask two questions,” I said, already knowing the answer.

“Nope,” he grinned. “Start taking it off.”

I grimaced... then kicked off my high heels. “One, two,” I smiled sweetly.

“Oh well, we’ve got to start somewhere.”

Then I lost again. This time I folded, though, so I only lost a bracelet I was wearing.

“This is not going well.”

“It’s going great for me,” he grinned.

Then he won *again*.

I was sure I had him beat – a low straight! – but he had a flush.

Damn it!

“I’d like to see a little something more come off than just jewelry.”

“Too bad,” I said, removing my earrings.

Next hand, I got nothing. I was trying for a straight... but I didn’t get it. 5,6,7,8... and a Jack.

But the bluffing thing might work...

“I’m in,” I said, staring him down.

He grinned. “You sure?”

“Yes.”

“You absolutely sure?” he grinned, enjoying himself immensely.

“Yes,” I insisted, trying not to let my voice falter.

He laid down his cards. He didn’t have anything, either.

“Tie,” I said, as I laid down mine.

“High card wins,” he said, tapping his Ace of Hearts. “Two pieces of clothing.”

Crap. Crap, crap, CRAP.

I didn’t have anything else ‘harmless’ to take off.

I guess I *could* slip off my underwear and keep on my clothes...

Don’t be silly. He’s already seen you naked.

And liked what he saw, apparently.

But my cheeks were still scorching hot as I tried to decide what to do.

“I’m waaaaiiiiting.”

I glared at him, then began to unbutton my blouse.

Thank God the lights were already down low. I was hoping the candlelight would be forgiving.

His eyebrows rose slightly, and his eyes stared at my breasts and bra.

Like he was starving, and somebody was putting food right in front of him – but not letting him touch.

To tell the truth, despite my embarrassment at being half-naked and on display, his open show of desire was turning me on.

I peeled off the blouse and stood up. I unzipped my skirt a little.

He just watched, mesmerized... but his lips parted slightly, and I could see him swallow.

I was so turned on – I loved the idea that this gorgeous, rich, powerful man really, actually wanted *me* – that I tried to

make it a little sexier. I worked my hips back and forth a little, slowly tugging the skirt down, bit by bit, over and over, until the skirt fell to the floor.

He couldn't peel his eyes away.

In fact, he crossed his legs, and I saw his hand move down to his fly as he rearranged himself.

I was making him hard.

Heat flushed through my entire body.

I wanted to go over there right now and make him *do* things to me...

...but I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction.

Not yet.

"Enjoy the show?" I said in what I hoped was a seductive voice.

He took a second to answer... and for his eyes to raise to meet mine.

"Yes," he said hoarsely.

A shiver went up and down my body.

I smiled. "Just so you know, I'm winning the next hand."

11

And I did. He even tried to bluff me – or maybe he thought he could win. But my three queens beat his two pair.

“Damn it, I wanted to see more,” he growled, staring at my breasts again.

“There’ll be time.”

“So... two pieces of clothing?” he asked, both hopeful and mocking at once.

I considered.

“One question, one piece of clothing.”

“Which one first?” he asked with a seductive little smile.

“The question.”

“Go for it.”

I knew I shouldn’t ask it... I *knew* I was asking for trouble, for heartache, for a swift kick to the gut...

...but I had to know. And it was going to keep on driving me crazy if I didn’t ask.

“How many women have you slept with?”

He stared at me, sphinx-like, and didn’t answer for a second. When he did, his face was a blank slate, and his voice was carefully controlled. “Are you sure you want to ask that?”

“Yes,” I said in a quavering voice, when the truth was actually *No*. I wasn’t sure at all.

He shook his head. “I don’t think you do.”

“Just tell me.”

“The truth?”

When he said that, it was confirmation I should have never asked. I most definitely wasn’t going to like the answer.

Still, I’m stupid that way.

“Yes.”

His face relaxed into something like resignation, and he shrugged. “I don’t know.”

I frowned. “You don’t know?!”

“No.”

“Well – give me an estimate, then.”

“It’s over fifty for sure. Probably closer to a hundred.”

I felt like I was going to be sick. My stomach twisted and churned with nausea.

I was just one more in a long line of conquests.

This was nothing special... I was just bimbo #97 to him.

How stupid was I, exactly? Handsome, rich, smart, funny, charming... he’d probably had women throwing themselves at him his entire life. Hell, *I’d* slept with him right away, and I never, never, *never* did that, not ever. And I was thinking this was going to be a fairytale?

Stupid, stupid, stupid, STUPID –

His voice broke into my interior monologue of abuse and self-loathing.

“I told you you didn’t want to know,” he said as he leaned the side of his face on one balled-up fist.

He was right.

I didn’t answer.

My internal struggle was obviously playing out on my face, so he just kept talking.

“I get to pick the piece of clothing, right?” he asked, reaching up for his top button. He could tell I wasn’t happy – in fact, that I was miserable – and was basically going through the charade to keep the situation from becoming any more uncomfortable than it already was. “I think I’ll –”

“How many in the last six months?” I blurted out, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

He tensed slightly. In fact, he looked more uncomfortable now than before. “That’s two questions. You said one question, one piece of –”

“I changed my mind,” I answered, straining to keep my emotions in check. “I want to ask another question.”

“Because the first one was so pleasant for everyone involved.”

I ignored him. “How many in the last six months?”

He sighed. “Including tonight?”

Now I was getting angry. “Yes, including tonight.”

He stared into my eyes, no hint of a smile on his face.

“One.”

12

I didn't understand at first. The math didn't register.

But he slept with ME tonight – that's one – but I asked about the last six months – and he still said one –

“I'm the first woman you've slept with in six months?!” I cried out.

Suddenly my heart lifted.

I guess I should have kept in mind that I was still #97 or whatever, but the fact that I was number one in the last six months was *something*.

It let me think that maybe, just maybe, this wasn't an average Friday night for him.

And it quieted the little voices in my head calling me *stupid* and *idiotic*.

“That's three questions,” he smiled.

I think he was smiling because he knew it was back on. He'd snatched victory out of the jaws of defeat with his answer, and he knew it.

But why had he looked so tense before he told me?

I hemmed and hawed. “Technically, I'm... I'm just asking you to clarify your last answer, that's all.”

He rolled his eyes. “Then... yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, you're the first woman I've slept with in six months,” he snapped, getting slightly annoyed.

“You're telling me the truth?”

“Yes!”

Maybe he thought he was betraying some sort of weakness, that he was admitting he wasn't the Mythological Stud he wanted others to see him as.

I felt nothing but relief... until another, less appealing possibility came to mind.

“You didn’t turn gay the last six months, did you?” I asked, suddenly afraid.

He tipped back his head and roared with laughter.

Then he brought his eyes back down to look at me.

“That’s four questions!” he complained. “I am NOT answering any more questions if you win the next hand!”

“Just answer it!”

“NO, I’m not gay! Why would you ask that? Do I seem gay to you?”

“No... but *technically* you said you hadn’t slept with any other *women* the last six months... but you could have slept with *guys* and still be telling the truth...”

He shook his head like an annoyed schoolmaster. “I haven’t slept with anyone else but *you* for the last six months, and I have *never* slept with any men. There – is that clear enough for you? Do you feel better now?”

Actually, I did.

In fact, I was pretty freaking happy.

I guess it was silly – it didn’t change his final number – but I didn’t care. I didn’t feel like a fool anymore.

There was the possibility that this still meant something to him.

That it had been special, and not just some tawdry conquest he would forget tomorrow morning.

“Yes,” I said, trying to suppress a smile.

He looked at me from underneath his scowling eyebrows, then shook his head again. “You owe me two questions.”

“One. I owe you one.”

“Whatever. Doesn’t matter, you’re not going to win again,” he said as he began to shuffle the cards.

13

The next hand I had a pair of sixes. I thought about staying in... but couldn't bear to lose both my bra *and* panties. Not at once.

So I folded.

I tried to stay cool and calm, but I was dreading what was going to come next.

And, strangely enough, I was incredibly turned on by it, too.

I'd never experienced such a weird mix of emotions.

Terribly insecure, but badly wanting him to make me undress.

Afraid of what he would think of me if it was 'all just hangin' out'... and desperately wanting him to see me and want me more.

I guess I should have taken encouragement from the way his mouth was open when I took off the skirt, but I have a short memory when it comes to self-confidence. Plus, there's a big difference between half-naked and totally naked. My bra kept things nicely in place. I wasn't sure how he would like the total package once I was on display for five minutes.

I began to wonder if I could play with one arm wrapped around my boobs. After all, he never mentioned anything about not being able to cover up...

But, once again, he threw me for a loop.

14

“Crawl to me,” he ordered, his voice sexy as hell and tinged with smoke.

My eyes grew wide. “What?”

“Get on the floor and crawl towards me.”

“Uhhh... I don't... do a lot of crawling...”

“Quit making excuses and get on the floor.”

My heart beating wildly, I slipped out of my chair and slowly got down on my knees. At least the carpet was super plush; it was more like kneeling on a bed than on a floor.

I felt like a fool. I felt stupid. I felt like I didn't know a damn thing.

“On all fours,” he growled.

I lowered down like he said – and, immediately self-conscious, sucked in my gut. I did *not* feel sexy.

I just knelt there for a second, biting my lower lip, wondering how I should do this...

“Don't do that,” he whispered hoarsely.

“What?” I asked, absolutely confused. *Was I doing it wrong already?!*

“Bite your lip like that,” he said, his voice... God, I don't know how to describe it. Like he was trying to contain a volcanic passion.

I stared at him. “Why not?”

“Because it makes me want to come over there right now and fuck you.”

Whoa.

Normally I don't like cursing. I don't do it.

Much.

Being stuck in traffic is the only exception. (Don't you judge me!)

It was repeatedly rammed into my head growing up that the use of profanity is crude, unladylike, and a sure sign of lack of intelligence. *Only those with the inability to express themselves resort to bad words*, my mother must have told me a thousand times.

But when he said that...

It makes me want to come over there right now and fuck you.

Oh my God.

I was wet within one second.

The way he said it... like he was just barely able to keep from coming over and ravaging me...

"You're doing it again!" he said, his voice both desperate and angry.

And I realized that, in my confusion and being overwhelmed, that I *was* doing it again.

I stopped, and watched his eyes.

They dropped from my lips and came to settle about a foot lower.

I looked down, and came face to face (or face to breast) with my boobs.

Gravity was definitely at work, if you know what I mean. Thank God I still had my bra on. It helped shape and keep things in place so I looked fuller and bigger, and not just like I was dangling in the wind.

I hoped.

I looked back up at him and found he was still staring at them.

Hm.

"Connor," I whispered.

His eyes drifted back up to mine.

This time, I intentionally bit my lip. Then I ran the tip of my tongue along my lips, wetting them slightly.

He groaned softly.

I started to move towards him, slowly, one hand forward on the carpet, then the other. When I reached him in the chair, I sat back with my legs folded underneath me.

He was breathing heavier. His eyes kept dropping down to my bra, then coming back to my face.

I wanted sooooo badly for him to touch me, I could barely stand it.

But I was going to make him suffer even more first.

I brought my shoulders back and slowly pushed my breasts out. One of my raunchier friends from college had always shouted that out whenever a group of us girls took a picture together – *Shoulders back, boobs OUT!*

From the way his eyes got wide and dropped down to my bra, I could see she had been on to something.

“Do I get to go back to my seat now?” I asked coquettishly.

“No, you stay there,” he said, his voice cracking, as he shuffled the cards for the next hand.

He never took his eyes off me.

15

He won again.

I knelt there next to the chair, waiting.

Okay, here it comes... this is where he unclasps my bra and we go at it again...

I was, needless to say, quite ready.

But he didn't do it.

Instead, he traced his finger slowly down my cheek. So softly it tickled, but made the fire between my legs rage all the hotter.

“What do you want me to – ”

“Shh,” he whispered.

I stopped talking and just stared into his eyes as he looked deep into mine.

His finger moved slowly to the side of my head, where he gently caressed my left ear.

I don't know about you, but I have several weak points. One of them is my ears – not the earlobes, but the outer edges. Kisses there have a way of making my knees buckle.

Apparently, soft caresses have the same effect.

I moaned and closed my eyes – not because I wanted to stop looking into his gorgeous blue eyes, but because I couldn't stop myself. The shudders going through my body made me react, and my eyes closed as my head tilted back automatically.

His finger slowly traced its way down the side of my neck.

Another knee-buckler.

My muscles trembled and my skin became gooseflesh. I moaned a little louder.

His finger softly caressed the curve of my collarbone... then the other... then curved back around and lightly grazed the top swell of my breasts.

The inside of my thighs were aching, I wanted him so badly.

Then his finger moved up my throat, lightly over my chin, and touched my mouth, slowly, *softly* caressing my bottom lip.

“Take me in your mouth,” he ordered, his voice husky with restrained desire.

My stomach fluttered as my eyes popped open.

He wants me to... to go down on him?

I wasn't ordinarily used to being ordered to do *that* on command, but... this wasn't an ordinary Friday night for me by any stretch of the imagination.

And the idea of having his gorgeous shaft between my lips again... well, I hoped it would quickly get detoured to another part of my body.

My eyes looked over at his pants zipper.

There was a *huge* bulge pressing against the material, at what I'm sure was a very uncomfortable angle for him.

I raised my hand to his thigh –

He caught my wrist in his other hand, the hand that had not been tracing along my body.

“No,” he whispered. “Take my fingers in your mouth.”

I frowned a little.

He wants his fingers sucked, but not the... uh... other thing?

He extended his middle finger to join the forefinger, then brushed my lips and slowly eased between them.

I stared into his eyes as I let him penetrate me.

“Show me what you'd do to me,” he ordered, his voice barely louder than his breathing.

The slow-boiling urgency in his voice made me forget my confusion and hesitation.

I began to suck.

I wet his fingers first, slowly moving up the length of them. Then I moved backwards, running the tip of my tongue along the underside.

I started to go faster, the way I might if I were trying to pleasure the, uh, 'real deal.'

"Slow," he whispered.

So I slowed down, moving at an incredibly sensual pace. I moved my hands up to the base of his fingers and began to caress the top of his hand and lightly tickle his palm with my fingernails.

From the groans and pained expression on his face, I think he enjoyed it.

Because his fingers were a lot (a LOT!) smaller than his shaft, I had way more margin for error and more room to work with. Less performance pressure, you might say.

And I didn't have to concentrate on doing the best job possible because, hey, there was no way in the world he was going to have an orgasm from this.

And I didn't have to worry about... um... being *too* good and having things end unexpectedly, if you know what I mean.

For the first time ever, I paid attention to my own sensations: the velvet pressure on my tongue... him stroking sensuously inside me... the way he softly grazed the top of my mouth as I sucked on him...

Strangely enough, by removing the most obvious sexual element from it, the act became as much about *my* pleasure as his.

The entire time, we gazed into each other's eyes. His were heavy and half-lidded most of the time, like he was hypnotized.

It was incredibly sexy.

And then I felt his fingers slide softly across my tongue, pause on my lower lip, and then slip away from my mouth.

I felt real disappointment at having to stop.

“Next round,” he whispered hoarsely.

16

He won again. Not surprising, because I could barely keep my mind on the cards, or my eyes off the front of his pants.

Not only that, I didn't fold – so I lost twice over.

By now, I didn't mind at all.

He unbuttoned his shirt, revealing his abs and chest. In the shadows cast by the candlelight, they looked like they could have been carved out of oak. I could also see the beginning of the curves of his lower abdomen, which led down to the part I so desperately wanted to see.

My mouth watered.

“I thought *I* lost,” I said in a breathy voice.

“You did,” he smiled, and took my hand. “Touch me here.”

Again, I reached for the bulge in his pants.

“Not there,” he said, and placed my hand on his abs. “Here.”

I gave him a quizzical look and rubbed my palm over his skin.

“No. The way you were touching my hand before, when my fingers were in your mouth. Tickle me. Tease me.”

I gently traced my fingernails across his skin, brushing him ever so softly.

His muscles jerked beneath my touch, contracting beneath the skin.

I was so startled that I stopped for a second... and then I began to oh-so-lightly caress him again.

He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and let his head hang off the back of his chair. A strangled moan escaped his clenched jaws.

“You like that?” I asked, slightly amazed. The few guys from my past had never really been into soft touching – either getting *or* giving.

“Yes,” he choked out, nodding as though he were in pain.

A surge of power went through me.

I could make him react like *this*?

Just by touching him softly?

Oh HELL yes.

I withdrew my hand.

He looked down at me in surprise. “I didn’t say to stop,” he said with a touch of annoyance.

“I’m not going to,” I answered as I crawled around directly in front of him, pressed apart his knees, and centered myself directly between his legs.

He was staring down at me half in shock, half like he was about to go crazy.

I got very, very close to his manhood – my bra was basically grazing his fly (which made his eyes get big as saucers) – and braced my forearms on his thighs.

And then I began to trace my fingernails very, very softly against the muscles of his belly.

A strangled sound came out of his throat. He didn’t know what to do or where to look – at my breasts almost cupping the bulge in his pants, my teeth strategically biting my bottom lip again, or my fingers caressing the skin over his chiseled abs and gorgeous hip bones.

I felt an incredible surge of power.

I was sexually enslaving this man with the lightest of touches, the smallest of efforts. I could feel him respond to my every touch, his muscles quivering beneath my fingers.

I could hear him cry out softly every time I tried something new.

And I was exulting in my power.

I felt more in control, and sexier and more confident, than I ever had in my entire life.

I leaned over – his shaft pressing rock-hard against my chest – and slowly, softly licked the curve of his pelvis with the tip of my tongue. (*Yum!*)

This time, he cried out a lot louder.

I gave him little soft flicks of my tongue, pulling downwards on his belt so I could lick lower along the firm edges of his muscles.

His hands grabbed mine.

“Part two,” he said hoarsely, his voice strained with unfulfilled desire.

“Yes?” I purred.

“Do that... tease me... here,” he said, and pointed at the bulge in his pants.

Oh GOD yes.

I reached for his zipper – but again, he stopped me.

“Outside my pants,” he ordered.

I grinned at him, then slowly lowered my head a few inches.

This guy REALLY has a thing for foreplay...

I started with my fingers, tracing the bulging outline through the cloth.

Good Lord he's big, I thought idly as I began to caress the shaft.

Then I moved down and kissed it.

He moaned.

Okay, I'm on the right track.

As my fingers softly moved back and forth, I parted my lips and ran them along his entire length, pressing them firmly against his manhood. Beneath the cloth, he was extremely hard. ‘Wood’ was never more accurate a description.

His hands gripped the seat of his chair as I tickled and teased and caressed him. As I did so, my feelings of power increased – but also my desire. It was verging on severely uncomfortable.

I had to get him inside me soon, or I felt like I was going to *die*.

Suddenly, his hands grabbed mine and pulled them away.

I looked up into his face. What I saw both frightened and aroused me even more.

He looked half-insane with desire, a deep scowl knitting his brows.

“Get up,” he ordered me roughly.

I stood up, a little scared.

He got up from the chair, pressed my body tight against his, took my face between his hands, and kissed me.

WHAM.

That’s what it felt like as a wave of fierce passion rolled over me. My legs almost gave out from under me as his mouth pressed roughly against mine, his tongue parting my lips, penetrating me, caressing my own tongue, his urgent need burning through the touch of his hands, his fevered kiss, the solid weight of his erection pressing against my stomach.

Oh God I wanted him so badly.

His hands traveled down my body – not light and soft, but hard and frenzied. He grabbed my ass, pulling my pelvis tight against him.

I was burning up in his arms, about to faint.

I broke away from his kiss, my hands pressing against his bare chest.

He stared at me, confused and still scowling, though I knew it was desire and not really anger.

“Take me,” I begged him. “Take me now.”

Suddenly, that grin came back.

Like he knew he had me.

Like he knew he'd won.

Then the grin faded back to dead seriousness.

“No,” he whispered, and shook his head. “Not yet.”

17

He took me by the hand and pulled me roughly towards the nearest window. Or should I say, the nearest full-length wall of glass. Outside, the lights of LA glowed softly in the darkness.

“What – ?” I started to ask, but he answered by positioning me two feet away from and facing the glass. Then he stepped behind me.

I was about to ask again what the hell was going on when I felt his fingers between my shoulder blades.

The clasp came undone and my bra loosened. He nuzzled my neck, and I gasped with pleasure and closed my eyes. As his lips grazed the edge of my ear, he slid the straps off my shoulders, and my bra slipped to the floor.

His muscular arms reached around me, engulfing me. His warm skin pressed against me, slid softly across mine. I felt the firmness of his chest and stomach next to my back, and the hardness of his manhood pressing against my backside.

Then his hands reached up under my breasts, cupping them, supporting them, caressing them. I moaned as he played with their weight, then brushed his fingertips around the outer curves and up along the tops of my breasts. He circled slowly in towards the nipples, which he rubbed and pinched very, very lightly between his fingers, making them even more erect than before (and making me moan even louder). Then he grasped my breasts forcefully in his hands and pressed me hard against his body as he kissed my other ear.

I was almost weeping with desire and pent-up frustration.

He forcefully lifted my arms up and planted my palms against the glass, so that I was leaning forward slightly, my weight supported by my arms.

He squatted behind me and pulled my panties down to the floor. My face burned red because I knew they were soaked. I was wondering what he thought of that when I felt his hands

rough against the insides of my thighs, forcing them apart. By the time he was finished, my legs were quite a bit further than hip-width apart, and my ass was sticking out in the air. I could just imagine him standing up and taking me from behind, that glorious member of his penetrating me and filling me up.

Oh God yes please PLEASE

But that's not what happened.

I felt something warm, wet, and soft caress the inside of my thigh.

I gasped and looked over to the side.

He was still squatting between my legs... and he was licking me.

From behind.

Oh... my... GOD.

The sensations were incredible. And excruciating. His tongue was still teasing me – not even touching my... um, the main event. Just softly grazing the edges of my lips down there, and licking the place where my legs joined my torso.

I was whimpering, it felt so good.

And I desperately wanted him to lick me totally and completely, up and down, all over.

But embarrassment and self-consciousness reared up inside me. I don't know about you, but when previous boyfriends had given me oral sex (the relatively *few* times they had done it, compared with how often I had done it for them), I was always on my back on a bed, and they were always lying between my legs. The missionary position of oral sex.

I had never, *ever* been in this position before.

All the insecure little voices in my head began whispering at once:

He's got his head basically down near my ass!

Oh no, oh NO, what's the view like down there?!

Oh God, how embarrassing!

Thank GOD I tidied up in the bathroom!

Do I smell okay? Is he going to be okay with how I taste?

The little voices got to be too much.

“I don’t – ” I started to say as I pressed my hands against the glass, getting ready to force myself up into a standing position.

“STOP,” he snarled.

I froze where I was.

In theory, a man crouching between your legs and giving you oral sex is probably not at his most dominant – but Connor sure was.

“I won,” he continued sternly. “Unless you absolutely hate this, *let me enjoy myself.*”

Well... I couldn’t say that I *absolutely* hated it... so I just whispered, “Okay.”

And I was rewarded with having my mind blown.

18

His tongue glided over everything at that point. All of me. Across my lips, up towards my front, and then wetly caressed my clit.

I cried out and braced myself hard against the glass as my legs trembled.

His tongue moved backwards, separating my drenched lips and plunging inside me, tickling just inside my body.

By this point, all the little voices were basically washed away by a tidal wave of pleasure.

I kept moaning over and over as he moved backwards again, his tongue sliding out of me and going backwards –

– a little *too* far.

WHOA.

Not all the way to the back door, but right in between.

The sensation was great, but all the little insecure voices surfaced from the ocean and started a chattering chorus again.

Oh no, he CAN'T do THAT!

This is bad, this is really bad!

You can't do this, it's not right!

Thankfully he slid forward again, plunged his tongue deep inside me, and the voices were silenced again as a single, short contraction of pleasure fluttered through my belly.

Then he was at my clit again, licking and caressing it.

I felt like I was about to cry – not a bad cry, a *good* cry – but my body was wound up like a spring, with my hormones and emotions at a peak.

I needed him inside me.

SOON.

And then, my wish was granted... though not quite in the way I had expected.

He drew his head back, and I felt his fingers brush against my thighs.

And then, gently, slowly, I felt them sliding inside me.

I cried out, a choked sob.

“Are you okay?” he asked from somewhere behind me, his voice concerned.

“Y-yes,” I whispered, my head down, my palms braced against the glass. “Yes.”

His fingers began to move inside me – not in-and-out, but curling. Like he was stroking one spot with his fingertips.

A steady, building pressure of intense pleasure began to fill me down there. With the girth of his fingers filling me up (though not nearly as much as another part of his body might), the sensations were incredible.

Suddenly, I realized what he was doing.

Oh my God, he must be touching my G-spot!

I’d read about it. Countless articles in *Cosmo*. Best-sellers on sex (well, read them furtively in bookstores, but didn’t actually buy them. That would entail having the cashier know what I was reading). Blog posts.

From what I remembered, the guy was supposed to use a ‘come-hither’ curl of his fingers to hit your spot. Connor was doing that, except he was on the opposite side, so I guess it was more of a ‘go-thither’ gesture. Or the way a person says ‘hit me’ in blackjack by rubbing his cards with two fingers.

Remember, I’m *not* sexually experienced. Sexually well-read, yes, but not experienced. Two of my four ex-boyfriends couldn’t even find my clitoris. Three of them didn’t go down on me much (one not at all), so why would they have taken the time to find what was, to them, a mythical place that didn’t afford *them* any pleasure?

The fact that Connor was even *attempting* to do this suddenly overwhelmed me with even greater desire for him.

That, and the fact that it seemed to be working pretty well.

At this point I was a hot mess, whimpering and moaning, my body shuddering as short contractions of bliss shot from my hips up to my head and down to my toes. My elbows had collapsed and my forearms and forehead were pressed against the glass now – otherwise I would have keeled over.

I think all the noise got too much for him, because his fingers suddenly slid out of me and he stood up.

As the waves of pleasure abated, I opened my eyes and stared out at the darkness.

My first thought, as I realized I was pressed up against the glass: *Oh my God, I hope there's no one out there with binoculars.*

At least the Dubai was the tallest hotel around, and we were in the penthouse.

Then I realized that the possibility someone was watching was actually turning me on.

My second thought: *Why did he stop?!*

I suddenly got all self-conscious again. *I didn't do anything for him! I'm being selfish! I'm just taking and not giving!*

Then I heard *thump, thump.*

I looked over to see his shoes rolling across the floor.

Then I heard *zzzziiiiip* and the sound of cloth falling softly to the floor.

That was when I put two and two together and realized my wishes were about to come true.

19

I felt something glide against my ass. Soft on the surface, but incredibly hard beneath, like a lead pipe wrapped in velvet.

And radiating heat. My god, it was burning up.

And very, very *large*.

And *thick*.

My knees shook. I turned around to look at it – I wanted to see it very, very badly –

But suddenly, a hand grabbed the hair at the nape of my neck, gently but firmly, forcing my head up slightly.

Oh God...

I don't know what it was. Nobody else had ever done that to me. If you had asked me before, I would have said I wouldn't have liked it – somebody grabbing my hair, pulling my head?

But in the moment, as turned on as I was...

...daaaaaamn.

It was like he was totally in control of me. Dominating me. He was the Man, and I was the Woman. I was all his... and he knew it, and I knew it.

And I loved it.

I gasped.

He leaned over me as he pulled me up slightly, my arms straightening out against the glass. I could feel his erection gliding over my ass. Heat radiated off his body onto my back as his mouth came right up next to my ear.

My head was back and my eyes were closed. My entire body was trembling.

“Are you on birth control?” he whispered.

My eyes flew open.

It was a little comical. I had been expecting... I don't know, 'dirty talk' or something. The question was a *leeeetle* bit too clinical to be sexy.

And then I felt his shaft slide across my ass, and I realized why he was asking it.

My heart thudded in my chest.

"...yes," I whispered.

It was true. One of the *only* good things about working at Exerton was the awesome medical insurance benefits.

I'd had painful, irregular periods since I started at 13. I tried the pill during college, but it left me bloated and nauseated, so I quit after a few months. When I got hired at Exerton, I went for an annual exam, and my OB/GYN had suggested the NuvaRing. It's a little plastic ring, looks like a jelly bracelet. You insert it 'up there' – waaay up there – and it gives off the same hormones as the Pill, but milder. Worked like a charm – only had to worry about it once a month, and no side effects.

But I'd never had unprotected sex before. The three months I'd been on the pill had been between boyfriends, and I was so freaked out about getting pregnant that I'd never had sex without a condom.

The thought of him inside me without protection terrified me... and thrilled me, too.

"You're the only one in the last eight months," he whispered, "and I've been tested since then. I'm clean. But I'll use one if you want. Do you want me to use a condom?"

I didn't answer at first. A little voice inside me was saying, *Of COURSE!*

And another voice, a lot more sultry, was saying, *Hell no!*

Apparently he decided to give me a little preview, because I felt his hips shift back. His shaft moved away from my body – and then I felt it between my legs. Not trying to enter me, but lying flush against me, pressing against my swollen, drenched lips.

I felt him move it back and forth, slowly, his skin sliding wetly against mine.

It felt *heavenly*.

I moaned.

“...no,” I whispered, afraid and unsure, but wanting to know what it felt like so badly.

He froze.

“‘No’ what?” he asked, his voice concerned. “Do you want me to stop?”

I realized my answer was a little vague.

I paused, then finally said it:

“... do it without a condom,” I whispered.

“Good,” he murmured, and pulled away from my body. I felt his manhood slide away from me, too.

Then one hand grasped my left hip, and I felt the other hand brush against my thigh.

He was grasping his shaft.

He repositioned it at an angle, the tip pressing against my swollen lips...

...and then slooowly, smoothly, he slid inside me.

20

It was incredible.

The sensation of skin on skin, with nothing between us... it was so much more intimate.

Now, don't get me wrong; back in the boardroom had been mind-blowing. Sex had *never* been that good for me before.

This was better.

I moaned louder and louder as he slowly moved inside me. I don't know if it was the angle of entry, or his height or what, but as he entered me, his shaft kept stroking against the same place he had caressed with his curling fingers.

Oh my GOD it was amazing.

The pressure began to build and build. I was already on a hair-trigger from thirty minutes of foreplay and mind-games, and now the feeling of his girth inside me... and the long, slow, sensual pressure on my G-spot...

Within half a minute, I came.

Loudly.

Waves of pleasure racked my body. Every muscle in my core fluttered and spasmed with ecstasy, and waves of warmth and bliss pulsed through every other part of my body. My arms gave way, and I sank my forearms and head against the glass to keep from pitching forward. My legs buckled under me. The only reason I stayed standing was because Connor's strong arms supported me around the waist, keeping me on my feet.

After the orgasm died down, I found myself with my face pressed against the glass. Not exactly the sexiest position I've ever found myself in... but then again, I'd never lost control like I had tonight.

There was one thing, though, that bothered me. While doggie style had been hot – and naughty (by my standards,

anyway) – I wanted to look into his eyes. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted that eye-to-eye contact.

While I was awash in a sea of desire, that lack of closeness was okay. I wasn't really thinking about it while I was moaning and screaming my head off. But I didn't want to spend the next five or ten minutes like this, no matter how pleasurable it might be.

I wanted *him*.

It was as though he read my mind.

I felt him slowly leave my body as my legs wobbled beneath me.

“Did you... did you come?” I panted as I looked over my shoulder. I was genuinely shocked and surprised that he hadn't made any noise.

“No,” he said, and firmly but gently turned me around.

Then he looked down into my eyes... and kissed me.

Slow. Soft. Sensual.

His hands caressed my skin, moving from my shoulders to the small of my back.

I swooned.

When he finally broke away, he looked me in the eyes. “Can you keep going?”

Oh HELL yes.

I nodded, not trusting myself to keep my unladylike enthusiasm out of my voice.

“Good,” he grinned, then reached down, grabbed under my ass, and lifted me into the air.

“Oh my God, what are you doing?” I gasped. He handled me like I was a doll, he was so strong – seemingly no effort on his part at all.

“Continuing the festivities,” he murmured in my ear. Bracing my thighs against his ribs, he moved one hand down,

fumbled with something beneath me... and then let me slooowly settle down.

The head of his shaft slowly entered me again, wet and slippery.

Oh My GOD.

I clutched at his shoulders and moaned as he filled me up. This time the sensation was different... it was astounding how *deep* he went inside me. I was actually a little afraid, but he eased me down onto him, keeping my ass supported with his powerful hands, until his hips softly butted (pun intended) against my ass.

“Kiss me,” he whispered fiercely.

I wreathed my arms around his neck, tilted my head, and sank into his lips for a long, slow, glorious kiss.

And as his tongue slipped sensuously over mine, he began to move his hips.

Slow and shallow at first, rocking back and forth. I could feel him deep inside me, touching places I’d never felt before.

Then he began to speed up, lifting me higher with his hands, his pelvis slapping against my ass, sending thrills of pleasure through me.

I moaned into his mouth, my lips pressed against his as he filled me and retreated, filled me and retreated, slammed inside me violently, then stopped – and slowly eased in again.

My head was swimming. He was exciting me so much, all over again, so fast.

And then suddenly we were moving.

I grabbed tight onto him and looked around in alarm. “What – ?!”

“Just going to the bedroom,” he grinned.

“Am I too heavy?” I asked, mortified.

“About as heavy as a couple of feather pillows.” (A blatant lie... which I appreciated immensely.) “But I want to get a

little more... vigorous, and it's hard to do that when you're fighting gravity."

Vigorous.

Mmmm.

Bring it on.

21

We entered the bedroom still attached at the hips, more or less. Just front to bottom, not side by side.

He walked me over to the bed, his shaft still inside me, and leaned me down almost vertical with the floor.

“Get the cover off,” he urged me.

“What?”

“The sheets – pull back the sheets.”

“Oh!”

I twisted around slightly, giggling – I’d never done *this* before, not from this position – and pulled the coverlet and sheets halfway down the bed. Then he let me sink down on the mattress and put his full weight on top of me, never once pulling out of me.

The sheets were *amazing*. Soft, silky – satin, maybe. All I know is that I was feeling a world of sensual delight against my back as I had a whole *other* world of sensual delights between my legs.

Now that he didn’t have to ‘fight gravity,’ Connor began over again – slow thrusts at first, then increasing in speed and depth. The difference was that he moved his hands to my head, where he grasped my hair. Sometimes he stared me in the eye, sometimes he kissed me passionately, sometimes he moved to the side and nibbled and licked at my ear.

The whole time I was moaning like a banshee.

He began to work up to a frenzy, his hips slapping mine. His hands clutched frantically at my hair, pulling it, driving me even wilder.

And he started whispering in my ear – hoarse, frantic, almost unhinged.

“Jesus – Lily – oh my God, Lily – oh fuck – oh fuck, Lily, oh FUCK – ”

Normally, in my everyday life, the language would have given me pause.

Not now. Unh unh. It just threw gasoline on the fire.

I clutched his ass, pulling him deeper inside me, moaning and crying out as my own pleasure rose higher and higher, getting closer and closer to coming again.

His voice became louder and more strained – his hands were rougher, pulling at my shoulder and hair more insistently –

“Oh GOD Lily, oh fuck, oh LILY, OH FUCK – ”

And then he shouted, a strangled cry, as he crushed me to him and I felt him explode inside me.

The sensation of him pulsing inside me, the feeling of hot, warm wetness suddenly gushing inside me, pushed me over the edge.

I screamed his name as I dug my fingers into his skin and pulled him as far inside me as I could get.

For an instant, my entire body was made of light and electricity and sex, and I lost myself in a giant, pulsing swell of pleasure that swallowed me whole.

He was still moaning when I came back down to earth, gasping for breath.

He slowly raised his head from the hollow of my shoulder and looked me in the eyes.

With one finger, he smoothed away a sweat-drenched curl of hair from my forehead... and then he grinned.

And kissed me.

22

We lay like that for the longest time, his sweaty skin sliding sensually over mine, as he gave me long, slow, lingering kisses. We gazed into each other's eyes (though I tended to let mine slip close as I got lost in the moment). My lips felt puffy and slightly painful, but I couldn't stop kissing him. Didn't want to stop.

Finally he pulled away from me. "Stay here," he ordered as he rolled out of bed.

"What, I can't use the bathroom?"

"Oh... yeah, go ahead," he said as he padded out to the main room of the penthouse.

"Thanks!" I called sarcastically.

When I came back out of the bathroom, the room service table was by the bed, and the silver trays were up.

The chocolate.

I'd almost forgotten.

I watched his perfect backside, entranced, as he poured some more wine into our glasses.

He turned around. "Well? Get back in bed."

Suddenly I was shy – buck-naked and very self-conscious about it. I ran around the other side of the bed, jumped in, and pulled the covers just over my breasts.

"Here you are," he said, passing me a wine glass. Then he placed one of the open silver trays on the bed next to me and got in himself.

"Oh my God," I sighed in rapture as I let one of the pieces of dark chocolate melt on my tongue. "This night couldn't *get* any better."

"I can think of at least one other way," he said, and nuzzled against my neck.

I giggled, mostly from the tickling on my neck. But not entirely. “I’ll bet you can. Too bad we never finished the game.”

“Oh, I think we finished it pretty well,” he said as he popped a grape into his mouth.

I frowned. “Yeah, but there were other questions I wanted to ask you.”

He sighed dramatically and took a sip of wine. “Okay: yes, I was cheating.”

My stomach turned.

What I heard was, *Yes, I was cheating on my wife/girlfriend.*

With YOU, Lily Ross.

“WHAT?!” I cried out.

“I admit it,” he grinned.

I just stared at him. I could feel my lower lip starting to tremble.

“I *am* a card shark,” he finished.

I blinked.

“...what?” I asked, now totally confused.

“Oh, excuse me... a card *sharp*,” he said, and ate a cherry.

“You... you cheated at *cards*?”

He looked at me oddly. I think he heard the enormous relief in my voice.

“Yeah... it was something I picked up a long time ago for fun. I always wanted to learn, so I hired a guy to teach me. One of the best ‘prestidigitators’ in the world,” he said, saying the word with self-mocking snobbery, as though he were ridiculous for even using it. Then he smirked at me. “I’m assuming you know what that means, Ms. ‘It’s really a card *sharp*.’”

“You stacked the cards?”

He nodded with a grin. “That’s another thing you’ll find out about me. If I can’t bluff, I like to cheat.”

At this point, the relief rushing through me was immense. I had a couple of choices: I could either break down and explain my misinterpretation, and look like I was Seriously Over-reactive Girl... or I could keep it to myself.

Hold my cards close, I guess you could say.

I figured there was no need to show him my *entire* hand.

“Put your wine glass down,” I ordered.

He looked at me quizzically. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

After a brief hesitation, he set the glass over on the room service table.

Then I grabbed the nearest pillow and *whomped* him with it.

“Oh ho!” he laughed, grabbed my wrists, and forced me onto my back. I shrieked as he tickled me mercilessly, and then it devolved into a hot, sloppy kiss.

“Now I know better than to trust you,” he said as he broke away and grabbed his wine glass again.

“Said the cheating card sharp.”

He shrugged, took a piece of chocolate, and popped it into my mouth.

“Don’t think that excuses your bad behavior,” I said as I let the heavenly sweetness melt in my mouth.

“I don’t. I figured the multiple orgasms did that.”

I blushed and smacked him as he laughed.

“You still owe me some answers,” I said in fake indignation.

“Really.”

“Yes.”

He considered for a second, even though I had been teasing. “All right. As long as they don’t revolve around women, or any relationships I might have had before tonight.”

“Hey!” I protested. “That’s cutting out half my questions!”

“This is the bonus round, and that’s the deal I’m willing to make. Take it or leave it.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. In reality, though, I didn’t want anything to mess up the last hour... and if I’d been able to ask *anything* I wanted, I might have been tempted to do just that.

“*Fine*,” I said, and thought as I took a sip of wine. “Oh – I’ve got one. What was with all that Mr. Templeton stuff?”

He looked at me funny.

“What?” I asked. “The valet called you Mr. Templeton, and you said he must have confused you with someone else. But then the woman at the desk called you Mr. Templeton, too. Is that something Sebastian came up with?”

Connor looked down at his wine glass and rolled the stem between his fingers, as though he were trying to decide whether to tell me something.

My stomach began to knot up again.

He looked at me again from the corner of his eye. “You honestly don’t know?”

“Don’t know what?” I asked as the panic began to rise. I was fully expecting to hear *That’s my wife’s last name*, or something to that effect.

He looked amused... and also pleased. “You honestly, truly have no idea, do you?”

“Quit stalling and just tell me!” I said in both impatience and fear.

“My name isn’t Connor Brooks, Lily. It’s Connor Templeton.”

I frowned. That didn’t make any sense.

“But why would y...”

And then it hit me.

The reason why the name had seemed familiar was because we were at the Dubai Hotel.

The same Dubai Hotel on the E! Entertainment special I’d seen.

In which the host had mentioned the owner of the hotel:

Connor Templeton.

I’d heard his name before, but I hadn’t seen any pictures of him. I mean, I’ve heard of Michael Dell, but I have no idea what he looks like. I just know he’s the kajillionaire who started Dell computers.

But then everything clicked.

Connor Templeton...

...youngest son of the Templeton family, one of the wealthiest dynasties in America...

...a billionaire in his own right who had actually made more money after he split from the family business...

...and owner of the Dubai Hotel, where we happened to be staying.

I began to *freak out*.

I had just slept with one of the richest men in America.

No, scratch that.

I had just slept with one of the richest men in the *world*.

ALL THAT HE DEMANDS

Part 3

1

I stood in the parking garage with all my belongings in a cardboard filing box.

I looked around in confusion and shock, trying to process what had just happened.

Then I burst into tears.

That had not gone well.

My entire life had cratered in just three short days. Less than that, even: sixty hours since I'd first met him, I was a sobbing mess.

Sure, I'd been places I'd only seen on E! Channel red carpet premieres. I'd rubbed elbows with people from the covers of *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair*. I'd had experiences right out of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*...

...and I'd felt things I had only read about before in romance novels.

And for what?

So I could stand in a parking garage with a cardboard box in my arms, tears running down my cheeks.

I should have never gotten in that damn limo.

2

All that came later, though.

At the moment, I was in a luxurious penthouse hotel room, in the most exclusive hotel in Los Angeles...

...in the middle of a full-on freakout.

I'd met him at my job, where I was a lowly secretary.

Connor Brooks.

Tall, dark, handsome, charming... a sculpted Adonis.

He'd seduced me.

Well, I mean, I was a willing participant from the get-go. Looking like he did, with his playful grin and occasionally infuriating cockiness, he didn't have to try too hard.

We'd had mind-blowing sex in the boardroom of my company. After hours, of course – I'm not *that* stupid. It was, however, a room I wasn't even *supposed* to enter, *ever*; much less have sex on their super-posh carpet.

Then he'd asked me to run away with him, to ignore work and my obligations and everything I was supposed to do, just so I could spend the rest of the evening – and maybe the weekend – with him.

We'd wound up at the Dubai Hotel in West Hollywood, courtesy of his Bentley limo and his badass bodyguard/chauffeur.

We'd had an amazing dinner in the penthouse, during which time I succumbed to the little voices in my head telling me, *He's rich, he does this with every woman he meets, you're nothing special, you're an IDIOT.*

He seemed to guess what was going on, and he proposed a sort of hybrid game of strip poker and 'Truth or Dare.'

He mostly asked me to take off my clothes and do naughty things to him; I mostly asked him questions.

That was how I found out he'd slept with a lot of women.

A *lot* of women.

Which made me feel nauseated and insecure.

But it was also how I'd found out that I was the first woman he'd slept with in eight months... which made me feel a whole lot better. (A 'whole lot better,' as in I slept with him again. And oh. My. GOD am I glad I did.)

It was also how I found out his name wasn't really Connor Brooks.

It was Connor Templeton.

As in the Templeton family, one of the richest families in America.

I'd just unknowingly had scorchingly hot sex – twice – with one of the wealthiest men in the world.

Commence freakout.

3

I was pacing back and forth, back and forth, doing this thing with my hands that I do when I flip out: I flap them frantically, like I painted the nails and I'm trying to dry them superfast.

And I was trying really hard to *breathe*.

It was sort of working.

The breathing part, I mean.

Sort of.

“Uh... Lily... are you okay?” Connor asked.

He was lying on the bed, leaned back against the pillows, the muscles on his perfect body etched by the shadows. His crystal blue eyes followed me as I paced in a loop from one side of the room to the other.

He was grinning, too, like he found all of this very amusing.

Like I said: he could be infuriating sometimes.

“No!” I cried out.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re... ohmygod... you’re not... you’re not who you said you were!”

He shrugged and settled nonchalantly back into the pillows. “Sure I am.”

Then he took a sip of wine and popped a grape into his mouth like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“You don’t even care!” I said as I fought down a rising tide of hysteria.

“Sure I care.”

“You don’t look like you care!”

“Well, frankly, I’m kind of relieved.”

“Relieved about what?!”

“That you’re acting so freaked out.”

That stopped me in my tracks. “Why?!”

“All the other women I’ve been with knew my last name before they slept with me. And usually, at some point, they want to go shopping. Four hours, four days... depends on the woman, but at some point, most want to go shopping. Whether I go along or not is pretty much immaterial, as long as they have my credit card.”

“Well I do NOT want to go SHOPPING!” I snapped.

“I can see that,” he grinned. “Which is why I’m relieved – because now I’m *positive* you’re not like them.”

I started pacing again, but slower now. That last little bit about how I wasn’t like other women was oddly comforting.

Connor gestured towards me with his glass. “As much as I’m enjoying the show, I think you should come over here and we should talk.”

I looked down and realized I was totally naked.

Which, you know, shouldn’t have taken me by surprise, seeing as we’d just finished having sex about ten minutes before, and spent the rest of the time lounging around in the nude.

But having your world yanked out from under you like a cheap rug on a hardwood floor makes you forget things like *Hey, I don’t have any clothes on as I parade around naked in front of Mr. Perfect!*

Mr. BILLIONAIRE Perfect!

Flapping my hands and probably jiggling stuff I don’t want to be jiggling right now!

I stopped mid-step, gave a little shriek, and covered myself with my arms.

“Lily... come here,” he said softly but firmly, and patted the bed next to him.

I hesitated.

“Lily... *come HERE,*” he growled with that ultra-sexy voice of his, in a tone of voice that refused to be denied.

I timidly padded over to the bed and sat down beside him... though several feet away. I was closer to his feet than the spot where he’d patted.

And I sat with my back to him, like I was afraid to face him.

Because I was.

But I could still feel his eyes on my shoulders as I clasped my arms around my naked body, trying to protect myself.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

I looked over my shoulder at him. He’d cocked his head slightly and was staring at me with a quizzical look.

“I... you... I don’t...” I tried, and then I just gave up.

“Why are you freaking out?”

“Because you’re not who you said you are!”

“I’m Connor. That’s it. My last name doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t matter when it’s ‘Lily Ross’! It *does* when it’s – it’s – Kennedy, or Rockefeller, or Templeton!” I spluttered.

“*Why* does it matter?”

That stopped me.

It *shouldn’t* have mattered. He was the same man who’d made love to me fifteen minutes ago... his name shouldn’t have changed anything.

But it did.

Not because of him... but because of me.

“I’m not... I’m not...” I whispered.

“What?!”

His eyes were so soft as they peered into mine – but probing, as though I was some unfathomable mystery, and he wanted more than anything to know what the hell I was thinking.

I could feel my lower lip trembling as I whispered, “Why were you even interested in me?”

His forehead frowned, but his mouth grinned, like I’d said the most endearingly stupid thing he’d ever heard.

“Because you were beautiful.”

My body flooded with warmth, and I relaxed the death grip I had on myself as I hugged my arms to my chest.

But as much as that answer made my heart skip a beat, it wasn’t enough.

“There are lots of other women more beautiful than me,” I murmured.

The smile faded to a look of concern.

Despite my freakout, I couldn’t help but longingly watch those muscular arms, that magnificent chest, the washboard abs, the powerful thighs, the... um... the very, *very* nice naughty bits between the thighs as he scooted across the bed towards me.

He raised one hand to my face and brushed a curl of hair – still damp from our frenzied lovemaking – away from my forehead and behind my ear.

His eyes locked into mine, and I felt like I was drowning in them.

“Not to me, there aren’t,” he whispered.

It was a line. I *knew* it was a line. I’m not a supermodel, I’m not a Victoria’s Secret Angel, I’m not even a former high school cheerleader. I may be cute, but I’m not one of the most beautiful women in the 90028 area code, much less Los Angeles. Hell, I’m not even one of the most beautiful women on my *block*.

But it was what I wanted to hear.

What I *needed* to hear.

He pulled closer to me, and I could feel the heat radiating off his body, warming my skin like the sun.

“Do you want to know why else I wanted you?” he asked, his eyes hypnotizing me.

“Why?” I whispered.

“Because you were funny. Because you had backbone. Because you were smart. Because you wouldn’t take any crap from me, even though I knew you wanted to kiss me from the moment I saw you.”

I blushed. “Not the *first* minute... exactly...”

It was a lie, and he knew it.

He grinned. “Okay, the second minute, then.”

“Maybe the second,” I relented.

He laughed, and then he got serious again. “All of that, and because you gave as good as you got. I gave you shit, and you wouldn’t take any of it. You stood up for yourself. Because you’re your own woman – even if you don’t exactly know where you fit in yet... even if you’re still looking for a place to belong. Because I could see so much in you... so much talent, so much potential, so much *power*; and you didn’t even know it was there. Because it killed me to see a woman as wonderful as you not know how incredibly special she was. *That’s* why I wanted you – not just because I wanted you naked, in my arms, and to hear you moan when I made you come... but because I wanted to make you *see*, just for one moment, what *I* saw.”

Everything he was saying to me, it made me want to cry, and to laugh a little.

It made my heart soar.

And broke it a little, too.

Nobody had told me I was special like that, never.

Nobody had ever made me *feel* I was special like that, either.

And then, when he got to the *I wanted you naked, in my arms, and to hear you moan when I made you come...*

Oh.

My.

God.

I wanted him so badly again, I ached.

“Do you know why else I wanted you?” he whispered, in a deep, seductive voice, as his fingers caressed my hair and set my heart pounding.

“...why?” I whispered back.

“Because you’re *real*.”

I frowned a tiny bit... and then dropped my eyes down to my chest.

He roared with laughter.

“Well, I must say, they ARE quite wonderful, but that’s not what I meant,” he said, still laughing.

My heart fluttered again.

I would never, *ever* have described my boobs as ‘wonderful.’

So it made me feel awesome to hear him say it.

“Well, what do you mean, then?” I asked.

“Almost everyone I’ve ever known my entire life has been... it’s like they play a part around me. They hear the last name, and suddenly I’m somebody they have to impress, or get into my good graces, or win me over, or seduce me, or whatever... because they *want* something.”

I gave him a wry smile, raised an eyebrow, and dropped my eyes down to his thighs. “Well, *I* wanted something, too...”

He laughed again, then shook his head.

“Yeah, *not* like that. They want a piece of the power, or the prestige, or money, or influence, or God knows what... a little

reflected light from whatever fantasy they attach to my family. They don't want me, they want whatever they can get from me, whatever bit of the fairy tale they've concocted in their head. Most of the time, I can see them coming from a mile away..." Suddenly his face darkened. "...and sometimes they fool me until they've got their pound of flesh."

I was about to ask what he meant, but his expression lightened and he continued. "You know the people I value the most?"

I shook my head 'no.'

"The people who are real. Who treat me like Connor, not 'Connor Templeton.' Johnny... Sebastian... you."

I gave him a sad smile. He sounded almost heartbreaking... like he was lonely... a little boy locked in a tower, with no one to trust.

I leaned over and kissed him softly on the cheek.

"Thank you for telling me that," I whispered.

"Thank you for being someone I could *tell* that to," he whispered back, and kissed me softly on the lips.

A tiny whisper of a breath escaped from my lips, and I closed my eyes.

From there, it just happened naturally.

4

His lips brushed across mine, so soft and tender. A tiny kiss at the corner of my mouth, then back to my lips... then my cheek, light like a feather tickling against it... then a kiss on my chin, which he tilted up with his hand... and then back to my lips.

I moaned slightly, my eyes closed, and he took my mouth with his. His tongue softly parted my lips, then caressed me as he kissed me deeply, sensually.

His hand floated from my chin down to my shoulder, traced one finger along my arm, then slowly caressed my breast, his fingertips barely grazing my skin. He brushed the back of his finger light as silk over my nipple, and I felt it grow hard and stiff beneath his touch. A line of sweet pleasure pulsed directly down to my thighs, and I moaned as he kissed me harder.

I turned my body so I was facing him, and let my hands wander out – blind, since I still had my eyes closed as he continued to kiss me. My hands settled against his sides and slid along the carved muscles of his belly. I traced my fingers lightly across his skin, through a curly thatch of hair, until I found what I was looking for.

He was only halfway erect, and I softly took him in my hands, caressing him, stroking him, so softly, so gently. I still wasn't used to the massiveness of him... just the sheer, solid *weight* of him. And it was growing bigger and heavier with each pulse of his heartbeat. I stroked his skin – softer than velvet, and scorching hot like a fever. His shaft came to life, straining against my touch, jerking away as contractions made him longer, harder, thicker by the second.

It was turning me on *so* much just to hold him, to feel him double in size as I stroked him lovingly.

He broke off our kiss and groaned softly in my ear, which made me hotter and wetter and need him even more.

Then he was gently lowering me down onto my back. I felt his weight on me, and his eyes gazed into mine as his hands softly pushed apart my legs. Then his body shifted as he positioned himself on top of me.

I gasped as the tip slowly entered me.

I closed my eyes, anticipating the pleasure of him filling me up –

“Don’t,” he whispered. “I want you to look at me.”

I opened my eyes and found him staring at me from just inches away. The intensity, the intimacy of his gaze took my breath away. He cradled my head gently in his hands and framed my face with his fingers, staring into my soul. All the while he moved deeper inside me, then pulled out slightly, then moved still deeper.

I tried to look at him the entire time, but pleasure overcame me. Sometimes my eyes would roll back in my head from the bliss building inside me, and I would struggle to come back to him, to stare into those beautiful blue eyes that watched me with so much passion, so much tenderness.

I could feel his hips rocking back and forth – not violently, not fast, just a slow and steady rhythmic movement that filled me up, that touched me so deeply, that glided inside me and made me cry out with pleasure.

I let my hands lightly glide over his back, then over his perfect ass. I clutched him tighter, feeling his muscles beneath my fingers, and I pulled him into me, forcing him deeper inside me, deeper than I thought possible, deeper than I thought I could bear, but wanting more of him, wanting him so deep that he would become *part* of me.

His thumbs lightly caressed my temples as his fingers stroked my hair. As he thrust deep inside me, his shaft so thick and feeling so *GOOD*, he would place the smallest of kisses on my lips, his nose brushing mine, as he continued to stare into my eyes.

“Lily,” he murmured.

I moaned over and over, and clutched his muscular backside as he drove himself thicker and deeper and stronger inside me, slow and long and hypnotic.

“Lily,” he whispered, “I want you to do something for me.”

“What...” I breathed. The pleasure was building inside me, a deep, intense throbbing that felt like a giant wave was roaring in from far off in the distance.

“Promise me something...”

“Anything,” I moaned as I raked my fingers up his back to his shoulders.

“Look into my eyes when you come.”

That was all I could bear.

Just the words pushed me over the edge into ecstasy.

I screamed, and I felt the dam breaking.

I struggled to look at him, but it was like trying to stand upright on shifting sand as that giant wave crashed down on me. But I clung to his eyes like I was drowning, like they were the life raft that would save me.

Long, slow, overwhelming waves of pleasure pulsed through me, from between my thighs to every inch of my body, from my feet to my ears to my breasts to my fingers. I wrapped my legs around his calves, and my hands clutched his hair, and I hung on for dear life as I came over and over and over again, with his thickness filling me up past bearing, and his sweet, steady, powerful thrusts pushing wave after wave of bliss through my body.

Halfway through my orgasm, *he* got pushed over the edge, and I watched his face contort in pain and pleasure. Then I felt him spasm deep inside me as he half groaned and half shouted. My own pleasure doubled as I felt his hot wetness spurt deep inside me, with his already massive girth suddenly pulsing bigger, then receding, then bigger, then receding, and all the while he kept driving into me... and we kept staring into each

other's eyes, overcome by emotion, but still hanging on to each other in the middle of the storm.

And then it gradually subsided... and the waves of bliss became little shudders of pleasure... and then a delightful shiver... and then he collapsed on top of me, his face in the hollow of my shoulder and neck as I stroked his hair and softly kissed the side of his head.

5

I think he pulled out of me and we nestled against each other, our breath caressing each other's skin as we lay there in each other's arms...

I *think*, because about then my memory becomes hazy. I believe that was the point the wine and exhaustion took over.

The next thing I knew, my eyes were squinting open in pain.

The bedroom was dimly lit, with just a ghost of sunlight coming through those crazy sci-fi windows with the fade-up glass – but it felt like floodlights were aimed right at the back of my brain.

A voice was coming from the other room, indistinct and muted.

I looked over beside me and saw that Connor's side of the bed was empty.

I could still smell the lingering scent of his cologne in the rumpled sheets, though.

Just beyond the bed, I saw a fancy digital clock on the nightstand.

10:14 AM.

Wow, it's late...

While I lay there, I took stock of my current condition.

My head was pounding.

My lady parts were... ah, *tender*, shall we say.

My mouth felt like the Sahara.

And I had to pee like a mofo.

I crawled to the edge of the bed and forced myself up into a seated position with my legs off the edge of the bed.

Ugh.

The pounding in my head turned into a full-on, percussion-only symphony.

But the peeing would not be denied.

I stumbled over to the palatial bathroom and turned on the light.

OWWWW.

Too bright, so I turned it back off and stumbled over to the toilet.

I was just about to sit down when I realized the bathroom door was wide open.

I sprinted over to the door, closed it, and shuffled my way back over in the dark. No *way* I was turning the light back on. There was just enough glow from the crack under the door to make sure I didn't face-plant on the floor – or worse, in the toilet.

While I sat there on the throne, I gave thanks that at least I wasn't nauseated. I hadn't drunk *that* much wine... I mean... three glasses, maybe?

But no other water since... four or five o'clock the evening before?

God, no wonder I had a throbbing headache.

After I was finished, I lurched over to the sink, opened the door to let in a little light, and looked at myself in the mirror.

Oh.

My.

GOD.

And *not* in a good way.

My hair looked like a bird's nest. And the bird was on LSD. My eyes were swollen, my eye makeup was smeared, I had little red lines on my skin from the creases in the sheets...

Please God, I hope he didn't see me this... way...

Memories from the night before came flooding back:

The boardroom.

Out on the street, him asking me to come with him.

The limo ride.

The Dubai lobby.

The dinner.

The poker game.

Him taking me against the glass window, then carrying me to bed.

Doing it a third time.

And finding out his real last name.

“Oh my God,” I moaned.

I can't even begin to accurately describe my emotional state at that moment.

There was the amazing flood of hormones from the memories of sex...

...and the disbelief that I had done what I did.

This was *sooooo* not like me.

I'd never had a one-night stand before in my *life*.

Not that I wanted this to be a one-night stand. Far from it.

But – I mean – I just don't meet a guy and fall into bed with him on the first date. That's not me.

Obviously it is, a snarky little voice in my head said disapprovingly. And you didn't fall into bed with him, you fell onto the boardroom carpet with him.

And it wasn't exactly a 'date.'

Yes it was! I screamed back silently. It totally was! There was lobster, and filet mignon, and wine, and heavenly dessert...

...just... AFTER the sex...

...the first round of sex, anyway...

Add to that the fact he was CONNOR TEMPLETON.

Billionaire.

I felt like I had somehow stumbled into the pages of a tabloid magazine you see by the checkout in grocery stores.

Ordinary Chick Sleeps With Scorching Hot Billionaire Playboy!

Three times!

There was fear, disbelief, a little bit of guilt – did I really give it up *that* easy? – and the overwhelming feeling that I didn't belong, that I was out of my league, that I needed to get out of there as fast as I humanly could.

And the horror that the hottest man I'd ever seen in person had seen me like *this*.

Whacked-out bedhead, puffy eyes, smeared makeup, little red creases everywhere.

I put my hand in front of my mouth and puffed out, tried to smell it.

I couldn't tell, but I'm sure it was dragon breath from the pit of hell.

Oh God, oh God, I hope he didn't try to kiss me while I was asleep...

I tried to talk myself down as I unwrapped a toothbrush on the counter and squeezed out some mint toothpaste from the mini-tube next to it.

One nice thing about this place was they had *everything*. So much better than scrubbing your teeth with a bare finger.

I also drank down about five glasses of water, I was so thirsty.

After I was sure I didn't smell like a corpse flower anymore (see, super nerdy to the end), I looked at myself in the mirror and decided, *No, this will NOT do*.

I locked the door... thought about it for a second... then unlocked it and left it slightly ajar.

Just in case... y'know... somebody wanted to join me...

I was a little disappointed when he didn't, but the shower was heavenly just the same.

It took me a minute in my addled state to figure out which handle went to which nozzle, but when I did, OH MY GOD.

At first I tried the two heads pointing down from opposite angles.

Then I tried the overhead showerhead, the three-foot diameter one. It was like standing in the middle of a rainforest downpour – but a nice, you-choose-the-temperature, bug-free rainforest downpour.

Then I cranked them all up and let the hot steam billow around me in an orgy of hot water.

And the soaps and shampoos! I had died and gone to spa heaven.

I settled on one that smelled like mango, and lathered my hair with it. After that, I applied a coconut conditioner, and washed all over with a soap that smelled like roses.

As I lathered gingerly 'down there,' I couldn't help smiling. There was a throbbing from the, um, various activities of the previous evening... and (I'm blushing right now) his exceptional size... but it was a good ache. An ache that reminded me of him being inside me.

Without a condom.

And coming inside me.

Cue full-on freakout for about ten seconds.

Then I remembered not only was I on birth control, but he had said he hadn't been with anybody else for the last eight months. And he'd been tested, and was fine.

Do I trust him? I asked myself. That he was telling me the truth?

And after a second's hesitation, I thought, *Yeah, I do.*

I thought about that as I scrubbed all over with the world's softest washcloth.

How the hell does a man as gorgeous, as rich, and as... um... well-equipped as Connor not have sex for eight months?!

I mean, *me*, yeah. Try a year and a half. That was my longest dry spell since I lost my virginity. And all the non-dry spells were with boyfriends.

But I didn't exactly have hot guys throwing themselves at me every day. I'm sure Connor did.

Hot girls, I mean. Throwing themselves at him.

Although I'm sure there were hot guys throwing themselves, too, but –

Oh, hell, you know what I mean.

I wondered why he hadn't slept with anybody in eight months.

Who was the last one?

Had she hurt him?

Was that why?

6

I got out of the shower feeling – and looking – halfway human.

After I toweled off with the world's plushiest towels, I wrapped up in a robe that was even thicker and softer. I wiped away the condensation and checked myself carefully in the mirror and cringed a little. I was scrubbed pink and clean, and no longer looked like a stoned raven had constructed a bird-townhouse in my hair, but...

I think I look okay without makeup, and I definitely try to keep it light. I mean, that's the point of makeup, so that they don't immediately *know* you're wearing makeup, right? Or at least so they don't think, "Oh yeah... hooker."

But I would have *killed* to look as good as I could right now.

I thought about getting my purse –

– and went into full-on, nuclear alert, Defcon Five freak-out mode.

Actually, I think Defcon One is the worst (nerd, nerd, nerd) – but Defcon Five *sounds* worse.

And whatever *sounds* the worst, that's what I was experiencing.

Times ten.

I'd left my purse back at work.

With my wallet and keys and credit card and twelve dollars cash and cell phone inside.

Where – ?

Next to my still-turned-on computer?

With the report I was supposed to have finished and sent to Klaus, my douchebag boss?

NO.

OH MY GOD, IT WAS EVEN WORSE THAN *THAT*.

I'd left it next to the cappuccino machine in the boardroom.

Idiot, *idiot*, IDIOT –

I started pacing back and forth in the bathroom, flapping my hands again in my little freakout ritual.

Why didn't I take it down with me?!

Why didn't I REMEMBER IT?!

Well, if we're going to be fair, I *had* just had my brain turned to jelly by the hottest sex in my life.

(Up to that point. It got even hotter a few hours later.)

And then I'd suffered the worst freakout I'd ever had (again, up to that point) because I had realized I'd just had that mind-blowing sex in the boardroom of the company where I worked.

I had been panicked beyond belief, with my brain already no better than jelly –

– and then super-hot Sex God had requested I walk him downstairs.

Not 'go with me and have more sex.'

Just 'walk me downstairs.'

I'd been intending 1000% to go back up and finish my report like a good little corporate drone. At some point I would have realized I didn't have the purse.

But then he'd kissed my brains out in the elevator –

And *then*, just as we got out on the sidewalk and I was getting all weepy that I'd never see him again, he'd seductively asked me to go with him and have the time of my life.

To be honest, it was no wonder I'd forgotten my purse.

After about five minutes, I calmed down.

Sort of.

The purse and everything in it were safe. Nobody was going to take it, I knew that.

Getting it out of the boardroom... I could do that... I just had to get to work before anybody else.

However, the report was a different matter.

I could imagine my cell phone blowing up *right NOW* as Klaus kept calling me, leaving screaming voicemails about where his report was.

But I had chosen to completely shirk that duty when Connor asked me to get in the limo.

I'd known at the time what I was doing, and what I was potentially risking.

I looked at the freaked-out girl in the mirror and asked her, *Was it worth it?*

She relaxed, and a huge smile spread across her face.

It was SOOOOO worth it.

Then I thought of the cell phone again, and my heart stopped cold.

My roommate Anh.

She'd said to call her once I got off work, and she'd leave the club and bring some Haagen Dazs and we'd watch a sappy romantic comedy on DVD.

Not only hadn't I called her, but I had never come home.

In all the time Anh had known me – five years, going back to my sophomore year in college – I had *never* not come home. Not unless I had a boyfriend and she knew I was staying over at his place.

She was probably worried sick!

She probably thought I was dead, or raped, or lying in a ditch somewhere, or in the hospital!

Oh God, I have to call her!

And that was the state of mind I was in when I bolted out of the bathroom, through the bedroom, into the main room of the penthouse – and into a very strange scene, indeed.

7

My head was already pounding from moving *waaay* too fast for my hangover.

Then I was caught off guard by what I saw.

Connor was dressed in a white linen shirt and blue jeans. He hadn't showered or shaved yet; his hair was a ruffled mess and he had dark stubble on his cheeks and jaw.

God, he looked hot.

I immediately wanted to rip off his clothes and drag him back to bed.

But *that* wasn't going to happen, because he was padding back and forth in his bare feet, shouting into his cell phone.

"You can tell Krebbs he doesn't have a single working brain cell if he thinks those quarterly numbers are good enough to justify what he's asking. What? NO, I don't give a damn about last quarter's numbers, everyone knows they were inflated –"

Over by the wall, Johnny was dressed immaculately in a suit and tie. He saw me come in, smiled politely, and jerked his chin up a tiny bit as a greeting, like *whassup*.

I blushed in embarrassment and grasped the top of my terrycloth robe together to make sure no more skin was showing than absolutely necessary.

Beside Johnny stood a silver rack of clothes, with wheels on the base so it could move. Little black dresses, skirts, matching bra and panty sets, casual tops... and on the bottom floor of the rack sat an assortment of shoes, from flip flops to elegant heels.

The rack part confused me.

What the hell is THAT for?

Connor had his back to me, but he caught sight of Johnny's chin nod and looked around.

I don't know what I was expecting – him dropping the phone? A big, goofy, dumbstruck look of love plastered all over his face?

A smile, maybe?

Didn't get *any* of that.

His face was totally neutral as he said into the cell, "Sam, hold on a sec."

Then he covered the mouthpiece of the phone and said to me, "I need you to go down to the pool. Johnny'll take you."

Then he turned away and commenced shouting into the phone again.

Well, good morning to YOU, too.

I think I must have looked pretty crestfallen, because Johnny strode over quickly and whispered, "Big business blow-up. Sorry, but we need to give him a little space."

"Okay," I said, trying not to let my disappointment show. "But I need to call somebody – it's an emergency –"

"Down at the pool," he whispered.

"Hold on, I'll get dressed," I said – and then realized all my clothes should have been out here in the main room. Where the strip poker game took place.

But they weren't.

I darted a quick look around, wondering if Connor had put them on a sofa –

"Uh, yeah, I sent those down to get dry-cleaned," Johnny whispered.

I must have immediately turned a fire engine shade of red.

I remembered my panties... how turned on I'd been... *multiple* times...

And here a complete stranger had picked them up off the floor.

Not even the floor of the bedroom. Oh, no. He'd probably found them over by the big-ass glass window of the main room, where I'd let Connor do all sorts of things to me in full view of the Sunset Strip.

God, I wanted to crawl under the couch and die.

He smiled. "Relax, I've got a girlfriend, okay? I know what a bra looks like."

Did she leave her clothes lying all over the place on the first night she met you? I almost asked, but realized I would only be bagging on myself, so I didn't.

Instead I said, "But I don't have anything to wear."

"Oh yeah you do," he answered, and led me over to the clothing rack.

The closer I got, the nicer everything looked. The bras were amazing, the dresses looked like silk, the tops were gorgeous – and then I got close enough to see the tags on the clothes:

Gucci. Prada. Dolce & Gabbana. Versace.

Oh, and let's not forget the shoes: Balenciaga. Manolo Blahnik. Jimmy Choo.

I drew back in horror.

Not in a *Yuck, gross!* kind of way, but in an overwhelming bout of sticker-shock.

Johnny misinterpreted my look. "You don't like them?" he asked, surprised and a little disappointed.

"No, I LOVE them, but – I can't – I can't afford any of that!" I choked out.

He actually covered his mouth to stifle his laugh.

"What's so funny?" I hissed. *He* might be able to afford fancy clothes, but *I* sure as hell couldn't.

"You don't have to 'afford' any of it," he said. "Take what you want, it's yours."

I stood there, frozen, staring at him. Then I looked at the clothes.

The total dollar value of everything hanging on that rack was probably double my annual salary.

And don't even get me *started* on the shoes.

"I can't," I whispered, and shook my head stiffly.

"Yeah you can," Johnny said, giving me a quizzical grin. He was obviously quite amused.

"No I *can't*."

"Why not?"

"It's not... it's not right... I shouldn't..."

Suddenly, behind me, Connor's voice boomed out.

"HEY GUYS – what's the holdup?"

Johnny winced a little.

I looked around and realized Connor was talking to us.

To *me*.

He was scowling, his hand held over his phone again.

I could feel tears stinging my eyes, and I gave him an angry look.

If it had been a knife, it would have come four inches out of his back.

Jackass.

Then I whipped around and walked stiffly back towards the bedroom.

I felt like a fool, I felt poor and out of place, my head was pounding from my hangover– and worst of all, the guy I'd fallen all over last night was showing me just how important I really was to him.

"Sam, hold on," I heard behind me, and then bare feet were running over the carpet.

His hand took hold of my arm.

I jerked it away and forged ahead.

He grabbed tighter and half spun me around, half stepped in front of me.

“Leave me alone – ” I tried to choke out, but I was already on the verge of crying.

Then he leaned down and kissed me.

8

I gave in out of shock – thrilled to feel his lips on mine again, the scratch of his stubble on my chin –

And then I remembered how he'd just treated me the last three minutes.

I pushed away from him.

“Hey, hey, HEY, come on,” he said in a low voice, holding tight onto my arms. “I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.”

I stopped fighting and looked up at him.

He broke out into a grin. “Good morning.”

I sniffled a little and wiped one eye. “Good morning,” I mumbled.

He kissed me again softly, and this time I let him.

My heart fluttered, and I felt other parts flutter, too.

But he broke it off quickly.

“Look, something’s fallen apart, and I have to handle it,” he said. “Just go down to the pool for awhile, and I’ll be down to get you soon, okay?”

I wiped my other eye, hesitated, and nodded as I sniffled. “Okay... but I don’t have anything to wear.”

Connor frowned. “I got them to send up a whole rack of clothes for you! You don’t like anything?”

Johnny’s voice floated up from the background. “She says they’re too expensive.”

Connor turned slightly, and both he and I peered back at Johnny.

The bodyguard suddenly looked abashed, and started inspecting the nearest wall like *La dee da, don’t mind me, I’m not here...*

Connor turned back to me. “What do you mean, they’re too expensive?”

“She says she can’t pay for them,” Johnny added, with a touch of amusement.

I leaned past Connor and scowled at Johnny. He pressed his lips together tight, like he was trying to keep from laughing, and went back to staring at the wall.

“You don’t *have* to pay for them,” Connor said, trying to stifle a laugh himself.

“Well, you shouldn’t either, they’re too expensive!” I protested.

Now he actually *did* laugh, and shook his head in disbelief. “You’re joking, right?”

“Do you know what’s on that rack?” I asked. I was serious; I had never even *touched* a Versace dress before. I don’t touch things I know I can’t have, because it only makes it worse when you stop daydreaming and come back to reality.

“Apparently something with the Hope Diamond on it.”

“Don’t make fun of me!” I snapped.

He shook his head and gave me an incredulous look. “You *do* remember finding out about my last name, right? You *do* have some inkling of what I can afford, right?”

“Well, you shouldn’t have to – ”

“Lily, I’ve lost more money in the last 30 seconds talking to you than what’s on that rack.”

My stomach lurched. I couldn’t even begin to comprehend that – it made my head even worse. For the first time since I woke up, I felt nauseated.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, and turned to go –

But his strong arms pulled me back, and he forced me hard against his body.

I struggled the tiniest bit, but he grabbed the back of my hair with one hand – upon which I had a delicious, delirious

flashback to the previous night – and he ran his other hand through the front of my robe, reached around, and clutched my rear end as he pulled me in *hard* against his body and kissed me.

Conscious that Johnny was behind us, I tried to force his hand away from my ass, but he resisted – and started caressing me instead.

I was helpless.

I just melted into that kiss, my heart thudding in my chest. How could I not? All I felt was utter submissiveness to that tug of hair at the nape of my neck, and the warmth of his powerful hand as he grasped my rear end like he *wanted* it, NOW, and wasn't going to take 'no' for an answer.

I was wet within seconds.

I *sooo* wanted him to pull me back into the bedroom, take off the robe, and *do* things to me, over and over and over.

But *noooo*... of *course* not.

He broke off the kiss. Hypnotized, I took a second or two to open my eyes halfway and see him grinning down at me.

“Go down to the pool, get something to eat, and I'll be there soon,” he said.

“I could go over to that one,” I said breathlessly, pointing at the pool that began in the floor by the thirty-foot glass wall, and continued outside to the patio.

Number one, it was *right there*. What good is having a pool in your penthouse if you don't use it?

And number two, *this* pool was a lot closer to the bedroom...

“I need some privacy. Now pick out a swimsuit and get going,” he growled playfully.

“But – ”

He squeezed my rear end. “*NOW*.”

“That’s *not* making me want to leave,” I said, which was true. I wanted both hands on my ass, lifting me into the air, then plunging me down *onto* something that I wanted even more –

“Lilyyyyyy...”

“Okay, okay,” I whispered, and removed his hand out of my robe, making sure I was behind Connor and that Johnny couldn’t see anything as I did it. Then I shuffled self-consciously over to the clothing rack as Johnny politely kept staring at the wall with an amused grin on his face.

9

I rifled through about six different bathing suits and settled on a dark red Gucci bikini. Not that I had much of a choice – there were no one-pieces, which is what I vastly would have preferred.

Johnny saw my unhappy expression. “What, you don’t like them?” he whispered, since Connor had gone back to shouting at his cell phone.

“There’s only bikinis.”

Johnny smirked. “That was Connor’s explicit instructions – bikinis only.”

I looked around and glared at Connor.

He looked at me like *What now?!*

I held up the red bikini.

Immediately he broke into a grin, gave me a thumbs-up, then turned around and started yelling again.

I went back into the bedroom and changed.

It fit well enough, but *God* I felt exposed. I kept tugging the top into place, worried that I might accidentally pull a Janet Jackson and have a wardrobe malfunction.

Then I bundled back up in the robe and walked out to the rack and picked up a small pair of fancy leather flip-flops – by far the plainest, cheapest pair on the rack.

They felt *wonderful*.

As we were walking out, Connor clicked his fingers.

I whirled around, ready to shout, *I’m NOT a dog, mister*.

But when I saw his face, I couldn’t do anything but suppress a giggle.

He had on a hurt look, like, *What, no toys for me?!*

Then he put on a *Yeah, yeah, yeah!* face and made a gesture like he was opening up an invisible robe on himself.

I licked my lips seductively...

Put on my best pouty face...

Placed my hands on the belt holding the robe together...

And then lifted up my thumb and pinky into a fake cell phone by my ear, then brought it down and waggled one finger like *No, no, NO*, as I shook my head soberly.

The look of disappointment on his face was priceless.

I grinned, turned on my heels, and walked out of the door as Johnny held the door open and shrugged at his boss like, *Sorry, dude.*

10

As we rode down in the elevator, I tried to make small talk.

“So, uh... you sleep okay?”

“I would have, but there was all this moaning and screaming from next door,” he said seriously.

BOOM. Fire-engine-red face.

And my mouth dropped open.

He burst out into laughter. “Kidding, *kidding*. Both the penthouse and my room are soundproofed, Lily. Geez, relax.”

I averted my eyes, and I’m sure my expression looked like I was about to keel over and die.

“I slept very well, thank you,” Johnny said with a grin. “And I’m sure that after dinner, you went right to bed and immediately went to sleep, too.”

“Yes,” I said slowly, “...yes, I did.”

Johnny just kept on grinning. “Sorry, I was just kidding around. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Too late for that,” I said with a weak smile.

He suddenly got serious. “Really, though, I am sorry. You’re a nice person, I shouldn’t have done it. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

I felt bad for him. “It’s okay, I just... I embarrass easily.”

He smiled. “So I’ve noticed. It’s one of the things I like about you.”

I wanted to ask him what he meant by that – and whom he knew from Connor’s past who *hadn’t* embarrassed easily – when the elevator door opened.

We were on the twelfth floor, according to the digital display in the elevator. Johnny led the way through a beautiful area with a bunch of leather couches and small tables, around

which a few groups sat eating brunch and drinking. Some were young and beautiful – male underwear models and their supermodel girlfriends – and some were older and distinguished looking. But they all looked very, very wealthy.

Beyond them was a grand doorway with green, billowing curtains, and beyond that the bright sun.

I squinted as we stepped outside. The pool was gorgeous, an amorphous shape filled with crystal-clear water. The sides and bottom were black tile with the logo of the hotel in gold. All around the edges were little forests of flowers and gorgeous plants, so that the pool looked like an exotic oasis plucked out of a fairytale desert.

Hundreds of feet in the distance stood several other tall buildings, though none were as tall as the Dubai. And beyond them lay the Hollywood Hills, which last night had been lit up like fairy villages. In the daylight they looked more like dollhouses: massive mansions, some modernist glass boxes, lots of old frame houses, but at this distance they looked just big enough for Malibu Barbie and Ken to park a pink plastic Corvette in the garage.

Cabanas with wooden frames and tan drapes lined one side of the pool area. Inside them, people lounged on cushioned chairs or ate brunch around glass tables. Nearby, more tables sat out in the sun.

The rest of the pool area was lined with plush sunbathing chairs, on which reclined a good thirty or so people worshipping the sun god. Among them were a few women whom I hoped Connor didn't see when he came down here, or I was sure he'd ditch *me*.

“We forgot sunglasses for you,” Johnny realized.

I looked over at him. “What? No, I'm fine.”

“Don't worry, I'll go back in and get some.”

“You don't have to – ”

“It's already a done deal, so quit saying ‘You don't have to.’ Let me just get you settled first.”

Johnny led me over to an empty cabana. I looked at him like *What are we doing here?*

He gestured at the area, which was big enough to house a twenty-person party. “There you go.”

“There I go what?”

He shook his head and laughed. “Sit down, have something to eat, something to drink. Enjoy yourself.”

I looked around in a bit of panic. “I can’t sit here!”

“Why not?”

“I’m just one person! I can sit over there!” I said, pointing at one of the tables in the sun.

“This is the penthouse cabana. You sit here,” Johnny said with a tone of finality.

“But – ”

“If you don’t, I’m going to ask what you and Connor did after I left last night.”

I turned bright red. “I’m sitting, I’m sitting.”

“Good girl,” he grinned. “I’ll be right back with the sunglasses.”

Suddenly, with a huge wave of guilt, I remembered Anh. “I need to borrow your cell phone.”

He pulled it out of his pocket, punched in a code to unlock it, and handed it over. “See you in a minute.” Then he walked off.

I sat down in one of the plush chairs and sighed. It felt *so good*.

Ahhh, Los Angeles at 11AM on a late spring morning. It was about 80 degrees with no humidity – just enough to make me want to pull off my robe, but not enough to overcome my shyness yet. The sky was deep blue with a few wisps of clouds. It had rained a few days ago, which always clears out the smog and makes everything beautiful.

There was an eighty-five old man in Anh's and my apartment building who had lived in LA all his life. He told me once that after the rain, he caught a glimpse of what the city *used* to look like year-round when he was a boy.

Anh.

I started to dial the number –

“Hi there, my name's Celia. What can I get you?” a friendly voice chirped.

I looked up to see a tall, really pretty blonde waitress in a white blouse and black skirt, with legs all the way down to Antarctica.

Man, did *every* woman who worked here have to be runway-worthy?

“Uhhh... water, please. Ice water. And...”

My brain clicked through hangover cures.

Greasy food, yuck. Goody's headache powder... eh...

Hair o' the dog that bit ya.

“What's good for a hangover?” I asked, squinting up at her.

She laughed. “Well, I always go for a Bloody Mary.”

“Okay, that sounds good.”

“Spicy?”

“Noooo, just... regular. Uh, non-spicy. Do you guys have food?”

“We certainly do – hold on.” She walked over to a little desk at the cabana and pulled a menu out as though by magic, then handed it to me.

“Are you guys still serving breakfast?”

She smiled. “We serve brunch all day. Even if we didn't, I think I could arrange it for *you*.”

And then she winked.

“Um... okay...”

I didn't quite know how to take that.

Is she HITTING on me?!

Thoughts of my waitress's sexual orientation disappeared as I looked at the menu and almost choked.

The prices were *astronomical*.

I thought about scratching the Bloody Mary, but I really wanted to stop the pounding in my head.

Instead, I quickly scanned for the cheapest food I could find.

"Could I have... a cup of strawberry yogurt?"

"That's it?" she asked, a little surprised.

Actually, I was ravenous. A cup of yogurt wasn't going to cut it, so I scanned for the next-cheapest thing, too.

"Um... and an order of toast."

"Whole wheat, white, rye, French bread, or sourdough?"

"Um... sourdough."

"...anything eeeeeeee?" she asked, as though to say, *C'mon, get the caviar... get the caviar...*

"That's it," I smiled.

"Okay, just keep the menu if you change your mind," she said brightly. "Be back with your drink in a jiffy."

I watched her strut away and wished I had legs like that.

You managed to sleep with an ultra-hot billionaire WITHOUT legs like that, a little voice in my head pointed out. Not the mean, snarky voice, but the *You go girl!* voice that I heard far too seldom.

And then everything fell into place.

Ahhhhh... I bet THAT'S why she winked at me.

After all, I *was* in the penthouse cabana, right?

And Connor owned the hotel.

I bet it was common knowledge who had checked in last night...

...and who he checked in *with*.

I looked over at the blonde waitress, and saw her whisper to a brunette co-worker over by the bar. They both cast glances back at me and said something else.

Oh, man, I wanted to crawl under the glass table. I could feel the blood in my cheeks.

People all *over* the hotel were probably gossiping right now. I could hear them:

Connor Templeton slept with HER?!

Yes he DID, honey, and don't you forget it, my sassy little voice mm-hmmed in my ear.

I stopped worrying so much about what other people were thinking – but then found something else to worry about.

If what Sebastian had said on the phone last night was right (“By any means necessary”), then the hotel had probably kicked somebody out of the room.

I winced.

That sucks.

I wondered what the hotel had to give them as compensation.

A free stay in the future?

A free week in a regular room?

Business tips from Connor?

OF COURSE.

Now it all clicked.

The guys in the lobby staring open-mouthed at Connor as he passed – especially the old, fat dudes. The ones who read *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Financial Times*. The ones who would have known what he looked like.

And the hotel staff – especially the supermodel desk clerk – all acting like Jesus had just booked a room.

I pondered that for a second.

If I were rich enough to afford a penthouse... and Warren Buffett kicked me out... but I got to talk to Warren Buffett for ten minutes about stocks, *and* got a free stay in the future... maybe that wouldn't be such a bad trade.

I wonder what Anh would –

Anh.

Damn I'm so A.D.D.

That's 'attention deficit disorder,' not anything hip 'teh kidz' are saying these days, by the way.

I started to dial Anh's cell number –

“A beautiful day, isn't it?” a deep male voice interrupted.

11

I looked over in shock, halfway wondering, *Who's this gonna be, the general manager?*

But it wasn't a hotel employee, unless the hotel allowed guys to walk around out of uniform.

He was completely bald, but in a Jason Statham or Bruce Willis badass way, not a 'needs Rogaine' kind of way. He was slightly dark with olive skin. He was wearing a black short-sleeve shirt and black dress slacks, and his arms and chest were powerfully muscled underneath. His nose had been broken once and never healed straight. His jaw looked like it was made out of granite, and he was wearing black sunglasses that completely hid his eyes.

He was kind of scary-looking, though his voice was pleasant enough.

And he was standing just at the edge of the cabana.

"Uh... yes. Yes, it is," I agreed warily.

"I have to tell you, I've been to hotels all over the world," the man said, "and this ranks with the best of them. Best in Los Angeles, by far."

He had the lightest hint of an accent, but I couldn't place it. It wasn't American, though – not a Southern or New York or Texas accent, for instance. It sounded vaguely European.

"I'll have to take your word for it," I smiled politely, and looked for the waitress or Johnny.

"Oh, you haven't been to too many places?" the man asked.

"No, I haven't."

"Oh, well, I'm sure that will change now."

"Excuse me?"

I wasn't *exactly* sure what he meant, but I didn't like what I *thought* he might be hinting at.

Turns out that was *exactly* what he was hinting at.

"Now that you're travelling with such an impressive... companion," the man smiled.

Anger flared up in me.

Asshole.

"I don't know who you are, or if you think you're being funny –" I started.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" the man asked as he stepped inside the cabana and sat down in a chair across the table from me. The smile never left his face.

I felt like a spider had crawled up my arm. I jerked away from the table, even though the man was still a good five feet away from me. "Yes, I do. I'm not comfortable with –"

"You should tell Mr. Templeton that he should tread lightly," the man said, never altering his smile. "He's very good at alienating people. He should remember that spurned allies sometimes turn into enemies."

The spider on my arm had turned into a snake slithering down my spine.

I stood up, knocking my chair over, and took a couple of steps back.

"Leave me alone," I said, as coldly and with as much control as I could muster, "or I'll scream."

He *tsked* with his tongue. "No need for that, I'll be going now. Just remember to tell him what I said."

Then he stood up quickly and disappeared behind the cabana, as though he were just out for a stroll.

My mind whirred quickly, even though my limbs felt like they were stuck in molasses.

This guy was threatening Connor – I needed to find out who he was, where he was going –

I stepped around the edge of the cabana, to see where he'd gone.

He was disappearing into a doorway at the end of the patio, into what looked like the kitchen area for the pool.

"Lily!" a voice called out behind me, and almost made me jump out of my skin.

I turned around. Johnny was striding towards me, a pair of sunglasses on his face and another one grasped in his hand.

"Where you going?"

I pointed towards the door and said in a fast, frantic voice, "Bald guy – sunglasses – black shirt – he threatened Connor –"

Johnny's face suddenly went cold and stone-like, and his easygoing manner turned taut and lethal.

"Stay here," he said, then rushed for the doorway, his hand edging up towards his jacket.

Towards his gun.

I watched him run past a startled waitress, then disappear into the doorway.

I stood there trembling, hugging myself, still dressed in my robe. Despite the sunlight beating down on me, I felt like a winter wind had chilled me to the bone.

There was a light *crack!* behind me, and I jumped.

I turned around to see the blonde waitress setting down my Bloody Mary on the glass table.

"Here's your drink – oh my God, are you okay?" she asked, real concern in her expression. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

"I'm okay, thanks," I whispered, and turned back to look at the door.

It was a very, very long three minutes.

12

Johnny finally came back through the door, a grim look on his face. The gun was still in his holster.

“Did you see him?” I asked.

“No,” he said, and held out his hand. “Give me the phone.”

I looked down at it, then handed it over.

Dammit, I didn't call Anh!

Although I wouldn't have known what to say if I did.

Hey, Anh, I hooked up with this hot billionaire, and this other guy sorta kinda threatened him and ran off, so I gotta say goodbye so the bodyguard can use the phone. See ya!

He hit a button on the smartphone's screen and waited a second.

Somebody answered – apparently Connor, judging from the conversation.

“You in the room?” Johnny asked tersely. “Good. *Stay there.* We're coming up.”

He hung up and took me gently by the elbow.

As we passed by the table, I looked down at my untouched Bloody Mary.

“Wait – I have to pay for it – ”

With *what*, I had no clue, but I thought it would be rude to dine and ditch.

Or drink and ditch.

Well... *not* drink, but still ditch.

For the first time since he'd come back, Johnny smiled and shook his head. “You're a keeper, Lily.”

“What's that mean?” I asked warily.

“It means you’re the first woman I’ve met around Connor who worried about paying for something herself, much less paying for it after having her life threatened.”

A little glow sparked in my chest.

At least there was *something* unusual about me, as far as the women in Connor’s life went.

Even if all it was, was that I didn’t want to stiff a waitress.

“Thanks... but he didn’t really threaten *me*.”

“Close enough.”

“But they’ve got food coming, too – ”

“Don’t worry about it,” Johnny said, and hustled me past the mystified wait staff.

I hope they don’t think I’m getting pulled upstairs pronto because Connor decided he wants to have sex, I thought, mortified.

Although that wouldn’t have been such a bad reason.

It would have been a lot more preferable than his life being threatened.

13

Connor opened the door, his face a question mark. “What’s going on?”

Johnny hustled me into the room. “There was an incident.”

Connor smirked at me. “Lily, did you slap somebody?”

“I wish I had,” I answered honestly.

He frowned, and Johnny made me recount exactly what had happened.

Connor listened the whole time with his arms crossed, his chin on one thumb, and his index finger crossing his lips. He stared deep into my eyes as I talked.

I don’t think he’d looked at me that intently the entire... um... 16 hours I’d known him.

...if you don’t count the last time we had sex.

After I was finished, he walked over to me, put his arms around me, and pulled me in tight.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” I said, and leaned my head against his chest. I could hear his heartbeat – a deep, powerful pulse that made me feel comforted and safe, and at the same time made my own heart speed up.

I would have given anything just to stay there for hours, nestled protected in his arms.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he said into my hair. Then his voice changed, and I could tell he wasn’t talking to me anymore. “That being said... I don’t think it was anything to worry about.”

That got Johnny *all* wound up.

“Don’t brush this shit off, man. He knew Lily was staying with you – he was obviously keeping tabs on you – ”

“She was in the penthouse cabana,” Connor said in a *Come on, gimme a break* kind of voice. “Not only that, but the whole staff knows she’s staying with me.”

I blushed a little. *Great.*

“And as far as threats,” Connor continued, “that was about as mild as they come.”

“Of *course* it was mild – if we caught him, all he has to say is that he wasn’t *threatening* you, he was just pissed off and telling you to be *nice*.”

Connor grinned. “Maybe he was.”

I pulled away from his arms. “Are you saying that was *nothing*?”

I was a little frightened he was treating it so cavalierly – and I was a little pissed, too. It had scared the hell out of *me*, that was for sure.

He put his hands softly against me face as he looked into my eyes, and I felt my fear and irritation melt away.

“No, I’m not saying it was nothing. I know it was scary, and I’m sorry you got pulled into it. It’s just... this sort of thing happens a lot. People trying to spook me. It doesn’t mean anything, because nothing ever happens.”

“Bullshit,” Johnny snapped. “You know what happened at Davos.”

“Johnny,” Connor warned. There was something dark and steely in his eyes.

“What? What happened at Davos?” I asked fearfully – and then, a bit more confused, “...uh... what’s Davos?”

Connor grinned. “Little town in the Swiss Alps, hosts the World Economic Forum. There was an incident two years back when I went there... a kook with a gun. Johnny took care of it.”

“Damn straight I took care of it,” Johnny seethed.

“And I appreciate that, I do – ”

“He wasn’t a kook, either.”

“Can we talk about this later?” Connor asked, though it was a lot closer to a command.

“What about your father?” I asked.

“What about him?”

“You said he was kidnapped five years ago in Mexico.”

“*Yeah*,” Johnny said, like a kid getting backup in a playground fight.

Connor sighed. “With him, there was no warning, there were no vague threats beforehand, it was a straight-up snatch and grab for cash, that’s all. No thugs in sunglasses, no kooks with guns.”

“That doesn’t diminish this,” Johnny warned. “Would you at least wear the bulletproof vest?”

My eyes bugged out. “You have a bulletproof *vest*?”

“It’s nothing – it goes under a shirt – I wear it sometimes when he’s being too much of a nag – dammit!” Connor wheeled on Johnny angrily. “Thanks for freaking her out, asshole!”

“Don’t be mean to Johnny!” I snapped.

“Yeah, don’t be mean to Johnny,” the bodyguard smirked.

Connor rolled his eyes. “*Fine*. We’ll eat lunch up here. Is that okay with you?” he asked Johnny mockingly.

“Connor, this isn’t something to take lightly – ”

Connor cut him off. “If this guy is such a threat, what are you going to do about him?”

“I already talked to Pete. I’m going to go look at the security tapes, see if I can get a picture of him.”

“Pete?” I asked.

“The manager,” Connor explained, then turned back to Johnny. “Alright, well, why don’t you go do that, and Lily and I will have lunch up here.”

“You promise you’re not going to go pull some crazy dumbass stunt, like disappearing on me?” Johnny prodded.

“I promise.”

Johnny grumbled, then relented. “Fine.”

He started for the door, then turned back to Connor. “Oh, Lily was upset because she couldn’t pay the waitress for her Bloody Mary.”

Connor looked at me with a grin, like, *Is that so?*

I frowned. “I didn’t want her to get stuck with the tab.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t get stuck with the tab,” Connor reassured me, amused, then fluttered one hand at Johnny. “Shoo, shoo. Go make the world a safer place.”

“I get no respect,” Johnny muttered to himself as he let himself out of the penthouse.

Connor looked at me. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m *starving*.”

“Me, too, but... um...”

“...yes?”

“I *really* need to call my roommate Anh.”

14

While we were waiting for the breakfast to arrive – the ordering of which I left entirely in Connor’s hands – I dialed Anh’s cell from the phone in the penthouse bedroom.

She answered on the second ring, hesitancy in her voice. “...hello?”

“Hey, it’s me.”

“*Are you okay?!*”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.”

“*Good, because AAAAHHH!*” she screamed, “*I am going to KILL you!*”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry – ”

“*I thought you were DEAD, or in the HOSPITAL or something! I called you four times and texted you, too – GOD, Lily!*”

Anh is usually the most mild-mannered girl in the world. She must have *really* been worried to react this way. I immediately felt sick with guilt.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry – ”

“*Why didn’t you answer your phone?!*”

“I left it at work.”

“*Why’d you leave it at work?!*”

“Um... it’s complicated...”

“*This had better be good.*”

I thought about saying, *Well, is sleeping with a billionaire good enough?* but I thought that sounded golddigging and skanky... so I toned it down a bit.

“Well... I met this guy...”

There was silence on the other end.

Then she laughed.

“Yeah, RIGHT. No, really, what happened?”

“Excuse me,” I said haughtily, “I could have met someone.”

“Where, in the crazy afterhours club that is the 23rd floor of Exerton Consulting? No, really, what happened?”

“Um... actually... yeah, that *is* where I met him... well, I guess, technically I met him in the lobby, and then we went up to the 23rd floor...”

More silence on the other end.

“You’re SERIOUS,” she said, astounded.

“Yup.”

“HOW?!”

“I’ll tell you later. I just needed to let you know I’m okay.”

More silence.

Then she whispered, *“Did you do it?!”*

“Anh!”

“OH MY GOSH,” she squealed, *“you TOTALLY did it! OH MY GOSH! Wait – are you at his place?”*

“Um... sorta kinda...”

“Then why does my phone say the Dubai Hotel?”

“Uh... ‘cause that’s where he’s staying...?”

More silence.

“You had better start from the beginning and tell me everything,” she instructed. *“And I mean EVERYTHING.”*

I winced. “I can’t... I’ve got to go... but I promise I’ll – ”

“Lily, oh my GOSH I am going to KILL you – you can’t just run off and have mysterious sex with some mysterious stranger and not – is he mysterious?”

“Kind of, yeah. Actually, pretty mysterious, yeah.”

I could almost hear her swoon on the other end.

“Is he cute?”

“You wouldn’t *believe* how cute.”

She squealed. *“You have to tell me EVERYTHING!”*

“When I get home, I will, I promise.”

“Are you coming home soon?”

“Um... I don’t know.”

“Are you coming home TODAY?”

“I hope not.”

“Oh my GOSH, Lily, I am so freakin’ jealous!” she squealed, though I could tell she was happy for me. Then she turned somber. *“You’re being safe, right?”*

“YES, Mom,” I said, though I felt a pang of guilt because, no, I wasn’t, not really – and by that I mean condoms, not bald thugs in sunglasses.

“Fine. Just... come home safe, okay?”

“I will.”

“If for no other reason than I have to hear how the hell you, Lily Ross, did something as crazy as shacking up with a mysterious cute guy you met last night.”

“I’ll tell you everything, I promise.”

“Okay... thanks for calling.”

“I’m sorry I made you worry.”

“Yeah, YOU’RE going to be the one buying the Haagen Dazs for a month after this crap.”

“Deal,” I said. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Okay... have fun!”

“I will,” I grinned, and meant it.

15

We had breakfast by the penthouse pool, just Connor and me. Johnny had gone to talk to the manager about surveillance tapes and see if he could identify Mr. Clean.

The spread laid out on the white linen tablecloth and expensive china was magnificent: eggs, bacon, every type of fruit imaginable, croissants, pastries, a pot of fragrant coffee, carafes of freshly-squeeze orange juice and ice-cold milk...

...and a piece of sourdough toast, a cup of strawberry yogurt, and a Bloody Mary.

"I made sure they brought your favorites," Connor said as he tucked into a massive helping of bacon and eggs.

"Ha ha," I said without laughing as I crunched into the toast.

He gave me a mischievous smile. "Those *must* be your favorites, seeing as how you could have ordered anything on the menu and you still chose those."

"I didn't want to freeload," I said, taking a sip of the Bloody Mary. "By the way, thank you."

Mm. Nice.

It was probably entirely psychological, but I could feel my hangover begin to recede.

"You're welcome. And it's not freeloading, it's letting me do something nice for you. I *like* doing nice things for people I care about."

I blushed slightly at the *People I care about* part, and my heart pitter-pattered a little.

"You've done plenty of nice things for me," I murmured.

"I meant besides orgasms," he grinned.

The slight blush turned into bright crimson.

He continued to stare seductively into my eyes. “And you’ve more than returned *those* nice things – ”

“SOOOO, who was that guy?” I said loudly.

He grinned at my discomfort – and then decided to let me off the hook. “Who knows. A disgruntled shareholder. A disgruntled former employee. A disgruntled something or other.”

“Aren’t you worried?”

“I know this is hard to believe, seeing as you probably don’t have to deal with assholes making vague threats against you on a daily basis – ”

“Other than Herr Klaus?” I said, and immediately regretted it.

He laughed. “Herr Klaus? That’s what you call him?”

“Yeah.”

“It fits. Yes, besides Herr Klaus, you probably don’t have too many assholes making threats against you, whereas mine are legion. That guy was a piker. He might as well have been threatening to de-friend me on Facebook. You should hear what people say about me in *board* meetings.”

“You’re on Facebook?” For some reason that surprised me.

“Somebody somewhere in one of my organizations runs it for me,” he said, waving a fork. “It’s for publicity more than anything else.”

“You weren’t there, though. He was creepy.”

Connor reached across and took my hand. “I’m sure he was, and I’m sorry you had to go through that... but his tactics were strictly Bad Guy 101. No, not even that – Remedial Bad Guy Basics. Bad Guy For Dummies.”

I giggled a little in spite of myself, then made myself stop.

“I want you to be careful,” I insisted.

He used a finger to cross his heart in an ‘X.’ “Promise. I’m just sorry you didn’t get to enjoy the pool while you were

down there.”

“I like the company at this one better.”

He smiled, and looked down at the robe still tightly clasped around me. “Are you going to open that up and get some sun, or what?”

I hesitated... mostly because I was self-conscious of my body, and nervous about exposing myself to him out here in the unforgiving daylight... but then I untied the belt, shrugged my way out of the robe, and let it stay under me like a slipcover over the chair.

His eyes moved up and down my body, pausing especially long on my breasts.

I blushed a little. The bikini top felt even smaller than before, and I could almost feel him caressing me with his eyes.

I liked it.

I liked that he was looking at me, openly, lustfully.

He certainly wasn't interested in his breakfast anymore.

I sat back, rested my hands on the arms of the chair, and let him look some more.

His eyes moved up to mine and tried to hold there – but he kept darting a quick glance down at my breasts, my legs, then back up to my face.

I could feel myself getting very turned on.

Especially when he shifted, crossed his legs with one ankle on his thigh, and rummaged in his pocket, as though rearranging something.

He's getting turned on, too, I thought, and the idea that *I* was the one responsible made me feel more confident – and even more turned on.

“I have to say,” he murmured, his voice hoarse and thick, “I'm glad you kept the robe on downstairs.”

“Why's that?” I asked, my voice almost a whisper.

“Because I want *this*,” he said, gesturing to my body, “all for myself.”

My breath caught in my throat.

“Come here,” he said, his voice commanding.

I stood up, leaving the safety of the robe behind completely, and walked over slowly to him.

He uncrossed his legs and took my hands.

I could see the bulge in his pants, and it made me even more excited.

“Sit here,” he said, and pulled me down to his lap.

I started to sit on his legs like I would on a bench –

“No. Straddle me,” he ordered.

I paused, then lifted one leg over him and sat on his lap facing him.

I raised my arms up hesitantly and put them on his broad shoulders.

He gazed deep into my eyes, and I felt his strong, powerful hands lightly touch my sides.

I whimpered a little as his fingers brushed my bare skin, then worked their way lightly up my back. Every touch sent a little thrill of heat through me, and I shuddered.

“Are you cold?” he whispered.

“No. Not at all.” I swallowed. “Just... turned on.”

He grinned, and traced one of his fingers around my side to the bikini top. Then he began to caress everywhere there was exposed skin – the top swells of my breast, at the sides, my cleavage.

Did I mention the top was rather small?

It left a lot of skin to caress.

He pulled gently at the cloth and I about had a heart attack – *is he taking off my top, up here, out in the open?!*

But he was only tugging up the top so that the underside of my boobs was slightly exposed. And he began to softly brush that with his fingers, too.

He was *killing* me. I wanted *so much* for him to move on to other areas – but he kept away from them, teasing me, making them yearn even more for his touch.

By now my nipples were diamond-hard under the cloth. Apparently he could see that, because he gave me one of his self-satisfied grins and softly – *barely* – touched one of the points through the red material.

I moaned.

He began to softly massage the little point through the cloth, circling it, stroking it, rubbing it gently, switching from one breast to the other, caressing the other nipple through the cloth.

And with his other hand, he moved down between my legs.

He brushed softly across the insides of my thighs, his touch like feathers or silk, then slowly advanced towards the bikini bottom. At first he stroked the edge, where the red cloth met my leg... tracing a line from my ass all the way around my thigh...

Then his fingers wandered across the red cloth. He stroked between my legs, tracing my lips, advancing softly up them until he reached the apex – and another hard little point beneath the cloth that he began to circle with one fingertip.

So soft, so slow... then gradually harder, but not much... the difference between a kiss so soft it felt like a breath, and one that merely tickled the skin.

The bikini bottom was soaked with my desire, as wet as if I had submerged in the pool just enough to touch the cloth.

I whimpered and shuddered over and over. I had to close my eyes for a second, I was so overcome with need. Then I opened them again and stared at him. I felt like I was drowning as I gazed into those icy blue depths.

At that moment, he had me.

He *owned* me.

One set of fingers softly brushing my nipples, the other teasing and playing with my clit...

...and then he slipped his thumb beneath the edge of my bikini bottom.

I gasped as I felt his fingertip move down past my clit and caress my lips... then slowly inch back up. My wetness made his flesh linger on mine, made it glide sensually across my skin. He began to massage me in slow, soft, tiny circles, and I could feel heat and fire building faster and faster inside me.

His other hand pulled the bikini top askew. Then he circled his hand around my back and forced my upper body closer to him.

No matter how insanely turned on I was, fear shot through me.

“No,” I protested, even as I had to close my eyes against the onslaught of pleasure from his caresses. “No, someone will see – ”

“No one will see,” he growled, and took my nipple in his mouth, sucking wetly at it with his lips and tongue.

I cried out and arched my back so he could take all of me in his mouth.

He broke off just long enough to ask, “Do you still want me to stop?”

He said it as he started pressing the tiniest bit harder on my clit, faster, stroking around in a circle, sending lightning bolts of ecstasy through my thighs.

Damn him.

At that point, I wouldn't have cared if all the paparazzi in Los Angeles were up there snapping away with their cameras.

Well, *that's* probably not true.

But seeing as we were on the highest building for miles around, and only birds, airplanes, and helicopters could see what was going on – and there weren't any around that *I* was aware of – I had to keep going.

“Don't stop,” I gasped, and he went back to sucking greedily at my breast. Then, with his teeth, he savagely pulled away the other triangle of cloth and began licking my other nipple, too.

All the while, his thumb was pressing so sweetly, so amazingly on my clit, sending me into insane contractions of pleasure and bliss –

And then I came.

I screamed and grabbed the collar of his shirt, holding on for dear life, as his thumb swirled around me, pressing harder yet still soft, massaging me up and down, around and around. Waves of liquid fire rolled through my belly and thighs, straight up to my breasts where he sucked and licked greedily, lusting for me, *wanting* me.

My body jerked and shuddered and I screamed again, then moaned, then whimpered as the bolts of lightning receded, and finally had to put my hand on his to stop his caresses... and then I collapsed on him, my head on his shoulder, and trembled.

16

He kissed my neck and stroked my hair, let his hands glide softly down my back, sending more shivers along my spine.

When I was fully recovered, I leaned back and rearranged my top so everything was covered. Then I looked him in the face and smiled shyly.

“See?” he grinned. “I told you I like doing nice things for you.”

“That was... *very* nice.” I bit my lip, trying my best to be seductive. “Now I want to do something nice for you.”

His gaze flitted back and forth from my eyes to my lips. “Um... okay...”

I let my own fingers drift down to his jeans, and I began to trace my fingernails lightly along the giant bulge there. I could hear the soft scratching sound of my nails on denim, and imagined that there would be just the slightest pressure along his member.

I guess I was right, because he groaned.

I winced apologetically. “The only thing is... I’m still a little sore from last night...”

He nodded, though I could tell his mind was elsewhere as I ran my fingers along the bulge in his jeans. “...that’s okay...”

I leaned in and whispered in his ear. “But I could do other things.”

Then I licked his earlobe lightly, just a tiny caress, and breathed out the tiniest of whispers.

A groan escaped his lips.

I moved off his lap, took my robe, and put it on the ground in front of his chair. Then I knelt so that I was right there in his crotch.

I could feel the heat radiating off him, just inches away from my face.

I started to get excited again, despite the shattering orgasm just a minute ago.

“You poor baby,” I cooed as I stroked the outline beneath the denim, “I know you’re all pent up in here...”

I pulled up his white linen shirt. The sight of his tan, sculpted abs made my excitement double.

I popped the top button on his jeans and started to pull down the zipper –

“Wait,” he said in a choked voice, and grabbed my wrist.

“What?” I asked, genuinely surprised.

“Not here. Not out here,” he said, shaking his head.

I frowned and looked around for planes, helicopters, or birds. “Nobody can see us.”

“I don’t want to take the chance. All I need is photos showing up in the tabloids.”

I scowled. “You didn’t seem to mind so much when it was *me* just a minute ago.”

He grinned. “If you’ll remember, I never took off your panties. And as far as your top, I merely... rearranged things.”

I glared at him. He was right... sort of.

“You know, I wouldn’t exactly be thrilled to see you motorboating me in the tabloids, either,” I said. “But you didn’t let that stop you.”

He laughed. “True. But you’re not the head of a multi-billion dollar corporation.”

“So you’re saying it’s okay if *I* get embarrassed, just not you.”

“I’m saying I really want you to do whatever you were going to do to me... but let’s do it inside,” he said as he got up, took my hand, and pulled me inside the penthouse.

17

I was still a little annoyed as he led the way to the bedroom.

On the other hand, the idea that somebody could have taken photographs of us, with my head buried in his lap, kind of threw a cold bucket of water on me.

I had just been scared of somebody *seeing* us.

I hadn't even considered that they might be taking *pictures*.

"You don't think anybody –" I started.

"No. But it's better to be safe than sorry. Hang on a second, will you?" he asked as he headed into the bathroom and closed the door.

Ew, I thought, and tried not to picture what he was going to do.

But I didn't hear any... um... incriminating sounds. Instead, all I heard was the sink running for about a minute. Then it shut off.

Then the door opened, though I couldn't see him yet.

"Shy bladder?" I teased. "Do you need a little running water to help out?"

He stepped into the bedroom, and I caught my breath.

He was completely naked except for the towel he held in front of his crotch.

Connor was beautiful in jeans and linen shirts, suits and ties – in all of it, he was incredibly sexy.

The night before, nude, his muscles etched by the shadows, he was gorgeous.

But in the light of day, he was breathtaking.

His perfect, golden skin was mouthwatering. His muscles were like a hero's out of Greek mythology. The light scattering of hair across his powerful chest and washboard stomach were so incredibly masculine, it made me want to run my fingers across his body. His thighs were so massive, his calves so beautifully sculpted, he looked like he could have given Usain Bolt a run for his money.

I stared at him, my knees getting weak. He smirked a little, knowing full well what effect he was having on me.

"I, uh... I didn't have a shower this morning," he explained. "Didn't want to wake you up."

Awww...

"So I figured I'd wash up a little downstairs..." he said, then added hesitantly, "...if that's what you were planning."

The idea that he was still thinking of me, first and foremost, made me grin like an idiot. Then I looked back at the towel he was holding in front of the main show.

"Thanks. I hope you didn't... lose too much enthusiasm," I said, not nearly as smoothly or seductively as I would have liked.

He let go of the towel.

It hung there, suspended midair. What was beneath it was not the least bit weighed down.

And, as I've mentioned before, it was a plush, *heavy* towel.

He grinned. "No, I think we're fine on that account."

My mouth watered.

I *so* wanted to take that towel off.

But I wanted to be as sexy as I could about it.

I tore my eyes away from the towel and what was underneath it, as hard as it was (ha ha! Pun!... sorry), and looked him in the eye as I walked slowly over in front of him.

Then I knelt in front of him, letting my fingernails trail down his naked thighs.

I could feel his legs stiffen and his breath quicken.

When I was on my knees on the carpet, my head at the level of his thighs, I slowly, slowly tugged at the cloth.

I felt his manhood flex a little beneath as the towel pulled away.

However, I didn't want to remove it all at once.

I wanted to slowly reveal it.

I pulled the towel until I could see the enormous base, covered with dark, damp curls. The rest of him – quite a few inches – was still covered by the plush white terrycloth.

I looked up at him towering so far above me, leaned in until my face touched his rock-hard abdomen, and then I kissed the thick base of his manhood.

He started breathing harder, and –

18

Okay, sorry, but short intrusion here.

I've never been comfortable using certain words for body parts. I guess, like not using profanity, it was just drilled into me when I was little that 'good girls' don't say certain words. I'd certainly been able to avoid it with past boyfriends, because, well, sex was nice and all, but I didn't need to do much more besides point or touch and say 'here' or 'that' or 'this.'

But, I've got to be honest... as I was staring at him, about to pull off that towel...

...I didn't want to be a good girl anymore.

I wanted him *so bad*.

And I *wanted* to be bad.

I'm blushing as I'm telling you this... but it turns me on, too.

Soooo... I know I've recounted a lot of stuff that is certainly far off the 'straight and narrow path,' but I've largely tried to be a 'good girl' up to this point.

But I can't keep on that way...

...because, at that moment, kneeling before him, wanting him so badly, something inside me changed. And I can't pretend anymore that it didn't.

19

I kissed the thick base of his cock (AAAHHH! I can't believe I said that!), and slowly ran my tongue up the side of the shaft until it touched the towel.

I could smell lavender from the soap he'd washed himself with. The taste on my tongue was light, not bitter or overpowering at all. He tasted the way I figured a violet might taste.

I let my fingers drift up the inside of his powerful thighs. I could feel him tremble as my fingertips touched his balls (AAAAAH! Alright, that was the last time, I promise), and I stroked the delicate skin, tickling him.

"Oh God," he whispered hoarsely as I stroked him, played with him, teased him.

I noticed the base of his cock strained, and the towel lifted slightly.

"Poor baby," I whispered up at him.

I pulled the towel a little bit more, uncovering another two or three inches of his shaft.

Then I put my mouth again at the base and slowly, slowly licked up and down the underside, going down to the balls and tickling them with my tongue as well. All I could taste was lavender and the cleanness of his skin.

From the sounds he was making, I thought he was about to have a heart attack.

Then I licked sensually along the underside of his penis until I reached the towel again... and I slowly pulled it off all the way.

His cock bobbed upward violently as the towel fell away. I had the funny image of someone jumping off a diving board, and it wobbling up and down, then the vibrations receding until it settled back into place.

The head was so big, so pink, the skin stretched tight... in fact, the entire shaft was stretched so tight, he looked like he might explode...

Poor baby, I thought, and moved myself directly in front of him.

I'm not going to make it easy on you, though, I thought devilishly.

I softly cupped my hand around the shaft and looked up into his eyes.

He was staring at me with the expression of a man whose life depended on whatever action I took next.

I looked down at the pink head, then back up at him shyly (all an act)... and bit my lip again, because I knew that drove him crazy.

It did.

His scowl deepened, and he looked like he might die if I didn't do something.

So I opened my mouth wide, and slowly... slowly... moved it over the head, all the while staring up at him with doe-like eyes.

But I didn't touch my lips or tongue to him.

I just let my breath caress his velvet skin...

...teasing him.

I remembered how he had made me suffer before he pleased me.

Two can play at THAT game.

I slowly, gingerly, let my tongue play along the underside of his cock, on the tiny ridge of skin beneath the head – as light as though he were sleeping, and I didn't want to wake him.

It woke him, though, alright.

He groaned. His lower lip was trembling, and he looked at me angrily – but begging me, too, like *please, Please*,

PLEASE, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!

I withdrew my mouth completely, and he groaned in disbelief.

But letting him watch – making *sure* he was watching – I licked my lips, getting them incredibly wet.

Then – still staring at him – I held his manhood in place with my hands, and slowly moved my lips back around the head.

I let my tongue, so wet and warm now, slide along the underside of his shaft.

And I let my wet lips envelop him, let them slip across his skin, as I took him fully inside my mouth.

“Oh God, Lily,” he breathed out, and then threw his head back as he groaned.

I began to caress his length with one hand, so lightly I might have been handling the most fragile thing imaginable... and with the other hand I traced my fingertips through the thatch of his curls, down to his balls, tickling, teasing, stroking, caressing them with my palm.

And all the while I smelled the beautiful hint of lavender, and tasted it on him, as I slowly moved my wet lips over his hot, velvety skin... first out, then taking him inside me... then out, then taking him further in... soaking him with my mouth. I was sucking him so lightly that his flesh and mine felt joined more by wetness than by actual skin-to-skin contact.

I switched hands, letting the other one stroke his long, thick shaft, and traced his gorgeous abs with my other fingers, then let them brush through the curls of his hair, then down to his balls, which had tightened against his body.

There was one problem.

He was so tall, and so, um, *long*... and I was so short... and he was standing at full attention, so to speak... that it was a little awkward to get my head into position.

Don't get me wrong, I was totally enjoying myself. Even more than that, I was *loving* torturing him and hearing the

moans coming out of his mouth. So I was okay for the first couple of minutes. But then the angle was a little awkward, and I was afraid to pull down more on his shaft to get it closer to my mouth...

And then he read my mind.

“Let’s go to the bed,” he suggested urgently.

I nodded, slipped him out of my mouth, gave him a little kiss on the underside of his shaft, and then let him pull me to my feet by one hand.

20

He led me over to the bed. I tried to pull him down onto the sheets, but he resisted.

“What?” I asked.

In answer, he pulled one strand of my bikini top off one shoulder, then the other. I smiled, reached behind me, and untied the string and let it drop to the floor.

Then he knelt down in front of me, hooked his fingers through the bikini bottom, and pulled it over my thighs and down to the floor.

A thrill shot through me as he grasped my ass tightly in both hands, pulled me in to him, and kissed the little shaved runway of hair between my legs.

And got in a tiny flick of his tongue on something a bit more sensitive while he was at it.

Then he stood up, and I pushed him down on the bed. He grinned and pulled himself back so that he was completely on the mattress, head to foot.

I crawled over him, and while I was in that position, licked him softly from his balls, sloooooowly up the shaft, and then kissed the underside of his head as it strained away from his belly.

He groaned and thrashed his head around a little.

“Can I ask you a favor?” I purred.

“Anything,” he gasped.

“Just let me know a few seconds before you’re about to come.”

He looked a little disappointed, but he nodded his head. “You got it.”

Then I switched my body so that I was kneeling beside him, with my rear end close to his head, and I took his cock in

my hand and began to suck him again.

Soft, slow, wet, teasingly.

So that I could free up my hands, I lowered my body against his, feeling my soft flesh against his rock hard muscles. My legs stretched off to the side, both of them crossing his right arm and shoulder.

Then I began to trace my fingers along the muscles of his thighs, his lower abdomen, and his hips, watching his skin quiver and jump under my touch as I moved my mouth wetly over the head and first couple of inches of his shaft.

I wasn't that experienced, and I wasn't going to try to fit *all* of that in my mouth (HELL no), so I figured I would just concentrate on making things sensual.

If he wanted more, we'd talk about it on the tenth or eleventh date.

I kept stroking with my hands and sucking with my lips, running my tongue over his feverish skin, when I suddenly felt him grab my leg.

At first I thought maybe I was hurting him somehow, so I moved further away from him, shifting my legs a few more inches away from his head –

But that's not what he wanted.

He used his powerful arms to force my leg up and over his head, so that I was basically lying spreadeagled on his face.

My eyes got wide.

Um... okay...

And then my eyes got wider as I felt his tongue lick my lips.

Then slide like silk over my clit.

Shivers ran up and down my spine.

And then, softly, wetly, but firm and delicious, he slowly entered inside me.

All while I had his very large, lovely, lavender-tasting shaft inside my mouth.

OH.

MY.

GOD.

So this was 69.

I *told* you I was inexperienced.

I'd never done it before. I guess I was a little too shy, and none of my boyfriends liked giving oral sex (some of them *never* gave me oral sex), so I'd never experienced it.

To be honest, it was a little distracting.

I was trying to do something for Connor, and now I was dealing with crazy sensations from down under.

It was nice. *Really* nice. The scratch of his whiskers against my thighs was a little uncomfortable... but he seemed to know that, and somehow kept it to a minimum. And the long, lingering swirls of his tongue more than made up for any discomfort.

To tell the truth, though, it was like I was trying to concentrate on studying, and a bowl of ice cream was next to me, and I was only allowed to take little bites of the ice cream, but I still had to study, so I couldn't *fully* study, and I couldn't *fully* enjoy the ice cream – so it was all a bit distracting.

Fun, but distracting.

I actually paused a few times and just closed my eyes as I felt him move in and out of me, his tongue soft and yielding, but firm enough to give me a hot, delicious feeling. And since it wasn't *nearly* as big as, um, other parts, it didn't hurt anything that was still tender.

I took him out of my mouth.

“If you keep doing it that well, I can't concentrate enough on you,” I said, looking back.

His answer was to swirl his tongue around my clit, then fuck me even harder with his tongue.

“*Oh my GOD,*” I moaned, and decided I would just have to make the best of a tough situation.

In fact, I turned it into a contest.

I tried to block out as much as I could of his tongue licking, caressing, and pleasuring me, and focused solely on him.

I began to move up and down, my wet lips moving along his shaft, drenching him, sucking him lightly, letting my tongue tease him as much as I could.

I caressed his shaft with one hand, sliding it up and down, enjoying its thickness and heft in my grasp, as I cupped his balls with the other hand, tickling him, fondling him, rubbing him with gradually increasing pressure.

As much as I tried to ignore the pleasure he was giving me, though, it was still affecting me. I kept going faster and faster as I sucked him – not consciously, but because he kept giving me more and more pleasure, and the more I tried to ignore it, the further and further it drove me into a frenzy.

I just kept sliding over him with my mouth, closing my eyes, feeling the waves of bliss rolling up from my thighs, and then tried to go back to concentrating, running my lips and tongue over his massive shaft –

It must have worked, because suddenly the naughtiness downstairs stopped, and I saw the muscles of his legs clench tight.

“Lily,” he choked out, his voice muffled beneath me, “I’m going to come – ”

I told you before that I’m not fond of guys crossing the finishing line in my mouth.

Really dislike it, actually.

This time was different.

I only paused for a second, but then I decided I wanted to do this for him.

I wanted to give him something.

I wanted to give myself completely to him.

Even if I didn't totally enjoy it, I wanted *him* to.

And, to be honest, I was so turned on from him licking and kissing and being inside me, that I kind of *wanted* him to come in my mouth.

So I just kept doing what I was doing – licking him, sucking him, moving him in and out of my mouth as one hand stroked his gorgeous shaft and the other hand cupped harder and harder against his balls.

“Lily, I'm going to come – ” I heard him say again, his voice straining as he hung on valiantly, trying to give me a chance to move away.

I just kept plunging down on him, stroking him, sucking him as sensuously as I knew how.

“Oh God Lily I'm going to come in your mouth if you don't – ”

And then he just groaned and gripped his hands tight around my waist, and I felt his cock burst in my mouth.

I had been a little worried that it would be *a lot*, which I really didn't want. But luckily, he'd come so many times in the last twelve hours that it was just a tiny bit. I relaxed and enjoyed it as he pulsed between my lips, over and over, the feeling of his entire shaft quivering and shuddering in my hand and my mouth, as he groaned like he was dying.

As his contractions finally stopped, I withdrew him from my mouth and tasted him fully for the first time. Salty, yes, but not bad. And not much, so I just swallowed, and it was done.

I licked him again, and sucked his head lightly a little more, which brought out a couple more short, dying spasms... and then I kissed him, once, twice, six or seven times, all around his slowly shrinking head and shaft. I ran my fingers

softly up and down the length of him and rolled off his body so that I could look back and see his face.

He was staring up at the ceiling like he'd just had a religious experience.

Like, 'celestial choirs and glowing lights' type religious experience.

I laid my head on his strong, muscular stomach and smiled at him. "Did you like that?"

He raised his head just enough so that he could look into my eyes, and croaked, "I'd say that's an understatement."

I felt full of happiness that I could do something that affected him so powerfully.

"You were doing your level best to make it difficult for me," I chided him, then gave him a naughty little smirk. "But I won."

He lifted his head all the way, his mouth open in surprise. "You won?"

"Mm-hmmm," I grinned.

"YOU won?!"

Apparently he was so competitive that this was unacceptable.

"Yup."

"Oh no you didn't," he said, sitting up fast.

I shrieked and giggled as he loomed over me. "Yes I did!"

"No you didn't!" he insisted as he tickled me.

I laughed and screamed all at once, "YES I DID, YES I DID, YES I DID!"

He stopped my mouth with a long, slow, lingering kiss. I put my fingers to his face and caressed the stubble on his cheeks.

And when he pulled away, I whispered, "I won."

“I’LL show you who wins around here,” he growled, and began flicking his tongue from my nipples down to my belly, then between my thighs.

His cheeks were a little scratchy, but he was careful – and his tongue was velvety smooth.

I was at such a high pitch from before that I came within sixty seconds, a crashing, devastating, annihilating orgasm that left me unable to talk for almost a minute afterwards.

After it was over, he crawled back up to me, kissing my skin, licking the curves of my hips, sucking softly on my nipples before he collapsed next to me.

“So... *who* won?” he growled sexily.

“I think it’s safe to say we both won,” I whispered dreamily as he held me against his chest.

He nuzzled into my shoulder.

“...but I won more,” I said, then shrieked as he pounced and tickled me again.

21

After the tickling (which finally ended in a long, slow, lingering kiss), we lay in each other's arms for awhile.

Then he leaned up on one elbow and looked at me.

"I need a shower. You want to join me?"

I nodded. He rolled off the bed and got to his feet, then pulled me along with him and led the way to the bathroom.

"Hmmm... I changed my mind. How about a bath instead?" he asked.

"Fine by me."

He turned on the extra-large faucet for the jacuzzi bathtub, which was set into the floor. The faucet spewed water so fast that a fireman could hook up his hose to it.

That's a bit of an exaggeration, but not much.

"Hold on, I'll be back in a minute," he said as he grabbed a robe and padded out into the main room of the penthouse.

I walked down the steps into the jacuzzi and sat on one of the little ledges as the deliciously hot water began to fill up the tub. It was up to my waist when Connor finally returned, carrying a bowl of fruit and two glasses of orange juice from the breakfast table outside.

"Just in case," he said, and set everything down beside the tub. Then he grabbed his shaving kit, placed it by the food, dropped the robe (yum) and walked down into the jacuzzi to join me.

"Stand up," he said, and when I did, he sat down and pulled me onto his lap. "Much better."

We kissed as the water rose around us, filling the air with steam. Then he broke away from me and shut off the faucet.

"Hold on a sec." He unwrapped a fancy package of soap by the tub and began to lather it between his hands. "Now..."

time to get clean.”

He began to rub his soapy hands across my back, my neck, my shoulders, and most of all my breasts.

“I think you’ve got them clean enough,” I teased after he’d spent a good sixty seconds on them.

“Nope,” he said as he continued fondling them. “Gotta make sure.”

After a minute I returned the favor, working up a lather and running my sudsy hands over his chest, his back, his neck, and his arms. I loved the sensation of my fingers tracing the outlines of his powerful muscles, feeling his firm, taut flesh as my soapy hands glided over him.

Once I was finished he rummaged around in his shaving kit and pulled out a razor, one of those snap-on kinds with the five safety blades, and a can of fancy shaving cream with French on the label.

“You mind?” he asked while he lathered up his face.

“No.” In fact, I was curious to watch him.

He paused, looked at me, and then grinned. “You want to do it?”

My eyes grew wide. “What? No!”

“Why not?”

“I might cut you!”

“You shave your legs, don’t you?”

“Yeah, my *legs!* I’ve never shaved anyone else before!”

“Always a first time.” He winked at me. “Come on... I don’t have a mirror.”

“There’s one right there,” I said, gesturing to the long mirror over the sinks.

“Yeah, but I’d have to get out of the bath. Help me out.”

I shook my head woefully, then acquiesced. “This is a bad idea.”

“This is a *great* idea,” he grinned, then pulled me onto his lap again, straddling and facing him.

I could feel him between my thighs, thick but soft, brushing against the inside of my thigh as the water currents moved it.

I would have been turned on if I weren't so nervous.

I began by shaving down his cheek.

“After you shave down, shave up, too, against the grain,” he said, enjoying watching my nervousness.

“I can't believe I'm doing this,” I said as I dunked the razor in the water, washing away the lather.

“I trust you implicitly,” he grinned. “I am literally putting my life in your hands.”

“Don't smile, it makes it harder.”

“Yes ma'am,” he said, and took on a mockingly serious expression.

After the first few strokes, though, I began to get the hang of it – and I began to enjoy it. The soft scrape of the blade on his skin... the miniscule vibrations of his whiskers under the metal... the curves and slopes of his face and jaw as I traced the razor across it.

It was incredibly intimate – something I'd never done with anyone, or *to* anyone, ever before.

Come to think of it, the last 24 hours had been *full* of firsts.

Of course, with this one, I was more focused and attentive than with any of the others.

I was incredibly present, aware of everything. Our bodies were pressed against each other, almost as close as if he were inside me. I saw every little detail, from the beads of sweat slowly dripping from his tousled hair, to the cleft in his chin that was so difficult to shave. I inhaled the sweet odor of the soap, the clean smell of the lather, and the faintest hint of his sweat. And I listened to him breathing, felt the light tickle of his breath across my wet skin.

It was lovely just to *be* there with him, concentrating on nothing but him, as I slowly continued my work.

“What would you like to do tonight?” he murmured.

“Shhh,” I whispered as I concentrated on shaving his throat. “Don’t talk.”

He didn’t say anything again until after I had finished. I set aside the razor on the edge of the tub, wet my hands in the water, and rubbed them across his cheeks and jaw.

“Smooth as a baby’s bottom,” I said.

“But hopefully more attractive,” he grinned as I ran my wet fingers softly across his face.

I felt something stir under the water, against my leg. His shaft was thickening, lengthening, pressing more insistently against my thigh.

Now that I wasn’t worried about hurting him, it seriously turned me on.

But I didn’t let him know that.

“I felt that,” I said.

“Yeah, you *caused* that,” he said, and felt his face with his hands. “Very nice. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So, what do you want to do tonight?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Come on... you don’t want to stay cooped up in here.”

I shifted my position on his lap so that my lower lips were pressed against his shaft. “Oh, I don’t know... there are benefits to that.”

He grunted, and I could feel him swelling even more.

I began to move slowly up and down, rubbing the length of him with my softest parts. I was beginning to get wet, and not from the water.

He grabbed my ass and pressed me harder against him. He was fully erect now, hard and thick against my belly and between my thighs.

“We’ll do plenty of that,” he said, trying to retain his composure, “but don’t you want to do something? Something you haven’t done before?”

“Like what?” I asked as I continued to massage his shaft. I loved the way it felt as it slid up and down against my clit.

“Unh...” he grunted again, and closed his eyes.

“Like what?” I whispered playfully in his ear.

“I don’t know... a party at a movie star’s home, or something...”

I stopped moving and peered down at him. “Seriously?”

He opened one eye. “Sure, why not?”

“You hang out with movie stars?”

“Not usually, but I don’t think it’ll be too hard to wrangle an invitation.”

I must have looked like a fish, my mouth was gaping open so wide.

He grinned. “So I guess that’s what we’ll be doing, then. Now, before you get me revved up beyond the point of no return, let’s get in the shower and wash off. I need to make a phone call.”

22

“You’ve never wanted to go to any of those parties before,” the ultra-gay voice said on speakerphone.

It was Sebastian on the line, Connor’s personal assistant in New York.

“Well, there’s always a first time for everything, isn’t there?” Connor said, and winked at me.

We were dressing in the bedroom. Connor looked incredible in a dark suit with a light blue shirt. I was putting on a little black dress from the rack of clothes, and fretting about how tightly it hugged my curves.

“I suppose,” Sebastian sniffed, then said disapprovingly, *“I just wonder if it’s your idea... or someone else’s.”*

Meaning me.

I stuck out my tongue at the phone.

Connor laughed.

“What?”

“Nothing. And what do you care?” Connor asked as he tied his necktie. “You’ve been after me forever to get out and enjoy myself. You should thank Lily for being a good influence.”

“I suppose...” he grumbled.

“Does he ever get a day off?” I whispered to Connor.

“I heard that – and no, I don’t.”

“You do, too,” Connor said. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

“That’s like asking me not to be gay, darling.”

“I got you Steven as an assistant so you could take more time off –”

“Oh PLEASE. Would Steven know who to call to get you an invite to an A-lister’s party? I think not. Would Steven have the cojones to threaten and cajole the staff at the Dubai so you

could get the penthouse at the last second possible? I think NOT. Would Stephen personally call the affronted guest and smooth things over with his astounding charm? I THINK NOT. Does Stephen even POSSESS an ounce of the charm necessary for such a thing? I THINK NOT.”

“You’re absolutely indispensable, Sebastian,” Connor grinned.

“Just so you recognize that. How IS the penthouse, by the way?”

“Lovely.”

“Just so you’re enjoying it. Considering the trouble I had to go to get it,” he added, sounding like he had all the woes of the world on his weary shoulders.

“What did you have to do to get it?” I asked, curious.

“What do you mean?”

“Wasn’t there somebody in it before us?”

“You mean, what did I have to promise the previous occupants so they would vacate it for YOU?”

“Yes, Miss Thing, that’s exactly what I mean,” I said tartly.

Connor stifled a laugh.

“Hmph. You don’t want to know.”

“Actually, I do,” I pressed.

“It was terrible – there was screaming, and threats, an epic temper tantrum – ”

“On your part or theirs?” Connor asked.

“Very funny. But in the end, I smoothed it all over – ”

“They hadn’t checked in yet, had they?” Connor smirked.

There was a long pause on the phone.

“...no, not yet,” Sebastian said, both haughty and embarrassed at the same time. *“They missed their connecting flight from JFK, so they were staying over in New York for the evening.”*

“You big liar,” I teased.

“I am not a liar!” he snapped, now just haughty. *“They agreed to give up the penthouse for the weekend, but I had to throw in two nights free and carte blanche on the room service.”*

“Wow,” I said, a little stunned. “Anything they want... free?”

“Yes. And I hope it was worth it,” Sebastian snapped.

“A pittance of a price, and well-played, my good man,” Connor said. “Now, so you can get off work at a reasonable time, can you call your contact and see what’s up?”

“Of course. I’ll have to move heaven and earth once again just to make sure you’re happy – ”

“I hardly think *that*,” Connor said.

“How do you know this guy, the one you’re calling?” I asked.

“Well, not that it’s any of your business...” Sebastian said, and then turned positively giddy. *“...but I met him on vacation down in Cabo.”*

“I thought you never went on vacation,” Connor said.

“Shut up and let me tell my story.”

Connor gave me a look like, *Well, I just stepped in it, didn’t I?*

“He’s a hairdresser – ”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Connor whispered in my ear, and I giggled.

Sebastian continued, off in his own little world. I could hear the rapture in his voice.

“He’s worked on some of the biggest movies of the last couple of years, the stars all love him, including a certain twenty-something Oscar winner – ”

“Did you sleep with him?” I asked as I applied some lipstick, some fancy European brand I’d never heard of before.

A little kit had been delivered up with the rack of clothes, I just hadn't noticed it at the time. I'd been too stunned by the Gucci, Versace, Manolo's, and Jimmy Choo's.

"I – what – that's none of your – " Sebastian sputtered.

"You totally slept with him!" I said gleefully.

"I – that's – Connorrrrrr!"

"Don't tease Sebastian, he's sensitive," Connor admonished me playfully.

"I am NOT!"

"Though yes, the hairdresser was all he talked about for three weeks after his vacation," Connor confirmed.

"I DID NOT!"

"You should call him up. Tell him you're coming out here for a couple of days, see what he says," Connor suggested.

Silence.

"...really?" Sebastian asked in a tiny, hopeful voice.

"Sure. You deserve a break. Get the Dubai to set up a room for you... that is, if you can't get the hairdresser to invite you to stay with him."

"Oh my God... do you think... oh, I wonder if he'll want me to..."

"Sebastian?"

"Yes?"

"Call him."

"Okaaaaay," he said, giddy as a thirteen-year-old girl in love. *"I'll call you back as soon as I know something!"*

"Please do," Connor said. *"Good luck."*

"Thank you! Goodbye, Lily!"

"Bye," I said, then looked at Connor in amazement. *"Were those two different people we just talked to? The guy at the beginning of the call, and the one who just hung up?"*

“Eh, Sebastian’s like everybody else... he needs to get laid once in awhile, or he gets uptight as hell.”

I sauntered up to Connor and ran one finger across his chest. “Well, *you* should be feeling pretty relaxed, then.”

He gave me a huge grin. “Incredibly. And you?”

I stood up on my tiptoes and gave him a soft kiss on the lips. “Wonderfully.”

He chuckled. “Good. Now let’s go get something to eat before I get carried away and ‘relax’ you some more.”

“That wouldn’t be so bad...”

“No, it wouldn’t,” he agreed, taking me by the hand, “but we’d *never* leave the room – and we don’t want to disappoint Sebastian.”

“God forbid,” I said as I rolled my eyes.

Connor laughed. “Exactly. Especially with all that heaven-and-earth-moving he’s going to on our behalf with his beloved hairdresser.”

I laughed and let Connor lead me out the door.

23

“I am *not* happy about this,” Johnny glowered as he held the rear door to the Bentley open.

“So you’ve said a dozen times already,” Connor said as he helped me inside. “But I’m not going to turn into a hermit just because some thug from Central Casting lobbed a nondescript threat my way.”

“I still think – ”

“Yes, yes,” Connor said as he got in and closed the door in Johnny’s face.

“That was rude,” I frowned. “He’s just looking out for you.”

Connor groaned. “Not you, too.”

“You said earlier that you should remember why you hired him.”

“So what, you want to stay in the hotel room all night?”

“I can think of worse things.”

Connor grinned and put a hand on my leg.

I pointedly took it off and put it back on his knee. “But we’re not going to do any of them if you’re not nicer to the people trying to keep you safe.”

“Who died and made *you* Miss Manners?”

“I just remember a charming, wonderful man who made my boss apologize to me Friday night. I’d hate to think he’s not around anymore.”

“Yeah, but your boss was an asshole.”

I stared at him, my eyebrows raised, with just the barest hint of a smile on my lips.

Connor glared at me... paused, as though wondering how far he wanted to push it... then reached out and pushed a

button on the console next to him. “Johnny?”

“*What,*” the bodyguard’s voice grumbled over the intercom.

Connor glanced at me. I prodded him onward with my eyes.

“Sorry I closed the door on you, man. I know you’re just trying to keep me safe.”

I could hear the smile in Johnny’s voice. “*Lily made you say that, didn’t she.*”

“Yes, she did.”

“*She probably blackmailed you into it, didn’t she.*”

“Extortion... blackmail... withholding of certain favors...”

I smacked Connor playfully on the arm.

“*Mm-hm. So, does this mean we can go back upstairs?*”

“Nope. Let’s roll.”

Johnny sighed, the intercom clicked off, and the Bentley slid into motion.

I squinted at Connor disapprovingly.

“What? You said to be nice, so I was.”

“Yeah, but – ”

“Do you want to stay locked away in a prison all weekend?”

“It’s a very nice prison.”

“It is, and you’re a *very* nice cellmate, but let’s go live a little.”

“You like making his life difficult, don’t you.”

“No,” Connor said, stretching his arm around my shoulders, “I just like making him earn his paycheck, that’s all.”

Then he leaned over and started nibbling at my neck, and all my objections were quickly forgotten.

24

The restaurant was amazing, recently opened by a young hotshot who had decided to get out from the shadow of a celebrity chef he had worked under for years. There was a large main room, full of candlelight and flowing tablecloths, where people obviously came to see and be seen. But there was also a twisty, maze-like ring around the main hall, with tiny little individual areas partitioned off from the other tables. Connor and I sat at one of these tables, isolated from the rest of the restaurant, in our own little world.

Of course, to get it, we had to go through a snobby *maître-d'*.

She was a beautiful redhead, tall, elegant and cool, like a young Nicole Kidman. I could tell she was affected by Connor's good looks, but resented being affected. She was pleasant enough, but her smile was remote as she assured him, "I'm sorry, sir, but there's absolutely no way I can fit you in this evening."

Connor pulled out his wallet. "I'm so sorry... I was sure I'd had my assistant make reservations, but I guess something happened..."

He slipped three hundred-dollar bills out and placed them on the sleek podium behind which she stood.

"Is there *any* way you can possibly fit us in?"

My eyes bugged out. I know, after everything I'd seen – ten-thousand dollar a night hotel room, rack of designer clothes, Bentley limo – \$300 shouldn't have even registered on my radar anymore.

But since that was a few dollars more than was currently in my checking account, it still got my attention.

It got hers, too.

She moved her palm over the money, and it disappeared as smoothly as if she were a magician headlining in Vegas.

“You know, I think I do remember those reservations,” she said, warming right up. “Please, follow me. Did you want something in the main room, or something more... intimate?”

“Oh, the more intimate, the better,” he said, flashing her one of his panty-dropping smiles.

She actually stumbled when he did it, then led us back to the table with a red face.

I hate to admit it, but I felt a stab of jealousy. I know he was just turning on the charm for fun... or to help get a table... but it annoyed me that he could do it at the drop of a hat, and could affect other women so easily.

And it hurt a little that he was using it on somebody else but me.

Just a tiny little pinprick... but it was there.

I decided I was being silly, so I swallowed my annoyance and walked along with him, my hand in his.

And thus we found ourselves seated in a tiny alcove away from the rest of the world. Another hundred dollars had secured Johnny at a table down the way from us, where he could keep tabs without being too intrusive.

“That was interesting,” I said between sips of the most wonderful Chardonnay I’d ever tasted in my life.

“What?”

“The bribe to get in here.”

“Oh, that.” He laughed. “It’s amazing how cheaply some people can be bought.”

I arched an eyebrow. Now the flirting really *was* forgotten. “For some of us, \$300 isn’t cheap.”

He shrugged diplomatically. “True.”

“And I wouldn’t say you were *buying* her.”

He grinned. “She has a certain amount of power. This is her domain... and \$300 was her price.”

“You probably could have just told her who you were.”

“Maybe... but I hate people who say, ‘Do you know who I am?’ If they don’t immediately know who you are, you should never, ever say it.”

“I didn’t know who you were.”

“Yes, but... you’re rather slow,” he said in a sad, patronizing voice.

I kicked him under the table.

“Ow!” he laughed, and rubbed his shin. “Careful there, I need that leg.”

“Do you think she knows who you are?” I asked, the jealousy returning a little bit. I didn’t want the tall, elegant redhead showing me up any more than she already had.

“I hope not. I go to great lengths to keep my picture and my name out of the news.”

“Why?”

“You ever talked to anybody who’s famous? I mean, *really* famous? ‘Walk down the street and people come up to you’ famous?”

I gave him a look like *Puh-lease*. “Me? No.”

“Well, all the ones I know say it’s the worst part of the deal. Fame is only good for a couple of things: attracting attention to causes, and bedding beautiful women. I have enough money that I can hire other people to attract attention, and I already have a beautiful woman sitting across from me, so I’m fine.”

At first I blushed from the compliment – and then the jealousy hit me even stronger.

“Yeah, but you only met me yesterday. Surely you wanted to attract women before you met me.”

“Well, since the last one was eight months ago, you can see how high up on my to-do list *that* was.”

I averted my eyes. “Was she beautiful?”

“Who, the last woman I was with?”

I nodded without looking at him.

“She was my fiancée.”

The bottom dropped out of my stomach.

I looked up at him and stared.

“I... I didn't know...” I whispered.

He smiled – but it was a polite smile that put distance between us. Sort of like what the redhead had used when she assured us she couldn't possibly let us in. “How could you have?”

“I... did it end... amicably?”

His features turned to stone. “No. Not really.”

“What happened?”

For the first time since I'd met him, his blue eyes made me think of ice. Cold, arctic, glacial. “I don't want to talk about it.”

I dropped my gaze again. “I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked.”

His voice thawed, as though he realized he'd been too harsh. “It's alright... I just don't want to talk about it.”

It made sense now. Why he hadn't been with anybody else in eight months.

He'd had his heart broken.

And because of that, mine broke for him.

25

“Enough about me,” he said. “I’m sick and tired of me. Tell me about you. I hardly know anything about you.”

I looked back up at him. He was smiling again.

“Yeah, I guess we kind of skipped the chit chat, didn’t we?”

He laughed, back to his old self. “Yeah, we kind of did.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Who you are. What makes you tick.”

“That’s not exactly something *I* have figured out yet.”

“Alright, let’s start with basics. Parents? Siblings?”

“My mom and dad still live in Charlotte, North Carolina. That’s where I grew up. I have an older brother. He’s at a software company down in Florida.”

“What was your major in college?”

“Business, with a psych minor.” I winced. “This is... kind of weird.”

“Too much like a job interview,” he agreed. “Alright, tell me this: what did five-year-old Lily want to be when she grew up?”

“Oh, that’s easy – a ballerina.”

“Really.”

“And six-year-old Lily wanted to be a scientist.”

“Those are kind of opposite ends of the spectrum.”

“They are. But it gets better. At eight, I wanted to be an astronaut. At nine, a psychologist. I guess that’s the one that stuck the most, what with the psych minor.”

“Why a business major?”

“My dad was paying for my education, and he wanted me to do something practical. So... I did.”

“Mm-hm.” Connor looked at me as though he were staring deep into my soul. “And what does the... how old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

“My God, you’re a baby.”

I flushed. “No I’m not.”

Connor grinned. “You’re still wet behind the ears.”

“Yeah, whatever. How old are you?”

“Thirty next month.”

“Good Lord, you already have one foot in the grave.”

He shook his head with mock sadness. “And here I am in an early midlife crisis, robbing the cradle.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m going to come over there and smack you if you keep saying stuff like that.”

He arched an eyebrow and smiled seductively. “You like that, don’t you.”

“What?”

“Domination. Aggression. You’re very physical.”

“I’m just playing around!” I protested.

He put a finger up to his lips, as though he were pondering something. “Maybe we can do a little something about that later.”

My eyes widened. “Like what?”

“I don’t know... maybe a little spanking or something.”

I blushed. “What?! No.”

“Oh, I think so.”

“NO.”

“Have you tried it?”

“What?”

“Being spanked.”

I was flushing a deep crimson by now. “NO.”

“Oh. Pity.”

“You keep talking like that, I’ll come over there and spank *you*,” I snarled.

He arched the eyebrow again. “...promise?”

I gulped down some wine for something to do. “You were saying something before you got sidetracked into your *50 Shades Of Grey* moment.”

He laughed out loud, then tilted his eyes up to the ceiling as though thinking. “What was – oh yes. I asked you what little Lily wanted, and you told me about at seven, eight, nine years old... so what does twenty-four year-old Lily want?”

I looked at him for a couple of seconds, thinking.

“Twenty-four year-old Lily is still working on that,” I finally answered.

He nodded and smiled. “I’m sure she’ll figure it out.”

Our eyes locked, and I felt my heart speed up.

And then the waiter came with our food, and the moment passed.

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My smoked salmon was incredible. Connor got pork tenderloin with some amazing kind of sauce made with puréed cherries. For the second time that day – the first being when I shaved him in the tub – I felt terribly intimate as we fed each other bites of food from each other’s plates.

I mean emotionally intimate; obviously we’d been closer... um, *physically*. But as I fed him bites of salmon from my fork, and he laughed at me when I freaked out about dropping some on his suit, there was a comfort there I usually only felt after months and months of dating somebody.

When we left, Johnny fell in behind us.

“How was your dinner?” I asked him.

“Nobody got shot, so it was good,” he grumbled.

“You’re not going to let this go, are you,” Connor asked.

“Not until you’re safe back at the hotel.”

“Well, then, you’re going to have to wait awhile.”

As though he were psychic, Sebastian called exactly as we exited the restaurant.

“*Hellooo!*” he said gaily over the speakerphone. And, I might add, rather gay-ly.

“Somebody’s happy,” I remarked.

“*I’m catching a flight out tomorrow! Javier was thrilled –*”

“The hairdresser?”

“*Yes, of course!*” Sebastian almost sang, then a note of worry crept into his voice. “*Are you sure it’s alright?*”

“Sebastian, when was the last time you had a vacation?” Connor asked. “Other than Cabo, whenever that was.”

“*I can’t recall.*”

“Then it’s completely fine. Just don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Unless you have sex with dudes, I don’t think that’s the best advice,” I pointed out.

“Oh yeah,” Connor realized. “Good point. Okay, do everything I *wouldn’t* do, then.”

“*No need to be crude,*” Sebastian said, though he sounded more like Julie Andrews in *The Sound Of Music* than his old snarky self.

I grinned. “You sound so *happy*, Sebastian.”

“*I am!*”

“You were only half-right,” I said to Connor. “He doesn’t even have to get laid, he just needs the *potential* of getting laid.”

“*Someone didn’t get the memo about being crude,*” Sebastian snapped, sounding more like his old self now.

“So what’s in store for us this evening, courtesy of Javier the hairdresser?” Connor asked.

“*The biggest party he knows of is being thrown by a producer, he did that movie last year everybody thought would win the Oscar for best picture but didn’t? Well, he’s working with the star again on his new picture, so it’s sure to be a humongous shindig. Not only that, but he produced three other movies starring everybody from Matt Damon to that little singer girl who’s trying to be an actress, and supposedly everybody’s going to be there.*”

Connor looked over at me. “Sound good?”

I felt both elated and horribly nervous at the same time. “I guess...”

Connor knit his brows. “You *guess?*”

“Are we going to fit in?” I asked nervously.

“*Connor will. You won’t,*” Sebastian said matter-of-factly.

“Hey!” Connor barked.

But, strangely enough, the honesty was a bracing tonic. “What happened to the kinder, gentler Sebastian from earlier in the conversation?” I laughed.

“*He’s still only got the POTENTIAL of getting laid,*” Sebastian said sassily.

“Hurry up and give us the address before the non-laid Sebastian comes back in full force,” Connor sighed.

I was buzzed from two glasses of wine as the limo headed into the Hollywood Hills. The lights of Los Angeles spread out below us as we twisted and curved up into the darkness, and I could see the Dubai standing taller than all the other buildings around it, outlined against the night sky.

The houses started off very expensive at the base of the hills, then moved into ‘extremely expensive’ range, and from there blasted off into the stratosphere. It was easy to tell when we were getting closer to the party: a long string of BMW’s, Mercedes, Aston Martins, Ferraris, and Porsches lined the narrow street as white-jacketed valets parked new cars at the base of the hill and then hustled back up to the main house.

It was an enormous mansion, very Mediterranean, like it had been airlifted in by a multi-millionaire from the coast of Greece. Johnny drove us up to the front, a valet opened the door and helped me out, and then Johnny grudgingly surrendered the car and followed us inside.

I stayed right up against Connor.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Just nervous.”

“Don’t worry, you’ve already slept with the hottest guy here, that gives you a certain amount of street cred.”

I poked him in the side. “You are so in love with yourself, aren’t you?”

“Unconditionally,” he grinned, and hugged me close with his arm draped around my body.

I might have been annoyed at his extreme self-confidence, but I was eternally thankful for how protective he was being.

We walked through the main front door into something out of a movie. Literally. I could have sworn I’d seen this foyer in one or two films over the years. It was a gigantic hall with a

ceiling thirty feet overhead, with a sweeping marble staircase and dark red carpet. Handsome men and gorgeous women gathered in little clusters, holding champagne flutes and cocktail glasses, and laughing and talking their asses off. Everywhere I looked there was a famous face: an actor, an actress, the lead singer of a band with a current Top 10 hit, a rapper, a director... not to mention lots of people who were basically famous for being famous. It was like God opened an US WEEKLY magazine, shook it real hard, and everybody just dropped out of the pages and landed in here.

I had always nurtured a secret pride that I wouldn't be starstruck if I actually saw anybody famous. That I was immune to that sort of thing.

Turns out, not so much.

My jaw dropped open wider than a big-mouthed bass.

Although, in my defense, it could have just been the sheer *volume* of famous people in one place that got to me.

Yeah, that's it. There was a critical mass of star power in the place, and it overwhelmed my normally worldly ways.

I like telling these little lies to myself to feel better afterwards.

Anyhow, I was gawking like a four-year-old at Disneyland.

Connor ribbed me gently. "Better close your mouth before something slips in there."

I turned and narrowed my eyes at him. "Can't you wait until we get back to the hotel room?"

He tipped back his head and laughed loudly.

Across the room, a little bald man in a tux and horn-rimmed glasses looked over – and *his* mouth dropped open once he saw Connor.

When I saw his reaction, I felt a little better about my own starstruck...ness.

The little bald man said something to the people he was with – which included an actor who had won an Academy

Award a few years back – and hustled over to us.

“Oh my, this is a wonderful turn of events,” he beamed, and stuck out his hand to Connor. “Lewis Vonder. Welcome.”

I figured this must be the producer throwing the party. I didn’t know him or recognize him, but on the other hand, I didn’t know any producers except ones who were famous directors. Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, James Cameron...

They weren’t anywhere to be seen, thank goodness, or my inner geek would have come out in a truly mortifying display.

Connor smiled tightly and shook his hand. “I’m Connor, and this is Lily – ”

“Oh, I know who you are, Mr. Templeton,” the man said slyly, then glanced at me with a cursory “Hello.”

Then he went back to Connor like he was drawn by a magnet. “If only I’d known you were in town, I would have invited you personally!”

“Javier beat you to it.”

The man frowned. “...Bardem?”

“The hairdresser,” I added helpfully.

“The... hairdresser?” the man asked, obviously lost.

“All the stars love him,” Connor said, as though *everybody* knew THAT.

Then he gently steered me around the producer.

Mr. Lewis Vonder wouldn’t give up, but trailed alongside us like a puppy dog. “Are you thinking of expanding into the movie business, Connor?”

“No, I’m just here for the free food,” Connor said as we walked through the hall towards the back of the house.

Lewis laughed like he had just heard the funniest joke EVER. “Hilarious! You’ll be a hit in Hollywood!”

Connor looked at him. “No, really... I’m just here for the free food. Javier said it was great.”

The producer frowned, like he wasn't sure whether he was the butt of the joke or just talking to a cheap-ass, Howard Hughes-worthy eccentric. He *did* want to keep talking, though, and he pushed people out of the way as he tried to keep up. "Obviously you're a busy man, so I'll make this quick. I have a slate of three films, all with major stars attached – Cruise, Clooney, Pitt – and we're looking for financing outside the studio system. We should talk, we could set up a meeting – "

Connor pointed at him. "You know who you should talk to? Javier."

"The hairdresser," Lewis Vonder said glumly. He now realized beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was the butt of the joke, didn't *like* being the butt of the joke, but was willing to put up with it for the sake of \$400 million in financing.

"Yes, just give Javier the details and he'll pass them on to me. Maybe after that we can ask him to do our hair."

Connor looked up at Lewis's bald head.

"...well... *my hair*. Nice to meet you, Lewis," Connor smiled, and then he walked through a doorway, his shoulder right next to the doorframe, forcing Lewis into the wall. Sort of like in action movies where two cars are racing side by side towards a tunnel, and one edges the other one out, and it explodes against the concrete wall.

Exactly like that.

But with a short, bald producer instead of a sports car.

We continued into the next room as poor Lewis Vonder looked on from the hallway.

"Well played, sir," I whispered. Ordinarily, I might have felt sorry for the producer if he weren't so... *ugh*.

"Thank you."

"Is it like that everywhere you go?"

"You have no idea. Energy industry, finance, tech, entertainment, it doesn't matter... they're all a bunch of sharks, and I'm the chum in the water."

“You’re not the least bit interested, though?”

“What, in playing a Hollywood big shot? So I can foot the bill and Lewis Vonder can skim \$30 million off the top in fees for ‘arranging the financing,’ then tell me we never made any profits when we gross half a billion in theaters? And *that’s* if we don’t flop? No thanks. Do you know that Hollywood is the only major industry in America where the accounting isn’t regulated by federal law?”

“I did not know that.”

“They keep four sets of accounting ledgers – one for the IRS, one to show the investors, one that ‘proves’ the movie is still in the red in case you’re the writer or any other poor bastard who agreed to backend profits instead of upfront money... and then the real books, which they keep locked in a safe and which never see the light of day.”

“Sounds like you’ve done your homework.”

“I have. I thought about getting into it as a hobby a few years back.”

“A hobby,” I said with equal parts disbelief and amusement.

He shrugged. “I don’t play golf.”

“I guess the answer was no, huh?”

“If I wanted to get into a business where you try to fuck everybody else for a buck, I’d go into porn.”

“What about creating something artistic?”

“I wouldn’t be creating anything artistic, I’d be footing the bill.”

“Well, you could still be part of making something people love.”

He stared off into the distance as though seriously pondering that – and then shook his head like *Naaah*. “I’d still go into porn.”

I leaned in close. “You’d be good at it.”

He chuckled, and his hand slipped down to my rear end.
“You could be my costar.”

I slapped it away playfully. “You’re not *in* porn, remember.”

“Not yet... but we could get a camera, and go back to the hotel, and – ”

“NO.”

He laughed and hugged me closer.

28

We entered another room where two bartenders were mixing drinks at a full bar. I suppose Connor had just been playing the odds when he made the crack about being there for the food, but there was indeed a spread that would have made the Dubai Hotel jealous. Mildly, anyway. Displays of exotic fruits and tiny pastries, more decadent desserts than I had ever seen in my life, and a small army of waiters walking around offering people bacon-wrapped scallops, chunks of seared ahi, bits of filet mignon, and the usual hors d'oeuvres and canapés.

“You were right about the free food,” I marveled. “We should have skipped dinner and eaten here.”

“I liked eating with the person I had dinner with.” While I beamed, Conner turned around. I followed his gaze to the corner of the room, where Lewis Vonder smiled widely and toasted us with a glass of champagne. Connor gave a fake smile back and muttered between his teeth, “Here, not so much.”

“You afraid it’s like fairyland?”

He looked over at me. “Huh?”

I realized I’d been thinking out loud. “Never mind, that was just... never mind.”

“No, what?”

“Well, in fairytales, if you went into fairyland and ate or drank something, you got trapped there.”

“Whereas here, you wind up having dinner with a greedy troll and having to hear about his three-picture deal,” Connor said. He scanned the room. “Hold on, I see somebody I should say hello to. I’ll be right back.”

I felt a combination of emotions – fear that he was leaving me, suspicion why he wasn’t taking me along, and embarrassment that maybe he didn’t want to introduce me to anyone he knew.

Connor must have read my mind, because he smirked at me. “I’m trying to save you from listening to the tribe of trolls surrounding him.”

I blushed, and tried to cover it up. “I’d like to meet your friends.”

“They’re not my friends. *He* barely qualifies – he just gave me some good advice about getting into the motion picture industry.”

“Which was...?”

“Stay far, far away.”

“Where is he?”

“Over there,” Connor said, and pointed to a thin guy in a suit surrounded by a bunch of not-very-attractive men who were all sipping glasses of amber liquid and laughing. “Entertainment lawyers at his firm. Nobody famous, all pretty boring.”

“I don’t mind.”

He sighed. “You don’t realize what I’m doing, do you?”

“No, what?”

“You’re my ‘out.’ If they start hounding me about investing or boring me to tears, I’m pointing over at you and saying, ‘Excuse me, gentlemen, but I have to get back to my date.’”

Date.

I was his date.

I guess it was silly, but it made me to feel happy to hear him say it.

“Okay, then. As long as I can be your escape pod.”

“I’ll ask him if he knows anybody famous he can introduce you to.” Connor gave me a wink, then ambled off across the room.

I stood there and watched as Connor went over, broke in suavely, and shook the guy’s hand.

The skinny guy apparently introduced Connor by name, because all the lawyers' mouths dropped open.

Then the glad-handing started.

Connor was dead-on about the feeding frenzy: they were the sharks, and he was the chum in the water.

I got bored watching them scramble over each other to kiss his heinie, so I started looking around the room.

There were half a dozen famous people in here, too, all surrounded by adoring circles. Either the famous people were talking and everybody else was hanging on their every word, or the famous person looked bored and annoyed as some pushy person tried to monopolize the conversation and impress them.

My geeky mind went into overdrive, and I started thinking about all the little groups as solar systems, with a star at the center and a bunch of orbiters circling around, smiling and laughing. Or, in the case of the annoying blabbermouths, annoying little dwarf stars trying to compete against a supernova.

And the room became the universe, with all these little solar systems going happily on their way...

...and here I was, alone, out in the middle of space, a comet that didn't belong anywhere.

My entire life, I've never felt like I've belonged. Big whoop – everybody feels like that at one point or another, right? But it was true. I'd never had many friends growing up, just one or two close ones, and I somehow managed to lose them as elementary turned into junior high turned into high school turned into college. All except Anh... thank God for her.

But I never really fit into any cliques in high school. I wasn't an athlete, or a cheerleader, or a rich kid, or an artist, or a brain, or a stoner. I was just... Lily. I had a boyfriend in high school, which was nice, but it was something I kind of fell into. Not something I chose because I really wanted it, but because it was better than the alternative, which was weekends

alone. He asked me out, it was an awkward first date, he asked me out again, it was slightly less awkward the second time, we kissed, it was okay, and I gradually got used to him. A nice guy, but...

When college came and we went to different schools, I can't say I was all that sad. Maybe a day or two, and then I got over it. I would have felt guilty about my lack of feelings for him, except he was probably even *less* sad than I was. His jackhole buddies talked all senior year about how easy girls were in college, and if you were in a frat, you got laid with a different chick every weekend. He ended up pledging his first semester, though I was secretly glad when a mutual acquaintance told me he could only make it into the nerd fraternity.

Sorry. TMI.

I guess I'm saying all this because, in that Hollywood Hills mansion, I'd never felt like more of an outsider. Here *most* of them were beautiful people – and if they weren't, then they were at least rich and powerful. I suppose there are tens of thousands of people in Hollywood without a dollar in their pocket who talk a big game as they desperately try to claw their way up, but this wasn't that kind of a party. To walk through that door, you had to have already *arrived*, at least at a certain level. The only reason I'd gotten in was because of Connor.

I *so* didn't belong here.

“And who are you?” a woman's voice asked.

I whirled around to see a gorgeous blonde, probably about my age, with upswept hair and a shimmering red dress that showed off her rather large boobs. If they were fake, her surgeon had done an incredibly good job at disguising it.

“Um... Lily Ross,” I said shyly. I felt like a little girl, and she was a va-va-voom Woman.

I was glad Connor wasn't here to see her.

She was holding a champagne glass in the air, and she cocked her head slightly to the side as she looked me up and

down. “And what do you do?”

“I’m a... a secretary.”

“Oh.”

Her voice was full of polite disdain. Besides being threatened by her, I started to actively dislike her.

“Why, what do you do?” I asked, more out of social habit than anything else.

One hand fluttered to her cleavage, and she looked *soooo* happy I’d asked. “I’m an award-winning photographer, but I just co-wrote a screenplay with a good friend of mine who writes for TV. His agent at CAA is taking it out next weekend. He thinks it could go for seven figures. It’s an a-maaaaazing romantic thriller, perfect for somebody like Reese Witherspoon or Natalie Portman. He says there might even be a bidding war. I’ve already started on my next one – what I really want to do is direct. Kathryn Bigelow was *such* an inspiration when she won for *The Hurt Locker*, don’t you think?”

“Uh huh,” I said, and hated her – her and her big boobs, thin arms, movie-star face, weirdo lingo, and big-whoop screenplay – a little bit more.

“Whose secretary are you?”

“Nobody you’d know.”

She smiled smugly. “Try me.”

Okaaaaay...

“Klaus Zimmerman.”

Her forehead puckered the tiniest bit. “Zimmerman, Zimmerman... is he an independent producer, or is he at a studio?”

“He’s in executive comp at Exerton Consulting.”

“Oh.” The polite dropped out, leaving just the disdain. “You’re not even in the industry.”

The Industry. Like there was only one.

“No, I’m not.”

“Well... I’m sure it’s very interesting.” Her eyes drifted away from my face, settled on something or someone else, and she floated past me. “Nice meeting you.”

I didn’t say anything to that, because if I had, it might have come out as *Yeah, right, bitch*.

And at this party, she was a *nobody*. ‘Award-winning photographer’? What did *that* mean, she’d won third prize in a community college photo fair?

Ooooh, she was a *screenwriter*. Throw a stick in Hollywood, you’ll hit ten of them. And they’ll all ask if you’re a producer’s or movie star’s assistant, and can you hook them up?

Stop it, Lily.

I hugged my arms around me and scolded myself in my head. I only hated her because she made me feel small, and unattractive by comparison, and like a loser with nothing going on in my life.

If she’s a Nobody... then what does that make YOU?

A comet, out in space, cold and alone, not belonging anywhere.

And then the sun came back out.

I felt his hand, warm on my shoulder, before I heard his voice. “Hey, my little escape pod.”

I looked around at him and gave him a smile, not just of happiness, but of relief.

“Almost got stuck in fairyland?”

“They would not shut up about *this* producer who had a deal wherever, or *that* studio guy they could introduce me to,” he groaned. Then he took a closer look at me. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. I just...”

I looked around the room.

“...I don’t really fit in here.”

Connor smiled. “Neither do I.”

“Oh my GOD, you *so* fit in here.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You saying I’m a money-obsessed, shallow, opportunistic narcissist who’s only interested in what he can get out of other people?”

I knew it was a joke, and tried to play along.

“Well, when you put it like *that*, it sounds bad.”

It didn’t quite come out as funny as I wanted, so I just tried honesty instead. “I just meant they’re the ‘Beautiful People.’ That’s how you fit in.”

He moved in close and put his arms around my waist – in full view of everyone in the room.

My heart beat faster.

“Well, you’re beautiful, so you should fit right in, too,” he smiled.

My heart beat even faster.

“That’s not what I meant,” I protested mildly.

“Oh... you just wanted to keep up the pity parade for a little bit?”

I glared at him, then deflated a little. “...kind of.”

“Well, since neither of us fits in, you want to have a little fun?”

Now my heart was racing, but not in a good way. In a *terrified* way. “What do you mean?”

“You wanted to meet some famous people, right? Let’s go crash some conversations.” He turned around and scouted the room. “Who do you want to talk to first?”

I knew he would do it, too.

The thought of barging in on a movie star’s conversation was freaking me out – but if there was anyone who could pull it off, it was Connor. And he wouldn’t even have to drop his last name.

But really, that wasn't what I wanted.

"I just want to go back to the hotel," I whispered. "...and be with you."

He looked back at me and smiled. A *big* smile.

"That's what I want, too." He jerked his head slightly. "C'mon, let's get outta this dump."

I giggled lightly, and he pulled me to his side as we walked towards the door.

"You knooow..." he whispered seductively, "we could totally make our own film..."

"No."

He put one hand up in the air like he was framing a shot. "'Lights – camera – action!'

"NO."

He laughed again.

Johnny suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Connor nodded at him, Johnny made a face like *Thank GOD*, then turned around and preceded us as we walked towards the door.

I was expecting Mr. Lewis Vonder to come running up and exclaim about leaving too early, but I guess he was off talking up somebody else about financing his movies.

The one excellent thing that happened as we walked out was I saw the woman in the red dress again. There were a couple of people partly obscuring my view of her, so I don't think she saw me at first – but she sure as hell saw Connor. I knew this because her whole face lit up and her body language changed, from stiff and bored to *Hello, Sailor!* She lifted her champagne glass up a little, oh-so-elegantly, and I could see the wheels turning as she planned her opening salvo.

Then we passed the edge of the group, and she saw me on Connor's arm.

I wish I'd had a picture of the surprise on her face. I would have kept it on my phone for whenever I needed a lift.

“Kiss me,” I whispered to Connor.

“What?”

“Kiss me, and make it good.”

“Yes ma’am.”

He turned to me, put one arm around my waist, let the other hand cradle the back of my neck, and laid one on me right there in the middle of the giant hallway.

My head tipped back slightly and I felt his body press into me as he locked onto my lips and his tongue found mine.

After about 20 seconds of breathtaking bliss, he pulled away and looked into my eyes. “How was that?”

I opened my eyes dreamily. “That... was *awesome*.”

He grinned, took my arm again, and escorted me towards the door.

I take it back – I didn’t want a picture of the blonde woman’s picture from before, I wanted it *after* the kiss.

She looked like all her notions of what constituted Reality had been ripped away in one fell swoop.

And her mouth was hanging open even more than mine when I first walked into the party.

I gave her a smug smile as we passed by.

Take that, bitch.

Yes, the whole thing was petty.

Yes, it was childish.

Yes, I knew it ultimately came from a lack of self-confidence on my part.

But DAMN it felt good.

29

We arrived safe back at the hotel, much to Johnny's relief. He made us promise not to leave the room without telling him, then said goodnight and went into his room across the way.

"It's early, only ten o'clock," Connor said. "What do you want to do?"

"Dessert."

"Literal, or figurative?"

"Mmmmm. Both."

So we ordered up room service: a bottle of champagne and a selection of lovely things – the most perfect creme brulee I'd ever tasted, strawberries in whipped cream... and more chocolate.

We sat on the sofa in the main room, lit only by the lights of the city, and alternated between kisses and feeding each other bits of the desserts.

I was tipsy again when I purred suggestively, "Well, we did what *I* wanted to do... so what do *you* want to do?"

"Well... we could get that camera and –"

"NO."

He laughed. "What was your list again? The list of 'don'ts'? Nothing painful... nothing degrading..."

"No 'in through the out door,'" I said.

"I don't recall movies being on that list."

"And nothing that can go up on the internet. Rule number four."

He grinned. "Well, what if what I wanted to do bent your rules a little bit?"

I froze with a strawberry halfway to my mouth. "Connor, I'm *really* not comfortable with any sort of pictures... or

videos...”

“That’s not what I was talking about.”

I put the strawberry down. “Then... what *are* you talking about?”

“Remember what I said earlier, at dinner? About you being physical?”

I tensed up. “...spanking?”

He just smiled.

“Ehhhh... I’m not really turned on by the idea of that...”

“Well, you probably only know the *regular* way it’s done.”

I was amused. “Oh, so you have a *special* way that’s *ooohhh* so much better.”

“Damn straight.”

In spite of myself, I was a little intrigued. “Which is...?”

“Well, first off, I like to alternate between light, sensual caresses, and tiny little slaps. Just enough to feel it.”

“Uh huhhhh...?”

“But the thing is, you won’t know which one is coming. I want you to anticipate one thing... but you don’t *know*. And I want to make you wait. I want you to lie there, not knowing whether you’re going to feel my fingers softly caressing you... or maybe my tongue licking you slowly... or the tiniest little slap. Just enough to highlight when I caress you again.”

I swallowed. Maybe it was because I was edging over into ‘drunk’ territory, but... it kind of sounded *goood*.

“Not too much, though?” I asked, my voice thick.

“No. You’re in total control the whole time.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, right.”

He grinned. “No, you are. If you say ‘lighter,’ I go lighter. If you say ‘harder,’ I go harder. If you say ‘no more,’ then I quit. The only thing *I’m* in control of... is whether I touch you or kiss you down there... or whether I do something else.”

My mouth suddenly felt dry, and I took a sip of champagne. “I think you like it because *you’re* in control.”

“That doesn’t mean you won’t like it.”

“No...” I admitted.

He stared into my eyes. “There’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?”

I stayed quiet, thinking it over.

“It’s okay, never mind,” he said, and grinned. “You just asked what I – ”

“Okay,” I said.

He tilted his head as though he hadn’t heard correctly. “... what?”

“I said ‘okay.’ I’ll try it.”

“Really.”

“Yes. But if I don’t like it – ”

“Then we stop. Immediately.”

“...okay.”

“But first I want you to do something.”

I frowned. “What?”

“Go take a bath.”

I reared back. “Uhhh – *why?* Is that a hint?!”

He laughed. “No. Just... go take a nice sensual shower or bath. And be sure to wash *everywhere.*”

I looked at him from out of the corners of my eyes, like *Whatchoo talkin’ ‘bout, Willis?*

“Um... okay... are you going to come with me?”

He settled back into the couch. “No... this is where *you* make *me* wait.”

I bit my lip, thinking it over.

“But if you keep doing that,” he growled, moving over next to me and seizing me in his arms, “I’m not going to be *able* to wait.”

He kissed me softly, then with more heat, and I melted into him – until he broke it off.

“Go take a bath,” he whispered.

“Fine,” I snapped, stood up, and tipsily made my way to the bathroom.

30

I drew a nice, hot bubble bath (courtesy of a lilac-smelling liquid in a bottle by the tub), pinned up my hair, and luxuriated for a few minutes.

My mind kept wandering, though, to what he planned to do.

I was both excited and a little bit nervous.

When he'd originally brought it up, I had a flashback of a rerun of *Ally McBeal* I'd seen when I was a teenager. The weird little nerdy lawyer was dating the super-hot blonde lawyer, and she wanted to be spanked. He'd resisted it for most of the episode, and then *wham*, out of nowhere, he'd grabbed a hairbrush and whaled away on her fanny when she wasn't expecting it.

Needless to say, she was not pleased.

But she *was* quite surprised.

I know the scene had been played for laughs, but that had been my only image of spanking. And it seemed weird, and laughable, and kind of dopey.

But what Connor had described...

...that hadn't sounded dopey.

It sounded kind of hot.

So, despite how wonderful the bath felt, and how amazing it smelled, my curiosity got the better of me. I lathered myself up everywhere, every nook and cranny (I was still sulking from my assumption that he was just politely telling me I needed some freshening up downstairs, or my pits did, or something). Then I got out, took a quick shower to wash off the remaining suds, and toweled off.

I was going to come out in one of the terrycloth robes, but I decided to wrap myself in a towel instead. I figured it was sexier: he would see my bare shoulders, the top of my chest,

and all of my legs. That would be a *bit* more enticing than a full-body cover-up.

So I walked out of the bathroom, lightheaded from the heat and the champagne, and stopped dead in my tracks.

Housekeeping had made up the bed while we were out to dinner. It had still been made when I went to take my bath, but Connor had pulled back the sheets so that it was just one wide-open expanse of soft cloth.

There were candles on both sides of the bed – tiny tea lights floating in a glass bowl. It was gorgeous, with just enough illumination to make the room look mysterious, warm, and romantic.

And over in the corner, Connor sat in a chair, waiting.

He had taken off his shoes and socks and untucked his shirt, unbuttoning it all the way down the front. He sat there barefoot, practically barechested, sipping something amber-colored from a round, short glass... and when I walked in the room, I saw his eyes lift to take me in.

He just sat there, watching... but his eyes glowed in the candlelight.

Then he slowly stood.

God, he was beautiful.

He was the essence of masculinity, his hair slightly disheveled, his chiseled muscles cut by shadow under the white shirt.

“Get on the bed,” he said huskily, his voice thick with desire, as he put down the glass.

I went over and sat on the edge of the bed, my insides jumping with butterflies, my gaze roving up and down that beautiful chest, up to his eyes, and then back down to those gorgeous abs.

I wanted to touch them *so bad*.

“Not like that,” he whispered. “Turn around so you’re kneeling on the bed.”

That made me even more nervous, but I stood up, turned around, and kneeled on my knees, my body straight up in the air.

“Now bend over,” he said.

I blushed. “Um, that’s not going to be my most flattering –”

“*Quiet,*” he ordered.

Not mean, but... firmly.

“No talking,” he said.

I gritted my teeth and leaned over on all fours. At least I still had the towel still around me... but I was basically giving away a full peep show down below.

As he walked towards the bed, he shed his shirt on the ground. I watched, my mouth beginning to water, as I saw all the muscles move in his arms and shoulders, like a panther stalking its prey.

He stepped behind me and I tensed up, my eyes wincing, preparing for the first slap.

Instead, he leaned over and kissed my neck. Softly, sweetly. Romantically.

A flush of pleasure raced through me.

And then he placed one hand on my shoulder and pushed softly.

There was no way I could have resisted him if he’d truly pushed hard, but he didn’t. He was just letting me know what he wanted, with a minimum of force.

So I gave it to him. I sank down so that my face and forearms were now against the bed, with my ass the highest point of my body.

I wasn’t exactly happy about it... though I have to admit, I *was* a little turned on by that kiss.

That, and how he took control of me.

And I was damn glad I'd taken that bath and lathered up *everywhere*.

Then, slowly, he knelt down behind me.

I braced again and winced...

...and felt his fingertip, cool and soft, caress me from the curve of my left cheek all the way down the back of my thigh.

He took his time. It tickled... but it also made me want more.

Then his other hand slowly enveloped my right cheek. (Not my face, by the way, just to be clear.)

He was soft, like he was cradling something with infinite care.

And his whole hand moved down the back of my right thigh.

Okay, if this was spanking, I could get into this.

I waited... and nothing happened. I winced –

And then I felt his lips, soft and firm, as they kissed my left cheek. A long, steady pressure.

Oh my God.

His fingertips played softly over both cheeks, so gentle and seductive... and as the tickle and excitement of his touch moved down the backs of my thighs, his face touched my right cheek – and he licked. Lightly. Softly.

I breathed out a little sigh.

His hands moved up to my torso, found the fold in the towel, and undid it so that it fell away from my body and onto the bed.

I was lying there, completely naked, with my ass in the air.

And I liked it.

He licked me again, this time on the inside of my thigh, slowly traveling up to my lips. I was just getting ready for the delicious pleasure of him licking me all over when I felt it.

The first little slap.

My eyes widened.

It wasn't much more than a hard pat.

It didn't hurt, not at all.

But then, while I was recovering from the surprise, I felt his tongue... *down there*.

So light, so gentle, just barely touching my lips.

I gasped as the tip of his tongue parted me the tiniest bit.

Then the pleasure disappeared, and I felt another little slap... this time harder.

"Alright?" he whispered.

"Yes," I whispered back.

His hands began running over my back, and he began to kiss my cheeks again, slowly at first, alternating kisses and licks, and my eyes closed with the growing excitement –

Slap.

My eyes jolted open again.

That had felt kind of... *good*.

Like the vibrations were jostling something deep inside me.

"Too much?" he whispered.

I shook my head, moving it back and forth against the sheets. "No."

His hands reached through my legs, and his hands came up around my breasts, taking my nipples in his palms. He began to fondle me, softly, slowly, sensually –

And I felt his tongue lick at my lips again.

But wetter.

More urgent.

And this time, I felt him plunge deeper.

I gasped with pleasure.

One hand stayed on my left breast, gently massaging it, but the other hand withdrew.

I waited, caught between the luscious bliss as he licked me below, and the anticipation of the brief sting of his hand on my skin.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

The not knowing was unbearable.

And then he slapped me again.

Harder.

Jostling me deeper.

But the second after he did, his tongue plunged *deep* inside me.

I cried out from the slight pain, and moaned louder from the pleasure.

He pulled out.

“Are you okay?”

“Don’t stop,” I begged.

I could almost *hear* him grin, I swear to God.

And then he began to fuck me with his tongue.

Moving it in, and out, and in, and out, letting it slip out and lick my lips, barely touch my clit, then slip in, and out, and in, and out.

All the while, his head was moving. Like his hips would if he were thrusting inside me.

Now, in the present, I’m super-embarrassed thinking about it. About what he was seeing.

But sweet Lord O’Mighty if I gave a damn about that at the time.

I just laid there, my rear end in the air, bucking back and forth as he slammed lightly into me, his tongue going deeper and deeper, teasing me, making me want him even more.

And every so often, a sharp little *slap!* against my rear end, mixing just a tiny bit of pleasure with pain, jostling me deep inside, adding an extra little *unh* to the sweet ecstasy of his tongue licking me inside and out, dancing across my lips and clit and deep inside me.

Then his tongue withdrew... and I felt his fingers slide inside me, like the other night when he took me at the window. They curled downward, stroking my g-spot, revving up my desire even further, sending little liquid bits of fire all the way down to my toes.

I was moaning pretty loudly when he did it.

He trailed his tongue to the back end of my lips... and then softly licked upwards.

To *back THERE.*

My eyes shot open wide.

“WHOA,” I said, though my voice came out kind of strangled.

“Please,” he whispered.

“I don’t...” I started, but never quite finished, because his fingers were still stroking my g-spot, building up the incredible blissful pleasure, never letting up.

I looked back at him. It was quite a feat, lying in that position and craning my head back at that angle – and an even bigger feat to keep any sort of presence of mind, considering how he kept stroking me, caressing me, pushing me closer and closer to orgasm.

He saw me move and looked right at me, his eyes halfway between demanding and begging.

“*Please,*” he whispered insistently.

I lay there, struggling between the rising ecstasy between my legs and the storm of negative thoughts in my mind.

No!

It's bad!

He can't do THAT!

It's dirty!

It's naughty!

But the look in his eyes...

The wanting, the lusting, the *needing*...

It pushed me over the edge.

I gave in.

"...just... a little..." I whispered, and closed my eyes as another wave of bliss started rising through me.

He touched me so lightly at first, I wasn't sure he was touching me at all. Just the tip of his tongue.

Then a little more pressure.

And all the while, his fingers caressing me inside, making me feverish with pleasure.

Then a little more pressure...

...and it felt *good*.

I think I was shocked by that as much as I was by the fact he was actually doing it.

His tongue traced softly back down to my lips as his fingers still moved inside me, filling me, moving almost in a circular way along with the curling motion that was driving me crazy.

Then he licked back up, then down to my lips, then up again...

...and then he softly entered me.

I moaned.

It was weird, it was wrong, it was bad, it was hot, it was *so* hot, it was kind of distracting, it was – I don't know. It was

everything all at once. Soft, and light, and wet, and warm, and utterly wrong, bad, slutty, sinful, not what good girls do –

– and I was loving it.

His tongue began to thrust softly inside me as his fingers brought me to a fever pitch. I could feel his smooth face press into me over and over and over, just the way his hips might slap against me if he were thrusting inside me doggy-style. And his fingers were making me crazy, filling me up, pressing against me, as he was doing that *other* thing, my whole body awash in crazy sensations, and then suddenly I came, my whole body bucking and trembling and on fire of the sweetest kind.

I screamed into the sheets, grabbing them between my fingers, gripping them, holding on for dear life until the glorious convulsions wracking my body slowly abated, and just left my thighs trembling with weakness.

“Stop, stop,” I choked out, and put a hand back there to stop him.

He did, immediately, and I fell over to the side quivering.

He slowly crawled up the bed, rubbing his face on the sheets before he started kissing me along my back.

He peeked over the top of my arm like a mischievous little boy who knew he shouldn't have done something... but enjoyed doing it anyway.

“You're...” I whispered, looking at him.

“I'm what?” he asked, resting his chin on my arm.

“You're *bad*,” I said in a low voice, with just a throaty bit of lust mixed in.

He grinned. “I think you're bad, too.”

I shook my head ‘no,’ though it was hard to do with one side resting against the sheets.

He rolled me over onto my back and slid on top of me. “I think you *are*,” he whispered, and began to kiss my breasts.

“No... I'm a good girl...”

“No... no, I’m pretty sure you’re a *very* bad girl.”

I moaned as he sucked on my nipples, and my eyes rolled up into my head... and then I seized his face in my hands and brought him up so I could look him in the eyes.

“Why did you do that?” I whispered.

“Because I like it.”

“Why do you like it?”

He grinned even wider. “Because I’m *bad*.”

I bit my lip, then let my hand rove down towards his pants.

He got a confused look on his face. “What are you doing?”

I smirked as I undid the zipper. I could feel him straining against the cloth, he was so hard. “I think you know.”

“But... I thought you were sore...”

“Strangely enough, that seems to have disappeared,” I whispered as I took him in my hand and began to stroke him softly along his shaft. It was hot and long and thick, and the head was slightly wet and slippery. He’d been so turned on, he had soaked both his boxers and the front of his pants with his lubrication.

I pulled him over onto me. He propped himself up on his forearms, and I positioned myself in place and opened my legs wide.

The whole time, he stared into my eyes.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

In answer, I took the swollen head of his shaft and slid it across my drenched lips and put it right between my thighs.

He groaned, and gingerly inched forward.

My eyes rolled back in my head again as I felt him enter me, filling me.

He breathed hard as he moved slowly in, then slowly out.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

I grabbed his hair and pulled him down so his ear was right by my lips.

“Connor...” I whispered.

“...yes?”

“...I want you to *fuck* me,” I breathed into his ear.

He pulled back and stared me in the eyes. At first I was worried that he would react negatively – in fact, I was already amazed and a little ashamed I had said it – but a look of shocked joy slowly spread across his face.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard you say that,” he grinned.

“Didn’t you hear?” I whispered. “I’m *bad*.”

He grinned even more, then kissed me as he moved deeper inside me.

Within seconds he was thrusting hard and fast, and my orgasm was building again.

I shrieked and moaned and cried out in pleasure. He slowed down... only to start again, faster, then slower, never letting me know what was going to happen next.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop,” I cried out, and he drove into me harder and faster, his breathing ragged in my ear.

I could feel it building inside me, fast, hot, sweet, full of light, and as I was about to climax, I whispered in his ear, “Come inside me, come inside me.”

He shouted, a howl and a moan mixed into one, and I tipped over the edge as I felt him burst inside me, pulsing over and over, matching my explosions with his own.

We clutched at each other, kissing blindly, lips on lips, lips on cheeks, lips on ears, until he collapsed on top of me, and I clutched his head to me and ran my fingers down his back...

...with a very naughty smile on my face.

31

Afterwards, we lay there in bed, me by his side and running my fingers over his chest.

“Well, now I know why you had me take a bath,” I mused.

He laughed. “See, it wasn’t so bad, was it?”

I poked him in the ribs, and he made a *wuUAaah* sound as he arched away.

“You broke the rules,” I said in a pissed-off voice.

“Nooo, I just *bent* them a little.”

“No ‘in’ through the out door.”

“I think you came up with that rule for something slightly... larger.”

It was true, but...

“This better not turn into ‘give ‘em an inch and they’ll take a mile.’”

“It won’t,” he said with a smile. “And it wasn’t degrading, was it?”

“Nooo, but it *was* a little bit painful.”

“What,” he frowned, “the – ”

“NO, NOT THAT,” I said, blushing furiously, not wanting him to name what he’d done to me. “Just the... the spanking part.”

“Did you like it, though?”

I thought about how to answer. “...yyyyes...”

“Ha HAA!” he crowed.

“ – but that’s not a license to get all crazy on me all the time,” I scolded him.

He grinned. “Only on special occasions.”

“Great.”

“You can always say ‘no.’”

“Mm,” I grunted noncommittally. “So, other than more kinky stuff, what do you want to do tomorrow?”

He lay there in silence for so long, I wondered if he’d fallen asleep. “Are you awake?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I think... I’d like to be normal.”

I frowned and propped myself up on one elbow. “What? You’re normal.”

He looked at me like *Come on*.

“Well... you’re *better* than normal,” I amended. “In bed, you’re MUCH much better than normal.”

That brought a smile back to his face. “Thank you – so are you,” he said, pulled me on top of him, and kissed me sweetly.

After I nestled back down by his side, though, I asked, “What do you mean by ‘normal’?”

“I mean I don’t want to be Connor Templeton,” he said, staring up at the dark ceiling. “I don’t want to drive around with a bodyguard, I don’t want to be ‘the Rich Guy’... I just want to be a normal guy out with his woman, out on a normal date.”

His woman.

My heart swelled in my chest.

“What do most people do for a date in LA?” he asked me, his voice sincere. “What would you do if you went out on a date with a guy in Accounting, or somebody you met at the gym?”

“Um, I don’t go to the gym.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Go out for coffee or a movie, I guess.”

“Okay, not *that* normal.”

I poked him in the ribs, and he laughed.

“Let’s do something fun... but something you’d do with just anyone,” he said. “Nothing crazy, nothing that requires a ton of money... just a fun, laidback... *normal* day.”

“So you want *me* to take you out on a date, huh?”

He looked down at me and grinned. “Yeah. I’ll pay, but you choose something – ”

“ – normal. Got it. Do you even *have* any normal clothes?”

He thought for a second. “...no. Not in my suitcase.”

“Okay, then... that’s where we’ll start,” I yawned.

“It’s a date,” he said, and kissed me once more.

And we lay like that, in each other’s arms, until I drifted off to sleep.

32

We started off the morning with a room service breakfast in the penthouse.

“This isn’t exactly normal,” I pointed out as I ate a bite of the best French toast I’d ever tasted. “In fact, it’s distinctly *abnormal*.”

“Okay, normal starts *after* breakfast, then.”

“In the Bentley?”

“You think you’re sooo clever, don’t you?”

I just gave him a bratty little grin.

“Okay, *after* the limo ride,” he said. “Once we get wherever we’re going.”

Johnny was definitely *not* on board when he found out about it.

“NO.”

“Yes,” Connor said calmly.

“Come on, man – last night was bad enough, but you want to go – where are we going?”

“Santa Monica. Third Street Promenade, then probably to Venice afterwards,” I said.

“Oh, *great*. Crowds, no way to control access to you, wide open spaces – will you at least wear the bulletproof vest?”

“NO, that’s *definitely* not normal. And you’re going to have to change your clothes,” Connor said, pointing to Johnny’s suit and tie.

He frowned. “What?”

“Yeah, you don’t look normal.”

“...*what?!*”

“Normal. It’s the theme of the day. You gotta look normal.”

Johnny shook his head. “Oh, *hell* no.”

But he ended up giving in.

We drove down to Santa Monica, which is one of the beach communities in LA. Very expensive houses and fairly pricey shops and restaurants – though upper-middle-class pricey, not like Rodeo Drive or Beverly Hills. After we parked the Bentley (which got some stares, let me tell you), we went down to an Urban Outfitter’s on Third Street. The entire avenue is blocked off to traffic for half a mile, and thousands of people were walking along in the Sunday morning sunshine.

Inside, I made Connor trade in his dark slacks for some cargo shorts that showed off his muscular calves. He also bought some leather flip-flops and a loose linen shirt. Me, I chose a red tank top and blue jean cut-offs.

Johnny was resistant to the whole thing, but Connor made him pick. He settled on a black T, a dark Hawaiian shirt that hid his gun holster, green shorts, and some Chuck Taylors.

“Thank you,” I said as we exited in our new ‘normal’ outfits, our designer threads stuffed in Urban Outfitters bags.

“You’re welcome,” Connor smiled. “Thank *you* for indulging me.”

I raised one eyebrow. “Why do I get the feeling you’re not just talking about the clothes?”

He just laughed at that one.

We wandered the street, with Johnny staying about ten feet behind us the entire time, scanning the crowd restlessly from behind his black sunglasses. I forgot about him after a few minutes, and he just let us be.

We went into one of my favorite stores on the Promenade, a toy shop that has *everything*, from all your regular Barbies and toys to giant statues of Star Wars characters. There were hundreds of different models, antique dolls with beautiful

dresses, chess sets painted to mimic Alice In Wonderland and Star Trek characters, Japanese sci-fi mecha, and all sorts of crazy foreign toys.

We went in several funky clothing shops, a couple of bookstores, and the Apple store, too. When Connor saw me playing with a \$2500 laptop, he asked, “You like it?”

“It’s nice.”

“I’ll get it for you.”

I gave him a look. “That’s not a normal date thing.”

He shrugged. “We can make an exception – ”

“ – but we’re not going to.”

He grinned and kissed me. “Okay, okay. Window shopping only.”

“I don’t need any Microsoft products, either,” I joked.

Connor just rolled his eyes and groaned.

We ate at a cool little bistro out in the sun – nothing fancy, but good food. Then we went back to the limo and Johnny drove us to the Venice Beach promenade.

If you’ve never been to Venice Beach, it’s basically the weirdest place in all of Los Angeles. Maybe all of Southern California. The area is still largely rent-controlled, so you have all these stoners and hippies who live in cheap apartments and hang out in one of the priciest real estate neighborhoods in the country.

A promenade stretches along the coast. On one side is the beach and a grassy lawn filled with palm trees. The other side looks like it was frozen in time circa 1972. The shops are dingy, slightly rundown, with bright, crazy colors painted over the cement walls. We strolled along the head shops, smelling marijuana in the air, browsed the t-shirt stalls, listened to crazy bongo players, watched artists hawking their paintings, and saw the Rastafarian guy who rollerblades up and down the promenade playing an electric guitar with an amp strapped to his back.

“I don’t think this is ‘normal,’” Connor commented.

“Too much for you?” I teased.

“No. I’m just stating the obvious, that’s all.”

We hung out there until the sun started to get lower in the sky, then we strolled north along the beach.

“Don’t get in the water,” I warned.

“Why?” he asked, concerned.

“It’s gross. Stuff gets dumped in it.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Too much normal, if you ask me.”

I thought of making a joke about us going to Fiji or Aruba, then caught myself.

There wasn’t going to *be* anything after this.

It made me incredibly sad. Like, verge-of-tears sad. I knew the weekend was coming to a close... but we weren’t there yet, so I pushed the thought away.

There’s a set of adult-sized jungle gym rings near the Santa Monica pier. I egged Connor on until he finally attempted to swing from ring to ring. It took him a couple of tries, but he made it down all eight rings and then back. I just enjoyed the view of his forearms flexing and his pecs bulging at the neck of his shirt.

Then we continued down to Santa Monica pier. It’s huge and gaudy, but incredibly fun, with a giant ferris wheel as the centerpiece. The lights had already come on in the dusk, and the massive circle of orange and yellow lights turned slowly against the purple sky.

We ate corndogs, drank sodas, played Whack-a-Mole at one of the video arcades, walked along and watched the ocean churning twenty feet below us, and then turned to the rides. First the rollercoaster, which is small but kind of fun, owing to the amazing view more than the ride itself. And then we stood in line for the ferris wheel.

“This is a new sensation,” Connor commented.

“What?”

“Standing in line.”

“Ha! See, normal *sucks*.”

“Actually,” he said, “this day has been one of the most fun I can remember... in years. My entire life, maybe.”

I blushed a little, and my heart melted.

“Except for last night,” he added with a grin. “And yesterday afternoon by the pool. And the night before that...”

I blushed furiously and smacked his arm as he laughed.

Finally we got on the ride and rode up into sky, watching the sea stretch out in front of us, with the sun halfway below the horizon, and the sky on fire with orange and red clouds. I clutched his arm tighter and tighter the higher we went.

“You’re not scared of heights, are you?”

“Yes!” I half cried out, half laughed.

“Then why’d you want to come up here?”

“Because it’s worth it.”

After several times around, the ride stopped with us at the very top so people could get off and on at the bottom of the wheel. As we were hanging there, suspended midair, he turned to me, brushed back my hair from my face, and kissed me.

And kissed me.

And kissed me.

The warm breeze blew over us, and the sun dipped below the horizon, and the world faded away as we kissed the entire time, until the wheel started again and the ride was finally over.

33

Johnny refused to leave us there unprotected while he went and got the limo, so we took a cab back to the parking lot.

“You’re kind of the third wheel here, man,” Connor joked as we all sat scrunched in the back of the taxi.

“After what you put me through today, you and I are not talking,” Johnny said. I thought he was seriously angry, but then I caught his eye, and he gave me a wink and a quick smile before turning his face to stone again.

We got in the limo and started back towards Los Angeles. Now the feelings that I’d been trying to push away the entire day suddenly reared their ugly head in full force.

It was coming to an end.

I didn’t have him for much longer.

In fact, I would probably never see him again.

I snuggled in tight beside him, with his arm wrapped around me, and I tried to be happy, thinking about all the amazing things I’d done and felt in the last 48 hours...

...but all I could think of was how much I was going to be hurting very, very soon.

Connor noticed I was glum, but he didn’t comment on it. Instead, he chattered on as though nothing was wrong.

Which depressed me a little bit more.

It seemed like he wasn’t that sad to see the weekend end...

...which just made me feel alone.

“That was incredible,” he said as he held me close.

“You never did anything like that?”

“No. Not my entire life.”

“You’ve never been on a ferris wheel before?” I asked, my surprise overwhelming my sad mood.

“Well, yeah... but I never got to kiss a beautiful girl at the top of one.”

I smiled and rested my head against his chest, the sadness turning bittersweet.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

“Oh... it’s near Hollywood and Vine. But I left my work clothes back at the hotel – ”

“Johnny already got them dry-cleaned at the Dubai. They’re in the trunk.”

“...oh.”

For some reason that only made me more upset. Like he was so eager to get rid of me that he had made sure there was no reason to return to the hotel.

No last night together.

I almost started crying.

34

We pulled up in front of my apartment building in relative silence. Connor seemed to sense how distraught I was. I don't know if he really knew how I felt – maybe he thought I was moody.

In reality, I was already grieving for what I was about to lose.

Connor hit the intercom button. “Johnny, could you just wait in here and pop the trunk?”

“I don't think – ”

“If I survived the day at Venice Beach, I think I'll be okay here.”

“Fine,” Johnny grumbled.

I got out of the door on my own, and Connor followed me out.

“Can I say goodbye to him?” I asked.

“Who, Johnny?” Connor asked, shocked. “Yeah... sure.”

I walked around to the driver's side window and tapped on the glass. The window rolled down, and Johnny looked up at me, a little puzzled. “Did you need anything?”

“I just wanted to say it was really nice meeting you, and I'm sorry we made your job harder,” I said with an awkward smile.

He looked at me with the same shocked expression as Connor. “Uh... that's okay, Lily.” Then he smiled. “I'm glad you had fun. You had fun, right?”

I nodded and smiled. I didn't speak, because I was afraid I might start crying.

“By the way,” he said, “I think you might need this.”

He leaned over to the passenger seat, then turned back around and handed me Klaus's badge.

The one I'd used to get into the boardroom.

My eyes bugged out. I'd forgotten all about it.

That would have been a disaster.

And quite possibly still *would* be a disaster.

"It was... with your clothes," he said apologetically.

"Thank you," I said. And then I stuck out my hand.

He smiled even broader and shook my hand through the window. "I'll see you around."

We both knew that wasn't true. But I let it go.

"Bye," I whispered, and went around to the back of the car.

I was steeling myself, preparing for the 'It was great, babe, see ya' speech I was sure was coming. A last kiss on the sidewalk, and then me walking back alone to my apartment.

Instead, I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw Connor there holding a bunch of fancy paper shopping bags stuffed with clothes. Over his right arm hung my work clothes, encased in plastic wrap.

"Can you get the trunk? My hands are kind of full," he said.

I stared at him, then at the clothes.

They were the designer stuff that had been hanging on the rack – 90% of which I hadn't even worn.

"I can't take those!" I cried out.

"Why not? I can't wear them."

"You can return them!"

"Whatever," he said, and rolled his eyes. "Get the trunk and come on. The button's down there by the latch, on the inside."

I pushed the button and the trunk whirred closed on its own. I was annoyed by how non-mushy he was being until he

turned around and stepped up onto the sidewalk with the bags.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

He turned back around. “You live here, right?”

“Yyyeah...”

“I’m walking you to your apartment.”

My heart did a somersault in my chest, and lots of mixed emotions coursed through me.

Joy that he wasn’t dumping me out there on the sidewalk...

Hope that maybe this wasn’t the very end...

And embarrassment – because billionaire Connor Templeton was about to see my grungy little apartment.

“Um... okay... just know that it’s not as fancy as what you’re used to...”

“It’s normal, right?” he grinned. “This is Normal Day.”

“You’re going native, huh?”

“Damn straight. All the way.”

I smiled in spite of myself, and led him up to the gate of my apartment building.

35

And then I realized I didn't have a key.

“Ohhh, man...”

I went over to the call box with a silent prayer for my roomie to be home. There was no reason she wouldn't be – despite the Friday clubbing, Anh was more of a homebody. Quiet, dependable, even-keeled.

She probably would have said the same about me just a couple of days ago.

She answered the intercom cautiously. “*Hello?*”

“Hey Anh, it's me. I'm here with... my friend...”

I saw Connor's smirk out of the corner of my eye.

“...and I don't have my key. Can you let us in?”

“*Sure!*”

BZZZZT. I opened the gate and led the way.

Anh met me at the door, eyes wide with curiosity. “Hey!”

“Hey,” I said, and gave her a little hug.

And then Connor walked up behind me, carrying the bags.

Anh's face went from happy and curious to dumbfounded.

I knew why. With his wind-tousled locks and glowing tan, and his gorgeous face and ripped muscles, Connor looked like a movie star out of one of our romantic comedy DVDs.

He didn't belong in our dumpy little two-bedroom apartment.

And yet, here he was.

“Hi, you must be Anh,” he smiled, correctly pronouncing her name ‘On.’

I was surprised. I'd talked about her a few times over the last couple of days, but I usually called her ‘my roommate.’ I

think I had only mentioned her name a couple of times – but he'd been listening.

“H-hi,” she stuttered. Connor set down a couple of bags and moved to shake her hand.

As she took it, I could see the stars in her eyes.

I turned back to look at him.

Yup, he was giving her the panty-dropping smile.

“Lily’s told me a lot about you,” he said.

“Oh... th-that’s nice,” she managed.

I looked around at the apartment, and saw the place I lived with new eyes. It wasn’t *ugly*, and our furniture wasn’t any worse than that of most other twenty-somethings just starting out in their first jobs... but after a weekend in the glitziest hotel in Los Angeles, I was struck by how drab it was.

How ordinary.

How normal.

“I’m... did you have fun?” Anh asked, turning her attention to me because she was too shy to say anything else to Connor.

“Very nice. We’re just gonna go to my room for a minute.”

“Okay,” she said with a stunned nod.

“Nice meeting you,” Connor said as he picked up the bags and walked past her.

“You too.”

“Where’s your room?” Connor asked me.

“Down the hall and on the right.”

As he stepped out of sight, I turned back to look at Anh.

She stood there in shock until he disappeared, and then she put on a face like *AAAAAAHHH!* and silently mouthed, *OH MY GOD!*

I put a finger up to my mouth in a silent *Shhhh*, and she gestured me along like *Go, go!* with a huge, goofy smile on

her face.

36

He walked into my bedroom and switched on the light, and I immediately felt self-conscious: what did he think of it? Was it too plain?

Duh, he was a billionaire. Of *course* it was too plain.

There wasn't much in the room – a bed, a cheap IKEA desk with my laptop, a wall mirror, another IKEA nightstand, and piles of unwashed clothes everywhere. The bed was a single, with a pink comforter with roses on it and pale pink sheets underneath. I hadn't made it when I left for work on Friday, so everything looked extra slovenly.

Great.

“Uh... please ignore the mess,” I said as I kicked clothes over into the corner.

I didn't touch the bed, though. I was afraid that doing so might be seen as some sort of... invitation, I guess.

And I wasn't exactly sure how I felt about that.

He put the bags on the floor and looked around. “Nice.”

“It's very sweet of you to lie,” I said with an obviously fake smile.

He laughed. “It's very... *normal*.”

“Greaaaaat.”

He moved over to the desk and picked up a framed picture of me at graduation with my brother and parents. “Is this your family?”

“Yeah.”

“You look... happy. Like you love each other.”

It was such a strange thing for him to say...

I frowned, perplexed. “We do.”

“That's good,” he nodded, and replaced the picture.

There was an open bank register on the desk with several checks still in the pack. He looked down at them for a second, then tapped them. “Don’t forget to pay your rent.”

“Ha! You don’t have to remind me of *that*.”

He smiled and stood there, silent and gorgeous, taking in the room.

I stood there, shy and miserable, with my arms wrapped around me, shielding myself from the pain I knew was coming.

I wanted it to end quick. I could feel the sadness rising up in me, and I wasn’t sure how long I was going to be able to stay in control.

And yet, on the other hand... I wanted him to stay there with me forever.

He looked at me. There was several feet between us.

“Lily,” he said softly.

I gazed into his blue eyes, and my heart started to break as I realized this might be the last time I ever got to look into them.

No, not ‘might be.’

This *was* the last time.

“I had a wonderful, wonderful time,” I said, with a smile that was right on the verge of tears.

“I did, too,” he said, and stood there looking at me.

I waited for him to bridge the gap between us – to come over and hug me, or give me one last kiss, or *something* – but he just stood there.

“Well...” I said, hoping he would pick up from there and say something. Not only was this horribly sad, it was awkward and uncomfortable and downright excruciating.

I looked over at the bed. Maybe he wanted to sleep with me one last time, but didn’t want to seem cheap or tacky about it.

I didn't want to... not fully, because it would be too heartbreaking...

...but I couldn't let him go. Didn't want to.

To hell with it.

I drifted over to my bed and let my fingers brush over the tangled sheets. Again, I hoped he would just pick it up from there. Step forward and seduce me, if we were going to do it –

“I want you to quit your job,” he suddenly blurted out.

My eyes got wide.

Not what I'd been expecting.

“W... what?” I asked, leaning forward as though I hadn't quite heard him correctly.

For the first time the entire weekend, he looked uncomfortable. Like a regular guy who wanted to say something, but was agonizing about saying it.

The man who would mock anyone, anytime, and say whatever the hell he wanted... who was as smooth as they came... was acting like a teenage boy who wanted talk to a girl but didn't know how.

“I... I've had a fantastic time this weekend,” he finally said.

My heart soared. “Me too.”

“And... I don't really want it to end.”

My heart went higher, and the mistiness in my eyes edged over from sadness to joy. “Me neither.”

“I... look, quit your job and come with me for awhile. I'll pay you \$20,000.”

A bucket of cold water dumped over me.

I stood there in shock.

Numb, cold, disbelieving shock.

“Um... I'm not an escort.”

I tried to sound insulted – which I was – but it came out more incredulous. Which I was, too.

He smiled. “I know you’re not, but – ”

“*But?!*” I said. The shock was wearing off now. “BUT?!”

He looked at me like *Cut it out*. “Look, I was just saying that because I want you to quit your job, and I know you need money to live – ”

“Why do you have to pay me?! Why can’t I just keep my job, and we just, I don’t know, *see* each other like normal people?” Now I was getting angry. “Isn’t that what you liked about today – that it was *normal?*”

He obviously didn’t like my tone – and I’ll bet he didn’t like being told ‘no’ in any way, shape, or form – because his face darkened. “I live in New York City. And, oh, by the way, I have to go to Europe later this week for business. God knows how long I’m going to be gone. So, when are you going to pop over for the night, huh?”

I faltered a bit. “Well... I don’t have to quit my job... I can just see you on the weekends when you get back.”

“That’s not what I want.”

A sick feeling was creeping through my belly. “Oh? What *do* you want?”

“I want you to come with me. Tonight.”

The sick feeling went away, and hope started to bloom. “For how long?”

He shrugged defensively, like I was asking some sort of unreasonable ‘chick’ question, and all my hope withered on the vine. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I could get a couple days off, maybe – ”

“First off, no you can’t, not from your asshole boss. Second, I don’t want a couple of days, I want you to be there with me, not worrying about your job, or when you have to go back – ”

“That job is how I survive.”

“Which is why I offered you the money,” he snapped, then put his hand to his forehead. “Look, I didn’t want it to be like this – ”

“Like what?” I asked, ice in my voice. “Like you were offering money to a whore?”

He dropped his hand and looked at me in shock. “That is *not* what it was like at *all* – ”

“Well, that’s what it felt like,” I said, and wrapped my arms around me again, trying to shut out the hurt feelings.

“I just want – ”

“You said you wanted me to come with you, but what does that mean? For how long?”

“I don’t know how long – ”

“Well, give me *something* – a day? A week? A month?”

“*I don’t know!*” he barked. “We’ll see how it goes!”

The ice was growing inside me now, the crystals branching off like the limbs of a tree, filling me slowly. “Oh... I see. I’m just supposed to be *convenient*, until you get tired of me.”

He was really angry now. “I don’t *know* how long – I just know that, right now, I don’t want ‘forever,’ okay?”

If my heart was frozen before, it shattered into pieces when he said that.

He must have seen it on my face, because I heard desperation creep into his voice. “That didn’t come out right.”

“I think it came out exactly the way you meant it.”

“All I’m saying is...”

He breathed out hard, then regrouped.

“You *knew* what I was asking Friday night! I said, ‘come with me this weekend.’ Not ‘let’s get married,’ not ‘let’s move in together’ – come with me for this *weekend*.”

“I know that.”

Yes, I'd known that at the time. It had bothered me, but I had accepted it.

There was just one problem: over the course of the last two days, all our time together had come to mean a whole lot more to me.

But it apparently didn't mean the same to him.

He stepped over to me and put his hands on my arms, and looked deep into my eyes. "All I'm saying differently this time is, come with me for a little while longer."

I felt like crying – but I didn't want to let him see it.

And the only way I could do that was if I let my anger out instead. "I'm not a prostitute."

He flinched, and his hands dropped away from my arms. "I never said you were! I never even implied it!"

"No, you just offered me money to extend my 'weekend contract.'"

He closed his eyes and grimaced like he was in pain. Then he opened them again and stared at me. "Look... I handled that badly. But I only said it because you're not going to quit that goddamn job of yours where you're wasting yourself –"

"I need the money!"

"Which is why I offered it to you, dammit!" he roared.

He scared me. I pulled away and wouldn't look at him.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low voice. "I shouldn't have shouted at you – I'm sorry."

I hugged my arms tight across my chest as I stared at the wall. I was hurting so badly, all I wanted to do was lash out.

So I did.

"I heard you don't pay a prostitute to sleep with you, you just pay her to go away. Is that what this is?"

"You're just not going to let that go, are you?" he asked bitterly.

“Is it so when you get tired of me, you can just toss me away and not have to feel guilty, because, hey, you already *paid me?*”

“Fuck you,” he said coldly.

I turned around and looked him dead in the eyes.

“No thanks,” I sneered. “Not for the price *you’re* offering, anyway.”

He glared at me.

And then... I saw it.

The pain, deep down inside his eyes. The vulnerability he hated to show.

He softened his voice as he said, “Please... I’m sorry. Let’s not do this. It was so wonderful up till now.”

I wanted to cry. I was doing a pretty good job of keeping a lid on it, but I still had to wipe away a tear as I whispered, “Yeah, it was... but I’m not for sale.”

“I never said you were.”

I flashed back to what he’d said about the redheaded maitre d’ at the restaurant:

It’s amazing how cheaply some people can be bought... and \$300 was her price.

I was bound and determined that he would *never* be able to afford my price.

Not with money, anyway.

“But you tried to buy me,” I said. “I think you buy a lot of people... but I’m not one of them.”

“I won’t deny that you’re right – about *other* people. But I know that money is an issue for you, and I wanted you not to have to worry about it.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“Then what do you want?”

I stared him straight in the eyes. “I want you.”

“You can have me – *and* not have to worry about a job for a few months!” he exclaimed, like *Why can't you see this is a win/win for everybody?!*

“No, I don't just want sex, or another week in bed, or at the hotel, or whatever.”

“You said you wanted *me* – ”

“I want *all* of you.”

There. I'd said it.

I'd been honest... if not exactly, 100% clear.

Up until that point, I hadn't admitted it, and I sure as hell wasn't going to say it out loud...

...but I had fallen in love with him.

He didn't react the way I wanted him to, though.

He looked worried and wounded and brokenhearted. “That's the one thing I can't give you,” he whispered.

A sob escaped my throat, and my whole body trembled. “Well, no amount of money's going to make up for that.”

He put his hands over his face and turned away, walked over into the corner.

I sat down on the bed, trying so hard not to cry. Not yet.

Just hold out a little while longer.

“Look,” he said, his voice weary and worn down, “regardless of what just happened here between us, do me a favor.”

“What,” I said, barely hanging on.

“Don't go into work tomorrow.”

I froze, and everything came surging back in one nightmare flood:

Klaus.

The report I hadn't done.

My phone and wallet at the office.

The doubtless dozens of furious texts and voice messages that would be on my cell tomorrow morning.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because... it’s probably going to get ugly.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s supposed to be a meeting tomorrow.”

“So?”

“So what they *think* is going to happen... isn’t going to happen.”

I stared at him. “The buyout.”

“I can’t say anything more, but... I don’t want you to be there.”

I thought of the report, of my cell phone full of venomous messages. “I’m probably going to lose my job anyway – but I’ll *definitely* lose it if I don’t go in.”

“Lily, just call in sick. Lie to them,” he pleaded. “Klaus is an asshole – don’t go in and let him take it out on you, because he *will*. All the shit’s going to roll downhill tomorrow, and you’re standing at the bottom of the heap.”

“I appreciate you warning me, but... I need my job,” I said.

“Forget your job. Come with me.”

I just looked up at him coldly.

He shook his head like he couldn’t believe what was going on in front of him.

Then he walked over, took my face in his hands, and kissed me softly on the lips.

I stiffened. I didn’t give anything back to him. Not that I didn’t want to – I *wanted* to melt into him, to say, *Forget everything I said, I’m coming with you* –

But I couldn’t.

Not after that big speech about not being able to be bought.

And not after how he'd hurt me.

He pulled away from me and looked into my eyes.

“Goodbye,” he whispered...

...and then he was gone.

I heard him say something to Anh in the next room, then I heard the front door open and shut.

And then I burst into tears.

37

By the time Anh rushed in, I was wailing like a wounded animal. I was doubled over, holding my stomach, like somebody had stabbed me.

It really felt like he had – but in my heart.

“Oh my God, Lily, what’s wrong?!” Anh cried out. She sank down beside me on the bed and put her arms around me, and pulled my head onto her shoulder.

“He – he – ”

But I couldn’t go on. I just sobbed for a minute as she stroked my hair and rocked me gently, like a mother with her child.

Finally I could speak. “He... he asked me to quit my job and go with him.”

“Um... okay, that’s kinda weird...”

“And he offered to pay me. Like a prostitute or something.”

I looked at Anh to see her reaction.

“Eww,” she said, curling up her lip a little.

“I know!” I sobbed. “Like, I don’t know, like I’m a hooker or something!”

“Um... this might not be the best question right now... but... he, like, didn’t give you any money for this weekend or anything, did he?”

“NO! How could you even *think* that?!”

She looked around at the bags of expensive clothes lying on the floor.

“Those were gifts!” I shouted. “Jesus, Anh, I didn’t have sex with a guy for *clothes*! I even told him to take them back, and he wouldn’t!”

She cringed. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry – it’s just, it’s really unusual for you to disappear for a weekend. Like, a *sexy* weekend. And with some stranger I’ve never met, and who *you* apparently met Friday night. And... not that you aren’t beautiful, Lily, you know I think you are... but *daaaaaamn*, girl, that guy was *hot!* Is he a male model or something?”

I looked up into her eyes and realized Anh didn’t know anything. Other than the fact that I’d stayed at the Dubai Hotel with him, and that we’d had sex.

“Anh... do you not know who that was?”

She started to look alarmed. “Nooo... why, should I?”

I gave a sharp little laugh. “I guess I didn’t know who he was, either, so why should you?”

Actually, my roommate ranked way higher on the ‘informed about world events and important persons’ scale than I did, so I just assumed she would know.

“You’re kind of freaking me out, Lily,” she said in a low voice.

“Have you ever heard of the Templetons?”

“What, those rich people who own everythOH MY GOD, is he related to them?!”

I nodded.

Her hand flew to her mouth. “...is he... rich?”

I nodded again.

“...*how* rich?”

“Rich enough to offer me \$20,000 to quit my job and go travelling with him for a week... or until he gets bored,” I added bitterly.

“Oh my *God*.”

“Yeah.”

“Um... again... maybe not the best question to ask you right now... but... why didn’t you?”

“ANH!”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry, but... why?”

I inhaled deeply, then blew it out in one shaky breath.
“Because I’m in love with him.”

There.

I *had* said it out loud.

“Oh,” Anh murmured, and nodded slowly. “Yeah, that would kind of be... demeaning and gross.”

“Yeah.”

She scrunched up her face like a three-year-old trying to understand a math problem. “Um... *how* long have you known him?”

I buried my face in my hands. “I know, I know, it’s stupid...”

“No, I didn’t say that... I just don’t understand. Any of it.”

So I told her the story, from start to finish.

38

“...wow,” she whispered.

“Yeah.”

She sat there in silence for a few seconds, then smiled sadly. “Well... you did the right thing.”

“Did I?”

“Of course you did.”

“How do you know?”

“Could you have taken that deal and respected yourself?”

I smiled faintly. Just like Anh to cut right to the heart of it.

“No.”

She shrugged sympathetically. “So there’s nothing you could have done but what you did. And it was the right thing.”

I wiped away a tear from my cheek. “You know what really sucks?”

“What?”

“I wonder if I really did. The right thing.”

Her voice was soft and full of pain. “Lily...”

“He didn’t mean it like that. I know he didn’t.”

“Maybe not, but he was still being an asshole.”

“Anh!”

I wasn’t used to my roommate using any profanity, no matter how mild.

“Well, he was. Who treats people like that?”

I was about to say something, but I didn’t really want to defend the guy who’d just ripped out my heart, so I kept quiet and cried a few silent tears instead.

Anh watched me carefully. “Maybe he was just a dumbass... not an asshole.”

I laughed a little. “Yeah.” Then I grew serious. “But if he was just being a dumbass... shouldn’t I overlook that?”

“Lily, he just wants you for the sex.” She saw my face twitch like she’d accidentally cut me. “I mean, not *just* for the sex... I’m sure he cares about you, otherwise he wouldn’t have gotten upset... but he only wants things short-term, and he wants them on *his* terms, and you don’t get a say in it. Whenever he was ready to dump you, it would’ve been, ‘Sayonora,’ and he would’ve never looked back.”

“But isn’t that the way it usually is? Somebody always dumps the other person.”

“Yeah, but the dumper doesn’t pay the dump-ee. Especially not upfront, with the understanding that they’re *going* to get dumped.”

I grinned ruefully. “Maybe they should. I would’ve at least gotten *something* out of a couple of my relationships that way.”

“Yeah,” she sighed, and hugged me. “Are you going to be okay?”

No.

Maybe.

Someday.

“Yes,” I nodded, and gave her a sad smile. “Thank you.”

She hugged me tight. “I’m so sorry this happened.”

“Yeah, me too. It sucks.”

“I know. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No... I just need some time...”

“I understand.”

“Um, I do kind of need a ride tomorrow to work, though. And early. Before anybody else gets in.”

She stared. “Are you really going? After everything you told me?”

“I have to. I’ll definitely get fired if I don’t.”

She shook her head. “Look, Connor might have been a dumbass, but he was smart about *that*. And that’s the one thing that makes me think he really does care about you. Do what he said and just lie. I’ll go in early and get your purse for you. We can come up with a story about how you got really sick and –”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No, I knew what I was doing when I got in his car Friday night. I’m not going to lie to get out of it. And they could check the cameras, and see I left with him... and I’m not going to let you get in trouble for me.”

“I would, you know. Get in trouble for you.”

I smiled. “I know. And I love you for it. But just like you said about ‘could I take that deal and still respect myself’ – if I don’t go in tomorrow, I can’t respect myself, either. I made my bed, I need to go lie in it.”

She breathed out hard and hugged me again. “Okay, well, the takeout and wine is on me tomorrow night, okay?”

“Thanks,” I said, and managed a teary laugh. “And don’t forget the Haagen Dazs... I think we’re going to need that, too.”

I broke down crying again.

She held me for a long, long time.

39

Anh gave me a ride the next morning, and the whole time I felt like a prisoner on Death Row, headed for the execution chamber.

Add to that I hadn't slept but maybe an hour or two. Mostly I just cried all night, in fits and starts, until I finally dropped off to sleep from sheer exhaustion.

And the alarm blared five minutes later, it seemed.

I'd forced myself through my normal routine – shower, getting dressed, light makeup – but I felt like a zombie the entire time. The only thing that kept me going was the routine itself.

It was better than lying there in bed, thinking of Connor. And my possible firing gave me something to worry about besides him.

About what I'd lost last night.

On the way to the office in Anh's car, I sat there trying to come up with excuses I could give Klaus, but I couldn't think of any. My mind, already numb and overloaded, was of no use to me. The only thing it could do was force my feet forward, one after the other... make my hands open and close car doors... tell my fingers to press elevator buttons...

...and then we were on the 23rd floor.

"Good luck," Anh whispered. "If you need to leave... early... let me know."

I nodded and forced a smile to my lips. Then I went off to meet my doom.

I rode up to the top floor of the building. The receptionist wasn't in yet, thank God.

My heart was pounding in my ears as I used Klaus's badge to buzz myself in, then I raced for the boardroom.

The entire floor was deserted.

There, in the mini kitchen next to the coffeemaker, was my purse – untouched, undisturbed.

I was so frightened I would be caught that I ignored the cell phone for the time being and turned to go –

...and then I paused and looked back at the boardroom.

At the giant glass window where we'd watched the diamond and ruby lights of the traffic.

At the spot where I'd been standing when he first kissed me.

My heart broke again, and I rushed out of the room and back to the elevator, barely able to contain my tears.

40

When I got to my cubicle, my monitor and computer were still on, same as I'd left them on Friday night.

I put down my purse, went into Klaus's office and threw his passcard on his desk, then dashed back out like the guilty soul I was.

I opened my purse and picked up my cell with trembling hands, my heart thudding in my chest, and turned it on to see how horrific my fate would be.

Ten texts and four phone messages.

...that's all?

But five of the texts were from Anh, back when she thought I had gone missing Friday night and Saturday morning. She'd told me that she had called four times, so I was guessing that the four voicemails were from her, too.

That meant there were only five texts from Klaus.

And no voicemails.

WHAT?!

I scrolled through his messages.

Saturday morning, 10:57 AM – all caps:

WHERE'S THE TERAMORE REPORT?????

11:05 AM:

Never mind, I got the email. Lucky for you. But still, I should have the report in my inbox. I'm NOT HAPPY, Lily.

11:06 AM:

By the way, how did it go with that rep from LMGK last night? Call me.

12:12 PM:

When I tell you to call me, I don't mean when it's convenient for you. Call me ASAP.

Sunday 4:37 PM:

EXTREMELY UNHAPPY, LILY. We'll discuss your extreme lack of professionalism when I get in on Monday morning.

And that was it.

'I got the email'?

What the hell was he talking about?

I bent down to my computer and scrolled through the inbox, which was full of new messages.

One of them had come in Saturday morning at 8:55AM, from our contact over at Teramore. It was addressed to everyone in the exec comp department, and included me as a CC.

In light of certain unforeseen developments, the executive compensation report scheduled for Monday morning can be pushed back. We will not need it until later in the week. Will advise on Monday once everyone is in the office. Have a great weekend.

My already hurting brain struggled to comprehend what I'd just read.

They had canceled at the last minute.

I had been saved – literally – in the nick of time.

But how?

If I hadn't been so tired and brain dead, I would have realized it immediately. But it took me a few seconds.

Connor.

Connor saved me.

I looked at the time stamp in confusion. 8:55 AM Saturday...

And then I remembered. When I woke on Saturday morning, he'd been on the phone. One of the calls he'd made

must have saved my ass.

But why didn't he tell me, then?!

I almost burst into tears. Whether it was because I was so touched or so infuriated, I wasn't sure, but I was definitely both – and all at once.

“When I tell you to call me back, you *call me back*, Lily,” a snide voice said behind me.

Klaus.

I stood up and turned. I must have looked a little rough and glassy-eyed, because his normally disapproving frown shifted into ‘slightly alarmed’ territory.

“I'm sorry,” I mumbled, and because my brain locked from exhaustion and sadness and bewilderment over the Teramore email, I just went ahead and did it: I lied. “I got really sick.”

His expression went *full-on* alarmed, and he stepped back. “Well, don't get *me* sick!”

I narrowed my eyes, and remembered why I hated him so much. “Don't worry... it was a 24-hour bug.”

“You could've still called,” he said nastily.

No *How are you?* or *Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that*, or even a hint of sympathy.

Just *Don't get ME sick*.

That, and more rebukes.

Asshole.

“I didn't want you to hear the puking sounds,” I said with a cold, mirthless smile.

He got a little green around the gills. Herr Klaus was oh-so-delicate in certain ways.

“Well... you could have texted.”

“Sorry.”

He shook his head in disgust. No longer disgust at the mention of puking, but disgust with my work performance.

“Well... how did it go with... what was his name?”

I wanted soooooo badly to say, *You mean the guy who handed you your ass in front of your CEO on the phone Friday night? You mean the guy who forced you to apologize to me for being a jerk? THAT guy?*

But I remembered that my whole reason for coming in today was to keep my job... and that I'd turned away 'THAT guy' in order to be here.

“Connor Te – ”

I caught myself.

Maybe it was because I had said his fake last name more than I ever said his real last name. Maybe it was because I was still uncomfortable with the whole 'Templeton' thing.

Either way, I remembered that Klaus didn't know who Connor really was.

“...Brooks,” I said. “Connor Brooks.”

“What did he want?”

“To see a whole bunch of files.”

“Which files?”

I shrugged. “Dozens.”

“Well, which ones?!” he demanded, raising his voice.

I *so* wanted to grab a letter opener and buy myself a twenty-year prison sentence.

Keep the job, I reminded myself. *You must keep this job.*

Or else last night was for nothing.

“Teramore... Bennickson... PT & Associates... Zaruder... Telomere Biogenetics...”

His eyes got wide – and enraged. “You didn't *show* those to him, did you?!”

“Of course I did.”

“WHY ON EARTH WOULD YOU – ”

“Because the CEO *said to*,” I snarled.

Klaus looked shocked. He actually took a tiny step back.

I guess he’d never heard the angry side of me come out before.

Actually, the angry side of me never *had* come out around him before. Not openly.

Maybe it was how tired and emotionally spent I was. Maybe that was short-circuiting the logical, life-preserving part of my brain.

Or maybe some of the things Connor had said to me – about valuing myself, about not putting up with an asshole – had actually sunk in.

Then Klaus recovered himself, and his face contorted into a nasty mask of indignation and self-righteousness.

“Dave Westerholtz certainly didn’t mean to show that pompous asshole *everything*. Those files are sensitive – if I had been here, I most certainly would *not* have let him see those files – ”

“Then *maybe you should have been here*,” I hissed, “instead of getting drunk with some floozy at Sky Bar.”

I couldn’t believe it.

I could not *believe* those words came out of my mouth.

Neither could Klaus.

First there was shock, far beyond anything he’d shown so far.

And then there was fury. He started shaking a little, he was so angry.

“You little *bitch*,” he whispered, low and vicious, “don’t you EVER – ”

“KLAAAAAAUUS!” a familiar voice suddenly boomed out.

...and my stomach dropped through the floor.

41

Connor stood about fifty feet away, his arms open wide, like, *What UP, bro?*

Klaus whipped around, a look of stark terror on his face.

He obviously remembered the voice, too... and the humiliations he'd suffered because of its owner.

Toss in the fact that he'd been speaking ill of Connor just a few seconds before, and Klaus was *not* a happy camper.

Me?

I was not a happy camper at ALL.

Connor strolled over, gorgeous and every inch the billionaire. He wore a tailored, grey pinstripe suit, crisp white shirt, and maroon silk tie studded with a gold pin.

I thought he looked a little tired around the eyes... but then I convinced myself I just saw that because I *wanted* to see it.

I didn't want to believe he could have dumped me and slept like a baby afterward.

Although that was probably what happened.

I did notice one thing, though, that was undeniable:

He didn't look at me once.

He kept his eyes laser-focused on Klaus.

Inside, I felt like crying.

You can't even LOOK at me?!

But I quickly forgot that as the show unfolded.

"Klaus! In the flesh! Oh, how I've missed you since our last conversation, buddy!" Connor grinned as he approached, all back-slapping good humor.

He towered over Klaus by a good eight inches. And that was with the lifts in Klaus's shoes.

Klaus was *definitely* feeling the disparity in power, because he straightened up as tall as he could.

He got maybe an extra half-inch out of it.

“I have to say, I don’t remember it as fondly as you do,” Klaus said icily.

“Awwww, come on, don’t be like that!” Connor said, plastering some fake puppy-dog hurt on his face. “Especially after how helpful you were!”

“I – what?” Klaus asked, thrown off guard.

“Wait, hold on – I want to make sure your good deeds don’t go unrecognized,” Connor said with a serious look, then turned around. “Hey Dave – Dave, could you come over here a sec?”

Two seconds later, the CEO of our company came around the corner.

My stomach twisted a little.

Klaus looked like he had dropped a load in his pants.

Dave Westerholtz walked over. He was a man in his mid-fifties, short, compact, grey-haired, sharp eyes, all smiles – for Connor, anyway. When he glanced at Klaus, his expression soured a little.

“Zimmerman,” the CEO said in a clipped voice.

I will say this for him: after he dispensed with Klaus, Westerholtz looked over at me and gave me a polite smile. “Hello.”

“Hello,” I said calmly.

After sleeping with a billionaire over the weekend, garden-variety CEO’s just weren’t quite as impressive anymore.

Klaus wasn’t quite as slick, though. “M-Mr. Westerholtz,” he stammered.

“What do you need, Connor?” Westerholtz asked with a smile.

“I just wanted to make sure Klaus’s contributions were duly noted. Not forgotten in the hubbub of the meeting,” Connor explained.

Meeting?

Oh my God – the buyout meeting...

It must be happening soon...

“Oh?” the CEO said as he gave Klaus a more charitable look.

“Yes, he put himself completely at my disposal,” Connor said, gave Klaus a wink, and socked him lightly in the arm like a fellow fraternity brother. “Right, Klaus?”

“Uh... yes,” Klaus said, his eyes nervously flitting back and forth between Connor and Mr. Westerholtz. “Yes, absolutely.”

My initial reaction was shock at the outright lie.

Then anger – that Klaus was taking credit (in front of the CEO!) for doing something he’d palmed off on me.

And then my addled brain caught up.

Only two out of the four of us knew that the buyout wasn’t going to go through.

Klaus wasn’t one of them.

I almost burst out laughing.

Even in my sleep-deprived state, I could see where this was going.

“How he canceled that hot date to come back here and show me those files. Right, Klaus?” Connor continued.

Klaus forced a big smile. “It was nothing.”

“Don’t be so modest, Klaus!” Connor turned to Westerholtz. “He showed me every file I asked for!”

Westerholtz’s eyebrows raised the tiniest fraction, and his smile became just a little bit fake as he glanced over at Klaus. “...every file? Really?”

Klaus's smile faded a little. "Well, not *every* – "

"Teramore, Bennickson, PT & Associates, Zaruder, Telomere Biogenetics," Connor rattled off. "Plus, like, a dozen more. Right, Klaus?" he asked with a big smile.

He'd been listening the whole time. To everything Klaus had said.

And now he was letting Klaus *know* he'd been listening the whole time.

To *everything* he'd said.

A bead of sweat trickled down from Klaus's hairline. "I, well – "

"Klaus's help was invaluable to me in justifying the final decision," Connor said to Westerholtz.

"Oh, really?" the CEO asked, back to pleased again.

"In a way, you have *him* to thank for everything that follows today."

Unbeknownst to Klaus, Connor had just handed him a piece of rope.

Klaus also didn't realize it was fashioned into a noose.

He blithely slipped it on and tightened it himself.

"Well... I didn't want to brag... but I did everything I could to help," Klaus beamed.

"I'm certainly glad to hear you stepped up, Zimmerman," the CEO said.

"I do every day, sir."

That was probably a bit much, seeing as the CEO narrowed his eyes a little.

I know *I* almost threw up in my throat.

Connor clapped his hands together. "Well, now that we've got *that* established, we should head on up to the top floor and go meet the board, what do you say?"

“Let’s,” Westerholtz said, then turned around and walked off.

“After you... buddy,” Connor said to Klaus, and gestured grandly.

Klaus hesitated... then followed his boss.

Only then did Connor look at me.

He gave me a tight-lipped little smile. His eyes dipped to the floor, like he found it hard to look me in the eye. Then he glanced up at me again, and there was a warmth there, a bittersweet longing... and a pained sadness.

And then he followed the other two men around the corner and out of sight.

42

I almost went crazy as I sat at my desk, wringing my hands, obsessing about what was going on up in the boardroom.

Not least of all because I wondered if anybody noticed a stain on the plush carpet, or if they could detect the lingering scent of sex in the air.

“Oh God,” I whispered to myself, and put my head in my hands.

Emails went unanswered. I let calls go straight to voicemail.

I was a nervous wreck.

I played out a dozen scenarios in my head, all of them different in the particulars, but all boiling down to the same inescapable outcome:

Connor letting them know that the buyoff was off.

Would he tell them that the Teramore job was fake, designed to test the exec comp division?

Would he repeat the lie that Klaus had shown him all the files on Friday night?

And if he did, what could Klaus do but sit there and take it? Especially after he had lied right to the face of the CEO?

And if Klaus sat there, the scapegoat for the failure... just how mad was he going to be when he came out of that meeting?

I didn't have to wait too long to find out.

Well, not in real-world time.

But it felt like an eternity until Klaus stomped back into the office.

43

I stood involuntarily as he stormed around the corner, the way people in movies stand up when someone with bad news walks into a room.

He was scarlet red, *far* angrier than I had ever seen him the whole time I'd been at Exerton.

When he saw me, his jaw set and his eyes blazed. In my mind's eye, I pictured what a Great White must look like when it's having a bad day and it spots a baby seal.

"YOU," he shouted, and stomped over to my desk.

I just stood there mutely as he launched into an epic tirade. I was vaguely aware of everyone around me turning in their cubicles and watching what unfolded in mute horror.

"YOU FUCKING BITCH!" he screamed. "You didn't say anything when he lied about me to the CEO?! You stabbed me in the back, you goddamn little –"

He spluttered, apparently wrestling with himself whether he wanted to drop the 'c word.'

He didn't, but he *did* keep shouting.

"It didn't go through! The buyout didn't go through! He pulled the plug based on what he read in those files that *you* showed him, the ones *you* made me take the fall for – the ones YOU *lied* about – and now the CEO's blaming ME! I could lose my job over this, and it's not even my FAULT! And his last name isn't even *Brooks*, it's Connor *Templeton*! As in the fucking BILLIONAIRE!" Klaus shrieked, then pointed a finger right in my face. "You FUCKED us! You FUCKED this company, you FUCKED me, you're a complete FUCKING –"

"Shut up," I whispered.

He stopped and stared at me, hatred and disbelief warring in his face.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY TO ME?!"

“You heard me,” I seethed. “SHUT UP.”

He was trembling so bad, I thought he was going to fall down in an epileptic fit. “DON’T YOU TALK TO ME THAT –”

“YOU took credit for it when you thought you were going to be the big hero,” I snarled. Now *I* was the one shaking uncontrollably. “YOU were the one who lied. YOU could have said it was me who showed him the files – you could have said it at any point, but NO, you were sucking up and stealing credit, just like you always do.”

Klaus became incoherent in his rage. “I – YOU –”

“You didn’t come back on Friday night when your boss told you to, you took credit when you thought it would get you brownie points, and now that you’re getting reamed out for it, you want to put it all back on *me*?” I asked, colder and more in control than I could have ever imagined myself being. “You’re a shitty boss, Klaus – but you’re a shittier human being.”

“YOU CAN’T TALK TO ME THAT WAY!”

“I just did.”

“WELL – WELL – YOU’RE FUCKING *FIRED!*”

I clenched my teeth. “You can’t fire me, you asshole, because *I quit.*”

It was a line from a bad movie, but hell – that’s what I was in now: a really bad movie.

“CLEAN OUT YOUR DESK – YOU’RE THROUGH, YOU HEAR ME?! YOU’RE *THROUGH!*” Klaus screamed as he stomped into his office and slammed the door.

I looked around slowly. All the other office slaves turned away, averting their eyes from the mortifying scene, not wanting to be tainted by any contact with the pariah.

I stifled my tears and loaded up my few possessions in a cardboard filing box.

Then I turned off my computer and left.

44

I stopped by Anh's office on the way out. She was white as a ghost.

"I heard the screaming," she whispered.

"Yeah," I said dully, still in shock. "Everybody probably did, huh."

"Oh, honey..." she said as she stood up from her desk.

I shrugged. Nothing seemed real. I felt numb, both body and mind. "I just... I... do you think you can cover rent this month?" I asked feebly.

"Of course," she said, and came around and hugged me. "Of course I can."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't you dare apologize. It'll all be okay."

I relaxed a little in her arms, but I couldn't cry. I felt like I'd used all my tears for Connor the night before, and I didn't have any left for my present situation.

Besides, I'd be damned before I'd ever let Klaus hear that he made me cry.

"Do you need me to drive you home?" Anh asked.

"No... no, I'll be fine, I'll just drive my car... I left it here on Friday..."

She pulled back and looked into my eyes. "Are you going to be okay?"

I nodded mutely.

She hugged me again. "I don't mind."

"I know, but I'm fine, really."

"Will you text me when you get home?"

"Yes."

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

She let me go. “Be safe.”

“I will,” I said, and walked numbly out of her office.

45

When I got to the parking garage, they were towing my car.

“What are you doing?!” I yelled.

The guy hooking up the crane arm to my bumper looked over at me in alarm. Like, *Oh great, here we go*. “I got a call. Said you’re not authorized to be here.”

“I JUST GOT FIRED!”

He shrugged. “I got a call.”

My overwrought brain struggled to think. Who –
Klaus.

Of course.

He *did* love his petty little torments.

Still, this was low, even for him. He must have called security as soon as he shut his office door.

“Please,” I begged the towing guy, “can’t you give me a break? Just let me have the car? I’ll go right now, I promise –”

“Not worth my job, kid,” he said, and got into his truck and shut the door on me.

I watched as he pulled my little beat-up Honda after him, down the parking ramp and out of sight.

I *wanted* to hate Klaus. I wanted to *want* to kill him, but I was just too exhausted.

It was too much.

I thought I didn’t have any tears left, but I was wrong.

I burst out crying.

I didn’t hear the rumble of the approaching car until it was too late.

46

It pulled up in front of me, a gorgeous, glossy Lamborghini, the same maroon color as Connor's tie.

That was fitting, since Connor was behind the wheel.

I took one look as the car stopped in front of me, saw who was driving, then tipped my head back like *God, WHY ME?* and turned away.

His window whirred down.

"Lily, get in the car," he said in a soft, compassionate voice.

I turned back and railed at him. "ARE YOU HAPPY? You got me fired – THANKS! Is this how you get what you want? When somebody tells you 'no,' you destroy everything they have, and when they've got nothing left, then you come back and get your way? Is that how it works in your world?"

He looked pained. He slowly opened his door and got out – but he didn't approach me. The way I retreated from him probably convinced him that wasn't a wise move.

"I didn't want to get you fired, and I'm sorry it happened."

"Oh, yeah? Gee, *thanks.*"

"Lily... I have something I have to say, and I want you to hear me out."

I glared at him, tears running down my cheeks. When he didn't say anything, I jutted my head forward like, *WELL?*

"I handled last night worse than anything else in my entire life. I know I botched it – *badly* – but I want you to give me another chance. I care about you. A lot. I want you to get in the car and go with me. It's entirely up to you... but whatever you decide, I already deposited \$50,000 into your bank account."

I stared at him. The cardboard filing box almost slipped out of my fingers.

“It’s a gift. Even if you never want to see me again, I hate to see you wasting your life and your talents here,” he said, and gestured distastefully at the building. “I’m giving it to you, no strings attached, so you can go do what you want. So you can go find out what you do best. So you can go figure out where you belong in the world. I know you don’t want my money – you already told me that – so if you won’t keep it, then donate it somewhere. Give it to orphans, or the Red Cross, or whatever. Do whatever you want with it. But just remember that it’s a *gift*, nothing more than that. No strings attached.”

He stared at me earnestly, his blue eyes never more beautiful than that moment.

“If you never want to see me again, I’ll understand that, too. I’ll leave, and I’ll never bother you again. But I want you to come with me. I *want* you, Lily... and I want you to come with me because *you* want to. If you get in the car with me now, it’s because that’s what *you* want. You’re free to do whatever – get in, walk away, go live your life, whatever you decide. But just know... just know that I want you to get in and go with me. More than I’ve ever wanted anything. Because I want *you*, Lily... more than anything I’ve ever wanted before.”

I stood there, tears streaming down my cheeks, with my heart breaking all over again.

“Get in the car, Lily,” he whispered. “Please.”

I trembled slightly and tried to imagine what might lay ahead if I did.

I couldn’t think straight.

But I could still feel.

I looked at him, deep into his eyes...

...and I knew what I wanted.

I crossed silently in front of the car, opened the passenger seat, and got in.

He slipped into the driver's seat, reached over and gave my hand a squeeze, and smiled.

I was too tired to do anything but lean my head back against the leather seat. "Where are we going?"

He grinned as he pulled a pair of sunglasses down from his visor and put them on.

"Vegas, baby. Vegas."

Then he leaned over... brushed a tear from my cheek and kissed me softly on the lips... eased back into the driver's seat...

...and we were off.

ALL THAT HE REQUIRES

Part 4

1

I realize you probably know all this already, but let's set the stage first. Because, hey, I might sound a little crazy soon if you don't know where I'm coming from.

Number one: I'd had my heart broken the night before.

The man I'd fallen in love with had basically let me know we weren't on the same page as far as what we wanted, relationship-wise. *After* he'd offered me money to continue sleeping with him for another week.

Ew.

Yeah, yeah, he was a billionaire... and yeah, yeah, I'd only known him three days... and yeah, yeah, the 'relationship' (or whatever you want to call it) had essentially started with crazy-hot sex on the boardroom floor of the company where I worked.

Still – *ew.*

I said 'no,' and he walked out, more or less.

It hurt worse than anything in my life ever has before.

Number two: because of my heart being broken, I hadn't slept all night. I was the emotional equivalent of a zombie on *The Walking Dead*. But not a mean zombie that wants to eat your brains, just a weepy zombie that stumbles around on the verge of tears and needs a hug.

Yes, I'm a nerd.

Number three: I had been dreading losing my job for twelve hours. Actually, I had feared that possibility since last Friday night, but the crazy-hot sex and falling-in-love part had distracted me for most of the weekend.

Which made me a zombie on the verge of tears, who needs a hug, and is deathly afraid of the scary human chasing me with a shotgun. (The 'scary human' in question being my jerk of a boss.)

Number four: the shotgun went off.

I had just lost my job.

Actually, that's kind of soft-peddling the situation. Makes me sound like I was the victim of a corporate layoff or The Great Recession.

To be *technical* about it... I'd been fired. Partially for insubordination, but mostly because my boss was a raging asshole.

Immediately after that, I informed Asshole Boss he couldn't fire me, because I quit.

Number five: with my car towed by Asshole Boss, and my life in ruins around me, Man Of My Dreams came driving up like Prince Charming in a Cinderella coach. Except, in this case, it was a Lamborghini. And then he proceeded to give me a breathtakingly romantic speech about how he knew he'd messed up big-time, and that he was sorry, and I could walk away and never look back, but to please give him one more chance – and that I was what he wanted more than anything else in his entire life.

So, with my heart still broken – but temporarily back on life-support – I got in the car.

I'm still not entirely sure if that was a mistake or not.

But some mistakes are worth making.

2

The Lamborghini roared through the parking deck outside my former workplace.

I'd never been in a Lamborghini before. I might have enjoyed the experience more if it didn't feel like somebody had put my brain in a blender and hit frappé.

I settled back wearily into the leather seat and lolled my head towards the driver.

Connor Templeton.

Gorgeous Adonis.

Billionaire businessman.

Scion of one of the wealthiest families in America.

"You're a real asshole sometimes," I murmured.

He gave a tight little smile. Not one of his usual cocky grins; more like grim agreement.

"Yeah, I know," he said in a low voice.

He reached one arm across the center console of the car and took my hand in his.

The warmth of his skin on mine melted the tension in my body.

The sweetness of the gesture melted my heart.

I couldn't help myself: I broke down in tears.

Funny... after the last few hours, I didn't think I had any left.

He slammed on the brakes, pulled off his sunglasses, and stared at me with those gorgeous blue eyes. "What? What's wrong?"

I fought back the sobs. "I – I thought I was n-never going to see you again."

He leaned across the seat, took my tear-streaked face in both his hands, and kissed me.

Softly.

Sweetly.

Romantically.

Then he pulled back just a few inches and wiped my tears away with his thumbs as he gazed into my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

I nodded silently. Smiled sadly.

He leaned forward and kissed me again.

Behind us, a car beeped its horn.

I pulled away. “We should go.”

“He can wait – I’m busy right now,” Connor whispered, and pulled me back to him.

I think the car drove around us, honking angrily.

I’m not sure; I was lost in the kiss, and the rest of the world just faded away.

3

After three or four cars honked and passed us, though, the world started to come back into focus.

I finally broke things off with a laugh. “Come on... let’s go.”

“Alright,” he grinned, then put back on his sunglasses and started down the ramp again.

I can’t begin to tell you how overjoyed and relieved I was.

Or how much I still ached. My soul felt bruised from all I had been through.

But I could deal with that, as long as I got to stay there with him.

I lay there in the leather seat, almost half-asleep, watching him. He was absolutely gorgeous. Dark, wavy hair... bronzed skin... strong jaw... masculine nose... sinfully kissable lips...

“You look different,” I mumbled.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah... but I can’t put my finger on it...”

“Maybe it’s ‘cause I’m worn out.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“‘Why’?!” he repeated with an incredulous chuckle. “Well, for starters, I slept maybe two hours last night.”

I perked up slightly. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“...why?”

It was a stupid question.

But I wanted to hear his answer.

I *needed* to hear his answer.

He looked at me like I was insane. “‘*Why*’? Because last night *sucked*, that’s why. You were there, you should know.”

I wanted to cry... but this time it was from happiness.

I know that sounds crazy – but I’d thought he’d been okay after breaking up with me. A little sad, maybe. But unable to sleep? That possibility hadn’t crossed my mind.

I DID mean a lot to him, I thought.

I know that sounds crazy, too. I mean, the guy had just given me a huge speech about how much he wanted me, how badly he’d screwed up, and please *please* PLEASE get in the car. You’d think I would have realized that, hey, maybe he kinda sorta liked me.

But remember who we’re talking about here: weepy, sleep-deprived, need-a-hug zombie.

I settled back into my seat, but I reached out and put a hand on his arm. “I’m sorry you didn’t sleep...”

He slowed down and looked over at me. “Thank you.”

“...but you kind of deserved it.”

I gave him the look my best friend Anh reserves for when I complain about gaining weight after finishing a pint of Haagen Dazs. It’s what a basset hound might look like if it could say, *I feel sorry for you, even though we both know you’re a complete idiot*.

He stared at me for a second, then burst out laughing.

“I guess I did,” he grinned as he turned back to driving down the ramp.

“But it’s not that you’re tired,” I said. “It’s something else...”

“Hold on,” he said, and rolled down his window so he could hand a ticket and a \$20 bill to the toll booth attendant.

I looked at his immaculate pinstripe suit, followed the length of his arm down to the strong, powerful hand gripping the steering wheel –

“That’s it,” I realized.

“Thank you,” Connor said to the attendant, then turned back to me as he drove the car under the rising tollbooth arm. “What’s it?”

“I’ve never seen you drive anything before.”

“Oh – yeah, I suppose that’s – ”

“OH MY GOD!” I shrieked.

“What?!” Connor shouted as he slammed on the brakes.

“Where’s Johnny?!”

Connor leaned his head back in his seat, both relief and exasperation on his face. “Don’t *do* that – ”

“Where’s Johnny?” I repeated.

“You almost gave me a heart attack – ”

“*Where’s Johnny?*” I insisted.

“Why are you so worked up about Johnny?”

“Because he’s your bodyguard! It’s not safe for you to be wandering around without him!”

Connor sighed and edged out into the downtown Los Angeles traffic. “You’re as bad as he is, you know that?”

“Maybe because we’re worried about your safety. Even if you aren’t.”

“Well, you should be happy I ditched him.”

“You DITCHED him?!”

“Calm down – ”

“I’m not going to calm down!” I shouted. “That guy at the hotel *threatened* you – ”

“It wasn’t much of a threat,” Connor pooh-poohed me.

“You weren’t there! And now you go and ditch Johnny, like – like an idiot!”

“I had to.”

“Oh, you *had* to – and why was that, exactly?”

Connor shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I didn’t want him to be there if you said ‘no.’”

That stopped me dead in my tracks.

Connor always acted like everything was a game, and one he would win no matter what – by fair means, by bluffing, or by cheating. Whatever it took.

I had assumed that speech back there in the parking deck was just another ‘winning moment’ for him. That he’d figured out how to get me back. Just say the right things – beautifully, passionately, movingly – and *boom*, Lily comes running!

But in that one sentence... *I didn’t want him to be there if you said ‘no’*... he let me see that, no, actually, he *hadn’t* known he was going to win me back.

And it had scared him.

Enough that he didn’t want to risk having his friend see him get hurt.

I suppose I could be cynical and say it was just him protecting his ego... but Connor had the healthiest ego of any human being I’d ever met. I don’t think he would have cared if Johnny saw him get burned by a dozen supermodels in a row (though I doubt that scenario was even remotely possible).

I think he was actually scared.

And my heart broke a little for him because of it.

I was silent for a few seconds, and then I brushed the back of my hand softly against his cheek.

He smiled, took my fingers, and kissed the palm of my hand.

I stayed silent a few seconds more, just savoring the realization of how much he cared... and that he hadn’t taken winning me back for granted.

Then, of course, I got back to business.

“You have to call Johnny.”

He sighed. "I'm planning on it."

"Is he going to drive us to Vegas?"

"No, I am."

"You've only had a couple hours of sleep!"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine –"

"I've been up 72 hours before during a touch-and-go acquisition, closed it successfully, and finished with an off-the-cuff investment presentation in front of 300 of the wealthiest people in the world. I thrive on stressful situations."

"Well, whoop-de-doo for you, but I'm here now and the buyout thing's off, so there's no more stress. So I doubt you're thriving anymore."

"No, right now I'm deliriously happy and hopped up on adrenaline."

I gave him a wry smile. "You always know exactly what to say, don't you?"

He grinned. "It's what I'm good at."

"But promise me... when you come down off your 'deliriously happy' cloud of hopped-up adrenaline, we'll stop and you'll get in the limo and let Johnny drive us to Vegas."

"I promise." He took my hand and kissed it again. "I got you back... I'm not going to do anything to endanger that again."

"Awwwww... but I don't want you endangering yourself, either, so *call Johnny*."

Connor sighed and slipped his cell phone out of his suit jacket pocket. "Yes, dear."

4

Johnny was *piiiiissed*.

I couldn't make out exactly what he was saying, but whatever it was, he said it loudly enough for Connor to make a face and hold the cell phone away from his ear.

It sounded like Charlie Brown's teacher's *wah-wah-wah-WAAAAH* crossed with a fire-and-brimstone preacher.

Connor let him vent for a few seconds, then said, "I'm getting on 10 East... you can find me, I'll be the maroon Lamborghini Aventador."

More *wah-wah-wah-WAAAAH*.

"Yes, fine, okay, I'll drive under the speed limit so you can get to me... jeez, man, I don't know who's worse, you or Lily."

Things quieted down on the other end as Johnny asked something in a lower tone of voice.

Connor smiled. "Because she's with me."

Silence. Then Johnny said something else, and Connor pulled the cell away from his ear and hit a button for speakerphone.

"Lily?"

I smiled. "Hi, Johnny."

"You made him call me, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. At least SOMEBODY'S brain is working right."

"Hey," Connor warned.

"Where'd you get the car?"

"I called Frank D'Agostanzo."

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Owns an exotic car dealership in Beverly Hills,” Connor explained. “He gave me a loaner.”

I looked around, stupefied. “*This is a loaner?*”

“With an option to buy.”

“Wait...” I said as I struggled to do the calculations. “You would’ve had to have called him at, like, *six in the morning* or something.”

“I’m a regular client.”

“Oh, well, *that* explains it,” I muttered sarcastically.

“*Why can’t you be like normal rich people and just FLY to Vegas in a private jet, huh?*” Johnny asked.

If I hadn’t been virtually brain-dead from sleep deprivation – and if I actually had the kind of lifestyle where ‘private jet’ and ‘Vegas’ could appear in the same sentence while referring to *me* – I might have thought of that earlier.

“Yeah!” I agreed.

“I want to drive,” Connor said. “I need to clear my mind.”

“*You’re going to clear your mind completely when you nod off, flip the car, and shear off the top of your skull.*”

“Ew,” I winced.

“Little much, don’t you think?” Connor asked.

“*No. Lily, don’t let him be stupid, okay?*”

“Too late,” I teased.

“*True.*”

“Et tu, Brute?” Connor scowled at me.

“*But if he gets tired, you make him stop and let me take over, you hear me?*”

“He already promised me.”

“*Alright.*” There was a pause. “*Lily?*”

“Yeah?”

“It’s good to talk to you again.”

I smiled. “You too, Johnny.”

“I’ll see you guys soon. And Connor, I SWEAR TO GOD, if you go one MILE over the speed limit, or start feeling sleepy and don’t pull over – ”

“I know, Mom, you’ll take away the keys,” Connor said in a deadpan voice. “Love you too.”

Johnny grunted in exasperation, then hung up the phone.

5

Connor took the on-ramp to the 10 East. (By the way, just as a little aside, LA folks call their highways ‘the’ blah-blah. Like, ‘the 10,’ ‘the 101,’ ‘the 405.’ Like their freeways are one of a kind or something. I know, I thought it was stupid too, but then six months after I got here, I was doing the same damn thing. When Connor told Johnny he was getting on ‘10 East,’ I almost pointed it out... then decided to keep quiet.)

As promised, he kept the car in the far right lane and did a few miles under the speed limit.

“Look, there goes an 80-year-old woman,” Connor lamented as an Oldsmobile sped past us.

“It’s the little old lady from Pasadena,” I murmured sleepily.

“More like the little old lady from the Encino Retirement Home,” Connor said bitterly. “I can’t believe I said I would – ”

I cut him off. “Well you *did*, so keep your promise.”

He sighed.

As the road (and miles of cars) stretched out before us, I asked, “Why Vegas?”

“Why not Vegas?”

I shrugged. “No reason, I guess. I just didn’t see you as a Vegas kind of a guy, that’s all.”

“What, not a gambler?”

“Oh, you’re *that*, alright. No, I mean... leisure suits, sleazy gangsters, showgirls with pineapples on their heads...”

“I think your idea of Vegas is a bit dated.”

“Yeah?”

“Like, from a bad 1970’s movie.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered.

“It’s more like Disneyland now, all cleaned up for family consumption.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hm.”

“So are you a Disneyland kind of guy, then?”

He smiled. “Not really, no.”

“Cause we could just go down to Anaheim. It’s only thirty minutes away.”

“Only if we can have sex on Space Mountain.”

I laughed. “Somehow, I don’t think the House of Mouse would approve.”

“Come on, just think of it... us going at it as we sped through the dark...”

“With little kids on the ride? NO.”

“Ugh, that’s sick,” he scowled. “No, we’d be the only ones on there.”

“And how would that happen, exactly?”

“I know a guy.”

“Who runs the Space Mountain ride,” I mocked him.

“Who runs the company.”

Touché.

I sighed. “I’ll bet you do. Although maybe we ought to make it Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride.”

Connor laughed out loud, then shook his head. “Nope. Space Mountain.”

“Okay, you obviously have a Space Mountain fetish, so I take it you’ve been to Disneyland.”

“One of my companies rented it out for their employees.”

“Why aren’t I surprised...” I muttered. “So why are we going to Vegas, when you obviously want to go hump on Space Mountain?”

He grinned. “I have some urgent business that cropped up there.”

My half-lidded eyes suddenly opened wide. “Oh my God, I almost forgot – what happened at the meeting?”

Connor looked grim. “A whole bunch of unpleasantness.”

“Like what?”

“Shouting, recriminations, accusations of bad faith, threats of lawsuits, you name it.”

“What kind of lawsuits?”

“Oh, Westerholtz believes I never had any intention of buying out Exerton, and that I used the buyout to do corporate espionage by looking at his files.”

My stomach turned as I imagined my role in all this. “Does he... does he have a case?”

“I pointed out that corporate espionage doesn’t usually include asking the CEO of a company for confidential files and getting full cooperation. When he said he’d only agreed because he’d assumed it was a done deal, I said that was a very bad assumption. Our conversation ended with him screaming, and me suggesting that the Board of Directors might want to rethink his position as CEO.”

“You didn’t,” I gasped.

“Oh, don’t worry about Westerholtz, he’s as thick as thieves with Exerton’s Board. We researched that one thoroughly. No, all the shit’s going to roll downhill to his favorite whipping boy – and your favorite boss, Herr Klaus. Not that he doesn’t deserve it.” Connor glanced back at the cardboard box I’d crammed in the little shelf behind the Lamborghini’s seats. “I’m guessing it didn’t go so well between the two of you.”

“Ha!” I said, not laughing at all, just shouting ‘ha’ like you might say *wait’ll you get a load of THIS!* Then I told him, blow by blow, what had happened from the moment Klaus returned from the meeting.

Connor's eyes got angrier and darker the more I told him – until I reached the line about *You're a shitty boss, Klaus – but you're a shittier human being.*

Now it was his turn to look at me in shock. “You didn't.”

“I did.”

He broke into a huge grin as he turned back at the road. “Well done. I'm proud of you, Lily.”

“I guess all your advice finally sunk in.”

“Took awhile,” he teased.

I smacked his arm playfully. “It was the first morning I'd seen him since I met you, jackass!”

“Hey, I'm drivin' here!” he shouted playfully. Then he added, in a normal tone of voice, “Tell me what happened after that.”

I finished the rest of the story, including *You can't fire me, you asshole, because I quit.*

Connor howled with laughter.

“Yeah, well, then he towed my car, so I guess he got the last laugh,” I said glumly.

“I'll have my people take care of your car. Plus, you're now in a Lamborghini headed to Vegas with me, and Klaus – if he doesn't lose his job – is going to be demoted and/or continually harassed for several years by everyone at Exerton. He's a walking punchline now. Even if he moves to another company, I can guarantee you the story will follow him around like a bad odor. So, tell me again who got the last laugh?”

“Huh... okay,” I conceded. Then I added, “Plus I got a \$50,000 bonus.”

I said it coolly – not happy or giddy. It was kind of like an opening move where I was inviting him to respond.

“And there's that,” he agreed in a neutral tone of voice.

I laid my head against the headrest and gazed at him in silence for a few seconds.

“I don’t want your money, you know,” I finally said.

“I know,” he answered quietly.

“I want you to take it back.”

“I told you, it’s a gift. If you don’t want it, donate it.”

“How’d you even get it into my account?”

“I saw the checks on your desk in your apartment. Memorized the routing number and the account number.”

My mouth dropped open. “Do you have a photographic memory or something?”

“Not really, just a talent for remembering numbers. You’ve seen it before.”

It was true – the first night we’d met, he’d memorized a phone number off my cell with a single glance.

“And my bank just took the money, just like that? No questions asked?”

His mouth quirked up a little at the corner. “I know a guy.”

I sighed in annoyance. “I’m sure you do. But – ”

“Can we please not talk about the money?” he asked, a little irritation in his voice.

I assumed Connor never asked for anything, and it bothered him to do it now. I got a little defensive. “Why not?”

“Because talking about money was how I fucked up in the first place,” he said darkly, “and I don’t want to do it again. So please – let’s not talk about it, okay? Just donate it, or do whatever you want with it... but from here on out, let’s just not talk about it.” He paused. “Please.”

I sat there watching him.

I fucked up in the first place, and I don’t want to do it again.

My heart swelled. I felt like I might cry.

“...okay.”

“Thank you.”

He said it, not like he was exasperated, but like he was thankful.

Then he reached for my hand, held it to his lips, and kissed it softly, over and over.

Maybe it was how much of his emotions he'd shared – even subtly – with me over the last 15 minutes. Maybe it was the way he'd opened up. Maybe it was that all my sadness had finally washed away and been replaced with joy.

Or maybe it was because the hottest man I'd ever seen was kissing my hand.

Whatever the reason, despite how exhausted I was, I was getting a little turned on.

“You keep doing that,” I murmured, “and we're going to have to turn around and go to Space Mountain.”

He laughed. “I didn't realize you had the stamina to do that in your current state.”

“I don't think I do. I'm about to fall asleep right now.”

He placed my hand back on my lap. “You should. Tilt the seat back. Take a nap.”

I made a little disappointed sound, like *Awwwww...*

“I tell you what we're going to do when we get to Vegas,” he said in a low, seductive voice.

“Yes?” I yawned.

“We're going to check into the fanciest hotel and get the most beautiful penthouse available.”

“It doesn't have to be fancy,” I murmured. “Or a penthouse.”

“Quiet, just listen,” he said in a commanding tone of voice. “This is as much my fantasy as yours.”

I smiled. “Okay.”

“And it's going to have the biggest, most beautiful bed you've ever seen.”

“...uh-huh...”

“And we’re going to go up there, and I’m going to slowly undress you.”

Oh.

“...uh-huh?” I whispered, a little more awake now.

“I’m going to slip off your dress, then your bra, then your panties, very slowly, until you’re standing naked in front of me.”

Heat fluttered in my belly.

“Uh-huh...?”

“And then I’m going to take off my jacket and shirt, then my shoes and pants, then my underwear, until I’m standing there naked in front of you.”

In my mind’s eye, I could see his sculpted muscles... his bronze, perfect skin... and his limp shaft, dangling thick and huge between his perfect thighs...

...and then I imagined it growing, lengthening, hardening.

“Uh-huh?” I asked, almost fully awake now.

“And then I’m going to put you in the bed, and I’m going to get in beside you, with my body pressed against yours...”

“Uh-huh?”

“...and then we’re going to indulge in a long... deep... incredible... *nap*.”

I laughed. “You know exactly how to seduce a girl.”

“It’s true, my napping skills are irresistible.”

“How’d you know my biggest fantasy right now?”

“Oh, I had a hint.”

Then he did a fake yawn. Of course, yawns being contagious, I broke out into a huge one on my own.

“Stop!” I said, and swatted him lightly on the shoulder.

He grinned, then said softly, “Go to sleep. We’ll be there before you know it.”

“...you promise if you get tired... you’ll stop... and let Johnny drive...?”

“I promise.”

“...okay...”

I think I was out about 30 seconds later.

6

I experienced vague flashes of the trip as I dozed. Whispered phone calls... the purr of the engine... patterns of sunlight and shadow...

Once or twice I woke long enough to take swigs from a bottle of water, but then I lapsed back into semi-consciousness.

Until I felt someone's arms circling around me and lifting me out of my seat.

I looked over blearily. "...wha... where..."

I tried to force myself awake, but I was still so tired, it was like I was drugged.

"We're here," Connor said as he held me against his massive chest. Even through his suit, I could feel his hard muscles pressed against my body.

The sun was beating down with scorching heat against my skin. I saw the blurry outline of a gigantic white and glass building, much taller than the Dubai Hotel.

I winced against the bright light.

"...what are you doing...?"

"I'm carrying you," he said, and then we were moving. The bright light ended and shadow enveloped me. There was the sound of an automatic door, and cold air swept over me. The light dropped from shadow to near-darkness. Far away there was the digital *ching ching ching* of slot machines, and the sounds of coins clanking against metal.

We're in Vegas, I realized.

"...what... oh my God... I can walk," I protested, struggling against him sleepily.

No use. His arms were too powerful.

"I can carry you even easier."

I looked around. My eyes, which had been dazzled by the bright sun just a moment before, could barely focus in the gloom, but I could make out well-dressed people staring at us as we went by.

Tall, handsome man carrying tiny chick.

Well... not so tiny, to be honest. Just short.

“...what are people going to think...?” I asked anxiously, struggling to keep my head up.

“Why would I care what other people think?”

That was true. Connor didn't care what *anybody* thought.

Except you, a little voice whispered in my mind, and I smiled sleepily.

There was a musical chime, then the sound of doors sliding open. Connor stepped inside a mirrored elevator, and suddenly I could see myself in his arms, reflected hundreds of times, getting smaller and smaller, inwards to infinity.

Johnny stepped through the doors just before they closed.

“...oh... hi, Johnny...”

He grinned. “Hi, Lily.”

The elevator was so smooth, I barely noticed the transition from stillness to movement. But I could hear a hum, which rapidly increased in intensity. We were moving *fast*.

“...oh my God, this is embarrassing... put me down...” I told Connor.

“Mmmm...” he said, looking into the air as though pondering the question. Then he shook his head, as though he'd thought it over and decided otherwise. “Naaaah.”

“...Johnny... tell him to put me down...”

“Yeah, like *that* would do any good. In case you haven't noticed, he doesn't listen to me at all,” Johnny said with a reproachful look at his boss.

The elevator began to slow. Within seconds, the hum died away to nothing, and the doors opened again. Johnny walked

out first, followed by Connor with me in his arms. I saw a corridor painted light yellow. A dozen beautiful paintings covered the walls. Some of them looked vaguely familiar.

“...seriously, this is...” I said, then let my head loll against his shoulder. It was too difficult to finish the sentence.

“We’re almost there,” Connor whispered.

I heard an electronic beep and the click of a lock.

Connor stepped through a doorway into a darkened chamber, and moved through the shadows.

“I’ll take the room at the other end,” Johnny said.

“Sounds good,” Connor agreed. “Order up whatever you want – just keep things quiet.”

“You got it.”

Then we were past Johnny and inside a pitch-black room.

“Okay, now I put you down,” Connor whispered.

I felt his right arm slowly descend so that my feet lowered to the ground. But his left arm gripped my upper body so strongly that I never once felt in danger of falling.

My feet touched the floor, and I wobbled unsteadily.

“Hold on, hold on,” Connor said. He knelt down in front of me and removed my shoes, one by one. Then he stood back up and unzipped my skirt.

“...whoa... you move fast...” I murmured as it fell to the floor.

He laughed, then lifted my blouse up over my head. “Don’t you remember our conversation in the car? The one about me undressing you?”

“Oh yeah... and the nap...” I yawned.

“And the nap,” he agreed.

I felt my bra tighten, then release. The straps slipped off my arms.

“...where’s the bed...?”

“Right behind you,” Connor said as he hooked his fingers through my panties, bent into a crouch, and pulled them down my thighs to the floor.

I moaned a little, and ran my hands through his hair before he stood back up.

“Not now,” he smiled. “Later. After we sleep.”

I stood there as he took off his clothes twelve inches away from me – his jacket, his shirt, his shoes, his pants. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness now, and I realized that the room wasn’t pitch black – though it was close. I watched his arms and shoulders as they moved in the gloom, his outline little more than a muscular silhouette.

The light from under the door let me see a little of his lower body, though. Which was *very* nice. He stood before me clad only in boxers made of black material.

“...hey... if I’m naked, you gotta be naked, too,” I whispered.

“Do it, then,” he challenged me.

I could hear the smile in his voice even if I couldn’t see it with my eyes.

I hooked my fingers over the edge of his waistband and felt some sort of soft material under my skin. I pulled down slowly and watched the fabric move past his sculpted hipbones and the muscular curve of his lower abdomen, until I saw the thatch of dark curls and the base of his long, thick, limp manhood.

My mouth watering, I bent down in front of him, my knees touching soft carpet, and kept pulling until the boxers moved past his cock. Unrestricted, it bounced slightly, then slowly settled into a heavy, pendulous swing.

I leaned over and kissed it.

I felt the heat of his body on my face, the soft silkiness of the skin against my lips.

His shaft immediately began to grow with every pulse of his heartbeat.

But before I could do anything, I felt his hands grasp my arms and pull me gently to my feet.

“...hey,” I protested sleepily.

“Later,” he purred in my ear. “After our nap.”

Without the glorious sight of his manhood in front of me, I was easily distracted.

“...okay...” I yawned.

There came the sounds of fabric moving, and then Connor swept me up again like a doll and laid me in bed. The softest sheets I’d ever felt caressed my skin. They were cool to the touch, and a shiver ran through me.

Then the mattress dipped as Connor climbed in next to me and nuzzled against my body. He radiated warmth. I turned towards him like a plant does toward the sun, and nestled my head against his powerful chest.

He stroked my hair and whispered into my ear, “Sleep.”

And as his strong arms enveloped me... I did.

7

I awoke with no idea of where I was or what time it was.

I opened my eyes halfway. I was on the edge of the bed, facing outwards. Dim shapes of furniture lined the room, but I couldn't see a clock or a window or anything that might tell me whether it was day or night.

As I lay there in a muddled haze of brain fog, I replayed the last events I could remember, though they were like images from a fading dream:

Connor carrying me into the room...

...slowly undressing me...

...me pulling off his underwear...

At *that* particular memory, something inside me woke up a little bit more.

I turned over in the bed.

There he was a few feet away, lying on his back, one arm sprawled above his head, eyes closed and lips slightly parted.

Perfection.

I began to remember everything: the screaming match with Klaus... finding out my car had been towed... bursting into tears in the parking deck... Connor driving up... his impassioned speech... me crying in the car... his kissing my hand... the conversation with Johnny over the phone... the feeling of Connor's strong arms encircling me... the spectacle we must have made as he carried me inside the hotel...

None of that mattered.

I listened to the slow, steady rhythm of his breathing, and was happy just to be lying there beside him.

I was at peace.

And then my eyes wandered.

At first down to his pecs. Bronzed, massive, powerful.

Then to his washboard abs, which slowly moved up and down in time with his breathing.

And finally to the silken bed sheet, which lay draped across his lower abdomen, as though someone had positioned it there out of modesty...

...but had failed to completely cover everything.

I could see the curve of one hip, and the muscles at the top of his thigh.

I *so* wanted to see more.

I glanced at his face. He looked so calm and peaceful... I didn't want to disturb him.

...but I *did* want a peek.

I probably lay there for a full minute debating it in my head. Leave him alone and let him sleep, or peek under the sheet and potentially wake him up?

If it had been any of my previous boyfriends, I absolutely would have let them sleep.

Not that I wasn't concerned about Connor getting enough rest. I was.

It's just that, if it had been any of my exes lying there next to me, I wouldn't have been that interested in what was *under* the sheet.

I wouldn't have had the same hunger that gnawed at me now.

I reached out my hand.

I probably shouldn't have. I suppose it was selfish... just because I was hot and bothered as I lay there looking at him...

...but I rationalized it by thinking that most guys would love getting woken up to have sex, even if they were dead tired.

And I made an agreement with my libido that if I *did* wake him up, I'd do something extra nice for him.

What that would be – more ‘nice’ than what I’d done over the last couple of days – I didn’t know.

But I figured we could hash it out.

My heart was hammering as my hand lightly grasped the sheet above his hips. I kept glancing at his face, worried that my slightest movements would wake him.

It felt so *naughty*.

Spying on him when he wasn’t able to say ‘no’...

...about to uncover him...

I mean, you’d think it wouldn’t be that big a deal. I’d seen ‘it’ before.

Ha! *BOY* had I seen it before.

But I *soooo* wanted to see it again.

And I kind of wanted to do it especially because he couldn’t say no...

...and *because* he was asleep...

...and *because* it was naughty.

I know, I know. I’m vanilla. Simple pleasures for simple minds.

But that didn’t change the thrill that I felt, or the fact that my heart was hammering in my chest.

I gently lifted the sheet away from his body, watching his face to see if he stirred.

He didn’t.

I pulled the sheet back and immediately my mouth began to water.

His manhood lay thick and long, draped over his muscular thigh. Even limp, it was huge. And beautiful, like no other I had ever seen before. Pink and wonderfully proportioned, like the most lovely sculpture you’ve ever seen of one.

(I’m sure most guys would *loooooove* hearing their units called ‘lovely.’ Makes me think I should be saying it with a

British accent. ‘My, but your thing is lovely.’)

I’ve said before that I normally don’t find them attractive. I usually think they’re just funny-looking, and occasionally downright repulsive. I never cared that much for my exes’ (other than, you know, during sex), and I *certainly* didn’t enjoy the ones I’d seen in the few porno clips my college boyfriend had cajoled me into watching (usually with my fingers in front of my eyes).

But Connor’s... I could have lain there all day just looking at it.

If I didn’t want to touch it so badly.

See? That’s how it all starts. First you want a peek. Then you want to touch...

And oh my GOD I wanted to touch.

I watched his face again for any indication he was going to wake up, but he seemed to still be lost in deep sleep, so I gently lowered the sheet, letting it settle in folds on his thighs.

Then it took me another minute to work up the courage to reach out and touch it.

I felt *doubly* naughty.

I kept looking at his face, seeing if his eyes would open and he would frown at me.

I was SLEEPING, I kept imagining him say.

I know he probably wouldn’t do that... but I was still afraid.

And my heart was still hammering in my chest.

But I wanted to stroke it *so bad*.

I reached out with a few faltering stops and starts, and then finally touched it.

So warm and soft...

I traced my fingertip along its considerable length, glancing at his face every few seconds to see if he would wake.

He didn't.

But something else did.

His shaft began to slowly thicken and grow, expanding, getting larger by the second. I was touching him so lightly... but that was enough. I brushed my fingers over the little ridge of skin beneath the head, and his cock began to harden even faster. I lightly stroked his balls, watching as the skin reacted and shifted beneath my touch.

And every few seconds, I cast a glance up at his face.

His lips had opened the tiniest bit more, and I could hear his breathing quicken. His head moved a bit to the side.

Something was going on.

Pleasant dreams of me, hopefully.

I crept forward the tiniest bit, my face drawing close to his cock, but not touching it, as I stared up at him.

His lips moved once, but he never opened his eyes.

I was so close to his shaft, I could feel my breath bouncing off his skin and gently tickling under my nose. His warmth radiated out to me.

Watching his face the entire time, I kissed his cock.

It moved at my touch, and his shaft pressed against my lips.

His mouth dropped open even more, and the muscles of his face twitched.

Watching him continuously, careful not to disturb the mattress any more than necessary, I stuck out my tongue the tiniest bit and traced from his balls, all the way up his shaft, to the tight and swollen head.

A low, guttural moan escaped his throat.

He was rock-hard, his erection straining away from his body.

God I was so wet.

I wanted him so badly.

I kept softly licking and kissing, watching his face for a sign... but other than frowns of frustrated pleasure, he wasn't waking up.

I couldn't stand it anymore.

Damn it, I *had* to have him inside me.

This time I fully rationalized it away: what guy wouldn't want to wake up – not just to sex, but to a woman already pleasuring him?

Like she couldn't wait?

Hey – *had* to be good for his ego, right?

But I didn't just want to pleasure him.

I wanted to pleasure *me*.

Using him.

Still, my heart was thudding in my chest as I slowly shifted my weight and knelt beside him. I tried to be as slow and still as I could, but the bed moved slightly.

Yet he continued to lay there, his eyes closed, his breathing shallow and fast.

His arms were either above his head or level with his shoulders, so that at least helped with what I was planning to do.

I lifted one leg up in the air, slowly, sloooowly – wished I had followed through on last year's New Year's Resolution and actually gotten a gym membership – and then somewhat gracefully got it over his body. Then I settled down to my knees.

My legs were straddling him now. Though I was trying to keep as much weight off him as possible, it was only half-working.

But he still hadn't woken up yet.

Damn he's a sound sleeper...

I could feel the scorching heat of his cock against my upper thigh, both hard (his erection) and soft (his skin) at the

same time.

I put my hands on the bed next to his ribs, shifted my weight to all fours, and then slowly... slowly... lowered my pelvis, trying to angle him inside me without having to take his shaft in my hand.

There.

The tip of his cock.

It rubbed against my wet lips.

Ohhhhhhh my GOD.

My own breath was ragged now, strained with anticipation.

Should I ease down on him, and see how long it took to wake him?

Or should I plunge down on him all at once, and wake him with a shock?

(Considering how large he was, I might be in for the bigger shock, actually.)

And then my conscience piped up for a last minute legal disclaimer.

This isn't... BAD, is it? Like... non-consensual... right? I mean... he'd LIKE this, right?

I mean... I'D like it, if the positions were reversed...

(oh hell YES I would)

But... would I like it in all situations?

I bit my lip, trying to figure out exactly what I should do. I just kind of rocked there, feeling his swollen head *almost* enter me, but not quite, in a kind of delicious torture...

I wanted it so bad... but now that I was here at the final stretch, I wasn't sure I should go all the way...

And then one of his eyebrows raised, the eye beneath it opened halfway, and he looked right at me.

“Lily, you're *killing* me. Just DO it.”

I gasped. “You big FAKER!”

He burst out laughing. “Well, if you didn’t *take* so damn long – ”

“Oh *yeah?!?*” I cried out. “Well, this is what I do to fakers!”

And I plunged down on him in one gorgeous, golden stroke.

Well... halfway down, anyway.

I was already drenched from the constant anticipation over the last ten minutes. Thank God for all that lubrication, or it wouldn’t have worked otherwise. Or would have been rather painful.

As it was, it was just glorious instead.

Now it was *his* turn to be surprised.

His mouth formed an ‘O,’ and both eyes opened wide.

“Oh *fuck,*” he groaned.

I think that pretty much mirrored my sentiments, although I wasn’t thinking too clearly.

I was vaguely aware of an animal-like moan coming from deep inside me.

Every time Connor had entered me before, he’d eased inside me slowly.

Now, with my body at the nervous peak of anticipation, him slipping inside me – and so deep inside me – so fast –

Whoa.

I didn’t come, but I was getting there quick.

He raised his head and brought his hands down to my waist, as though to grab me –

“*Hold it,*” I commanded, and grabbed both his wrists before he could touch me.

If he’d wanted to put his hands on my waist, there was nothing on God’s green earth I could have done to stop him... but he yielded and just stared up at me.

“Fakers don’t get to run the show,” I said as I held onto his wrists.

He swallowed hard. “Fine – just, for God’s sake,” he whispered urgently, “do *something*.”

“Fine,” I snapped, and held onto his arms for leverage.

And then I raised up slowly, an inch or two... and slowly lowered myself down, taking an extra inch of him inside me.

Then I raised myself up, feeling his wet skin slide inside me...

And then I slowly rocked back down, taking another inch or more.

Much thicker.

Filling me up.

I slid back up along his length – which was already fairly deep inside me – and plunged down hard and fast.

Another inch.

He just kept getting bigger the further I went.

The entire time he kept his neck strained so that his head was upright, and he stared right between my thighs, attention rapt, watching as my lips enveloped his shaft.

I realized we hadn’t done this position yet. He’d never seen me... um... quite this way.

I got a little self-conscious.

A little embarrassed.

A little worried.

Then my interior *You go, girl!* voice spoke up.

Fuck THAT noise, it said.

After all, Connor had seen me a *lot* closer up.

He’d, ahem, put his tongue in an even *more* unusual place.

And his expression right now was akin to Indiana Jones’s the first time he saw the Ark of the Covenant.

(Yes, I'm a nerd.)

“You like what you see?” I whispered as I rocked up and paused.

“Yes,” he answered with a strangled voice.

I paused... for a second... two seconds...

“Good,” I said, as I plunged all the way down on his cock.

“Oh God,” he groaned.

I gave a little cry as my ass smacked his pelvis and he touched me *deep* inside.

Still using his upheld arms as leverage – which he was keeping straight and strong as bedposts – I raised my body up, up, up, until I was almost sure he was going to slide out of me... paused at the top...

“Lily, *please*,” he begged.

And then I plunged back down.

Smack.

We both cried out at the same time.

Again I went up, up, up, all the way to the tip... paused... then plunged down – but only three or four inches. I bobbed up and down, alternating, up to the top, sliding five inches down his cock, up to the top, two inches down, back up again, then plunged down, taking his entire length inside me with a *smack* of our flesh together.

He was panting and groaning the entire time, never quite sure if I was going to just tease him a little, or take him fully inside me.

Then I decided I wanted to do a little something specifically for *me*.

With his cock all the way inside me, I began to grind my hips around, using his amazing girth, pressing his thickness against every spot that felt good, gyrating my hips, feeling every inch of him fill me up.

“Let me touch you,” he begged in a strangled voice.

I kept hold of his wrists, but I didn't put up any resistance as his hands moved in and grabbed my breasts – softly at first, then firmer, until he was groping me, rubbing me, his fingers rolling and pinching my nipples between his fingertips.

It just added gasoline to the fire.

I leaned forward, putting more pressure exactly where I wanted it, feeling the rigidness of his shaft stroking me inside, in just the right spot.

Sweet heat and pleasure built faster and faster between my legs.

I closed my eyes and began to grind harder, feeling him touching every part of me, pressing against me, against my lips, against the spot inside me that was growing hotter and hotter with every second.

My body bucked against his hips, and I couldn't contain it anymore – the pleasure was too sweet, and like a flood it spread out through my stomach and up through my spine and I cried out, over and over, as I came, squeezing him tight, feeling him thick and hard and massive inside me with every jolt of pleasure, over and over and over.

I was panting and my skin was glistening with a light sheen of sweat when the waves of bliss subsided and I finally opened my eyes.

He was staring up at me.

“Wow,” he grinned.

“You like that?” I smiled back, then closed my eyes as one more aftershock rippled through my body.

“That was quite a show.”

I started moving up and down the length of his shaft again, softly, slowly. “And what can I do for you?”

“Come down here, for starters,” he said in a low, dangerous voice.

Then he reached up, grabbed me by the shoulders, and forced my body down against his.

I gave a little gasp, but that was quickly stifled as he put his hands in my hair, pulled my head down to his, and kissed me passionately.

Ahhhhhh.

His tongue played with mine, his lips rubbing wetly against mine in a steamy kiss – but all the while he stayed still from the waist down.

Until his hands crept down my back and cupped each of my cheeks, one in each hand.

Then he lifted my ass a little as we continued to kiss – and then plunged me back down on him.

Oh.

He began to move me – not against my will, but with no real effort on my part – up and down, my breasts rubbing against his firm chest, the sweat of our bodies easing the friction. And as he moved me down, he began to thrust his hips up, so that my body began to plunge down on him more vigorously, and his massive girth filled me up totally and completely with a jolt as our hips smacked against each other.

I sighed and moaned as his fingers massaged my ass, gripping me tight. I stopped kissing him – I just couldn't do it anymore, he was taking my breath away as he thrust into me over and over, long and hard and thick. I rolled my head slightly to the side of his and felt his hot breath in my ear, his voice a whisper as he breathed, "God, I love fucking you, Lily... Jesus, you feel so good..."

All I could do was moan in reply.

He began to move more insistently. One hand switched from my ass to my waist, and he began physically pushing me down as he thrust deep inside me.

I began to moan in ecstasy as his thrusts became harder, faster, slamming into me, filling me up to the very edge of what I could take – doubling his speed, tripling it.

My orgasm was building again, getting closer, as he slammed into me harder and more urgently – and then his

voice was ragged and hot in my ear:

“I’m going to come inside you, Lily – ”

“Come inside me,” I begged, “come inside me – ”

He cried out, and I felt his cock suddenly pulse between my legs, and the sound of his voice and the knowledge that he was coming inside me pushed me over the edge again. My fingers clutched at his shoulders and my nails dug into his skin as my whole body burst with heat and light.

Wetness filled me. His cries were loud as a shout in my ear. My own were muffled as I bit his skin, unable to control myself.

The thrusts slowed, and the spasms of his cock slowly ebbed, though they continued for a while longer – one every three or four seconds, then every seven or eight. Every time there was a contraction, he would move inside me, as though trying to extend his pleasure in my body for every second he could.

There was one more contraction between my legs, and then nothing more – except the sweet, full, thick presence of him inside me.

We lay like that, him inside me, me sprawled on top of him, my hair damp and in both our faces. I felt his chest move beneath me as he breathed – hell, it physically *moved* me up and down – and I counted the thuds of his heart as they pounded just inches away from my own.

Then he pulled the damp hair away from my face, found my lips, and kissed me again. Softly, sensuously.

Thirty seconds later when he pulled away, he smiled and peered into my eyes.

“*Damn* I’m glad you got in the car.”

I laughed, laid my head down on his chest, and whispered, “So am I.”

8

We eventually got up and made our way to the bathroom, where we took a long, sensuous shower together, rubbing soap (and our hands) all over each other's bodies.

Once we got out, I saw a tiny digital clock on the bathroom counter.

It was seven o'clock in the evening.

"Oh my God, I have to call Anh," I said in a panic.

The last my roommate had heard, I was heading home after being fired. She had probably gotten back to the apartment, found it empty, and wondered if I'd nodded off on the freeway and gotten in a car wreck.

For the second time in four days, I was worrying my best friend sick.

"You have your phone, or do you need mine?" Connor asked as he toweled his hair dry.

I watched below his waist as the movement made his manhood swing back and forth. "Um... yeah..."

He saw what I was looking at. "Focus," he teased.

"On this?" I asked as I reached out and caressed his limp shaft – after which it wasn't quite so limp anymore.

"Ah," he groaned, and leaned down and kissed me. Then he pulled away. "And don't do that, or you won't be able to call her for another half an hour."

"That long, huh?"

"Well... two minutes, at least."

I grinned and headed out to the bedroom with a towel wrapped around me.

Anh answered on the first ring.

"Lily?!"

“I’m sorry, I should have called, I’m sorry – ”

“Are you alright?!”

“I’m fine.”

“Where are you?!”

“Uh... Vegas?” I said with a wince.

A pause on the other end.

Then my roommate’s inner ‘mom’ kicked in.

“You thought it was a good idea to go to Las Vegas after everything that happened this morning?! And on, like, two hours of sleep?! And you didn’t let me KNOW?!”

“Well... Connor was driving, so...”

Another pause.

Then my roommate’s inner fan girl busted out.

“OH MY GOD, LILY!” she squealed happily. *“DID HE – DID YOU – ”*

“He showed up in the parking garage and said he was sorry, and asked me to get in the car with him.”

“And you got in?”

“Well... yeah,” I said, like, *Duh*.

She paused.

“Did... uh... you change your mind about his offer from last night?”

“What off– oh, no, GOD no – NO. He was just so sweet and amazing, and... and I couldn’t help myself...”

“Okay, good – so he’s not paying you, that’s good.”

I winced again.

Tell her later, or tell her now?

Might as well rip the band-aid off fast.

“Um... actually... he’d already deposited \$50,000 in my account,” I admitted.

“*WHAT?!*”

“He said it was a gift, no strings attached, if I didn’t get in the car I could keep it anyway, and I didn’t want it, but he said to donate it if I didn’t want it,” I said hurriedly.

“...uhhh... okay...”

I could hear the doubt in her voice.

“I got in because I wanted to get in, Anh,” I said forcefully.

“...and the fact that you had just gotten fired had nothing to do with it?”

“No. I mean, no, it didn’t have anything to do with it.”

I was starting to get annoyed. Half because she was harshing my buzz – and half because she was picking at some half-buried doubts of my own.

“...okay,” she relented. “*Just as long as you’re happy. You ARE happy, right?*”

I thought back to my conversation with Connor in the car.

And the last 45 minutes.

“Absolutely.”

“*Okay, then,*” Anh said, as though that settled it.

Then she paused again.

“...50,000 dollars? *Are you serious?*”

“Yeah...” I said nervously, chewing at my lip.

“*Jeez, Lily, you must be something ELSE in bed.*”

“Anh!” I laughed, shocked that my roommate would even think such a thing.

“*I wish some gorgeous guy would pay ME fifty grand for my poonanny.*”

“OH MY GOD, you did NOT just say that!” I howled, caught between shocked laughter and righteous indignation.

“*Oh, and way to go on negotiating for a higher –*”

“IT WAS A GIFT!”

“Uh huh... yeah, you’ll notice he’s not giving ME \$50,000, though...”

“Anh – ”

“I’m just kidding. You know that.”

“I know,” I said, though I was a little nervous.

As Dr. Sheldon Cooper, my favorite TV nerd of all time, said once on *The Big Bang Theory*: ‘It’s funny because it’s true.’

But I pushed that out of my mind.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with it yet...”

“Yeah, well, don’t put it all on black.”

“Oh hell no. And I think I can cover rent this month,” I teased.

“You think?”

“Maybe take you out for a deluxe spa day, my treat.”

“Ohhhh – NOW you’re talking.”

There was a pause, and her voice suddenly became serious.

“Lily?”

“Yeah?”

“...be careful, okay?”

“I will,” I promised.

“When are you coming back?”

“I don’t know. It could be a couple of days, or... longer, maybe.”

“Wow... well, just take care of yourself.”

“I will. You too.”

“I’m not the one in Sin City with a guy who thinks I bonk so good he’s putting fifty G’s in my bank account.”

“Anh!” I half-laughed, half-shouted.

“Have fun,” she said sweetly. *“Make sure you give him his money’s worth.”*

I shouted at her in playful outrage for a couple more seconds, and then we said our final goodbyes.

9

Dinner was amazing.

Hell, the whole *evening* was amazing.

It all started off as Connor got dressed and I was putting on my makeup.

“Where do you want to eat?” he asked as he buttoned up an expensive blue shirt. “I’m starving.”

“I don’t know anywhere in Vegas.”

“You’ve never been here before?”

“Oh, I’ve been... once. I just don’t think you want to eat at the \$8.99 prime rib buffet.”

“So let’s splurge and go for the \$12.99 one down the street.”

“What’s funny is, to you, that’s a joke. To me just a week ago, that was extravagant.”

“We’ll save it for another night. I’ve got something in mind, but we’ll need to go shopping beforehand.”

“For what?”

“For you.”

I suddenly felt incredibly self-conscious as I stood there in my bra and panties in front of the mirror. I looked over at my rumpled clothes still lying on the bedroom floor. “I... do I have to get new clothes to go out to eat?”

“No, but it’ll be fun.”

“Maybe we should just order in...”

“Oh no. We’re going out.”

“But if you’re starving – ”

“Room service is sending up a small snack. I’ll be fine.”

“But – ”

“Get dressed,” he commanded. “We’re going out. That’s final.”

10

The small snack turned out to be a bottle of white wine, some amazing cheese and fruit, and a bunch of light-as-air crackers.

Connor made a phone call as Johnny and I had a bite to eat. The wine was amazing – a light chardonnay with hints of pear and vanilla. But Johnny wouldn't take a sip, no matter how much I tempted him.

"I'm on duty, Lily."

"It's just a glass."

"No."

"Half a glass? A fourth of a glass?"

"You're a bad influence, you know that?"

I pulled back, suddenly feeling that I was being cruel. "Just on you, or on Connor, too?"

Johnny laughed. "No, I'd say you're actually a *good* influence on him."

I felt a little bit better after that.

Connor came back into the room groaning.

"Did you call Steven?" Johnny asked.

Steven was supposedly Connor's other assistant... or the assistant to Sebastian, I forget which. I'd only heard him mentioned briefly before, when Sebastian was going off on a mini-tirade about how wonderful he was.

Just to be clear, that was Sebastian going off on a mini-tirade about how wonderful *Sebastian* was. Not Steven. Steven was third-class all the way in comparison to Sebastian.

According to Sebastian, anyway.

"He couldn't get me the reservation I wanted," Connor said.

I drew my head back in mock horror. “Oh no! Whatever shall we do?!”

Connor gave me a dirty look, but I refused to be cowed.

“I guess it’s the \$12.99 buffet,” I shrugged with an *Oh well!* smile.

Connor kept the dirty look going. “I don’t think so.”

Johnny frowned. “Didn’t Steven just drop your name?”

“Yeah, isn’t that the magic word?” I asked saucily.

“Apparently not. Although ‘Connor Brooks’ seems to work pretty well on some people,” he smirked.

“Agh – you! – ” I yelled and threw a cracker at him.

He dodged it and laughed, then looked at Johnny. “Dare I...?”

“Dare you what?” I asked, a little fearful of retaliation for the cracker.

Like tickling, say.

Although *some* tickling might be nice...

“Just appeal to his need to be important to you. You do that, he’s putty in your hands,” Johnny advised.

Sebastian.

They were going to call Connor’s regular assistant.

“Oh, come onnnn!” I protested. “The poor guy’s on vacation 24 hours, and already you’re bugging him? Jeez, let’s just go eat somewhere else.”

Johnny grinned, then looked at Connor. “When I go on vacation and you want to call *me*, do me a favor and listen to her.”

“That’ll never happen, since you’re never *going* on vacation,” Connor said, then seemed to reconsider. “Maybe I shouldn’t call him.”

I folded my arms. “Finally, some common decency.”

Johnny looked over at me. “Lily, trust me when I say this: the only thing Sebastian likes more than reminding people they can’t get along without him... is hearing *them* say that they can’t get along without him.”

Connor pointed at Johnny like *You win* and dialed the phone.

“You’re both jerks, you know that?” I huffed.

“But you’re about to benefit,” Connor said, “and without having to sacrifice your righteous indignation.”

“I’ll take the \$12.99 buffet instead.”

“We can drop you off on our way, if you want...”

I flipped Connor off, which he found hilarious.

Then Sebastian’s over-the-top voice erupted from the speakerphone.

“Oh my God, I knew it – has everything fallen apart ALREADY?”

Johnny looked over at me like *See?*

“I go away for one day, and – what is it? Are you stranded somewhere? Did someone have the audacity to cancel a meeting? Did that little floozy run out on you?”

“HELLO!” I shouted at the phone. “I’m standing right here!”

“Ohhhh, of course you didn’t run out. Silly me, the gravy train’s still running...”

“Sebastian,” Connor warned.

I snorted in mock outrage. “And to think, I tried to get them not to disturb your vacation!”

I wasn’t really angry. Sebastian was outrageous, but he said things in such a ridiculous voice that it was hard to get worked up over them.

But I *was* determined to get in my digs.

“When the whole world’s gone to hell, you don’t NOT call the President of the United States just because he’s on

vacation.”

“Oh, you’re the President now?” Johnny asked, amused.

“I thought you were more like the butler,” I said.

Johnny and Connor both went “OHHHHHH!” at that one.

“At least I’m not the call girl.”

Connor’s face twisted in anger. He was about to throw a fit, but I beat him to the punch.

“You *bitch*,” I laughed.

“And don’t you forget it, honey,” Sebastian said, followed by three loud, sharp noises over the speakerphone:

Click! Click! Click!

I sighed. “That was in a Z formation, wasn’t it.”

“YES IT WAS. So, now that the butler and the call girl have finished their repartee, what can I do for you gentlemen?”

“First, you can be nice to Lily,” Connor snapped.

“That WAS me being nice to Lily.”

“That’s the sad thing, unfortunately,” Connor grumbled, but I just grinned.

“How’s your vacation so far?” Johnny asked.

“Lovely, until you interrupted it, thank you for asking. Javier’s a dream.”

Javier was the hairdresser in Los Angeles Sebastian had flown out to see. On very short notice. Without much warning.

I guess it hadn’t been a problem.

“But you didn’t call to ask about that, so what disaster shall I fix for you?”

“I can’t get a table at Robuchon’s,” Connor said.

“Yes, and the world is about to end,” I added.

Connor glared at me.

Then Sebastian spoke – with unbridled glee, I might add.

“Whaaat?!... STEVEN couldn't get one for you?”

Johnny elbowed me lightly in the ribs and arched his eyebrows like, *See? See?!*

Connor sighed. “No, he couldn't. I like him, but Steven is... insufficiently forceful, I'm afraid.”

“Or insufficiently bitchy,” Johnny muttered.

“I heard that, Kato.”

“Was that racist?” Johnny asked good-naturedly.

“Depends – does it make me the Green Hornet?” Connor asked.

“If you mean the clueless white boy who gets all the credit while Bruce Lee does all the work, then yes, that would be you.”

I looked at Connor with my mouth open like *Ohhh SNAP!*

He grinned and winked at me.

“Bruce Lee... I like that,” Johnny said, straightening the lapels of his suit.

“Mmm, me likey that, too.”

“Ewww, Sebastian!” Johnny shouted.

“I meant the original, not the knockoff, Mr. Homophobe.”

“You better watch it, I'll tell Javier you said that about Bruce Lee,” Johnny warned.

“Now who's being bitchy?”

“Focus,” Connor called out.

“I'll call you back in five minutes with the reservation. I KNOW people over there... unlike Steven.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.”

“The things I do for you, Connor... and on my vacation... tearing me away from a Latin heartthrob just to run your little errands...”

“I could call Steven again if you’re too busy,” Connor offered. “Maybe he could try again.”

“*DON’T YOU DARE.*”

Connor and Johnny looked at me like, *SEE?!*

I rolled my eyes and bobbed my head slightly from side to side, like, *Alright, you called it.*

“Thank you, Sebastian,” Connor said. “I’d be lost without you.”

“*I know,*” Sebastian said happily, then hung up the phone.

11

Sebastian came through with the reservation – which meant the start of the next round of negotiations.

“Will you at least put on the bulletproof vest?” Johnny asked.

“No,” Connor said as he popped a piece of cheese in his mouth and took a sip of the white wine that room service had brought.

“Fine – I just won’t drive you, then.”

“Fine. I’ll just take the Lamborghini, then.”

As they quarreled, I wandered the main room of the penthouse. It wasn’t the Dubai, but it *was* pretty damn nice. The ceiling towered thirty feet overhead, and a curving staircase made of pounded bronze connected the first floor with the second. Luxurious couches were scattered throughout the room. The marble flooring – dark green swirled and speckled with white – reflected back the dim lighting from far overhead, with the occasional rug thrown in here and there. There was a flat-screen TV on the wall that was as big as a car, a full bar made of the same speckled marble, and a kitchen and dining area down a hallway to the left. Twenty-foot-high glass windows overlooked the lights of the city and the mountains beyond. The sun had just set, and the sky was a gorgeous burnt orange that faded to deep indigo.

“When’s the reservation?” Johnny grumbled.

“In 45 minutes.”

“It only takes 15 minutes to get there, so... are you hanging out here till then?” Johnny asked hopefully.

“No, we’re going somewhere else first.”

Johnny groaned. “Great.”

“It’s not for me, it’s for Lily.”

I turned around at the sound of my name. “For me? Where?”

Connor grinned. “It’s a surprise.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Johnny muttered under his breath.

12

Turned out our destination was the Via Bellagio in the Bellagio hotel.

Johnny drove us in the Bentley, then dropped it off with valets and accompanied us into the hallway of marble and glass and wrought-iron ceilings. My eyes goggled as we walked past stores for Chanel, Giorgio Armani, Tiffany & Co., Dior, Prada.

“See anything you like?” Connor asked as we mingled through the crowd.

“Yeah, of course – it’s all gorgeous. Well, most of it.” Some of the purses I’d seen were truly hideous.

“Well, pick something out so we can go to dinner, I’m starving.”

I stared up at him. “What?”

“Pick out an outfit, we need to get going.”

I froze to the spot and looked around me. “H... here?”

He frowned. “Yes, here.”

I shook my head. “I... I can’t go in there...”

“Sure you can. Come on.”

He took my hand and dragged me into the Prada store. Johnny followed along ten steps behind, quite amused.

Inside it was nearly deserted, with only a couple of salespeople in the store. A forty-something woman in a stylish business suit came over. “How may I help you?” she asked politely.

“We’re just looking,” I said, stark terror rising up inside me.

“No we’re not,” Connor informed her. “We need ready-to-wear for her.”

“Right this way,” the woman smiled, then walked off ahead of us.

“I don’t want to do this,” I whispered frantically.

“Why not? Just get something for dinner.”

“Connor – these dresses cost a lot of money!”

“No they don’t,” he said as he towed me along behind him.

“Connor, they cost thousands of dollars apiece!”

“That’s not a lot of money.”

“What?! Yes it is – ”

“This is nice – you like this?” Connor asked, pointing to a gorgeous red dress that looked like it belonged on Angelina Jolie.

“Yes, but – ”

Connor turned to the saleswoman. “Let her try this on in – what’s your size?” he asked me.

I blushed a shade close to the color of the dress, walked over, and whispered in the saleswoman’s ear. She nodded and headed for the racks.

I turned back to Connor. “I can’t afford this!”

“Well, technically, now you can.”

He was talking about his \$50,000 gift.

“I don’t want to waste money on a dress I can’t wear anywhere – ”

“You’re wearing it to dinner.”

“But – ”

“And besides, I’m buying it, not you.”

“No.”

He frowned. “Yes.”

I set my jaw. “You said that you hated it when women always wanted to go shopping with your money.”

“A, I meant they wanted to go shopping *without* me. B, technically I’m going shopping *with* you, which other women didn’t really care about so long as I pulled out my card at the end. And C, I can tell you *really* don’t want to be doing this, so you’re in the clear.”

I glared at him unhappily.

He looked at me like he couldn’t understand what was going on in my head. “Why is this bothering you so much?”

I wrapped my arms around me and held on to my body like I was cold. “I don’t know... I just... I’m not used to any of this. Buying a two thousand dollar dress just for dinner – how much is dinner going to be?!”

“12.99. Prime rib buffet.”

I stamped my foot and stared at him like, *Can’t you be serious?*

He broke out into a rueful smile and shook his head. “Just enjoy it, Lily. Enjoy the moment, and don’t worry about the price tag.”

“I can’t do that. This is a lot of money to somebody like me, even if it isn’t to you.”

“I have a dress in the lady’s size,” the saleswoman said as she walked over.

Connor raised his index finger in the air without looking at her. His eyes were locked on me instead. “Can you give us a moment?”

“Of course,” she said, and melted away into the background.

“Okay, the way I see it, there’s several options here,” Connor said in a low, neutral voice as he stared into my eyes. “One is that you’re trying desperately not to be like other women I’ve been with. If that’s the case – ”

“I just don’t want to – ” I tried to break in.

“Let me talk,” he continued, gently but firmly. “If that’s the case, then mission accomplished. *Believe me*, I don’t think

you're after my money. And I know it's not a show. You're worried that I'll think you're using me. I don't.

“I think, even more than that, you're worried that you actually *are* using me for my money. Subconsciously, maybe. If that's the case, then know this: it's not a crime to enjoy nice things, Lily. I'm lucky, I have a lot of nice things in my life – but they're not worth a damn unless I can share them with somebody I care about. I *want* you to enjoy what I can give you, because I enjoy giving it to you. Partly because you're the first person I've ever met who has tried so desperately to convince me that you want me for *me*, and not what I can give you. I already know that. So quit worrying about it.”

I relaxed a little. “That's not the whole – ”

“I'm not finished yet. I also think that you're uncomfortable with wealth, and nice things in general. For one, you haven't been around it much. It's new to you. It's like being dropped in a foreign country where everything's different, and you haven't quite acclimated to it yet.”

I tilted my head slightly to the side. “...kind of.”

“But more than that, you think you *shouldn't* enjoy it, because you're acutely aware of less fortunate people. You were struggling just a few days ago, and you know there are people struggling even worse than you were, and you feel like paying two thousand dollars for a dress is wasteful and wrong, because it could be used to help people a whole lot less fortunate than either of us.”

I sighed. “...yeah, kind of.”

“Okay. I haven't gone into it much, because I don't like to brag – ”

“*Reeeaaally.*”

He grinned.

“About some things, maybe.” Then he got serious again. “But not about this, although I'm going to do it now to prove a point. Of the companies I own, they rank among the highest in charitable giving on the Fortune 500. By a long shot. And I'm not talking about symphony halls, or art museums, or whatever

other welfare programs for rich people you want to name. I'm talking clean water in developing countries, school programs in Africa, scholarships for the poorest kids in America. And that's just my *companies*. I have a charitable foundation that gives away twenty percent of everything I make, every year – to the same causes I just mentioned, not to mention medical research, Doctors Without Borders, natural disasters around the world. They're excellent causes, all of them, and I'm proud to support them. But that doesn't mean I'm going to put on a sackcloth and sit around and eat beans and rice the rest of my life. I have money, and I'm going to enjoy it. I'm going to use it for good, yes, but I'm also going to indulge myself when I want. I may not be a saint, but I can tell you this: I do a lot more good for a lot more people than all the self-appointed scolds who lecture me about my lifestyle, and I'm going to enjoy what I've got while I've got it. When they donate a hundred million dollars a year, every year, then they can take it up with me.”

I felt bad that I'd come across that way. “I wasn't lecturing you about –”

“Which brings us to the final issue: I think, deep down, you're freaking out about this because you don't feel like you deserve it. That you, Lily Ross, don't deserve to wear an expensive dress. That somehow, you're not worth it.”

I jerked slightly, like I'd touched a live electrical wire.

What he'd said cut deep. Deeper than I wanted to admit.

“Which is bullshit,” he continued. “I came across you doing an incredible job, for a boss that abused you, for a company that didn't support you or recognize you for what you did for them. But you stayed in that position for some reason, which *I* think is a particularly toxic combination of low self-esteem, a desire to please others at your own expense, and the mindset that you shouldn't question or rebel against authority. All of which you've got to get rid of.”

Ouch. Ouch, ouch, OUCH.

“I told Klaus off,” I said defensively – though a bit morosely, too, because I knew what he was going to say next.

“Which was great – but you did it because you had nothing to lose.”

“Except my self-respect,” I pointed out.

“And I applaud what you did – but next time, do it on the first day of the job instead of the last. In fact, do it in the interview and set some boundaries going in.”

I glowered at him. “I didn’t give you what *you* wanted last night.”

He burst out into a grin, and for a second I thought he was going to throw the \$50,000 in my face and say *Nyah-nyah, yes you did.*

But he didn’t.

“Yes, I’ve noticed that I seem to be the main exception to your rule,” he said drily. “You challenge me all the time, you *definitely* don’t seek to please me at your own expense, and you constantly put me in my place. Which leads me to believe there’s hope for you yet.”

I dropped my eyes and then looked up coyly. “I please you *some* ways without worrying about me,” I whispered.

He laughed, then stepped forward and kissed me – wrapped me up in his arms right there in the Prada store, in front of God and everybody, and laid one on me.

And took my breath away.

When he finally broke off the kiss, he was grinning. “Yes, you do,” he whispered in my ear, sending a shiver through me. “Yes, you do.”

I sighed. “I didn’t think I was going to get psychoanalyzed when I walked in here.”

“And I didn’t think I was going to have to play therapist just to take you shopping.”

I glanced over at the saleslady, who was standing about thirty feet away, pretending to look at a display instead of us. The dress shone like a ruby spun into shimmering cloth as it dangled from her arm.

“Connor, it’s beautiful, but I – ”

“*Lily*,” he said insistently, put a finger under my chin, and raised me up to look in his eyes. The next words he said might sound harsh in black and white, but he said them with impish good humor and a sparkle in his eyes:

“Pretty please. For me. Wear the fuckin’ dress.”

So I wore the fuckin’ dress.

And it was absolutely amazing.

13

Not only did I get the dress, I got a black wrap that offset the dress beautifully. Los Angeles is basically a desert, and the temperature can swing between extremes from day to night – so imagine what it’s like with Las Vegas, which is *all* desert. At this time of year, once the heat from the day radiated off and the night really took hold, it was going to get *really* chilly.

That was how I rationalized the wrap, anyway.

There wasn’t much of a way to rationalize the shoes, though. (They were absolutely jaw-dropping, though.)

Or the seductive bra and panties. (Although I guess you could say Connor was going to really enjoy them later. Or enjoy taking them off, anyway.)

At any rate, I left the store a completely new woman – sashaying around in luxury, feeling like the clothes were kissing my skin with every step, and looking like a million bucks.

At least it didn’t cost that much.

A million bucks, I mean.

Because I’m sure it cost plenty.

Although I have no idea what the final price tag was. Connor refused to let me see the bill when he signed it.

I’ll do charity work, I bargained with the universe. I’ll donate to widows and orphans.

Then I remembered what he’d said about feeling like I didn’t deserve nice things, and I tried to shut out the guilty voices and enjoy the moment.

And oh my God, what a moment it was.

We got back in the Bentley and drove to the MGM Grand – not far away at all, though with the heavy traffic on the Strip, it took a while. It gave me a chance to watch the fountains

outside the Bellagio. If you've never seen them, they're almost worth a trip to Vegas just by themselves. They were gorgeous as they pulsed in time to an opera song, twining around each other and exploding like aquatic fireworks.

A few minutes later we drove up outside the MGM Grand – but not the main building, with its emerald glass exterior. Instead, it was a circular drive in front of a building that looked like some kind of Italian mansion – which made sense once I saw the lettering ‘The Mansion at MGM Grand.’ Johnny left the Bentley with the valets and accompanied us inside. After a short passageway, we entered a tiny jewel-box of a restaurant lobby with black-and-white tiled floors, crystal chandeliers, and antique furniture lining the walls. A maître-d’ whisked us away to a room that looked like it was out of a picture book of decadent French salons in the 1800’s. The whole place was done in purple – though if you’re having visions of an adolescent girl on an out-of-control decorating spree, I can assure you, this wasn’t it. It was *much* pricier. Purple velvet curtains framed windows that looked out over a lush green courtyard of trees. The purple wallpaper had the faintest of raised textures, barely visible except at the edge of shadows. The carpet was black with long, elegant loops of white throughout, and crystal chandeliers cast everything in a subdued glow.

In retrospect, I guess it was a tad gaudy, but this *was* Vegas. And somehow the lighting and the luxury of the place made it seem otherworldly.

There was a line I read once that said, *A little too much is way too much, but WAY too much is just right.* I had never fully understood until I saw that room.

The maître-d’ sat us down at a tiny table along the wall. The room was relatively small, with room for perhaps 20 people total. I looked around at the other diners, all in expensive suits and fancy dresses – and all sitting at long, black tables.

We were the only ones next to the wall. In fact, our table was conspicuously out of place – both its placement and the

way it disrupted the flow of the room. As though it wasn't ordinarily there.

I could just picture a couple of waiters hastily arranging everything moments before we arrived.

"How many strings do you think Sebastian pulled to get us in here?" I whispered across the table to Connor.

"Don't worry, he enjoyed pulling every one of them."

"There must be a months-long waiting list to eat in a place like this," I marveled.

"It's a Monday."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that has nothing to do with it."

"What can I say? Sebastian's the best."

"We should record that and send it to him so he can fall asleep listening to it."

Connor grinned and settled back in his chair.

I looked around. "Where are the menus?"

"Sebastian already ordered for us."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I would have *liked* to have seen the choices."

Connor smiled. "Setting boundaries, are you?"

"Glad you noticed."

"Like I said, you've never had a problem doing that with me. But this time is different. The chef here is an artist. I mean that sincerely – he's world-class. And there's a sixteen-course meal that changes every –"

"Sixteen *courses*?"

"Don't worry, they're fairly small. But the menu he selects is only around for a couple of weeks or so, and then it changes and never repeats. A fleeting moment that's here, then gone. You might not like some of it, but the overall effect is pretty incredible. It's kind of like participating in some kind of theater performance... you just have to give yourself over to it and *experience* it."

Give yourself over to it.

That was a pretty apt description of some other things, too.

“You’re getting a glassy-eyed look,” Connor commented.

“Just thinking about some other things I’ve ‘experienced’ this past weekend.”

“Ah, yes. Now *that* was a hell of a performance.”

“By you or me?” I asked coquettishly.

“Now you’re just fishing for compliments.”

“Or you were congratulating yourself.”

He grinned. “I prefer to think of it as a dance, and you need two highly skilled performers for it to be the best it can be.”

“And how was it for you?”

He leaned over and took my hands on the table. “The best. The very, *very* best.”

My heart fluttered to hear him say it.

14

The dinner eased by in a sumptuous parade of dishes, things I'd never tasted – or even seen – before. I'm more of an onion rings kind of a girl than an *haute cuisine* chick, but I was so dazzled by the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that I completely surrendered.

If that sounds naughty... it kind of was. In a culinary way, anyhow.

There was a strawberry soup to start, both spicy and sweet. *Foie gras*, which is definitely not my favorite food in the world – but the shavings of truffle scattered across the top quickly *became* my favorite (at least for the next fifteen minutes). A carpaccio of a delicate fish, followed by scallops served on half a scallop shell. A truffle tart with smoked bacon. A cheese soufflé. Abalone and leeks in a ginger broth. Roasted lobster with lemongrass. Grilled seabass with spinach. A tiny veal chop flavored with pesto. Three or four desserts, including a chocolate mousse with a Fuji apple compote. (I was in heaven with the chocolate.)

Not only was the food astoundingly good, but the presentation was... how should I put this?... *whimsical*. There were tiny bits of gold foil over some of the food, like on a dish of wild grains prepared like risotto. (Now I know what money tastes like. And it's not Goldschlager.) One course came with a little bale of hay, about an inch square and tied with strands of cloth, on the edge of the plate. Because, hey, what should you put next to a fancy plate of food topped with gold foil? Why, a miniature bale of hay, of course.

I stopped trying to wrap my head around it after awhile, and just *experienced* it, like Connor suggested.

Oh – don't forget the wine. My God, the wine. There were different glasses, just an ounce or two, paired with each dish. I'm no connoisseur, but *wow*. My tongue was having orgasms.

And yet, despite the culinary fireworks, what I'll remember most about that evening was the conversation.

"So, tell me..." I began somewhere around the third course.

"What?"

"What's this mysterious business you're here for?"

Connor sighed. "Let's not talk business right now."

"What do you want to talk about, then?"

He took a sip of his wine and considered. "Something personal."

"We talked about personal stuff last time we ate out."

"I'm pretty sure we haven't exhausted the subject."

"Okay, smart guy... but we talked about *me* last time. I think it's about time we talk about *you*."

"Hm," he said, noncommittal.

I thought about his ex-fiancée – the woman who had broken his heart – but decided against bringing *that* up. The topic had gotten a slightly chilly reception last time.

Instead, I went with a variation on something he'd said to me.

"So... what did five-year-old Connor want to be when he grew up?"

"A futures trader," he said, entirely seriously, as he took a bite of scallops.

I laughed and almost snorted wine up my nose. "What five-year-old wants to be a *futures* trader?!"

"I did."

"Um... what's a futures trader?"

"It's somebody who buys and sells commodities, like gold or soybeans or cotton, and tries to anticipate future changes in prices, either up or down, to maximize profit."

"You wanted to buy soybeans?" I asked, confused.

“Not really – I wanted to *bet* on whether the price of soybeans would go up or down. It’s kind of like day-trading stocks, where you’re trying to buy low and sell high in a relatively short period of time.”

“Oh. Well. *Every* five-year-old wants to do *that*.”

Connor smiled. “My father had an employee who was especially good at it. Rajesh Sengupta. He was really nice to me. I think that’s why I wanted to trade futures – I wanted to be like him.”

“Oh, that’s cute.”

“Yeah. Mr. Raj... I haven’t thought about him in years...”

“What about your dad?”

“What about him?”

“Wasn’t he nice to you?”

“Haha,” Connor laughed. “Not particularly, no.”

I stared at him. “Not at all?”

“He didn’t have much use for children. Or for anybody who couldn’t make him money.”

“But you saved his life in Mexico!”

I was referring to a few years ago, when Connor had walked into a den of kidnappers and paid his father’s ransom, at great personal risk of being captured and killed himself.

“I wasn’t five years old at the time,” Connor pointed out.

“But... what did you do as a family?”

“You mean, when I wasn’t in boarding school? Went to Fiji a couple of times. And France and Italy. Skied in Switzerland every Christmas break.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“Well, it was, but not for the reasons you’re thinking. My parents usually left us with a nanny and took off for the black diamond runs. By the time I got good enough to go with them, I was a teenager, and there was no *way* I was going to hang out with them then.”

“But... you spent time with them after skiing, right?”

“No, they usually went out dining and drinking with friends. I’d see them in the mornings before we left for the ski lifts, and that was about it.”

“What about on Christmas?”

“Eh... I guess I saw them a little longer on Christmas morning, but then it was off to the slopes.”

I sat there openmouthed. I knew that situations like this existed – where parents did little more than make guest appearances in the movies of their children’s lives – but I’d never actually *met* anybody like that.

I had tons of friends whose parents had divorced, and a couple of them had rarely seen their fathers growing up. But that was different; they usually lived in different states. I’d never met anybody who had grown up like Connor, with married parents they never saw.

I tried again.

“But... what about as a kid?”

“What about it?”

“Didn’t you ever... I don’t know... play games?”

Connor thought for a second. “My father and I played Monopoly a few times.”

Finally.

“That’s nice,” I smiled.

“He would make deals with me and then renege.”

“...he’d what?”

“I sold him Park Place once to get money to buy hotels for another property, but with the promise that I could land on Park Place or Boardwalk twice and not have to pay. He agreed, then when I landed on Boardwalk the first time, he demanded payment. I told him he’d promised, and he asked if I had it in writing.

“‘But I trusted you,’ I said.

“He said, ‘Only a fool trusts another man’s word without anything to back it up.’

“I started to cry. I told him that if I paid him, I’d go bankrupt.

“‘Why should I care?’ he said. ‘That’s your problem, not mine. You should have thought about that before you sold the property to me.’”

My mouth dropped open even farther. Besides parents outright abusing their children, and redneck dads leaving three-year-olds inside cars while they went inside strip clubs – which I had only ever read about in newspapers – this was the most insane thing I’d ever heard. “*What?*”

“Oh, it gets better. The next time we played, I sold him a property and made him sign a contract, and he still screwed me over. When I pointed to the contract, he asked, ‘And who’s going to enforce it?’ So I ended up going bankrupt again.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “That’s... that’s absolutely unbelievable...”

Connor smiled grimly. “My father never loses. In Monopoly *or* in real life.”

“Why did you keep playing with him?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t know any better. I just thought that was how the game was played. Plus, I was only eight years old. I guess I wanted him to play with me no matter what – to pay me some sort of attention – so I just kept on coming back for more.”

“He did that to an *eight-year-old*?” I asked in horror.

“Well... maybe I was nine. It’s hard to remember.”

Connor kept on eating like nothing was wrong – and then he looked up and realized I had an expression on my face like I’d just heard about somebody killing puppies. He smiled consolingly. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“*Not that big a deal?! Connor, your dad’s a psychopath!*”

“I think you mean a ‘sociopath.’ And... yeah... probably. He definitely has sociopathic tendencies, that’s for sure. Love of power for power’s sake, and lording it over other people. Total lack of empathy for others. But... no matter how horrible all this sounds, I learned some of the most valuable business lessons of my life from those games with my father.”

“Like *what?!?*”

“Like never trust another person’s word. Always be able to back up your agreements by some form of leverage. Always watch your back. Destroy your enemies when you have the chance, to make sure they don’t recover and destroy you later.”

This was unbelievable. “You can’t live life like that!”

“I said *business* lessons, not *life* lessons. It’s not the same.” Suddenly his face grew dark, and he stared off into the distance. “Unless you get involved with someone who treats your relationship like a business.”

My stomach dropped. “I would never do that!”

His eyes found mine as he came back to the present, and his expression lightened. “I wasn’t talking about you. I know you would never do that.”

“Where was your mother in all this?”

He shrugged again and returned to his food. “If she wasn’t running her charity balls and dinners, then she was telling me to stop being a whiner and beat my father if I was so upset.”

“Jesus,” I murmured.

“Poor little rich boy, right? Rich people problems.”

“Child abuse isn’t ‘rich people problems.’”

He frowned like I’d just suggested something incredibly outlandish. “My parents didn’t abuse me.”

“Maybe not physically, but *emotional* abuse is still abuse.”

He waved off my comment with one hand. “Lots of people have it *way* worse than I do. I turned out fine. No harm done.”

I wondered about that.

Then I thought of something else I knew about him: according to some E! show I'd seen on the Dubai, Connor was the youngest son of the Templeton family.

"Don't you have older brothers or sisters?"

"One older brother. Vincent."

"How much older?"

"Five years."

"What about you guys?"

"What about us?"

"Weren't you close?"

He made a face like *Naaah*. The way you might answer if somebody asked if you wanted ketchup on your hotdog. "Not really."

"Why not?"

"Well, I didn't see much of him during the school year."

"He didn't go to boarding school?"

"Oh, yeah, he did. But he kept getting thrown out, so my parents kept shipping him around the world to new schools. So I only saw him during summers and Christmas. And not much then."

"Why'd he get thrown out?"

"Sex, alcohol, drugs, bad grades – the usual."

"Um... don't take this the wrong way... but I thought *you* were the black sheep of the family."

Connor laughed. "I am."

"If your brother did all those things and isn't the black sheep, what the hell did *you* do?!"

"Vincent shaped up after college. Well, law school, really." Connor's voice became tinged with the slightest hint of bitterness. "He figured out which side his bread was buttered on, and he buckled down and became a perfect little heir to the

throne. Me... I was pretty much a good kid until my late teens, and then I *really* pissed off my family.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, I quit college my freshman year, for one. *That* didn’t go over well.”

“Why’d you quit?”

“The way I looked at it, the world was full of limitless opportunities, and here I was stuck freezing my ass off in boring classes, just like every other boring school I’d ever been in.”

“Where’d you go to college?”

“Harvard.”

Of course.

“What’d you do once you quit?”

“Ha – *there’s* a fun story. I told my father I wanted out. He said ‘no, absolutely not.’ We had a big fight, I made some grandiose claims about how I could succeed better and faster than any of my ivory tower professors and clueless peers... and he made a bet with me.”

“What was it?”

“He’d stake me, to the tune of ten million dollars, and I could go out and have three years to make something of myself.”

“Ten million dollars?!” I yelped.

Connor smirked. “And here you were, thinking my father was such a bad guy.”

“Well... maybe I misjudged him...”

Connor shook his head. “No you didn’t. Ten million was nothing to him. It would be like you giving your kid the change under your couch cushions to go start a business.”

“Oh.”

My mind was spinning.

That must be a hell of a couch in the Templeton household.

“And for a mere pittance, he was buying my soul. It really was a deal with the devil. If I succeeded, then I owed him the original ten million, plus 75% of all profits as my primary investor. If I failed, then I agreed to go back to school. After graduation, I would enter whatever position in the family business that my father deemed fit.”

“What did you do?”

“I agreed, with the proviso that we cap the buyout at twenty million. Meaning if I could give him \$17.5 million, that was it, we were done, and I kept the rest – plus my freedom.”

“What did he say?”

“He laughed – after all, remember, he thought I was going to crash and burn, and then he’d own me. But, being the consummate negotiator that he is, he wouldn’t do the deal for less than \$30 million – meaning I would owe him \$25 million to get out from under his thumb. The original ten, plus 75% of the 20 million in profit.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I protested.

“That’s another lesson I learned in Monopoly. In business, nothing is fair; you get what you negotiate for.”

“So what did you do?”

“I took the deal.”

“What happened?”

“I crashed and burned spectacularly,” he grinned.

“You lost ten million dollars?” I gasped. “In three years?”

“No – in nine months. I gambled recklessly on several enterprises, all of which tanked.”

“You?! But you’re, like, a business genius! How did *that* happen?!”

“Well, I was *trying* to lose the money.”

“WHAT?!”

“It was my form of adolescent rebellion. Anyway, that’s what my mother’s shrink told me at a Christmas party one year.”

“What did you do?!”

“I told him to stick to analyzing my mother and leave me out of it.”

“No, I mean – ”

“I know what you meant. I went back to my father and told him I’d lost the money.

“He said, ‘Well, now you’re going back to Harvard.’

“And I said, ‘No I’m not.’

“And he said, ‘We had an agreement!’

“And I said, ‘Do you have it in writing?’”

My mouth fell open. “Did he?!”

Connor burst out laughing. “No, he didn’t. I think it was the only time in his entire life he didn’t sign a contract – because he totally underestimated me. He thought I’d never learned a thing from him. You should have seen his face. Especially when I said, ‘And since you don’t, how are you going to enforce the agreement?’”

I laughed in spite of myself. “Did he know what you were referring to? The Monopoly games, I mean?”

“Oh, of *course* he knew. My father has a memory that’s a cross between a computer and a steel trap. He just didn’t think I remembered – or had enough balls to cross him.”

“What did he do?”

“He ranted and roared about suing me in court, then he threatened to disown me. I flipped him off and left the house.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

“It was pretty stupid, but – hey – I was twenty years old at the time. And it felt *great*.”

“But.... what happened after that?”

“Well, one thing I’d done with that ten million dollars was make a lot of contacts in the industries I targeted. And I had the family name backing me up, not to mention dozens of college and boarding school friends with rich fathers who had millions of dollars to invest. I secured a hundred million in seed money – with far, *far* better terms than my father had offered me, I might add. I buckled down and actually tried to make it work... and the rest is just boring details in a bank account ledger.”

He toasted me ironically with his glass of wine.

“You got people to give you a *hundred million dollars* right after you blew ten million?!”

“First off, you’ve got to remember, we’re talking about people worth hundreds of millions of dollars apiece. Some of them worth billions. A couple of million for an investment – especially backing a *Templeton* – ”

He said his family name in a hoity-toity, self-mocking way.

“ – was a no-brainer to them. Some of them wanted to get closer to my father. Those guys, I let them have the impression that I was still in the old man’s good graces. And the ones who hated my father, well, I let them know exactly what I’d done. They usually roared with laughter and then asked how big a check I needed. They figured I had inherited my father’s business sense, and they could stick it to my dad by helping me succeed.”

“Did your father find out?”

“Oh yeah. That was part of the fun – especially when my initial investors made back 300% within two years.”

“So... it was all just a... a ‘screw you’ to your dad?”

“Well, that, and getting rich in the process.”

“But... your father... you still *talk* to him, right?”

“Now we do. We didn’t for a couple years afterward.”

“Not even at *Christmas*?”

“Oh, when he threatened to disinherit me, he wasn’t joking. And my mother went right along with it. I was ‘disinvited’ to all family functions for awhile. In fact, I didn’t see or talk to either of them for almost three years.”

“But – but Mexico – ”

“Yeah, well... that’s a bit more complicated.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what percentage of my actions was real fear for his life... and what percentage was feelings of responsibility to him, as a son for his father... and what percentage was just the ultimate ‘fuck you’?”

I stared at him blankly. I couldn’t think of anything to say. This conversation had gone *that* far beyond my realm of what constitutes ‘normal.’

“Nobody else would do it,” he continued. “Vincent sure as hell wouldn’t. In the end, my brother is only out for himself. Mom wanted to hire a professional go-between, a mercenary, to deliver the money. But I went to the dropoff without either of them knowing. Paid the ransom myself, just so I could stand there and look him in the eye. Kind of like, ‘I’m the son you hated, and yet here I am. Asshole.’”

Connor shrugged.

“In the end, I guess I still felt like I owed him that ten million... so... I had to repay him somehow. That, combined with all the other things I mentioned. Like I said, it’s complicated.”

“What did he say when you got him out?”

Connor grinned. ““What took you so long?””

“You’re joking.”

“No, I’m not. In that instant, I showed him up, utterly and completely... and the bastard didn’t have the graciousness to admit it. But that’s my father for you. On the other hand, I got invited back to family gatherings after that. They kind of had to.”

“You still care about him, though, right? I mean... you risked your life...”

“*That* is a question for another therapy session.” Connor took a sip of his wine, then gave me a lopsided, sarcastic smile. “Now aren’t you glad you asked about my childhood?”

“...I’m not really sure...”

“It was supposed to be a funny question. Nobody in their right mind would say ‘yes.’”

“Well... I mean... I want to know more about you... so I guess I’m glad I asked... I’m just so sad that you had to go through everything you did growing up...”

“Save all that sympathy for kids with unhappy childhoods who didn’t turn out to be billionaires,” he said lightheartedly.

“Hopefully they got to play a few games of Monopoly with their parents and didn’t have to worry about a knife in their back,” I muttered.

Connor laughed, then settled back in his chair. “But I learned a lot from those games.”

“What, how to rip people’s throats out?”

“*Businesses’* throats out, *businesses’* throats. Figuratively speaking, of course. But I learned something else, too.”

“What was that?”

“What I wanted to do when I grew up.”

“I thought you wanted to be a futures trader.”

“That was when I was five. Before the Monopoly games taught me what I really wanted.”

“...which was...?”

Connor gave me a chilling smile.

“To destroy my father’s empire... just to watch it burn.”

15

Things got less dark after that.

Although it took me awhile to recover.

Connor knew he'd frightened me a little, and so he spent the rest of the time regaling me with stories about playing pranks on schoolmates at boarding school... and bizarre tales of business deals gone wrong... and funny bits about how much Sebastian hated Connor's family, and all the snide remarks he would make when he talked to them.

Eventually the wine took over and put everything into a nice, soft haze... and the food overwhelmed me with the sheer sensual delight of it all. And I forgot about the creepy family history.

For a while, anyway.

We finished dinner – all sixteen courses – around 11PM. I swear I almost asked the restaurant staff to cart me out in a wheelbarrow.

As we walked out into the lobby, Connor did the worst thing he could have possibly done under the circumstances.

“So... want to go back to the hotel and have crazy sex?” he whispered in my ear.

“UGH. NO,” I said, not wanting to admit that I felt about as sexy as a stuffed pig. “You paid too much for it to all come back up.”

He roared with laughter. “That's gross... and yet, somehow endearing.”

“I'm so glad to entertain you,” I said sarcastically. “By the way... how much *was* that dinner?”

“You don't want to know.”

“That's what I was afraid of...”

Once we were back in the Bentley, I snuggled up next to Connor. “What are we doing now?”

“Are you tired?”

“No, I had a couple of nice naps earlier,” I said, then followed up impishly with, “Followed by some nice exercise.”

He smiled. “Yes it was. But since we’ve got to wait an hour before we go back in the water – ”

“You know that’s an old wives’ tale, right?”

“You’re aware I was using a metaphor, right?”

“Very funny, smartass.”

“As I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted: if we’ve got to take a break from... ‘exercise’... is there anything you want to do?”

I thought about gambling... but it didn’t really sound appealing. And I didn’t think there were any shows this time of night. “No, not really. You?”

“I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Remember when you asked why I was here on business?”

“Yeah.”

“Want to go see what it is?”

I edged backwards so I could look at him. “Now?”

“Well... not *right* now... but soon.”

I frowned at him, intrigued. “What are you talking about?”

He gave me a mysterious smile. “You’ll see.”

And that’s all he would tell me until we got back to the hotel.

16

When we walked into the penthouse, Connor strolled over in front of the twenty-foot-high windows and gazed out at the glowing lights of Vegas.

Johnny headed for his room on the opposite side of the suite – then paused and looked back. “We good for the night?”

“We’re good,” Connor nodded. “See you tomorrow.”

I looked at Connor questioningly, but he didn’t look back at me.

“Okay. Goodnight, Lily.”

“Goodnight, Johnny,” I said, though I felt guilty about it... because I was pretty sure I was participating in a lie.

Once Johnny was gone, I whispered, “I thought you said we were going to go see something.”

“We are. Just give him a little while to go to sleep.”

“He’s not driving us?!”

“Keep your voice down. No, this is secret. Just you and me.”

“But – ”

“Stop worrying.”

“You don’t worry *enough*.”

“Then we can stay here, if that’s what you want. But if we go, it has to be just the two of us, alone under the stars.” He looked into my eyes. “What do you want to do?”

Secrets, intrigue, and a line like *it has to be just the two of us, alone under the stars*.

What girl could resist that?

17

We waited almost an hour, then left the penthouse in silence. Connor seemed preoccupied; I was just terrified Johnny would come out of his bedroom and start yelling at us.

But we made it down to the valet's desk, and within two minutes we were in the Lamborghini. I thought at first that he was taking me to a casino, or an office building, or someplace else in the city – but then I realized we were heading out of town.

Waaaaay out of town.

Into the desert.

Connor was quiet the entire way. I reached out and took his hand for assurance; he held mine in his, smiled briefly, then stared out at the road ahead as though lost in thought.

After thirty minutes on the highway, far past all the suburbs, Connor exited onto an empty side road and drove through the darkness. The lights of the city receded into a dim glow on the horizon, and the stars began to shine brighter above us.

I don't know if you've ever been out beyond the reach of light pollution from cities and towns, but it's astounding when you finally go to a place where there's no other light around for miles. I had lived in suburbs and metropolitan areas my entire life – first in Charlotte, then in Athens, Georgia during college, then in Los Angeles. I had never been outside the glow of a thousand streetlights.

Until now.

As we drove further into the desert, the stars began to assert themselves. First a few hundred, then a thousand, then ten thousand, multiplying with every mile we traveled.

I've read somewhere that only 20% of all humanity has ever seen the Milky Way in its full glory. Most of us live too

close to ‘civilization’ to see the millions of lights that make up our galaxy.

This was the first time for me.

I opened the window and just stared as the Lamborghini raced through the darkness. I lost track of time as the clouds of starlight became brighter and brighter.

Then the Lamborghini slowed and made a turn onto a dirt road.

“Where are you going?” I asked, startled.

“That’s part of the surprise.”

The wheels ground their way over the dirt road – two minutes, five minutes, ten minutes. I began to get worried – *what if we break down out here?* – and then I just forgot about the circumstances as the stars glowed even more beautifully overhead.

Finally we stopped.

Connor turned off the headlights, got out of the car, walked around and opened my door. Once I was out and he closed it behind me, there was nothing but darkness for miles around. That, and starlight for millions of miles overhead.

There was no sound, either, except for the *tick tick tick* of the Lamborghini’s engine cooling down. Not even the wind was blowing, though the air had taken a decided turn towards the chilly. I pulled my black wrap over my shoulders and looked around.

“So... this is what you wanted to show me?”

“Yes. This is it,” Connor said as he stared out into the darkness. His voice sounded excited... almost giddy.

“Um... okay...”

“What do you see?” he asked me.

I looked up at the sky. “Millions and millions of stars.”

He followed my gaze. “It really *is* beautiful, isn’t it? But that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Around us. Here, where we’re standing. What do you see?”

Vast plains of sand and scrub brush and low-lying plants, barely visible in the darkness.

“Uh... desert. Lots and lots of desert.”

“I see the opportunity of a lifetime.”

I looked around again. And still all I saw were miles and miles of nothing.

“I guess that’s why you’re a billionaire and I’m not,” I joked.

Connor walked about twenty feet way, then turned back to face me. “I see the equivalent of all the oil in Saudi Arabia, times a million.”

I frowned, then peered out into the darkness, wondering if maybe I had missed a couple of oil derricks.

Nope.

“You think there’s oil out here?” I asked as I edged closer to the hood of the Lamborghini. In the cold night air, the heat radiating off the hood was deliciously warm.

“Better than that. I think there’s a resource that’s virtually limitless – at least for a couple of billion years – and one that’s cleaner than any other energy resource we’ve got.”

“Solar,” I realized.

“Exactly. Did you know that all of the United States’ electricity could be supplied by a parcel of land 100 miles long by 100 miles wide?”

I looked out at the dark. “Is that what I’m looking at? Uh... 10,000 square miles?”

“Good multiplication skills.”

“I try,” I said sarcastically. Knowing his head for numbers, it felt a little like Wynton Marsalis telling you that you sure could play that kazoo.

But Connor chose to ignore the snark. “It’s close to 10,000 square miles. And that’s less than 10% of the entire surface area of the state.”

“But I thought there were tons of problems with solar. Um... do you mind?” I asked as I lowered my rear end slowly, signifying I wanted to sit on the hood of the car. “It’s warm, and the air’s kind of cold.”

“What? Oh, go ahead, I don’t care.”

I planted my booty gingerly on the metal, waiting for the horrible sound of metal *dinging* under my weight. None came.

Ahhhhhhhhh.

Shivers of warmth spread through my entire body.

“There are tons of problems with *every* technology,” Connor continued. “Especially before it hits the tipping point and really takes off.”

“Yeah, but – I thought there were problems with how to store it. I mean, you can’t get solar at night, and there aren’t any battery systems that can overcome that.”

Now that my eyes had adjusted, I could see his grin as well as hear it. “That’s why I’m working with a couple of scientists from UCLA on graphene supercapacitors.”

My nerd spider-sense started tingling. “Whoa – what?”

As he continued talking, he got more and more excited. “Graphene is a form of carbon – one of the strongest materials known, and it’s completely flexible. The guys who discovered it got the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2010. Now two scientists at UCLA have not only devised a way to manufacture it cheaply and in huge volumes, but they figured out that it can take on an immense electrical charge, and slowly release that charge over time. You can power a small light bulb for five minutes off a one-inch square piece of graphene less than a millimeter thick. Imagine an array of millions of sheets of graphene, able to take on huge amounts of electricity generated from solar – and then release it slowly over time.”

I was starting to get excited, too. “That could totally solve _”

“ – the storage problem! Not to mention revolutionize the transfer of it, too!” he interrupted me, his voice bursting with excitement. He was like a five-year-old boy hopped up on birthday cake.

“You mentioned supercapacitors. I’ve heard of them, but...”

“Okay, you’ve got batteries, which are basically just storage devices for energy. They can be anything from the double A’s that go in your TV remote control, to car batteries, to giant industrial batteries they use now for storing solar energy. But they charge slowly, and they discharge slowly. Capacitors have high output, but horrible storage capabilities – like a flash on a camera. Big burst of energy, but that’s it. A supercapacitor combines the best of both worlds. It has high energy storage, and fast charge and discharge. That’s what these UCLA guys have created. Theoretically, you could put graphene batteries in cars that would allow you to go 200 miles on a single charge, and you could refill it in 60 seconds at a charging station. Or you could have a cell phone battery that fully charges in five seconds. Or massive electrical storage at solar power stations, using nothing but carbon to do it.”

“But I’ve read there are lots of poisons involved in solar panel construction.”

“It’s not perfect,” Connor said impatiently. “But when you average out the detrimental effects versus the life of the energy source, solar beats everything else hands down. Coal only seems like a cheap source of energy when you don’t factor in the costs of pollution, climate change, coalminers’ lives, and mercury exposure from the mining and processing.”

I looked out at the vast expanse of desert. “So... what are you planning to do, create a giant solar farm?”

“Exactly.”

“Who owns the land?”

“The federal government and the state of Nevada.”

“Are you going to *buy* it from them?!”

“No. They wouldn’t sell. But I can *rent* it from them... which is what I’m in town to negotiate over the next couple of days. I’m meeting with the governor and key state representatives. I’ve already sealed the deal in D.C. with Nevada’s senators and representatives from the congressional districts. In exchange for a 99-year lease, my companies will provide free energy for the entire state of Nevada, an estimated 10,000 jobs, and a cut of all profits as we provide cheap, clean energy for California, Arizona, Idaho, Oregon, and Utah.”

“Holy crap,” I whispered.

“Yep,” he said proudly.

I paused, thinking through the ramifications.

“Wait – I thought you said this amount of land could provide all the energy for the whole U.S.”

“It can... theoretically. But we need to start off small. People get freaked out when you say you’re going to change the world. Sometimes you need to hold their hand and change their backyard first.”

“They’ll let you do that? Rent the land, and all that other stuff you mentioned?”

“Yes. They will.”

“How do you know?”

Connor smiled. “I’ve figured out what they all want... and I’m prepared to give it to them.”

“But – if you do what you say you’re going to do... aren’t you going to totally screw all the coal plants?”

“Not just coal. Imagine a world where electricity costs less than a tenth of what it does now – not to mention it’s clean. Imagine you can pull your electric car into a charging station and fill up your car in under a minute, and for less money than a single gallon of gas. *That’s* what we’re talking about – and it’s only five, maybe ten years down the road.”

I stared at him. “You’d put Exxon and every other oil company out of business.”

“If they don’t adapt.”

“Holy *shit*, Connor! Can you actually *do* that?!”

“Yes. All the pieces are assembled. I have controlling blocks of stock in the major public utilities I need, plus a major automobile company that wants to dominate in the electric car market. I have a chain of gas stations ready to install all the necessary equipment for charging the cars, as long as I put up the seed money. I’ve assembled the funding necessary for the first five years. All I need now is the bureaucratic machinery behind me to make it legal.”

The realization hit me all at once: “They’re not going to let you do it,” I murmured.

“They’re not going to have a choice.”

“But – all the companies who make millions and *billions* of dollars off the way things are now – ”

“Will have to join in or get crushed.”

“But those companies pay huge amounts of money to politicians to make them vote the way they do!”

“I’ve taken care of that, too.”

“How?!”

“I shouldn’t say anything more, because I wouldn’t want you to ever have to testify in court... but let’s just say I’ve taken care of the situation.”

I sat there, mouth open, and tried to take it all in. It was a little much to absorb. After all, I’d been struggling to make rent last week, and now I was talking with a billionaire who was planning on changing the entire world. And who was entirely serious about doing it.

And who might just have a shot at it.

Then I remembered a conversation from earlier in the evening.

“Connor... your dad... does he have a lot of energy stocks?”

“That’s an understatement. I’d say over 40% of his net worth is in companies involved in fossil fuels and related industries, like the energy sector and automotive companies.”

“OH MY GOD!” I cried out as I jumped to my feet. “You’re doing this to screw over your dad?!”

He laughed. “No, that’s just a nice by-product.”

I started pacing back and forth.

I hadn’t exactly grasped what he meant earlier when he said he wanted to destroy his father’s empire, just to watch it burn.

Now I did.

And it was frightening me.

He walked over, stopped me from pacing, and put his hands on my shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

“If your dad is as big an asshole as you say he is, there’s no way he’s going to let you get away with this!”

“I told you, all the pieces are already in place. It’s just a matter of tipping over the first domino now.”

He sounded supremely self-confident.

“But the fact that you want to do this just to screw over your dad? That’s messed up! You should really talk to somebody about this – like a psychiatrist!”

Connor looked at me a long moment... and then he asked, “Lily, do you know who Nikola Tesla was?”

If you’re a nerd girl, you *must* know who Nikola Tesla was. It’s like knowing who James Tiberius Kirk is, or who Anakin Skywalker became.

“Serbian-American inventor in the early 20th century,” I said. “Total genius. What’s he got to do with anything?”

“Tesla was quite possibly the greatest unsung inventor in the history of science. He was hired by Thomas Edison to fix

his direct current electrical generators – and then Edison stiffed him out of his fee. Tesla turned around and basically invented alternating current – and Edison tried every dirty trick in the book to stop him. When Marconi invented radio, he was using over a dozen patents first registered by Tesla. He came up with the idea for radar in 1917, but Edison was the head of R&D for the U.S. Navy, and he nixed it because he hated Tesla. So it didn't actually get invented until 1935 by someone else. And he devised things we still don't understand to this day, and still can't duplicate – like transmitting electricity wirelessly, or pulling it out of the atmosphere. An investor had him build a tower near New York City to do just that – pull electricity out of thin air. Tesla was going to give it away free to the entire planet, but when the investor realized he wouldn't be able to control it or charge people for it, he had the tower torn down.”

“I know all this,” I said.

Connor gave me a look.

“Well... I know *some* of it,” I said grumpily. “What's it got to do with you? Are you saying you're a modern-day Nikola Tesla?”

“No. Not at all. But I *am* a businessman, and I'm in the position of being able to help guys who *are* modern-day Teslas. Imagine if that investor had never torn down that tower. What would the world be like today?”

“Different,” I admitted.

“*Vastly* different,” Connor said. “But my father? He's like that investor who tore down the tower. He's like Edison. Well... if Edison had never gotten famous for inventing anything. Edison might be credited with inventing the light bulb, but he didn't. He *sold* the light bulb. He paid a laboratory of technicians to improve on an existing design, created by someone else, until it could be manufactured on a massive scale. That's Edison – and my father – in a nutshell.”

“Edison was a genius,” I protested.

“Yes, he was. But his main gift was in self-promotion and business. Look at what he did to Tesla – cheated him, slandered him, fought against some of the potentially biggest advancements of the 20th century – because Edison wanted money, and fame, and power, and he couldn’t stand to be upstaged by someone else. My father’s like that. Hell, just about every CEO of every major corporation that controls the levers of the world is like that. They’re invested in the status quo, and they’ll do whatever they can to protect it – even if it means hindering progress that could benefit all of humanity. They convince themselves that the new kids on the block are just crackpots, flavors of the month. But even if they were presented with undeniable evidence, *they wouldn’t care*. They make decisions to benefit themselves and their rich cronies. They don’t give a damn about what *could be*. Not unless it directly lines their pockets, or gives them a return on their money in the very foreseeable future. And if they can see that a technology works, but they see it as a threat, then they’ll actively sabotage its development. Only when the genie’s out of the bottle, and it’s a choice of jumping on the train or getting run over, *then* they’ll finally sign on. But until that point, they’ll fight tooth and nail against progress – because all they care about is the almighty dollar. And in their eyes, a nickel in the hand is worth ten possible dollars in some distant, unproven future. No matter how amazing that future might be.”

Connor stepped away. He started pacing back and forth like a mad conductor in front of some unseen orchestra in the darkness.

“I don’t want to be that guy. I want to be the guy who changes the world for the better. And if I can’t *be* him, then I want to *help* the guy who’s going to change the world for the better. I want to be the man who enables geniuses to lift the world up. I want to be the person who helps make the world a better place, who helps usher humanity into the future. Because that’s what I’m good at – the game. The selling. The arm-twisting. The power plays behind the scenes. I can do that for the people who *can’t* do it for themselves. The dreamers, the scientists – the Nikola Teslas of the world.”

I wanted to believe him. He was more passionate than I'd ever seen him (well... with his clothes on, anyway).

He obviously cared about this deeply.

But I wasn't entirely convinced.

"And if you can screw over your dad in the process, all the better, right?" I asked, my arms folded across my chest.

"If I want to actually do the things I'm talking about, I'm going to *have* to screw over my father, and every other CEO like him. People who want to keep the world the way it is, no matter how many people get sick because of it, no matter how many poor people get victimized, no matter how many bodies are buried in the foundation. Because *that's the status quo*, and they will do *anything* to protect the status quo. You want to change the world? Nature isn't your enemy. The slow tide of scientific discovery isn't your enemy. Your enemies are the people who control the way things are. The bureaucrats... the power brokers... the mega-rich... anybody who stands to lose by having things change."

"Aren't you doing this for the money, though, too?"

"Yes – but money is just a by-product. The money's not the reason. It's *never* the reason, it's never *been* the reason. The ultimate reason is the *game*. Against all odds, to create something amazing and beautiful – like the Dubai. Why do you think I got into hotels as a hobby? To make money? Fuck no. I could make ten times the money in oil exploration. It was to create something beautiful – something that will be around in a hundred years, and still be considered beautiful and classy."

He walked closer to me, talking more passionately the closer he got. "Now imagine doing something that will be around for a thousand. Something that won't just benefit the rich, but poor people on every continent. Something that the history books will say changed the course of human civilization. *That's* what I want to be part of. Something amazing. Something that changes the world."

He slid his arms around my waist and pulled me against him.

I don't like to admit it, but I'm a little shallow. I mean, after all, I'd fallen for Connor partly because he was the most beautiful man I'd ever laid eyes on.

And... as much as I *hate* to admit it... the trappings had affected me, too. The beauty he'd exposed me to. The amazing experiences, the magnificent surroundings.

But you start talking about Nikola Tesla, and how you want to change the world by helping geeks and scientists...

...that was it. Game over, man.

I was a goner, totally swept up in his enthusiasm and passion.

18

He bent down to my mouth, his lips warm and forceful.

I opened my own lips to let him in.

I could feel the heat of his body against mine in the cold night air as he kissed me passionately. His wild enthusiasm from a moment ago became feverish motion as his hands roamed over my body.

I draped my arms around his neck and pulled him deeper into me.

His hands cupped my ass, ran up the red dress, caressed the bare skin of my back. Then I felt one hand circle around to the front of my body and softly move over my breast, feeling its weight in his palm.

And I felt something else stir below his waist.

I pressed my body against his hips and thighs, felt the delicious weight and size of it as it grew by the second. I dropped my left hand from around his neck and let one finger trace its way down his shirt – over his firm chest, down the ridges of his abs, and to the front of his pants, where I let my palm gently cup the thickness under the cloth. I stroked him, back and forth, slowly, sensuously, feeling his girth expand in my hand, feeling him harden in my palm.

He groaned and dropped both of his hands down to my ass again. At first I thought he was just feeling me up – and then I felt myself being lifted into the air.

“Oh,” I gasped. Then I gasped even louder as he tilted and lowered me backwards, softly, slowly, until my entire body from ass to shoulders rested softly on the Lamborghini hood.

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

The warmth from the metal flooded through me, like getting into a toasty warm bed on a bitterly cold night.

He bent down over me and braced himself with one hand against the hood. The other hand tugged at the top of my dress, pulling both it and my bra down until my right breast was exposed.

Then he took me in his mouth.

I moaned and felt my excitement grow as he greedily sucked at my nipple, then licked around it sensuously, then urgently pressed his mouth into my skin, trying to devour me.

Warmth from his mouth on my breast... warmth from the excitement building deep inside me... warmth from the Lamborghini beneath me... all of it combined to flush me through and through with pleasure, and need, and want, contrasting deliciously with the cold night air on my face.

His head moved up and buried in the crook of my neck, his lips nuzzling my skin, caressing my ear, his tongue lightly licking my flesh – not so much wet as soft.

By now, the front edge of my dress was up around my thighs, and I felt the outline of something thick and long press between my legs. I gasped as the pressure rubbed over my clit, sending shivers of pleasure all through my belly.

Then he stood up slightly, and his hands reached under the edge of my dress.

I stared up at him, a silhouette against a billion stars, and felt his warm fingers move over my hip bones... caress the tops of my thighs... and then hook through my lace panties and slowly begin to pull them down.

I arched my back and wriggled, helping him slide them off. I felt my own wetness brush against my thigh as the panties came off, and then he pulled them completely over my high heels and shoved them in his pocket.

One of his hands moved back down to my thighs, and I felt his fingers trace over my wet lips, caressing the skin, making me quiver with anticipation.

His thumb lightly – ever so lightly – traced its way over the hood of my clit, then circled around, teasing me, giving me just the slightest hint of pressure.

But no matter how good it felt, I was paying more attention to his other hand.

It slipped down below his belt and unzipped his fly. Then his fingers reached into the cloth. His cock was so long and big and hard that he had to pull his hips back and change his stance to finally tug it out – but when he did, the shaft wobbled briefly and then jutted up into the air, hard and thick and massive. The light color of his skin showed up against the dark cloth of his slacks, and even in the dim starlight I could see how beautiful and long and enormous it looked, even with the base and the balls still tucked away within his pants.

I reached out one hand and touched it.

Oh my GOD it was scorching hot... soft skin over a rock-hard shaft.

He rocked back and forth, letting his cock move over my soft palm, as though I were pleasuring him with my hand. I felt it strain even harder in my grasp, and my mouth watered and my insides ached because I wanted him inside me so bad.

I seized him – not too hard, but hard enough – and pulled him towards me.

He complied, and I felt the swollen, thick head graze the inside of my thigh, then slide up soft and hot over my skin until the tip touched my lips.

Then he slowly pushed his way inside me.

I groaned as he filled me up, gradually at first, then sinking deeper and deeper.

God, it was so thick and huge inside me.

The weight of his body slowly settled against mine, and I was pressed deliciously between the warmth of the Lamborghini and the muscles of his body and chest.

It was the first time he had been fully clothed while he was inside me. The unfamiliar sensation of cloth on skin was new and exciting, and I realized exactly what was happening:

A rich, powerful, gorgeous man, fully dressed, was fucking me on the hood of his half-a-million dollar sports car,

under the most beautiful sky full of stars I'd ever seen.

And I *loved* it.

He thrust into me, hard and thick, his skin wet from me, sliding deep inside me, slower, then faster, harder, then gentler – and with every thrust, I moaned and gasped.

When my eyes weren't rolling back into my head, I was staring at the Milky Way above me, overcome by the beauty all around me, swirling overhead –

And then he would thrust inside me, and the pleasure from his thick, amazing cock would overcome me even more.

I lifted one hand up to his face and stroked his cheek. Then he moved his head slightly to the side and took my fingers into his mouth.

He began to suck, wet and sensual and slow, as his cock filled me up and then withdrew, filled me up and withdrew, over and over and over again.

He began to match his mouth and hips – his tongue sliding over my fingers at the same time his shaft slid inside me, his thrusts stroking deep inside me at the same instant I was deepest inside him.

Oh My GOD.

I picked up my legs and circled them around his back, feeling his jacket under my calves, and pulled him harder into me.

I closed my eyes, and several fantasies flashed through my brain:

I was a high-priced call girl, he was the richest and most handsome client I had ever had, and he had paid a king's ransom to have his way with me.

We were in high school, sneaking out of our parents' homes in the middle of the night, and had driven out into the desert so we could fuck under the stars.

He was my husband and I was his wife, and he had begged me to make love to him outdoors.

All of that was washed away by the pure bliss of feeling him inside me, thick and massive and overwhelmingly masculine, beyond any other pleasure I'd ever experienced.

I opened my eyes as the bliss inside me built, wanting to make sure I could stare into his eyes when I came.

I must have had my mouth open, groaning and moaning, as I moved back and forth on the car hood. He was watching my lips intently, like he wanted them so much he could barely stand it.

He took my fingers out of his mouth, soft and wet as they slid across his lips, and then he leaned over my body and kissed me.

Softly, tenderly, passionately – all the while his gorgeous cock still thrusting, filling me up, sliding sensuously and wet deep, deep inside me.

When he kissed me, I don't know if it was the sweetness of his lips on mine, or a change in the pressure on my clit, or his angle inside me, or just the knowledge that in that moment, he was mine, all mine –

– but he tipped me over the edge.

I screamed with my lips against his, then I pulled him against my shoulder, clutched at his hair madly, blindly, my eyes fluttering as I cried out. All I could see were the stars above as light and pleasure and heat burst deep inside me, filling me up, just like his cock did with every powerful stroke.

Suddenly he groaned, too, and I could feel him burst deep within me. Instead of continuing to thrust, he pushed harder and more insistently, as though he wanted to become one with me, as though he wanted to get deeper inside me than he ever had before. I felt every glorious inch of him as he spasmed and convulsed and filled me with hot wetness, increasing my own pleasure, making me come harder, sending earthshaking tremors throughout my own body.

Then the tremors slowly dimmed and died away. He lay there on top of me, and I could feel his shoulders and arms trembling as he breathed in my ear.

I held him as close as I could and savored the feel of him still inside me, my eyes barely open as I came back from ecstasy and got lost in the stars above.

19

We drove back in silence – at least at first – with Connor holding my hand.

I just reclined in the leather seat, feeling wonderful and flushed and completely happy as I stared out the window. This time, though, I wasn't looking at the sky; I was watching the dimly lit desert landscape as it rolled by in the starlight.

“You know,” I said, “it’s kind of ironic that you took me out to see the future site of the largest solar energy installation in the world... in a Lamborghini.”

He laughed. “I thought about getting a Tesla.”

“That would have been more apropos.”

“Yes, it would have. But there aren't many charging stations between LA and Vegas, and the ones that exist are pretty damn slow. But... I'll fix that.”

“You really think you can do it?”

“What, put in high-speed charging stations between here and Las Vegas?”

I rolled my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

He gave me a little half-grin. “Change the world.”

“Yeah.”

“Yes I do, or I wouldn't attempt it.”

I thought carefully about what I was going to say next, especially since it contained the ‘L’ word – but then decided the way I was going to use it was innocuous enough.

“You know what I love?” I asked, then rushed on to avoid any awkward pauses or looks. “That you're so passionate about this. That it means so much to you.”

He smiled, and lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it softly. Then, as he lowered it, he gave me a pointed look.

“It’s nice doing something you love. You should try it sometime.”

I almost – *almost* – said, *But I AM doing something I love. YOU.*

But no matter how playfully I was planning on saying it, I knew it was too much of a risk.

So I just groaned instead. “I didn’t intend this to turn into career counseling.”

“What are you going to do, though? Have you thought about it?”

I just want to stay with you, I thought, but decided against saying that, too. Because I was afraid he might reply, *But what about after?*

That was the one thing that really bothered me with Connor. Our fight on Sunday night had left the field strewn with landmines. Any talk of the future, no matter how offhand or innocent, might set one of them off.

But I was happy, and I refused to let it bother me right now. There would be time for that later.

So I just stepped around the landmines.

“No, I’ve been too busy getting wined and dined and... other things.”

He grinned. “Ever the proper lady. I think it’s ‘wined and dined and sixty-nined.’”

“I don’t think a ‘lady’ would have done what we just did back on the hood of your car. And as for the other thing, we already did that on Saturday.”

He laughed and shook his head. “I said it before and I’ll say it again: you should become a politician. You’re *really* good at dodging questions.”

“As of the last four days, I have too many scandalous sex acts in my past to be a viable candidate.”

He squeezed my hand. “With more to come.”

My heart – and other parts of me – fluttered a little.

“But you’re still not answering my question. Have you thought about what you might do?”

“I don’t think I can get paid for the things I love.”

“And what’s that?”

Again, I almost said, *Having sex with you.*

But then the snide little voice in my head said, *Oh, wait – you already HAVE been paid for that, haven’t you?*

It left a sour taste in my mouth.

So I lied instead. “Watching reality TV.”

Connor grunted. “Yeah, not gonna happen. So, next question: what do you know?”

“What, like, for a job?”

“Yes.”

“Not much.”

“There you go again.”

“There I go again what?”

“Not believing in yourself. Tearing yourself down instead of building yourself up.”

“Okay, Mr. Hotshot – if I asked *you* that same question, what would you say?”

“Everything.”

“No, I mean, ‘what you know.’”

“I know what you meant. And I’d say ‘everything.’”

“Wow – *somebody’s* full of themselves.”

He laughed. “Somebody’s got to be my best PR agent. Might as well be me. Nobody else will believe in you until you believe in yourself.”

“What if you don’t believe in yourself?”

“Fake it till you make it.”

“Well, you obviously believe in yourself.” I gave him a sideways look that might have dented other guys’ egos, but only amused Connor.

“Wholeheartedly. One thousand percent.”

“Was there ever a point where you didn’t?”

“Yes.”

I looked over at him. The honesty in his voice was disarming. “When?”

“Walking out on my father was probably one of the defining moments of my life – maybe *the* defining moment, at least up until now. But after the adrenaline high wore off, I was pretty afraid. Actually, I was terrified. Getting disowned will do that to you. But I quickly realized that, even though I was alone and technically broke, it was more important than ever to present myself as confident, competent, and in control. I never would have gotten a single investor if I’d gone into those meetings saying, ‘I don’t know anything... poor little humble me...’”

“Well, I *don’t* know anything.”

He sighed, obvious annoyance in his voice – which annoyed *me*.

“What did I do when I came to your office?” he asked.

“Besides seducing me?”

He grinned. “Yeah, besides that.”

“And besides acting like a self-important jerk?”

“Who *you* slept with.”

I glared at him. “Technically, it’s *whom*.”

I’m not normally a grammar nerd. Only when somebody pisses me off.

Which he had.

He knew it – and loved it. “Technically or not, you still slept with me.”

“Technically, now you’re acting like a self-*satisfied* jerk.”

He laughed aloud. “Okay, besides that – what else did I do when I came to your office?”

“You looked at some files.”

“Why?”

“You were looking for information.”

“What information?”

“About the buyout.”

“What was I looking for?”

“The files for PT & Associates, Teramore, Zaruder – ”

“No – those are just data points. *Why* was I looking?”

This time, I thought before I answered.

“...you were looking to see if Klaus and the department were all that.”

“Exactly. Because I had my doubts.”

“And how does that involve me, other than I was the one who gave it up?”

He smirked.

I blushed a little. “Not *that* way.”

“Well...” he said, as though to say, *You kinda DID...*

I smacked him on the arm and he laughed.

Then he grew serious again. “Remember when you and I talked after I saw the Teramore report on your computer screen? I found out everything I needed to know from 30 seconds of talking to you.”

I frowned. “No.”

“Yes.”

“You quizzed me for, like, five minutes after that. Actually, ‘quiz’ is the wrong word. You were like the Spanish Inquisition for five minutes after that.”

“That was to satisfy myself that you knew what you were talking about.”

“Still – five minutes, not thirty seconds.”

“More like two-and-a-half minutes. I just kept going because I was amazed you knew so much.”

“You weren’t going to torpedo a buyout on the say-so of some little secretary in Exec Comp.”

“No – that’s why I did my due diligence for the hour afterwards. But I had a gut feeling 30 seconds in that you knew what was going on. Two-and-a-half minutes later I knew my gut was right, and the deal was off.”

I sat there, stunned. It seemed to me that was a pretty big decision to make after talking to a secretary.

But, then again... one of us was a billionaire investor, and one of us wasn’t.

“So what does this have to do with me? Sounds to me like *you* were the genius who connected the dots so fast.”

“I’ve often found that you can gather your best intelligence at the lowest levels of the company. At the people in support, the ones who have to deal with the bullshit generated by the idiotic ideas of the MBAs and people in management.”

“Not everybody’s *me*. There’s lots of crappy people at the bottom.”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you compliment yourself, however indirectly.”

I blushed.

“But you’re right,” he continued. “Which is why I made sure you knew your stuff. You did. And I scuttled a billion dollar buyout on your opinion.”

My mouth gaped open to hear it put so baldly. “That’s crazy.”

“Not from my point of view.”

“Why are we even talking about this?”

“What if you ran a consulting firm where you went in and interviewed the low-level employees about what worked and

what didn't? Basically, you culled all the problems and all the suggestions from the people on the front lines? The *good* people. That would be half your work, separating the wheat from the chaff. But you're excellent at grasping large-scale issues. You synthesize information rapidly. And you have six months of high-level Exec Comp experience. You basically did all the heavy lifting for an Executive VP. What if you could sell yourself as a consultant for smaller companies, with, say, more than 50 employees but fewer than 500? You go in, find out the problems... and then present the issues to management with suggestions, also pulled from the best employees. You'd basically be crowdsourcing the problems and solutions, but from the group of people who know the system inside and out."

I sat there for a long second, just turning it over in my mind.

"...that's kind of cool," I murmured.

"I know. *I* thought of it."

"Even when you're trying to be helpful, you're kind of arrogant, you know that?"

"It's not arrogant if it's true."

"Whatever. But answer me this, Mr. I'm Too Cool For This World."

"What?"

"Who in their right minds would hire me for my first gig?"

"They would if I recommended you."

I was silent for a long moment.

Finally I asked, meekly, "You'd do that?"

"I have faith in you. Faith, I might add, that you're sorely lacking in yourself."

"They would listen to you?"

He gave me a look.

“Okay, stupid question,” I said – yet couldn’t let it go. “But seriously... they would?”

“If Bill Gates said he’d just used an incredible software debugger last week, and the person was a freelancer and anybody could get him on a job-by-job basis... wouldn’t you hire him?”

“I don’t need any software debugged.”

“Very funny,” he said, not laughing.

“Yeah... if I had the money.”

“The people I’d be recommending you to? They have the money.”

“You’d do that?”

“Like I said, Lily, I have faith in you. You should try to have a little in yourself.”

“Or just fake it till I do.”

He grinned. “Now you’re learning.”

20

We got back to the hotel long after 2AM. Connor opened the door slowly, scanning for any angry Asian bodyguards – but the penthouse was dark, and Johnny was apparently sound asleep in his room.

We tiptoed into the master bedroom and closed the door.

“I need to take a shower,” I said. I had a thin layer of dust and fine grit over my skin and hair, and there was no way I was getting into bed like *that*.

I peeled off my dress and bra. The panties, as far as I knew, were still in Connor’s pocket.

He watched me as I undressed.

I enjoyed feeling his eyes roving over me.

“I’ll join you,” he whispered when I was finished.

I looked back at him and smiled. “Fine by me.”

While Connor undressed, I went into the bathroom. There were a number of small candles on the counters; I decided to light them rather than turn on the bright overhead lights.

And... y’know... just in case.

There was a light tap at the door.

“Come in,” I whispered.

The door opened, and he walked in.

Totally naked.

I caught my breath.

I *still* wasn’t used to seeing him like that. Still wasn’t used to seeing someone so *gorgeous* in front of me, and naked on top of it.

And Good Lord it was nice to see him naked.

I hadn't been able to out in the desert. As fun as it had been, I had missed looking at his body.

His muscles rippled in the candlelight. His chest was broad and powerful. His arms looked more like a construction worker's / fireman's / insert-your-preferred-fantasy-here than a billionaire investor. His hands were big and beautifully sculpted, like Michaelangelo's *David*.

My eyes moved back to his body and the muscles of his torso. In the candlelight, his abs look like they were drawn in India ink, they were so deeply delineated by shadow.

And my eyes still kept going lower – to the seductive curve of his hipbones, and the lower muscles of his abdomen... to the thatch of dark curly hair... and below that, to the long, thick member that hung between his muscular thighs.

I just stood there looking at it, entranced by the shading of the light over the ridges and contours... and then it slowly started to expand... to get longer... to thicken and pull away from his thighs at a slight angle.

I looked up and saw him smiling at me in that naughty little *I know exactly what you're looking at* way.

I blushed, though in the candlelight, I was pretty sure he couldn't see it.

He walked over to me slowly, like a jungle cat stalking its prey.

My eyes dropped briefly to his thighs again, and watched his shaft sway heavily with his movement.

Then I forced myself to look up into his eyes as he came to a standstill in front of me.

He put out a hand and brushed my hair back from my shoulder.

“I love it that you like looking at me,” he whispered.

I swallowed hard.

“There’s a lot of nice reasons to look at you,” I answered truthfully.

He grinned and put his other hand up to my cheek, tilted my head up, and leaned over and kissed me softly on the lips. So warm, so sweet. Our bodies weren’t even touching, but I could feel the heat radiating off him.

Well... *most* of our bodies weren’t touching.

Besides his hands on my face, I felt something soft and warm graze my thigh and slowly trail upwards, heartbeat by heartbeat, as it grew thicker and harder.

Oh God.

As his manhood grew, it brushed past my lips and my landing strip of hair, tantalizing me, teasing me.

Then, when it was fully erect, he stepped closer to me, pressing it against my belly, hot and massive and hard, but the skin still soft as it gently slid across my stomach.

I just stood there like that, hypnotized, his hands gently holding my face, his lips brushing a lingering kiss against mine, and the erotic pressure of his manhood against me, making me desperately want him inside me.

Then he pulled away.

“Weren’t we supposed to take a shower?” he whispered.

“Uhhhh... yeah...” I mumbled, my face still lifted up towards him, straining to continue the kiss.

Instead he grinned and turned towards the shower. As he did, his hands trailed down my chest, softly stroking my nipples before he moved away.

Grrrr.

He was the world’s worst tease. I would have *loved* to make him want me as much as he made *me* want him – and then leave him hanging.

For ten seconds or so.

But I don't think the 'him wanting me as much as I wanted him' part was possible.

I'd have to work on it, though.

The soft hiss of water filled the air.

"Come on in," he said as he took my hand.

21

The shower was wonderful, with the heat rising around us, and the flickering light of the candles through the pebbled glass, and the sensual feel of the water rushing over my skin.

But best of all was the person I was sharing it with.

He lathered up his hands and moved them over my skin, starting with my lower back and moving down to my ass, clutching my cheeks, kneading them, sliding his finger scandalously between them. Then he moved around to the front, soaping up his hands again and gliding them over my breasts, suspending them in his palms, tweaking my nipples between his soapy fingers and thumbs.

And all the while he kissed me – probing my mouth softly, leaving to gently nibble my ear, moving his lips down my neck, his tongue matching the wetness of the water cascading down my skin. Then he worked his way back up, sucking lightly at my lower lip, pressing his mouth firmly against mine, and caressing my tongue with his.

I kept busy, too.

First I soaped up my hands and reached around to *his* backside.

Ohhhhhhhh my God.

I sincerely hope that someday you get to hold as fine an ass in your hands as I did right then.

I roved my fingers over his cheeks – firm, muscular, *powerful* – soaping them up, playing with them, clutching them tight as I could.

Of course, that pressed something *else* up against me. So, after a few minutes, I moved on to it.

Again I soaped up my hands and started with the insides of his legs. I worked my hands up slowly... caressing the well-

defined outlines of his muscular thighs... and then my fingers brushed against his balls.

I didn't go too fast, though. I just kept my soapy fingers playing along his legs, up to where they joined his body, letting the backs of my fingers graze against his more sensitive parts. And then I took the tip of one finger, soapy and slick, and lightly touched his sack. Traced my finger across the sensitive skin, around the pendulous weights... and then cradled his balls in the palm of my hand.

With the other hand I made a 'C' with my forefinger and thumb, and lightly – *barely* touching his skin – started to move up his rock-hard shaft. There was more friction from the soap bubbles than there was from my actual hand.

He groaned.

I figured I was on the right track.

I made my way all the way up to the head, and then I moved my hand slowly back down, all the while softly caressing his balls, soaping them up, feeling their weight in my palm.

He stopped kissing me and just stood there, eyes closed, mouth open, and moaned.

I turned him slightly, letting the water hit him and wash away all the soap.

And then I bent over.

He was so long, I didn't have far to go.

I took his firm, swollen head in my mouth.

He groaned louder and braced his hands against the tile walls.

The spray of the water played over my skin as I went down further – one inch, two inches, as much as I could take of something so huge in my mouth – and then came back up and licked the underside of his shaft.

Then I plunged down again, a little bit further, wetting him with my mouth, slicking him down with my tongue.

He was groaning more or less non-stop by now.

That was when I stood up and immediately shut off the water.

His eyes flew open in shock.

I smiled sweetly, let my fingers trace along the underside of his cock, and then pulled away as I stepped out of the shower.

“All clean,” I announced, grabbed a towel, and headed into the dark bedroom.

If I were to describe it in a country song, he watched me go like I’d just run off with his pickup truck, his dog, and his last bottle of whiskey.

Maybe I *could* pull off that ‘making him want me more than I want him’ thing after all.

22

He didn't let me get away with it for long, though.

I was about ten feet away from the bed when he came racing out and almost tackled me from behind, his wet, powerful body smacking hard against my back.

I half-shrieked, half-laughed as his arms wrapped around me and pressed me hard against him.

"That wasn't very nice," he whispered hoarsely in my ear.

I tilted my head up and turned it towards him.

He kissed me hungrily as his hands found my breasts and fondled them, hot and wet in his hands.

I broke off the kiss this time. "How do you want me to make it up to you?" I asked innocently, batting my eyes.

"I can think of a few ways," he whispered, then turned me around so we faced each other. Then he grabbed my ass and began kissing me fervently again.

I ran my hands over the wet skin of his back, and felt his throbbing shaft – slick from my own mouth – slide across my belly.

Then he pulled back, and I swear he would have twirled his mustache if he had one.

"...I know," he whispered.

Uh oh.

"...wwwwhaaaat?" I asked warily.

He grinned and pushed me down on the bed.

"I'm getting the bed wet!" I protested.

"Before I'm through with you, it's going to be a lot wetter," he growled.

Oh my.

I waited and watched as he retrieved a couple of candles from the bathroom and put them on the tables by the bed. Then he went over to the closet and reemerged carrying four ties.

My mouth dropped open. “Um...”

“I want to tie you up,” he whispered.

“Ummmm...”

“Come on – you’ve let me do other things to you that you liked.” He paused. “You *did* like them, didn’t you?”

I blushed in the candlelight, and took my sweet time to answer.

“...yes.”

That was all the encouragement he needed. He knotted one end of the tie around my left wrist. Not too tight. The cloth was so soft that it could have been tighter, actually.

“Isn’t that tie really expensive?” I asked, worried.

“So?” he asked as he lashed the skinnier end to the headboard, pulling my arm out at an angle.

“So should you use it?”

“Never been put to a better purpose, I can guarantee you that,” he murmured as he moved across me, pausing to kiss me (and let me feel the delicious brush of his cock against my thighs) before he moved on to the other arm and my legs.

Within sixty seconds I was lying spread-eagle on the bed, with silk shackles tied firmly around my wrists and ankles. My legs were forced apart at a ninety-degree angle, the most private parts of me exposed, as Connor stood at the foot of the bed devouring me with his eyes.

I watched as his massive hard-on seemed to swell just a little bit more, the head lifting further into the air.

“Very nice,” he whispered, his eyes taking in the ‘V’ of my legs.

I wasn’t exactly sure how I felt about this.

On the one hand, the ‘being tied up’ part wasn’t doing much for me.

But the feeling of total submissiveness was.

So, okay, maybe it *was* doing something for me.

I felt a certain amount of embarrassment as his eyes lingered over my lower parts...

...but I can’t deny how much I enjoyed the look in his eyes, either.

Or how wet I was.

And not just from the shower.

He knelt down at the foot of the bed, his eyes locked on mine. He began to softly kiss and lick my skin, still beaded with water from the shower, starting with my foot. His tongue and lips slowly moved from my calf, to my knee, to my inner thigh, up to my wide-open legs.

By the time his mouth enveloped my lower lips, I was trembling.

And I discovered something else: whatever my feelings about being tied up, the resistance was *wonderful*. I could strain and fight against the bonds – which I did – and it just heightened my pleasure. I don’t know why, but I *really* enjoyed the sense of struggling and powerlessness...

...as he slowly took me with his tongue and mouth.

His fingers smoothed away the water droplets on my belly as his tongue stroked me, caressed me, parted me, filled me.

I moaned and tensed my arms, pulling hard – but nothing happened.

I was trapped there.

I couldn’t get away from the pleasure.

He moved one hand up to my chest and softly massaged and played with my breasts. At the same time, he began to circle my clit with his tongue, caressing it, flicking it softly,

pressing against it with a firm, wet pressure and then sliding away, leaving me aching for more.

“Oh God,” I moaned as he softly pinched one nipple and took *all* of me down there in his mouth, pressing his tongue deep inside.

Not as deep as I wanted, though.

And I wanted something *much* bigger.

I lifted my ass into the air, resisting my bonds, straining against his touch, wanting more, needing more, demanding more.

His mouth released me and he got up on all fours, looming over me.

I could see the outline of his shaft, hard and thick, slowly moving back and forth between his legs. A thin string of his own wetness dripped from the tip, shimmering silver in the candlelight.

I squirmed on the bed sheets, waiting impatiently, trying to hurry him up without begging.

He misinterpreted it.

“Oh... you trying to get away from me?” he growled, slowly moving up the bed.

He seemed to like it. Me trying to get away from him.

So I played along.

“You can’t have me,” I whispered.

He let one finger glide up my thigh and part my lips, his touch slick and sweet over my clit.

I stifled the cry of agony and ecstasy that I wanted to let loose.

“I don’t think you have much say in that right now,” he whispered, his voice dark and dangerous.

“You can’t *have me*,” I said again, and angled my pelvis so that it was sideways – one hip jutting up in the air and the other pressing against the sheets.

“Oh yes I can,” he breathed hot into my ear, and placed one powerful hand against my waist.

I fought back all the harder, my arms and legs straining against the silk of the ties.

It was *incredibly* erotic.

“No, you can’t,” I whispered.

“Yes,” he answered, and pressed his upper body against mine.

I could feel him between my thighs now – the wet thickness gliding forward, trying to find its way inside me.

“No!” I whispered.

He stopped, still as stone.

There were a couple of seconds of silence.

“...um... just to be absolutely, 100% clear...” he said hesitantly.

I smiled at his concern. I really wanted to kiss him – but I spoke instead. “I remember the safe word. Seeing as it’s ‘Safe Word.’”

“...so... unless you say the safe word...”

“‘No’ means ‘yes,’” I whispered into his ear. “Just for tonight. Just for right now.”

He nodded somberly – and then his fingers grabbed my hair and he kissed me hot and wet, devouring my mouth.

And I felt something *else* hot and wet slide between my thighs.

“No,” I whispered, angling my hips away.

To be honest, what I was doing felt kind of wrong. Psychologically uncomfortable, a little shameful. ‘No means no’ – *period*. Right? So I felt like I was bad for doing this.

But it was really, *really* hot.

And I didn’t want to stop.

Not yet.

“No, you can’t have me – ”

“Yes,” he whispered, pressing his body harder against me.
“Please.”

“No – ”

“Yes,” he demanded. “Please – ”

I struggled away from him, though I wanted him inside me more than ever. “No, you can’t have me – ”

“YES,” he said fiercely. He sat upright, grasped my hips with his hands, forcing me flat onto the bed – and then he took that big, gorgeous shaft in one hand and angled the head right against my lips and clit.

The slipperiness of his juices made him slide across me, a pressure as wet and hot as his tongue, but firmer and harder and far more powerful. Soft and hard all at once, thick and juicy and slick, pressing against me, overcoming me with a jolt of pleasure.

I breathed in sharply, ragged and quick.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“No – ”

“Please, Lily, please, yes – ”

And then I felt him enter me.

Oh my God oh my God oh my God

It was just the head – just the tip, really.

But *damn* it felt amazing.

The sensations were mind-blowing.

But I wasn’t going to let him win that easily.

I tried to force him out, pressing the muscles inside me against him –

But the delicious pressure just kept easing deeper and deeper inside me as his girth filled me up.

“Yes,” he whispered in my ear.

“Yes,” I agreed, moaning.

I stopped trying to fight him and let him enter me deeply, let him fill me completely.

“Lily,” he hissed in my ear as he pulled out almost all the way – and then plunged deep inside me again.

“Oh God, yes, oh God,” I cried out as he filled me up, over and over, rotating his hips so that he swirled inside me, pressing everywhere inside me, stroking me, possessing me, fucking me, making love to me –

I bit his shoulder lightly as waves of pressure started to build up beyond my control.

“Harder,” he hissed. “Bite me harder.”

I bit him harder, his flesh firm and tight between my teeth.

The earth was shaking under me, and I couldn’t control it anymore.

“Harder,” he hissed as he filled me up over and over and over.

I bit harder and screamed, the noise muffled against his skin, as my entire body convulsed with pleasure, jolting again and again, larger and larger, with every thrust of him between my legs –

And then he cried out, too, his hands buried in my hair, pulling at my head, my teeth still biting his shoulder, as he pounded inside one more time... and then he relented, and his whole body shuddered. I could feel him expand inside me, over and over, thicker and bigger, and he pulled out and thrust inside me again, filling me once more, his orgasm bursting against mine, his contractions matching mine, his body one with mine –

And then he collapsed on top of me, his body shaking as I trembled underneath him, the aftershocks still pulsing through me every few seconds until they gradually died out.

I kissed the skin where I’d bitten him and felt the indention in his flesh. “Are you okay?”

He pulled his head up to look me in the eye. He had the dreamy, spaced-out look of someone on the best drugs *ever*.

“I’m fantastic,” he whispered. “Well, I mean... *you’re* fantastic... hell, you know what I mean.”

Then he kissed me on the mouth.

I giggled beneath his lips and kissed him back.

He pulled away and looked at me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fantastic, too. Although you could untie me now, if you want.”

“Oh – yeah,” he said, and reached up and fumbled with the knots around my wrists. “But I meant... with what we just did...”

Once my arms were free, I arched my head up off the bed, put my hands on his cheeks, and kissed him tenderly. “I’m great. But it was just for tonight.”

“Just for tonight,” he whispered, a promise.

I nodded, then murmured in his ear, “Until we use the safe word again. That thing’s awful handy.”

He laughed – and then we kept on kissing, our bodies still entwined.

23

I don't remember much after that.

In fact, I don't remember much of anything until I woke up the next morning.

The room was dim, but light was glowing through the curtained windows.

I remembered Connor making love to me...

...an amazing orgasm as I stared up at the stars...

...and an even hotter orgasm doing something really, really naughty.

Maybe it was time for round three.

I rolled over and reached for Connor.

He wasn't there.

His side of the bed was empty, just rumpled sheets and a pulled-back comforter.

But there *was* a note.

Lily,

Sorry, had to go tip over the first domino.

Johnny's with me, so you're on your own.

Order some room service – and DON'T PAY FOR IT. Put it on the room tab.

Give me a call as soon as you read this.

Connor

He left his cell number at the bottom of the sheet of paper.

The first domino...?

Then I remembered what he had said the night before:

All the pieces are already in place. It's just a matter of tipping over the first domino.

I grinned... and then lay back in bed, my mind reeling.

Had everything he'd told me last night been real?

A solar farm out in the Nevada desert?

The destruction of the coal and energy industries, at least as they existed today?

Changing the entire world as we know it?

If anybody can do it, HE can.

I reached for my cell phone, then realized it wasn't on the bedside table. I had to search the bedroom for it, and finally found it along with my box of office 'memorabilia' from my time with Herr Klaus.

Asshole, I thought about my former boss, then walked over to the bed.

I checked the phone. 10:27.

MAN I slept late...

I checked the note again and dialed the number.

Then I remembered something else from our conversation last night.

Isn't he meeting with the governor today? Or state officials or something? Why would he answer my phone call if he's in a meeting with –

"Hello?" Connor spoke into my ear.

"Hey," I said, breaking out into a huge smile.

"Hey yourself," he said. I could hear the grin in his voice.

"Glad I caught you before your meeting."

"No, I'm right in the middle of it."

"Oh my God," I gasped, my face getting red. *"I'm sorry, I –"*

"Why are you apologizing? I told you to call."

“Why did you answer?!”

“I make time for the important people in my life.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Hello?” he said, though he knew I was there.

“Who is it?” I whispered.

“Is this a bad knock-knock joke?”

“No – who are you meeting with?”

“The governor.”

My face went beet-red.

“I’ll call you back – ”

“He can’t hear me. I excused myself, I’m over at the window.”

“I can’t believe you answered the phone in a meeting with the governor of Nevada!”

“It’s his own fault. He made me wait five minutes, I can make HIM wait a couple.”

“Well... I’m just calling to say ‘hey.’”

“I won’t be done until later this afternoon, maybe 4 or 5. I left a credit card and a little bit of cash for you on the table by the front door. Go out and have some fun while I’m gone.”

An uncomfortable feeling roiled in the pit of my stomach. “I’m *not* going to take your credit card and go shopping.”

He chuckled. *“I should’ve never said that, should I?”*

“I’m GLAD you said it, otherwise I might’ve done it.”

“Well, I’m ordering you to enjoy yourself. Buy a nice little black dress for tonight – we’ll go out and have fun.”

“You’re ordering me?” I asked in a *oh no you DI-IN’T* voice.

“I’m... requesting.”

“Mmm... maybe,” I grunted.

“At least have a nice breakfast.”

“Alright. I don’t want to take up too much of your time – ”

“Lily?”

“Yes?”

“You can take up as much of my time as you want.”

I smiled. “Go take over the world, Connor.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“Okay.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

It was weird... I had to hold myself back from saying ‘Love you.’

Habit, mostly. I say it to my parents, I say it to Anh...

Not a good thing to say to HIM at this point, though, I chided myself.

Then I realized that this was the first time I’d spoken to him over the phone since the night we’d first met.

In fact, the very first time I’d ever heard his voice was over the phone. There was an odd feeling of completion to it all, talking to him now, with everything that had happened between us in the last couple of days.

Then I decided I was finished pondering the mysteries of the universe, and went off to the bathroom to take a shower.

24

And so began Lily's Day Out.

It began with a late, sumptuous breakfast of strawberries, mangoes, and peaches with a small order of scrambled eggs, a side of bacon, and two mimosas with freshly-squeezed orange juice.

Perfection.

I felt a little bad about spending Connor's money, but decided, *Hey, he SAID to*, and gave the room service guy a \$30 tip.

Not exactly a tip in Connor's league, but I'm not *that* crazy.

The red dress was a mess from the evening before – sand and dust everywhere – so I opted for my work clothes from Monday, which Johnny had helpfully stashed in the Prada store's shopping bag. They were a little funky, but I figured I wouldn't be wearing them *too* long.

The credit card was an American Express Black Card registered to Extremis Inc.

The 'little bit of cash' Connor had mentioned?

\$600.

Almost as much as my monthly rent.

I shook my head, put it in my purse, and headed down to the lobby.

I used the money to get a cab. After making the exasperated cabbie drive up and down the Strip twice, I decided I liked the Venetian the best, so I paid him (with a \$30 tip – hey! I was on a roll) and set out for the shops.

The interior of the shopping area was beautiful – buildings modeled after Venice, Italy (duh), complete with canals threading between the shops.

What threw me was the ceiling, which was sky blue and painted with clouds so realistic it took me a second to remember I was *inside* rather than *outside*. It was only some shadows in the corners of the ceiling that gave away the illusion.

I was hoping I'd find something a little cheaper than Prada or Gucci – and I did. There was an Ann Taylor store, and I searched until I found a little black dress that I figured Connor wouldn't mind taking off me. No, it wasn't as swanky as an Armani... but I figured it a thousand dollars less. At least.

I also picked out a new bra and pair of panties. I kept on all my new clothes when I walked out of the changing rooms, paid the cashier, and left to go find somewhere to eat lunch.

Along the way, I saw an ATM nestled amongst the shops. I still wasn't comfortable spending all of Connor's money, so I thought I would replenish it with a little of my own.

It's still his money, a snarky little voice whispered in my head.

“Shut up,” I said out loud, then looked around, embarrassed, hoping nobody had heard me. Thankfully nobody had. At least, nobody was looking at me like I was a crazy person babbling to myself.

I popped my card in the ATM slot... entered my code... withdrew \$400...

...and gasped when I saw the printed transaction receipt.

He'd already told me.

I *knew* it was there.

But it's one thing to 'know' something, and entirely another to actually *see* it.

Especially when the 'something' is fifty grand.

My bank balance was \$49,927.73.

Considering that I'd just withdrawn \$400, that had meant it had been \$50,327.73 just a few seconds before.

\$327.73. That's all I'd had to my name 24 hours ago. Not nearly enough to cover my rent – much less groceries, gas, car insurance, and utilities.

And now... now I had more money than I'd ever had before in my life.

Actually, more money than I'd ever made, *combined*, in my entire life.

It was disorienting.

I actually stumbled over to a bench and sat down. My hand was shaking as I looked at the receipt.

I think, until that moment, the emotional impact of being with someone as rich as Connor hadn't fully registered.

That sounds goldigger-y and smarmy. Let me try again.

Until that second, I had been living in a fairytale. An X-rated fairytale with some hot *hot* moments, and a few really unhappy ones, too... but it was like a story I was guest-starring in. It was somehow... not real. As though I might wake up any second and discover it was all a wonderful dream, and now it was Monday morning and time to go back to suffering the petty torments of working for Herr Klaus.

Tune in this week for *Fantasy Island*, starring Lily Ross!

But there was one thing in my life that was more Real Life than anything else – and that was Money.

Notice that I didn't say 'Important.' I said 'Real Life.'

Like the sort of things that beat you over the head and remind you you're not living in a Hallmark Movie.

Rent. Bills. Being able to eat something other than Top Ramen.

You need Money for Real Life, and there was never enough of it.

Not that I wanted a ton of money. I mean, yeah, you want to give me a winning lottery ticket? Sure, I'll take it. But I never chased after money, not like ambitious people do. There

were other things that were more important to me. Truth, beauty, love, friendship, a sense of greater purpose...

That sounds like it should go on a sappy greeting card.

But if all I was interested in was money, I would have been all over Connor's original offer of \$20,000 like white on rice.

I didn't take it because I was in love with him. And him offering to pay me for my time? It cheapened that. Made it feel tawdry. Made *me* feel tawdry.

But the Real Life thing about Money was this: I'd struggled with it all my adult life (what little I'd lived so far). Never enough money to do what I wanted. Just barely enough to scrape by. Having to do crappy jobs and work for people I hated just to survive.

Haha – welcome to the human race, right?

Yeah, I know, I know – *Join the club, Lily.*

There was a funny joke I heard last week on the radio that went something like this: you say you want a support group for people who hate their jobs? There is one! It's called 'Everybody,' and they hold meetings in bars!

But four days ago I'd met a guy for whom money was like tap water to me: something you just turned on. Took for granted. It was always there, as much as he wanted.

And he'd given me something that, to him, was no more than a glass of water.

But for me, it changed *everything*.

And the proof of it was on a little paper slip in my hand.

I cried a little as I sat there looking at it. I felt like I had a lottery ticket in my hand for No More Scraping By. No More Worrying. And the ticket had come up a winner.

I know that sounds stupid – after all, I wasn't exactly on Easy Street.

But that's how I felt. Connor's gift had bought me a year, maybe two if I was careful.

And it might sound as though all I cared about was the money. Trust me, nothing could have been further from the truth.

The main thing was, a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

I was thankful to Connor for so much – for the passionate nights, for the feelings he inspired in me, for the affection he gave me, for the way he touched me, for the sights and experiences I would have never had if it hadn't been for him.

For making me fall in love.

And for the hope that maybe, just maybe, *he* might be falling in love with me, too.

But at that moment, I was thankful that he had given me something else:

Time.

Freedom.

The chance to not have to worry.

And I hadn't had to sell my soul – or my feelings for him – to do it.

So I sat there and cried a little, and felt that my world had suddenly changed.

But it wasn't a dream this time.

It was reality, and the slip of paper in my hand proved it.

25

Okay, mope time over.

After I had my little freak-out over an ATM receipt, I decided I was going to celebrate.

Not, like, celebrate the way Connor did, with sixteen-course meals and surf-n-turf room service.

Just lunch. A nice lunch and a glass of wine. I'm a sensible girl (usually), and contemplating a year of financial freedom had made me want to keep it.

Mmm... maybe *two* glasses of wine.

I found a nice little restaurant by the crazy indoor canal that ran through the Venetian's shopping area. It was late enough after the lunch crowd that there was plenty of seating, so they put me by the wrought-iron railing so I could watch the gondolas go by. Guys wearing white-and-black-striped shirts with little red scarves pushed the boats along with poles. Meanwhile, the people inside the gondolas filmed the whole thing with their iPhones. Or smooched. Or filmed themselves with their iPhones as they smooched.

It looked like fun. I wondered if Connor would do something so 'Vegas-y.'

Probably not. He'd say, *Let's just fly to Venice and do it for real.*

Which would be great, but not really what I was after. What I *really* wanted to do was see him squirm. I figured I could bring it up and then make fun of him for being a snob when he recoiled.

But there was a chance he might say 'yes.' And that would make life super-difficult for Johnny. The poor guy would probably be jumping out of his skin the whole time... *if* Connor even let him on the boat.

On the other hand, we'd had the whole 'Normal Day,' and he'd ridden the ferris wheel at Santa Monica Pier, so maybe he actually *would* go for –

“Hello there,” someone said off to my left.

A woman's voice – low and husky, kind of like Lauren Bacall's when she was twenty years old and in black-and-white movies.

I turned around, expecting to see a waitress.

She wasn't a waitress.

She *was*, however, one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen. Face-to-face, or even in a movie or the pages of a magazine. She had skin like porcelain, cheekbones like a model's, eyes the color of emeralds, and a perfectly sculpted nose and lips. Her golden blonde hair was swept up into a kind of updo or chignon that showed off her long, elegant neck. Every strand was immaculately in place.

She was wearing a really nice business suit – white silk blouse, grey pencil skirt, expensive tailored jacket. Everything was either tight enough, high enough, or low enough to show off an amazing figure, loooong legs, and a tiny little waist.

Her makeup was minimal, as was her jewelry. Tiny diamond earrings, matched by a small diamond pendant on a slim gold necklace. A couple of rings set with diamonds and rubies – though none on her left ring finger.

She was probably in her late 20's, though I was guessing that really because she was so *tall*. Compared to me, anyway. She didn't have a wrinkle on her face – no laugh lines, no smile lines... just smooth, perfect skin.

She was beautiful in an elegant, prim, proper way, with style, taste, and grace to boot.

In short, she looked like Cinderella went off and got a Fortune 500 top executive job.

And then attended some sort of convention in Vegas, I guess.

I hated her for a second for being so beautiful, then reprimanded myself.

“Hi,” I answered.

“I’m so sorry to bother you... but can you tell me, where did you get that dress?” she asked.

Grace Kelly with Lauren Bacall’s voice. Damn.

I couldn’t for the life of me understand why she was asking me about my dress. It probably cost at least a grand less than her ensemble – and while I *liked* what I was wearing, hers was pretty damn top-notch.

“Ann Taylor,” I answered.

“It’s so cute. You have good taste.”

Oh... well...

My hater-ation went down several notches, and my friendliness quotient went up. Wine and flattery, greatest social lubricants in the world.

“Thank you – but, I mean, what *you’re* wearing is beautiful.”

She waved her hand through the air like she was batting away the compliment, and her expression said, *Oh, YOU know how it is.*

“Have to get dolled up for business.” Then she looked me dead in the eyes and said, “But your boyfriend is a lucky man.”

My first reaction was to say, ‘Oh, he’s not really my boyfriend.’

My second reaction was to think, *It kind of sucks he’s not my boyfriend.*

And my third reaction – which would have probably been my first, if not for the wine – was, *Wow, this is a weird conversation.*

First Cinderella comes over and compliments me... and now she’s talking about my ‘boyfriend’...

Is she just seeing if I HAVE a boyfriend?

Why would she do that?

Holy shit, is Grace Kelly/Lauren Bacall HITTING on me?!

“Um... well... we – he and I – just started dating...”

“But you’re here together?”

I frowned a little, even as I kept a smile on my face. Chatty Kathy here was seriously weirding me out.

Is she still hitting on me? What the hell?

She smiled when I didn’t answer, as though to put me at ease. “Best part of the relationship... when everything is romantic.”

“Yeah... it’s great...”

I probably looked like a girl in a horror movie when she realizes the proprietor of the spooky old inn isn’t exactly right in the head.

“Why isn’t he here?” she asked.

“Um... he’s working...?” *Not that it’s any business of yours?*

“Ah. Be sure to wear that for him later – he’ll love it.”

“I... uh... yeah, I plan on it.”

“Well, I’ve taken up enough of your time. Have a great day – and thanks for the information.” She smiled. “About the dress.”

“You’re welcome.”

She fluttered her fingers like *Ta ta*, and glided off effortlessly on her four-inch, *super-cute* pumps.

Wow. THAT was weird.

It’s not every day that Kate Upton comes up and tells you you have a nice bod. Or Miranda Kerr says you’re cute.

And might be trying to get into your pants.

Flattering, I suppose... but the vibe was strange. Sort of inappropriate and slightly creepy.

But my second glass of Riesling put a nice glow on the memory a few minutes later.

And then I forgot all about it.

26

After I finished lunch, I stopped by the casino for the hell of it. If you go to Vegas and don't gamble, what's the point?

(Besides the sex, fancy dinners, and surreal car trips out to the desert, I mean.)

I bet on a few hands of blackjack, and then when I was losing too badly, I switched to slots. That was not a good choice, as I could *not* figure most of them out. There's your old-school ones, yes, where you're trying to line up 'Bars' and Lucky 7's and fruit and whatnot – but I'm talking about the flashy new ones, with strange Egyptian or 'Under The Sea' themes, or where you can line things up in a zig-zag line. You have to have a genius-level IQ to know what's going on with some of them. I stared at them for a few minutes, trying to decipher what I was supposed to accomplish, and just ended up feeling like an ADD kid without my Adderall, eyes darting from one flashing light to another. So I went back over to one of the old-school ones and promptly lost \$20 in about 5 minutes.

That was it. \$100 was my limit. \$80 on blackjack, \$20 on slots, we out. Even with 50 grand in the bank, losing a hundred dollars was painful.

I was leaving the casino and pondering my next move when I got a call from Connor. I checked the time on my cell: a little after 3PM.

“Hey.”

“*Where you at?*” he said, trying to sound as ‘street’ as possible.

It was the first thing I'd witnessed that he just couldn't quite pull off.

It was goofy and adorable.

“Where you at'? What, have you been hanging out with Macklemore?”

“I don’t even know who that is.”

“Eminem, then.”

“Okay, I know who that is. Isn’t that what the kids say these days when they’re making a booty call? ‘Where you at?’”

I actually froze in the lobby of the Venetian, blushed, and hid my face with one hand as I whispered into the phone, “Oh my GOD tell me you are not still in the meeting with the governor of Nevada...”

“No, no. Just a state senator.”

“Connor – ”

“He doesn’t mind – he’s giving me the thumbs-up right now – ”

“CONNOR!”

He laughed. *“I’m joking. I just finished for the day.”*

I finally breathed in again. “Thank God.”

“I didn’t know you were so prudish, Lily.”

“About you talking about booty calls in front of elected officials?”

“No, just booty calls, period.”

“I’m NOT.”

Actually, I was. First of all, I’m not sure a boyfriend calling you to have sex is technically a booty call. And if any of my exes had tried it while we were together, I probably would have just hung up on them.

“Is that what this is?” I continued. “A booty call?”

“Hell yes.”

“Wow, *somebody’s* hot and bothered.”

“Happens when my plans for world domination go as planned.”

“The meetings went that well, huh?”

“You have no idea.”

“If you get hot and bothered when things go your way, then I think I have an idea.”

“Where are you?”

“About to leave the Venetian.”

“Go wait out front, I’ll pick you up.”

“Wait out front where?”

“I don’t know – go out front and describe where you are. What are you wearing?”

“Is this for identification purposes, or are you starting in on phone sex now?”

“Well, it WAS for identification purposes, but I like the way you’re thinking.”

I laughed. “Wow, if you don’t get your morning fix, you just turn into a little horndog, don’t you?”

“Yes. Like that movie GREMLINS... sort of.”

“I love that movie!”

“I figured you might. Are you outside yet?”

“Yeah... there’s a sort of bridge that connects the Venetian to Treasure Island.”

I only knew it was Treasure Island because of the gaudy green, red, and blue sign out in front of the casino. That, and the words ‘Treasure Island’ at the top of the twenty-story hotel. I’m brilliant like that.

“Right by that bridge, there’s a break in the railing where cars can drive up. Can you pick me up there?”

“Absolutely. You still haven’t told me what you’re wearing, though.”

“A little black dress.”

“Ah. Is it easy access?”

“Aren’t they all?”

“Some more than others. What have you got on underneath?”

I giggled a little as I headed over to the meeting place.
“Are you serious?”

“I am totally serious.”

“What has gotten *into* you?”

“The question is, how long before I’ll be getting into you?”

“Oh my God, that sounds like one of the cheesiest pick-up lines ever.”

“I have a better one. Want to hear it?”

“Sure.”

“That dress looks very becoming on you. And if I were that dress, I’d be coming, too.”

I actually burst out laughing in the middle of the sidewalk.
“Oh my GOD.”

“Huh? Huh?”

“I don’t know if you’re going to be able to wait until the hotel room.”

“Ohhhhh, I SO like the way you’re thinking.”

“That was an observation, NOT an invitation!”

“Too late. I want to have my way with you. Immediately.”

I have to admit, by now I was getting turned on.

“Do you know how much I’ve been thinking about fucking you today, Lily?”

Oh my God.

“I’ve been sitting in all these boring meetings, and all I could think about was making you come.”

I stopped breathing.

“I want you so badly, Lily, you have no idea. Just thinking about the things I want to do to you... how badly I want to

hear you moan...”

“You weren’t thinking about me at all,” I said, trying to be playful, or hard-to-get, or something, but I didn’t quite pull it off. My voice hitched a little, and I just ended up sounding like I wanted to hear him say more.

“Oh yes I was. I was thinking about taking off all your clothes... lowering you down on the bed... licking you up and down like an ice cream cone... parting your legs... taking my cock... and sloooooowly filling up that gorgeous little pussy of yours.”

I stood there on the street corner, my mouth open, my eyes bugged out, the phone glued to my ear.

Normally I don’t like the ‘p’ word.

I was liking it a whole lot better right about now.

“Lily?” he purred in my ear.

“...yes?” I whispered.

“The only time I really feel alive is when I’m inside you.”

That last one kind of took my breath away.

I think I whimpered a little bit.

“Lily...” he murmured seductively in my ear.

“...y-yes?”

“Are you wet?”

“Jesus, Connor!” I whispered, blushing red as a fire truck. I turned around, sure that a platoon of nuns was walking by and had somehow heard every word with their holiness-enhanced hearing.

“Yes or no, Lily? Are you wet?”

I was soaked.

I breathed heavily into the phone, glancing around me, afraid people could somehow read my thoughts.

“...yes.”

“Do you know how hard you make me, Lily?”

I could imagine it: the heat radiating off his shaft as it moved up my leg, brushing softly against my inner thigh...

"Lily?" he said, breaking me out of my daydream.

"...yes...?"

"I want you to do something for me."

"...what?"

"I want you to circle your hand like you're holding my cock."

My heart skipped a beat.

I looked around again. I was sure my cheeks were going to catch fire any second.

"Connor, I can't do that! –"

"You don't have to let anyone see. I just want you to put your fingers together like you're holding my cock."

"I am not giving you an invisible handjob on Las Vegas Boulevard in broad daylight!"

He laughed. *"So you'd do it in the middle of the night? Or on another street?"*

"What?! No –!"

"Technically it's 'imaginary,' not 'invisible.'"

I made a bratty little face, irritated that, yes, he was right.

"And I just want you to hold it."

I gave a furtive look around me. *"Can't this just wait until we get back to the –"*

"No, it can't. Do it for me, Lily. Put your fingers together like you've got your hand around me."

"Can Johnny hear any of this?!" I whispered frantically.

"No, he can't. Do it for me, Lily. I want you to put your fingers together like you're holding me in your hand."

"Out here on the street?!"

“Out there on the street. No one’s going to know what you’re doing. They’ll think you’re standing there with your thumb touching your other fingers, that’s all.”

“...can I hide my hand while I do it?”

“Of course.”

Clutching my hand under the arm holding the phone, I bent my fingers in a ‘C’ and touched the tip of my thumb to the tip of my middle finger.

“Are you doing it?”

“Yes.”

“Now I want you to close your eyes.”

“Are you serious?!”

“Yes.”

I kept my eyes open. “Okay, they’re closed.”

“No they’re not. You’re a terrible liar. Close them.”

I whimpered nervously, then closed my eyes.

“Is your hand around my cock?”

I swallowed hard. I imagined my skin against his, the pulse of his heartbeat under my fingertips as his massive member throbbed in my grip.

“...yes...”

“Do you feel how hard you make me?”

“...yes...”

“Do you feel how hot my skin feels against your hand?”

God help me, but I was actually standing on the Strip in Vegas, my eyes closed, fantasizing about holding him in my hand. The noise of the traffic, the heat, the chattering of tourists all around me, it all faded away as I stood there.

“...yes,” I whispered.

“Keep your eyes closed when I tell you this next part.”

“...okay...”

“I want you to move your hand up and down. Not much – not enough so anyone knows what you’re doing. Only you’re going to know and I’m going to know that you’re stroking my cock. Just... slow. A tiny bit. An inch or two... slowly... up and down... slowly... will you do that for me?”

My heart was hammering like a jackhammer in my chest, but... hell... he was so persuasive...

“...y-yes...”

Hidden behind my arm, I slowly moved my hand up and down, no more than an inch. If only the people walking past knew what I was thinking.

“Do you feel me in your hand?”

“...yes...” I murmured.

“Do you feel how hot you make me?”

“...yes...”

“Do you feel how hard you make me?”

“...yes...”

“Do you know how much I love having your hand on my cock?”

“...almost as much as I love having your cock inside me,” I whispered, and then my eyes popped open.

Holy shit, I can’t believe I just said that OUT LOUD.

Apparently Connor couldn’t, either.

“God DAMN, Lily, you almost made me come,” he whispered breathlessly.

I glanced around. Nobody was staring; they were all walking by, completely ignoring me. In retrospect, if *you* saw me on the street, I probably looked like an overstressed chick trying to calm down, her eyes closed, rubbing her arm a little, trying to find her ‘Happy Place.’

And I’d found it, alright. I can’t think of many ‘happy places’ better than me kneeling down in front of Connor, my hand around his manhood, making him groan with pleasure.

Unless they included him being inside me.

“Are your eyes closed?”

“No, but I’m closing them now,” I said, my cheeks burning red.

Happy place, happy place, happy place –

He whispered into my ear again.

“Stroke me, Lily... are you stroking my cock?”

“...yes...”

“Are you going to do that for me when you get in the car, Lily? Are you going to use your hand and your gorgeous little mouth and show me how hot you make me?”

“...yes...”

“Are you going to straddle me and let me fill you up, and make you come over and over?”

“...oh yes... yes...”

“Good. Now open your eyes and get in the car.”

My eyelids flew open.

There was the Lamborghini pulling up right beside me.

As I opened the passenger side door and slipped inside, my face was about the same color as the car’s maroon paint job.

Connor looked over at me like he was having the most boring day ever. “Hey. You talking to somebody on the phone?”

I hit him about fifteen times on the arm as he roared with laughter and pulled off into traffic.

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“You think you’re soooo funny,” I griped as I buckled the seatbelt.

“I *know* I’m so funny,” he grinned, then glanced over at me. “But I’d like to pick up where that phone call left off.”

“Ohhhh no. And where’s Johnny?!”

“Ditched him again.”

“Why?!”

“I told you. Booty call.”

“You are *not* getting any of *this* booty, not after your bad behavior.”

“I think you *like* my bad behavior.”

“No.”

Yes.

He slid one hand over to my exposed thigh and softly caressed it. “I think you do.”

“No.”

Yes yes yes

His fingers curled around my leg. The tip of one finger slowly stroked the inside of my thigh, light and soft as a feather. “I think you’re lying.”

“No.”

Yes I am keep doing that keep doing that –

The tip of his finger slowly, slowly made its way between my legs... touched my drenched panties... and began to stroke my clit through the wet cloth. Softly... just making light circles...

He never took his eyes off the road.

I moaned and gripped the hand rest on the door like I was on a rollercoaster.

“You’re a bad girl, Lily,” he said in that deep voice, soft as velvet.

“No I’m not,” I whispered.

Yes I am yes I am

His finger pulled the edge of my underwear to the side, and the tip of his finger touched the dampness of my lips.

And began to stroke me... slowly... up... and down.

I whimpered and clenched my teeth together as cars and buildings flashed by outside.

“Yes you are,” he said, soft but insistent as his fingers returned to my clit and softly, wetly, began to circle it. “You were thinking about stroking my cock out there on that street corner, out in front of everybody.”

“...you... you made me...” I whispered and gasped.

“No... you didn’t have to do anything I said. I think you did it because you’re a bad, bad girl... and you *liked it*.”

“...no...” I whispered, barely audible.

He had stopped circling and was sloooooowly, ever-so-softly, stroking my clit over and over again in the same direction. The same light pressure, over and over, making my insides feel like they were liquid fire.

“Did you like thinking about my cock?” he whispered as he stroked me... softly... wetly...

“...yes...”

I braced one hand against the roof of the car and gripped the leather headrest of my seat with the other. My mouth was hanging open and my breathing was ragged. My thighs tensed, straining against the building pleasure between my thighs.

He still never looked away from the road as he wove the car from lane to lane, around traffic.

But he kept talking, his voice hypnotic.

“Did you like thinking about stroking my cock with your hand?”

“...yes...” I whimpered, rocking my pelvis forward the slightest bit, trying to get the tiniest bit more pressure of his skin on mine.

“Did you like thinking about how hard you made me?”

“Yes, oh God yes – ”

The sensations were building up inside me. The tightness, the heat, the tension –

“Did you like thinking about how hard my cock was in your hand?”

“Yes – ”

“Did you like thinking about putting your gorgeous mouth around my cock?”

“Yes – ”

“Did you like thinking about my cock inside your beautiful, wet pussy?”

“YES,” I gasped, my body contorting in the seat – and still he kept stroking me.

Oh my God, I was getting so close –

“Are you a bad girl, Lily?”

I almost said ‘no.’

But instead I whispered, “...yes.”

With you, yes, only with you, yes –

I couldn’t bear it – and still his finger just caressed me, stroked me, made me feel like I was going to explode

“...Lily?”

“What?” I moaned.

“...are you going to come for me?”

At that instant, he increased the pressure of his finger on my clit, just the most miniscule amount.

And I exploded.

“FuuuuUCK,” I screamed, holding onto the headrest like I was being swept away, slapping one hand against the inside of the door, fighting against them, trying to contain myself as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through my body, wracking me from head to toe.

The pressure from his fingertip subsided, and he merely went back to stroking my drenched lips, slowly, sensually.

Meanwhile, I had turned to jelly over in the passenger seat.

“...oh my god oh my god oh my god...” I whispered as my arms and legs trembled.

He slowly withdrew his fingers from between my legs... letting them softly graze the inside of my thighs... and then, with a devilish smile, he put his index finger in his mouth and licked the taste of me off of his skin.

He cocked one eyebrow as though to say *nice*, and then glanced over at me with a wicked grin.

“So... you having a nice day?”

“I thought I was until now,” I said in a shaky voice. “Now I’m having an *amazing* day.”

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He laughed, then settled into a grin. “So... what are you going to do for *me*?”

A seductive smile slowly dawned on my face, and I looked down at his pants.

There was a *very* large shape pressing beneath the cloth, sort of at an angle. It looked incredibly uncomfortable for him, poor boy.

Time to make it MORE uncomfortable.

I unbuckled my seat belt (which, I might add, freaked me out a bit, but... oh well. Living dangerously and all that) and slid a bit closer to him – as close as I could manage with the car’s center console in the way.

I moved my hand over to his lap and let my fingers rest on his upper thigh. Then, with the tip of one fingernail, I slowly brushed that massive shape inside his pants, generating the slightest bit of friction against the cloth.

He lost his smile and got a look of severe tension on his face as he stared straight ahead at the road.

“On the phone, you said you wanted me to hold your cock... didn’t you?” I whispered.

He didn’t answer.

“Didn’t you?” I asked louder.

“...yes,” he said.

Now the tables were reversed.

I grinned.

I started stroking the shape in his pants with my fingertips, slowly, tracing from the base up to the head, then slowly back down.

“You said you wanted me to stroke your cock for you... didn’t you?” I purred.

“...yes,” he whispered.

My fingertips found the zipper on his fly, and I slowly pulled it down.

Ziiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiip.

But I didn’t do anything else.

“You said you wanted me to use my gorgeous little mouth on that big, thick cock of yours, didn’t you?”

His face looked like he was in serious pain. He stared straight ahead at the road like he couldn’t afford to do anything else, or he would be lost.

“...yes,” he whispered.

I put my fingers inside the fly of his pants and slowly probed until I found the front flap of his boxers.

Then I eased my fingers in until I touched hot, scalding skin.

“Unh,” he groaned, and gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles were white.

“You sure do talk big for a guy who doesn’t want to be photographed on the top of a thirty-story building,” I teased.

“That’s not true. Last night – ”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot... you’ll have sex outdoors if you’re a thousand miles away, out in the desert, in the middle of the night.”

“You didn’t enjoy it?”

“Oh, I *loved* it. But something tells me you’re not exactly Mr. Risk Taker when it comes to getting caught.”

“Oh really?” he grinned, and then the grin faded to an open mouth and a feverish frown as I stroked his shaft again. Only a few inches, up and down – I couldn’t reach any further than that because of the pressure of his pants against my fingers.

“Please,” he said urgently.

“Please what?” I teased.

“Do it.”

“Do what?” I asked, as though I was soooo innocent and had absolutely *no* idea what he was talking about.

And I stopped stroking him when I said it.

“Keep going,” he choked out.

“You mean... this?” I asked, and slowly stroked again.

“More,” he whispered.

“Even though we’re driving in a car in the middle of the day where everybody can see us?”

He paused, as though thinking it over.

I suddenly felt alarmed, as though I might have just killed the moment.

Don't stop, I pleaded in my head. *Don't stop* –

“Yes,” he finally whispered. “Keep going.”

I figured I wouldn't push my luck any more than I already had, so I just shut up and let my fingers do the talking.

I pulled my hand away from his fly, grasped his belt, and unbuckled it. Then I unbuttoned the top of his pants. It took some doing – I'm not the most adroit or practiced girl in these types of situations – but I think I did relatively well.

His pants almost popped open from the straining pressure inside.

Now I had more room to play.

I put my fingers inside his boxers again, and caressed his entire rock-hard shaft all the way up to his swollen head.

Damn, I wasn't the only one who was wet.

He had soaked the top of his boxers with his own juices, he had been so turned on.

“Did I do this to you?” I whispered, letting my fingers glide over his slick, wet skin.

“Yes,” he nodded, his eyes intent on the road.

“Do you like thinking about my...”

I didn’t want to say it – it was too much –

You’re a bad girl now, or don’t you remember that? a little voice said gleefully in my head.

I guess I better talk like one, then, I answered back.

“...my little wet pussy?” I whispered in his ear.

He groaned.

My fingers were wet with him now, and I let them glide over the underside of his shaft. The sensation of my skin slick and slippery over his was *amazing*.

“Do you like thinking about putting that big... thick... amazing cock... inside me?” I purred as I slowly stroked him up and down.

His arms were trembling as he gripped the wheel of the car.

“Yes,” he said savagely.

I let my fingers glide back up to the top of his shaft and rubbed my thumb over the head, slicking the swollen skin with his own pre-cum, massaging him, enveloping him, teasing him, pleasing him... all incredibly slowly.

I could feel his manhood straining, harder than I’d ever felt it before.

“Do you like thinking about making me come with that loooong... thick cock of yours?” I whispered.

His eyes rolled briefly back in his head, and he forced himself to focus again on the road.

“Yes,” he gasped.

I leaned way over and used my other hand to rearrange his boxers so that his shaft was finally freed through the flap in the front.

God, it was gorgeous.

Held in place by the cloth, it was standing straight up, a beautiful, sculpted piece of art – perfectly pink, very long, mouthwateringly thick. His balls were still in his boxers, so there was nothing but a long, uninterrupted, silky smooth column of pure sex.

I caressed him again, slowly up and down. His shaft contracted violently, just once, a single tremor, and a tiny bead of clear dew eased up from the tip of his swollen head.

I thought about using it to continue slicking him down with my hand – and then decided, no, I wanted to taste him instead.

I bent over the middle console, which was incredibly uncomfortable.

But the rewards were worth it.

After a bit of negotiating, I got my mouth right above his swollen head.

I used my tongue to swirl around the soft, hot skin... and then slowly took his head in my mouth, salty and wet and slippery against my tongue.

God I loved feeling him in my mouth. Just the softness of his skin... the heat of his skin on mine... the wet, sensual feel of my lips surrounding him...

And I *loved* hearing him. He was groaning now, moaning, a desperate man caught between pleasure and a burning need for more.

I was starting to *really* get turned on again.

I slowly moved down on him, letting my lips slide over his wet skin, taking him as far in my mouth as I dared. I was at an odd angle, it was uncomfortable, and he *was* incredibly large... I could only do so much.

That, apparently, was enough.

He grunted as I moved up and down, slowly, teasing him with my tongue. I took him out of my mouth, then brushed my wet lips down the underside of his shaft, taking extra care on the ridge of skin just beneath the head.

“Jesus,” he groaned.

I settled the side of my head into his lap, my right ear between his legs, and worked my tongue down around the base of his cock, probing into the folds of cloth, seeing how deeply down there I could lick –

And then I felt the car change course.

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He turned the steering wheel and accelerated a little too quickly.

I looked up at him, which was a bit comical considering where my head was, and what was just a few millimeters away from it.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I have to have you. NOW,” he said, his face wild and furious, his eyes intent on the road.

“Are we at the hotel?!” I asked, fear freezing my stomach.

“No,” he said, his voice husky and low.

“Ummm...”

This was a little alarming.

I pushed up on my arms and raised myself from his lap, then looked out the window, hoping to God nobody would see the worst cliché in the world: gorgeous guy in Lamborghini, disheveled chick rising up from his lap.

We were away from the Strip and the crowds. I wouldn't call where we were 'seedy,' but it wasn't nearly as glitzy as the main drag. Not nearly as tacky, either. Vegas by night is a wonderland of lights; Vegas by day is a monument to excess and the question 'Did they really think that would look *good*?'

We were outside something that looked like a condo or a timeshare – a bunch of tan, nondescript buildings. More subdued, not as tacky, pretty boring.

Not many cars were in the parking lot. Nobody was walking around outside, either. I guess they were all down at the main drag, and this was where they came to sleep.

“What are we doing here?”

Connor parked the Lamborghini, then hastily stuffed his erection back into his pants. It was kind of a process,

considering how much there was to work with.

“I told you – I need you. NOW.”

There was something animalistic in his voice, a tone that was absolutely *not* going to be denied.

It was a little scary.

And very, very hot.

“What – here in the car?” I asked, freaking out – and puzzled, too. *Why’s he zipping up if he wants to do it in here?*

“No,” he said simply as he buttoned and zipped up. The head of his shaft protruded beyond the beltline of his pants, but it was hidden by his tucked-in shirt. I only know because I had watched him rearrange himself.

I *so* wanted to reach out and touch him again, but he was already out the door, slamming it, and then walking around to my side.

He yanked the passenger door open, reached down, and took my hand. He didn’t hurt me, but he was *very* firm about it as he dragged me out.

The heat slammed into me like he’d just opened an oven.

I staggered onto my feet as he shut the door and locked it with his keychain remote. Then he started pulling me towards the building.

“Wait – what are we doing?”

“I told you – I need to fuck you *now*.”

My breath caught in my throat, and my already drenched panties got a little wetter.

“Do you have a place here?” I asked. The idea seemed a little ludicrous – Connor was strictly a *Nothing but the best will do* kind of guy, and this place seemed more suited to my budget back when I was still a struggling secretary.

Like, yesterday morning.

“No,” he said as he dragged me up the sidewalk.

“Well then where are we going?” I asked, my panic slowly beginning to rise as I figured out what he had in mind.

On the backside of the building, all the ground-floor units had a series of patios that opened out onto a sidewalk and a grassy area.

I was guessing the sidewalk led to a pool – which meant a moderately high-traffic area.

Even though the place was deserted.

The patios were like little enclosed courtyards, maybe fifteen feet on each side, surrounded by six-foot high stucco walls, with sliding glass doors that led into the apartment. There was a tiny gap in the wall so you could go in and out of the patio, but there weren't any doors or gates. Anybody could walk into one from the outside.

They were somewhat secluded, in theory – I mean, you could lounge out in your bathing suit, if you wanted, or chat with friends around the glass table with its giant umbrella in the center. But anybody walking by could see what was going on inside the patio. Maybe not back in some of the corners... but you would still get a fleeting glimpse.

Connor was walking past the open doorways and glancing inside.

No one was in any of them. All away at the pool or the casinos, I guessed. But there were signs of life: beach towels drying in the sun, empty beer bottles, long-dead cigarette butts in ashtrays.

At the fifth patio, there was nothing inside – no towels, no bottles, no ashtrays. The blinds were open on the sliding glass doors, and we could see the room was dark, the bed was made up, and there were no suitcases or anything else that might suggest an occupant.

Connor pulled me inside the patio.

“OH NO,” I said, shaking my head.

In answer, he pulled me into the corner, out of sight of anyone casually strolling by, and kissed me.

Hot.

Feverishly.

Lustfully.

It took my breath away.

I couldn't help myself. I opened my mouth to him, letting him inside me.

He grabbed my waist and pulled me against his body. I could feel the rock-hard pressure of his manhood against my belly. His large, powerful hands grabbed my ass and squeezed tight.

I broke off the kiss. "Connor, no."

One of his hands ran through my hair, grabbed me at the nape of the neck and pulled down so that my neck was exposed.

The feeling of submission and complete vulnerability was overpowering...

...and an incredible turn-on.

"Please," he whispered in my ear before he lowered his head and began kissing me frantically on my neck, running his lips along my skin.

My eyes closed and I gasped. He was everywhere, firing my desire with his increasing urgency: his lips on my neck, then his tongue caressing my earlobe, as one hand cupped my ass and the other found its way to my breast.

"Connor," I whispered. I was trying to protest, but the desire building up in me was overwhelming my ability to speak.

His fingers pulled roughly at my dress and bra straps and tugged down until my left breast was exposed.

That broke the spell.

Barely.

"Connor, no!" I gasped, craning my head around him to look out the patio door.

Nobody was out there.

“Please, Lily, *please*,” he whispered in my ear. “I know this isn’t last night, and I won’t do anything you don’t want me to – but *please*.”

When I didn’t say anything in response, he lowered his lips to my breast and began to greedily suck.

“Oh God oh God,” I moaned as his tongue swirled around my nipple and both hands clutched feverishly at my ass.

The spell was back on...

...mostly.

My eyes would close in ecstasy, then flutter open in panic, looking for someone to pop their head in through the patio doorway.

No one did.

His hands roamed under the hem of my dress and slid up my thighs, pushing the dress up to my hips.

“No!” I whispered, batting his hands away.

He raised his head and looked straight in my eyes. They were almost demented in their need – and as I stared into their sapphire depths, I felt my resolve slowly slipping away.

“Please, Lily,” he said, his voice thick with desire. “Please, I’m *begging* you. *Please* let me fuck you.”

Ohhhhhhhh my God.

Please let me fuck you.

My knees trembled when he said that.

“But... someone might see...” I whispered, fearful. “We might get caught.”

The wild, animal expression of lust suddenly broke into the roguish grin I knew so well.

“That’s half the fun,” he said, and lowered his tongue again to my breast.

I moaned, then tried to form a coherent sentence. "... getting caught is fun...?"

He lifted his lips back up to my neck, caressed my ear with his lips, and whispered, "No... the *danger* of getting caught."

After that, there was no way possible I could have said no.

The idea of it – of someone seeing us – was like gasoline on the fire raging inside me.

I was scared to death of it –

And yet, a deep, primal part of me *wanted* it.

Wanted someone to catch us.

Wanted someone to see this gorgeous, incredible, powerful man *fucking* me.

"Will you let me?" he growled into my ear, soft and dangerous and insanely hot. "Please. Please, Lily – *please* let me fuck you."

I closed my eyes and dug my fingernails into his shoulders.

"...yes," I whispered.

His mouth met mine, and he kissed me again, his tongue meeting mine, his lips possessing mine.

Then he tugged down on the right side of my dress and completely exposed both my breasts.

As he bent and sucked greedily again, switching blissfully from one nipple to the other, I felt his fingers hook through my panties and pull them down around my thighs.

I opened my eyes again and looked, terrified, to see if someone was outside the patio.

We were still alone.

I pressed my legs close together so he could tug my panties away more easily, and felt the damp cloth slide against my skin.

He bunched the black lace in his hand and shoved it in his pocket. Then he unzipped his pants, hitched backwards a little to give himself more room, and pulled out his cock.

I watched, fascinated, as his fingers grasped the thick base – and then I moaned as he pressed the tip against me.

The swollen head, still wet from his pre-cum, glided across my drenched lips. Then he moved the crown upwards, pressing against my clit, sliding up and down. No matter how rock-hard it looked, the tip was soft – firm, but soft – and the pressure sent a surge of pleasure through my whole body.

Then he let go of his shaft, put a hand under each of my cheeks, and lifted me effortlessly into the air.

I circled my arms around his neck and bit my lip as I stared into his eyes.

I felt something firm and wet hit the inside of my thigh – then slide across my skin – and then, finally, part my lips.

OH GOD.

Then he slowly lowered me down on him, his full length reaching deep inside me, his thickness totally filling me up.

I cried out loud with joy and raked my fingers down the back of his sports jacket.

The blissful fullness... that sweet pressure of being completely filled up... every inch of him pressing against me, inside me, with me – like liquid honey and sugar and chocolate and every sweet-tasting thing transformed into sensation, into sweet, sweet touch –

And then he began to fuck me.

Unnnnnnnnhhhhhh...

This wasn't the gentle, sweet Connor, taking his time.

This was a beast unleashed.

And oh my GOD if I didn't love it.

Just feeling his frenzy, hearing his guttural noises as he thrust deep within me – knowing the animal passion I was inspiring in him –

It brought out the animal in me.

And I started fucking him back.

I mean, he was in total control; he held my body effortlessly as he filled me over and over again.

But I raked my nails across his back, through his hair, bit his neck, could barely contain myself. I felt like something had been unleashed in me, and I couldn't get enough of him, of his touch, of his smell, of his taste, of his skin, of his cock.

I cried out with every jolt of his body slapping my ass – not ladylike, sensual moans, but animal noises, high-pitched cries and groans and grunts, as I felt my pleasure spiraling higher and higher –

And then I came, gloriously, overpoweringly, a massive roll of thunder that shook me to my core, not stopping, kept coming with every glorious stroke and thrust of Connor inside me, lifting me higher and higher into bliss –

And then my orgasm began to subside, with longer spaces between the contractions, but Connor wasn't letting up. I felt like I might come again – I felt myself start to lift again, felt the pleasure building, amazed that this could be happening –

And then I opened my eyes.

There was someone out on the path staring in.

It wasn't like they had poked their head in; it's just that the angle where they were standing allowed them to glance in and get a peek. Not much, but enough to see what was going on.

There were two people, actually, but I only saw the woman first.

She was probably about my age, and she was beautiful. She had black hair, with pretty features and big green eyes and tan skin. She was wearing a bikini top that barely covered her. She had a slim, Pilates-sculpted stomach, with a kind of sarong wrapped around her hips and a tiny diamond bellybutton piercing.

She looked like she'd been a popular girl in school – one of the beautiful people.

And she was staring at me, watching me in the throes of passion.

And I could see, despite the shocked expression and her mouth being slightly open –

That she wanted to *be* me.

She was looking at me with wonder, and jealousy, and longing.

Maybe it was the back of Connor's head, or the broad, powerful shoulders, or his perfect ass in his \$5000 suit... but I could see her look him over, and then at me, and I could see that she wanted to be exactly where I was.

There was a guy with her, too – a good-looking guy, kind of a rock-n-roll dude, with tats on his muscular arms and an Adam Levine haircut. Before I'd met Connor, I would have said he was insanely hot. Now he was just pretty good-looking by comparison.

He was grinning ear to ear as he stood holding his girlfriend's hand.

But I didn't look at him long.

I returned to her eyes, watching me, wanting what I had.

If you had asked me before, I'd have said I would freak out if someone caught us.

Instead, it was like I stepped outside of my body and saw me the way *she* saw me:

As the luckiest woman in the world.

And I figured something else out:

...I kind of like being watched.

A little.

Thank God it was a woman my age.

But instead of it throwing a wet blanket over me – instead of my pushing Connor away frantically – I just stared into her eyes, and I felt the ecstasy building in me again as I felt him thrusting deep and thick and powerful inside me.

My eyes fluttered closed, then I opened them as I moaned – and I saw rock-n-roll dude pull her away, obviously inspired

to go start a little mischief of their own.

She stayed as long as possible, though, her eyes locked on mine, occasionally flitting away to Connor, to his body, then back up to me – and then her boyfriend pulled her out of view.

The last thing I saw was her eyes looking into mine, and the jealousy and desire and longing behind them.

Then they were gone.

I clutched Connor as hard as I could again and wrapped my arms around his neck.

I heard him groaning as he approached his climax, and I felt my own build up again to a fever pitch.

Then he cried out in my ear.

Hot wetness burst inside me, and as he continued to groan with pleasure, I came again, too – hard, fast, hot, wet, full of light and bliss and sweet, overwhelming contractions that left me trembling and weak in his arms.

I clutched his head and ran my fingers through his hair. I leaned against his neck, and I could smell the warm musk of his cologne, taste the salt of his sweat.

“Thank you,” he whispered in my ear, grateful and sated and sane once again.

I kissed his ear and licked him softly, then whispered back as cocky and devilish as he would have: “You’re welcome.”

He laughed, pulled his face back to look in my eyes, and then kissed me, softly and romantically.

We arranged ourselves as best we could – sweaty, messy, and disheveled – and then walked back to the car, hand in hand, occasionally sharing a brief, stolen kiss and a laugh or two.

I didn’t see the woman on the way back.

And I didn’t tell Connor about it.

I don’t know why, exactly... except that it was something I wanted to keep for myself.

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We got back to the hotel safe and sound, though I basically looked like a hot mess. Not even the Lamborghini's air conditioning could cure that. Bird-nest hair syndrome and streaks of sweat everywhere. Thank God my new dress was black, or there would have been some pretty unattractive stains showing.

Connor looked great. He wore the sweaty and disheveled look like a movie star in a big action thriller, where you know some makeup artist has touched up the beads of perspiration dewing his brow – because *nobody* looks that good after running five blocks through New Orleans in the summertime.

Except Connor did.

Okay, so we weren't in New Orleans. And we hadn't been *running*. But you get the picture.

He attacked again in the private elevator to the penthouse floor.

I let him kiss me – *let* isn't the right word, exactly; *blissfully gave in* is closer – but pushed him away when the elevator bell dinged.

“I feel disgusting,” I moaned. “I have to go take a shower. *Immediately.*”

“Soon as we walk through the door, we'll head on in,” he said as he took me by the hand and led me down the corridor.

“‘We’?” I asked, trying to be as coy as possible.

“You don't think I'm going to let you hog it all, do you?”

“Oh, is *that* all it's about.”

“Mmmm... that's part of it.” He stopped me halfway to the penthouse door and pushed my back up against the wall.

My heart quickened as he leaned over and paused seductively just a few inches from my lips.

“What else?” I murmured as I lifted my chin, getting closer to those amazing, oh-so-kissable lips.

“If I’m going to be starting a solar energy company that’ll revolutionize the world...”

He paused as he stared me in the eyes.

“...I should probably conserve water, too.”

“UH!” I yelled, and pushed him away as he laughed. “You want to save water, take a two-minute shower *alone!*”

He pinched my bottom and I yelped.

Memo to self: get underwear back. As far as I knew, it was still in his pants pocket.

Then I slapped his hand away.

“Ohhhh no, you ain’t gettin’ none o’ that!” I said in my best *oh no you di-int!* voice.

“I think I will,” he grinned as he followed me.

“Dream on, Mr. ‘Let’s Conserve Water.’”

He caught me again right in front of the door and spun me around. I fought him (not really), but his strong arms circled around my waist, pulled me against his body, and then he pressed his lips against mine.

I struggled for about two seconds – and then sank into the kiss.

I swear, it had to have been the pheromones. Sweaty or not, he smelled irresistible.

After about ten seconds, he broke it off and pulled out a keycard, then inserted it in the slot. “We’ll go in and take a shower... *together*... right after I finish getting reamed out by Johnny for ditching him again.”

Oh crap, that’s right.

In the crazy afternoon smorgasbord of sex – phone, car, and outdoors – I’d totally forgotten.

My stomach did a sick little flip-flop as I anticipated the angry reception waiting for us.

Connor swung open the door to the penthouse –
Speak of the devil.

Connor's bodyguard was standing right in front of us, staring us down, before we took a single step inside. He was dressed in his customary dark suit, but without his sunglasses, so we could get the full impact of his scowl.

"Although I didn't expect him to be waiting at the door for me," Connor said, as though to an invisible audience. Then he pointed at me. "It's all her fault."

"My fault!" I cried out, turning to him. "I didn't –"

"Connor," Johnny said in a strangled voice.

I turned back to Johnny and realized I'd misinterpreted his expression.

I'd thought he was angry – with us. With *me*.

Instead... he looked worried.

Really worried.

"What is it?" Connor asked, suddenly concerned.

"I'm sorry... I tried to get him out, but..."

Johnny trailed off without finishing the sentence.

I had a bad, bad flashback to *The Empire Strikes Back*, right before Lando Calrissian betrays Han and Leia to Darth Vader.

(Yes, I'm a nerd.)

Someone walked into view on the other side of the room. A man, very tall and very imposing, wearing a black business suit and a dark blue tie. He was older, probably in his late 50's or early 60's, but his broad shoulders and solid chest made him look powerful enough to take on someone half his age. Though his silver hair was receding up his forehead, he was still incredibly handsome, with a chiseled jaw, strong nose, and cruel lips.

In fact... he looked unsettlingly familiar.

"Hello, Connor," he said in a dark bass voice.

I looked up at Connor, who gave a little smartass smirk, like *Great. Just great.*

“Hello... *Dad.*”

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About 17 different things were going through my mind at this point.

First and foremost was one word:

Crap.

Crap, crap, crap, crap, Crap, CRAP, CRAP.

‘Meeting The Parents’ is stressful under the best of situations.

It’s even worse when you’re standing there sweaty and rumpled after just having had kinky sex with their son.

Oh, and you’re not wearing any panties, either.

Yeah. So. Not at my best at that particular moment.

Second thing:

This is Connor’s father?!

This is the guy who cheated a nine-year-old at Monopoly?!

I peered even more closely at him.

If you are a huge nerd like me – or even if you’re not – perhaps you’ve watched *Game Of Thrones*. If so, then you know who Tywin Lannister is. He’s the badass, grim, ‘totally lacking in empathy and the milk of human kindness’ patriarch of the Lannister clan. He is played by Charles Dance, who has a gravelly voice, dangerous eyes, stands about 6’ 3”, and is one of the sexiest men on the planet over age 60.

This guy looked a lot like Charles Dance. Sounded a bit like him, too, without the British accent.

I usually like guys my own age – well, give or take six years in Connor’s case – and am *not* attracted to older men. Except in a few, very specific cases.

Go to Youtube and search for ‘Charles Dance 50 Shades Of Grey.’ Go on. I’ll wait.

Still waiting.

Seen it? Yes, it's a hilarious clip, especially when he's doing Anastasia's voice. But when he does Christian's?

'Yeah... that's what I thought.'

Daaaaaaaamn.

And the fact that this was what Connor would most probably look like in 30 years?

Not bad. Not bad at *all*.

But there was a problem.

Like Tywin Lannister and the other villains Dance has played, this guy embodied the worst possible qualities:

The arrogance.

The coldness.

The total lack of empathy and kindness.

He looked exactly like someone who would crush his kid's dreams to teach him some sort of effed up lesson about 'the real world.'

And then would go to work and destroy real people and real lives to add another \$100 million to his bank account.

He dressed just as expensively as Connor did, if a bit more conservatively. And he exuded wealth, privilege, and power.

It was like a king or an old-time lord had walked into the room... and not a particularly nice one.

Just like *Game Of Thrones*.

He was tall as Connor – maybe even a hair taller. His eyes were the same piercing blue. And he had the same powerful build.

But he had none of Connor's warmth. None of the mischievous charm.

Just cold, grim power.

Third thing:

Connor had greeted him like somebody seeing their deadbeat dad for the first time in months... but who had been expecting him to show up. No real surprise in his voice. Just irritation and a bit of fatalism, wrapped up in Connor's smartass humor.

Fourth thing:

I noticed for the first time that there were other people in the room. Like, a *lot* of them.

Well... compared to normal.

Four tall, powerfully-built men in suits and sunglasses stood guard over the four corners of the room. They were silent and stone-faced, their hands folded behind them. They looked for all the world like Secret Service agents standing at attention.

Connor's dad had apparently decided to err on the side of caution after Mexico.

I could see why Johnny hadn't been able to clear the room before we arrived – though I couldn't for the life of me figure out why he'd let them *in* in the first place.

But that question, along with a bunch of others, got answered in short order.

32

Connor strolled past me, completely at ease, as though finding his father and a bunch of hired goons occupying his hotel room was just another day at the office.

I snuck in behind him, trying to stay as inconspicuous as possible as I smoothed down my dress. Johnny closed the door behind me.

Connor stopped about ten feet away from his father. The lack of a handshake or a hug was glaringly obvious – at least to me.

“I’d ask what you’re doing here, but I’m pretty sure I know the answer.”

“I would wager you do,” the older man said.

“So I’ll just ask the obvious question: what are you doing *here*?” Connor asked as he pointed at the floor. Then he looked back at Johnny. “I thought I paid you to keep out the riffraff.”

“Don’t be too hard on Mr. Inaba,” Connor’s father said drily. “The management was kind enough to let me in before he arrived.”

I looked around at Johnny.

He grimaced in pain, as though his professional pride had been bruised.

“I’ll have to speak to them about that,” Connor said.

“Don’t bother. I’m better friends with the owner than you are. I was expecting you back about an hour ago, but...”

Here Mr. Templeton tilted his head slightly to look around Connor – at *me*.

The disdain on his features was subtle, but brutal nonetheless.

“...apparently you got *delayed*.”

I could've sworn he put an extra emphasis on the last syllable... like *de-laid*.

My face flushed scarlet.

It didn't faze Connor in the slightest, though.

"Oh – I'm being rude. Lily, this is my father, Augustus Templeton."

Augustus. Just like Caesar.

Fits him.

Connor turned back and looked at me. His expression was slightly bemused. "Dad... Lily Ross."

Mr. Templeton's disdain suddenly became a lot less subtle. "Scraping the bottom of the barrel, are we?"

I was so shocked I couldn't speak for a second.

Nobody had been that rude to me since –

Well, since Herr Klaus.

Maybe my last encounter with him had made me a bit more resilient, because when I spoke, I sounded *furious*. "Excuse me?"

But Connor had my back.

"Keep a civil fucking tongue in your head, *Dad*, or I'll have you removed, friends of the owner or no."

The old man smirked – a colder, meaner version of the expression I was so used to seeing on Connor's face. He looked only at Connor, and not at me, as he spoke.

"Forgive me, young... *lady*..."

The knife-twisting pause he inserted before 'lady' let me know he didn't consider me anything of the sort.

"...I have an unfortunate knack for speaking my mind."

Connor gave a brief, unamused grunt. "Don't worry, Lily – he's an asshole to everybody."

"Just not as crude as my son. Or as stupid."

“So – what are you here for, besides trading insults?”

“To try to dissuade you from the utter idiocy of your current course of action.”

“What, you mean me continuing to listen to you?”

Mr. Templeton glanced at me before speaking. “I would prefer to continue this conversation in private.”

“No need,” Connor said, and I could hear the smile in his voice, even though I could only see his back. “Lily knows all about the desert. And my meetings with the governor and the congressmen.”

For the first time, Connor’s father looked surprised. Shocked, even – which is what I guess Connor was aiming for.

Mr. Templeton looked at me again, as though reassessing who I was.

As the lady on the GPS says, ‘*Recalculating...*’

Then he seemed to reach the same conclusion he’d had when I walked through the door.

“You really shouldn’t expose *all* of yourself to the... hired help,” he sneered.

At that, Connor lost it.

“That’s it. Get the fuck out, now.”

“Calm down. I was merely suggesting that she’s your... employee.”

By the tone of his voice, he most certainly meant *hourly* employee.

And one hired down on the street for something not legal, even in Las Vegas.

“I know what you’re suggesting,” Connor fumed. “Fuck you. Get out.”

“So she’s not your secretary? Or your personal... assistant?” Templeton asked, putting his own snide spin on the last word.

“Lily and I are dating.”

My eyes bugged out and my heart did a triple-flip.

I knew we were... well... I knew *something* was going on... but to hear him say we were ‘dating’...

It almost made it worthwhile to put up with his king jerk of a father.

The old man scoffed. “You’ve come down a ways since Miranda.”

Miranda?

I didn’t even care about the diss.

Who’s he talking about?

Connor shook his head angrily. “You know what? You can insult me – fine. You insult her? *Fuck you* and get out.”

At that, Connor strode towards his father.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw all four Secret Service agents move forward.

Johnny was even faster; he dashed past me in a blur.

“STOP IT!” I cried out, terrified for Connor and Johnny.

This was going to be *horrible*.

33

But then Mr. Templeton spoke.

“Wait.”

It was a commanding tone of voice. The voice of an emperor or king. The voice of someone who was *never* disobeyed, on pain of death.

I'd heard Connor use a similar tone of voice... but even he wasn't *this* intimidating.

Everyone in the room froze – even Connor. But he was right up in his father's face, less than a foot away from him now.

Johnny stopped, too, but he was right by Connor's side, body tensed like a steel spring, eyes focused on the left two Secret Service guys.

Connor and his father stared each other down. It seemed to drag on forever, although it was probably no more than three seconds.

Then Mr. Templeton glanced over at one of the Secret Service guys, tilted his head, and half-closed his eyes.

Stand down.

All four bodyguards slowly retreated back to the walls.

Johnny stayed where he was, though he relaxed noticeably.

Mr. Templeton looked back at his son with a scowl... and then relented.

However, he never looked at me the entire time he spoke – only at Connor.

“Ms.... Ross, is it? As my son can tell you, I'm not the most pleasant of men at times. Especially when he's deliberately flouting me. My apologies.”

Though his lack of eye contact was dehumanizing, and there was no warmth in his voice, there was no sarcasm, either. I figured this was about as straight-up an apology as he'd ever given in his life.

The guy was a raging jerk, there was no doubt about that. But, when a multi-billionaire apologizes to you – no matter how insincerely – it's not something you brush off lightly.

Though I considered my options for a brief second.

Be a bitch back at him, or take the high road?

No matter how much I disliked him, though, he was still Connor's father.

And I was uncomfortably aware how... um... *bedraggled* I looked at the moment. I didn't want to come off as having a ghetto personality, too.

More than anything, though, I just wanted to decrease the tension level in the room. For Connor and Johnny's sake.

"Apology accepted," I said in as dignified a tone as I could muster at the moment, looking the way I did. And lacking panties.

He still never looked at me as he continued to speak to Connor. "So, can we continue this conversation in private?"

"No. You can state your business, or you can leave."

"Alright." Mr. Templeton raised his head slightly and looked down his nose, like he was a king giving out a death sentence. "You *really* thought you could get away with it?"

"Away with it"? You make starting a new company sound like a crime."

"In this case, it is."

"Actually, no, I'm not following your normal business plan."

"You'll never succeed. We have the politicians in our pocket."

“Turns out, they tend to jump out of one pocket and into whoever’s are deeper.”

“They’ll see reason.”

“They already have. I have several of them – the most important ones, anyway – locked down tight.”

Mr. Templeton’s right eyebrow arched up. “Blackmail?”

Connor didn’t say anything. He just stood there.

I didn’t like the idea that Connor would resort to blackmail to get his way. And I especially didn’t like his silence when confronted. But it was the first thing that had impressed Augustus Templeton so far. “And here I thought you said you weren’t playing by my rulebook.”

“When I know my opponent’s dirty, occasionally I play dirtier.”

“We’ll support the opposing candidate. First in the primary, and if they make it out of that, then the general election.”

Connor sounded positively gleeful. “Then it’s going to be a very expensive election season in Nevada next year.”

Mr. Templeton’s blue eyes flashed with cold fire. “You’re doing this deliberately to spite me.”

“No. As I explained to Lily, that’s just one of the many, many side benefits.”

“What, destroying our family?”

“‘Destroying our family’? That’s a bit grandiose, don’t you think?”

“You’d cost us billions of dollars.”

“And save hundreds of billions of dollars for everyone else on earth.”

Mr. Templeton sneered. “Now who’s being grandiose?”

“At least I’m thinking about somebody other than myself.”

“Just not the people you *should* be thinking of.”

“Oh, come off it, Dad. Just cancel the order on the 500-foot yacht, and don’t get any more Van Goghs for your private collection. And tell Mother she can only buy *two* Tuscan villas this year.”

“You can tell her yourself.”

And then, from the dining room area of the penthouse, came a woman’s regal voice:

“Hello, darling.”

34

Mrs. Templeton entered the room like she was walking onstage in a Broadway drama.

She was thin and tall – taller than me, anyway, though that’s not saying much. She was a ‘woman of a certain age,’ and fighting it mightily. Her face had the slightly too-tight look of someone with plastic surgery, though it was top-notch, I have to say that for her. Her neck was smooth with very few wrinkles, and her forehead was flawless. Either she’d had Connor when she was sixteen (I’m going to say ‘no’), or her surgeon had worked wonders on her. So had her stylist: not a gray strand in sight, just frosted blonde hair cut in a long-ish bob, Anna Wintour-style.

Like her husband, she reeked of money and prestige. Her aristocratic tone was forged, no doubt, by the best prep schools and colleges that Old Money can buy. She wore a grey, business-like dress with a slim-cut matching jacket. Conservative enough to match her station in life, but obviously a designer label to show off her money. She wore a beautiful double strand of pearls around her neck, ostentatious without being over-the-top. She wore only a couple of rings on her hands, but the diamond on her engagement ring rivaled an ice cube in size. (Okay, a *small* ice cube.)

Unlike her husband, she walked straight over to Connor and gave him a kiss.

Well, an *air* kiss, anyway, one on each side of the face, *mwah, mwah*.

“Good Lord, you’re a mess, Connor. What have you been doing, running a marathon? Don’t answer that, I don’t want to know.”

“You’ve been here the entire time?” Connor asked, seriously annoyed.

“I thought I’d let you and your father talk things over first. Although *that* didn’t solve anything, so now seemed as good a time as any to enter the fray.”

“Wonderful. All we need now is Vincent to complete the happy family reunion. Where *is* Vince?”

“He’s on his way,” Mr. Templeton said.

“Of *course* he is.”

“His jet landed just before you arrived.”

“Don’t you mean *your* jet?”

“What’s ours is his, and would be yours, too,” Mrs. Templeton snapped, “if you wouldn’t insist on betraying us. What’s this foolishness about you leasing 10,000 square miles of federal and state land?”

“If you know the square footage, you probably know the reason.”

“Honestly, Connor, why go you out of your way to antagonize us – ”

“Not kowtowing to your every wish *isn’t* going out of my way to antagonize you. *Or* betray you.”

“No, it’s just a ‘side benefit,’” she said acidly.

I could hear the impish delight in Connor’s voice. “One of the many.”

Mr. Templeton hurled himself once more into the breach. “I’m ordering you to stop this foolishness.”

“Oh – *well* – in THAT case...”

“As my son, you have a duty to – ”

“You’re trying to trade on the ‘filial devotion’ card? You ran out of those when I pulled your sorry ass out of Mexico.”

The old man’s jaw set.

But Mrs. Templeton went off on a drama queen rant, throwing her hands in the air and rolling her eyes.

“Oh, for God’s sake, do you have to keep bringing that up? You stab him in the back – ‘But I saved you in Mexico.’ You send our stock plummeting 20% – ‘But I saved you in Mexico.’ You plot to destroy us – ‘But I saved you in Mexico.’ You think your little Mexico spiel cuts any weight with me? ‘I gave birth to you’ is a bit more of an obligation than anything you have to offer.”

Connor’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “Thank you, mother, for giving birth to me. And then promptly foisting me off on an endless succession of nannies and boarding schools.”

“Perhaps I *should* have kept you by my side continually. Maybe then you wouldn’t have turned out to be such a sadistic, vengeful child.”

“Yes, you forgot the first rule of parenting: ‘keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.’”

“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth...” she muttered.

“Well, look on the bright side: you have at least *one* grateful son,” Connor sneered. “After all, he owes you two everything.”

“And you think you owe us *nothing*.”

“Ten million dollars, as I recall,” Mr. Templeton said.

“Oh, but didn’t you hear, Augustus?” Mrs. Templeton replied. “He saved you in Mexico.”

My eyes widened.

This was beginning to make *Mommie Dearest* look like *The Donna Reed* show.

Unfortunately, I think my little facial expression caught her attention.

She looked over at me and narrowed her lids the slightest amount.

I noticed that, like her husband, she disregarded Johnny completely. Just looked right through him. The only time Mr. Templeton had acknowledged his existence was when he referred to him in the third person as ‘Mr. Inaba.’

Maybe that explained why Johnny had been so surprised when I'd said goodbye to him Sunday evening, when Connor took me back to my place...

Connor saw that she was looking at me. "Lily, meet my mother, Lenora. Mother, Lily Ross."

"Mrs. Templeton' will do fine." She flashed a fake smile that died a quick death, then walked closer and looked me up and down.

She had high, arched eyebrows, frozen perpetually in an expression of haughty disapproval – which is all she was giving me at that second.

Well, *that* and overt hostility.

I felt like a baby seal being eyed by a great white shark.

Take the high road, Lily, I told myself.

I put out my hand. "It's very nice to meet – "

She interrupted me – though not to speak to *me*. Oh heavens, no.

"A darling little thing, Connor. Where did you pick her up?" she asked, her voice dripping with disdain. "A bar? A trailer park? The discount bin at Walmart?"

I saw Johnny's mouth drop open in shock.

Connor's face contorted in rage. "Mother – "

But this time, I beat him to the punch.

Still tried to take the high road, though.

"Where I come from, you're being very rude," I said quietly, staring her straight in the eyes.

"Oh, don't take offense, darling," she smiled. "Where I come from, that's how we treat people like *you*."

You know how, when someone insults you, you always think of the perfect comeback hours later?

I heard once that the French have a phrase for it. I can't remember the real translation, but it's something like 'the

stairway quip.’ Meaning that you don’t think of it until afterwards, when you’re walking down the stairs to leave.

I never think of the perfect retort. *Ever.*

Except for this one bright and shining moment.

I don’t know if I was channeling Sebastian or what, but as soon as she said, *‘Where I come from, that’s how we treat people like you,’* I just smiled demurely.

“And where is that, exactly? ‘Bitches ‘R Us’?”

Connor burst out into howls of laughter.

Johnny had to hide his smile behind his hand.

The four Secret Service agents clamped their jaws tight and looked down intently at the floor.

Even Augustus Templeton snorted.

His wife whipped around and gave him a dagger of a look.

He quickly turned his face away, as though something in the corner interested him greatly.

Then she turned back to me.

“Vulgar girl, vulgar tongue,” she hissed.

And for the second time, Sebastian came to my aid. At least in spirit.

“Mean old woman...”

I paused, then shrugged.

“...that’s all I got. Mean and old, no matter how much plastic surgery you’ve had.”

I think she almost had a coronary. A single vein started thumping in her temple as she stared me down, murder in her eyes.

“OHHH!” Connor guffawed.

Johnny’s eyebrows raised like he couldn’t believe I’d just said it.

Mrs. Templeton started trembling with fury. “You... little... *harlot*... how *dare* you – ”

“‘Harlot’? What is this, the 18th century?” I asked, with absolutely no follow-up intended – but saying it gave my brain just enough time to come up with a beautiful kicker. “Oh, wait – that’s when you were born, right?”

BOOM.

Three for three.

I’ll never have that good a performance again in my *life*.

I swear to God, I think she was about to slap me when Connor rushed up and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Remember, Mother,” Connor chided her, “when you play with fire, sometimes you get burned.”

“Just remember that when she gives you a venereal disease,” Mrs. Templeton spat.

I couldn’t think of anything witty for that one, but it didn’t matter – Connor had regained control of the situation.

“Lily’s wanted here, Mother. You’re not. Keep that in mind, or leave.”

She whirled around. “All I *want* is a private conversation – is that too much to ask?”

Connor looked over her shoulder at me.

I figured I’d taken the low road enough for the day. I half-closed my eyelids and gave a couple of tiny nods like, *It’s okay*.

The corner of his mouth quirked up, and his eyes gave me a warm, invisible hug.

Then he called out over his shoulder, “Johnny, could you take Lily into the kitchen for me?”

“Sure.”

I walked past Mrs. Templeton.

As I passed Connor, he reached out, lightly grasped my hand, and gave it a little squeeze.

I paused and looked up at him.

He winked, and I smiled.

Then Johnny hooked my arm and we walked away under the arctic stares of Mr. and Mrs. Templeton.

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When we were halfway down the hall to the kitchen, Johnny whispered in my ear, “That... was... AWESOME.”

I grinned. “Thanks.”

“I’ve *never* seen Mrs. Templeton get skewered like that before. Sebastian would have *killed* to be here.”

“He doesn’t like her?”

“He *loathes* her. And Mr. Templeton, too, but especially her. And yet, even *he’s* never had the balls to take her down like that. Not to her face. So thank you from both of us.”

I suppressed a giggle, then looked at him. “You’re not mad at us? For... you know... sneaking out?”

His face darkened. “Oh, I’m plenty mad at Connor... but I’ll have that talk with him later. He’ll probably throw it in my face that they were here when he got back.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“No, but once Connor gets an advantage in an argument, he always uses it, so that’ll be the main way he tries to shut me up.”

Once we were in the kitchen and dining area, Johnny pulled out his cell phone and hit a couple of buttons. Back in the main room, the discussion was still just as heated, even if it was taking place at a lower volume level.

“Who are you calling?” I asked.

With perfect timing, a *very* gay voice answered over the speakerphone. “*I am having Mai Tai’s by the most delightful swimming pool with the most handsome man in California, Johnny, so this had better be an emergency.*”

“Connor’s parents are here. Unannounced and uninvited.”

There was a pause.

“*Nooo,*” Sebastian said, not like he was replying in the negative, but like *I can NOT believe you just said that.*

“Yes.”

“*Both of them?!*”

“Yes.”

“*Why?!*”

“Apparently there’s some sort of business deal Connor’s in that’s going to cut into their bottom line. *Deep* into their bottom line, sounds like.”

“*Oh shit, watch your back, then. And especially Connor’s.*”

“I plan to.”

There was a pause. “*Which business deal, exactly?*”

“Something dealing with the governor and a bunch of land in Nevada.”

“*Um... why don’t I know anything about this?*”

My eyes widened.

Wow... Connor really DID trust me...

Johnny looked at me. “Lily knows more about it than I do.”

Sebastian’s tone of voice suddenly iced over. “*Oh, GOD, is she still there?*”

“So nice to talk to you, too, Sebastian,” I smirked.

“*It would be nicer if we weren’t talking at all.*”

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d been here five minutes ago,” Johnny informed him.

Curiosity piqued, Sebastian bit. “*Why? What happened?*”

“Lily took down Lenora.”

Sebastian sounded like the gayest five-year-old on Christmas morning *ever.* “*OH MY GOD, tell me EVERYTHING.*”

“What did she say?” Johnny asked me. “Something about if Connor picked you up in a trailer park?”

“That, and a discount bin at Walmart.”

“Oh, well... can't say I disagree with Lenora yet.”

“You're almost as big a bitch as she is, do you know that, Sebastian?” I asked.

“Honey, NOBODY'S as big a bitch as Lenora. She makes Madonna look like Mother Teresa.”

“Just be quiet for a second, Sebastian,” Johnny scolded. “So Lily said, ‘You're being very rude,’ and Lenora said something like, ‘That's how we talk to people like you where I come from,’ and Lily shot back, ‘Where's that? Bitches ‘R Us?’”

There was a pause. Then –

“No you didn't.”

“Yes she did,” Johnny grinned.

Another pause. Then, even more dramatically –

“No you DIDN'T.”

“Oh, just wait – it got better.”

Johnny went on to recount the ‘mean old lady plastic surgery’ and the ‘born in the 18th century’ quips.

Every time he delivered another punch line, Sebastian threw in an even louder, more gleeful *“NO YOU DIDN'T.”*

After Johnny finished, there was a long pause on the other end of the line.

Then, finally, Sebastian spoke.

“I say this only because Javier just left to freshen up my drink, and also because I'm about three Mai Tai's to the wind. Lily, if I weren't gay, I would ask you to marry me right now.”

I burst out laughing.

Considering who was saying it, it was probably the best compliment I'd ever had in my life.

“Thank you, Sebastian. I’d have to turn you down, but I appreciate it.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t actually go through with it. After all, I don’t like you very much. But right now, I LOVE YOU. I’m going to name my first adopted child ‘Lily’ just to commemorate my love for you right now. Boy or girl, doesn’t matter.”

I laughed again. “Thank you Sebastian, but please don’t saddle a boy with my name.”

“It’s alright, he’ll be gay, too, it’ll be fabulous.”

“I think this is the Mai Tai’s talking.”

“Undoubtedly. Another reason we’re having this conversation is because I’m probably not going to remember it tomorrow.”

“That’s probably for the best. Especially for your future adopted son.”

“Uh, Sebastian, I hate to ask you this – ” Johnny said.

“Already on the next flight. I’m booking it on my iPad as we speak, and I’ll get a car service to the airport. I’ll be in Vegas in... two and a half hours. Can you pick me up, or do I need to get a cab?”

“Get a cab, I want to stick close to Connor. Sorry to wreck your vacation.”

“Darling, you didn’t wreck it, Lenora and Augustus did. Besides, I’m bringing Javier with me. It’ll be a working vacation.”

“Thanks, Sebastian.”

“Toodles. And Lily?”

“Yes?”

“Yours and mine is a love that dare not speak its name. Understand?”

“Completely. See you soon.”

“Ta ta.”

And the phone hung up.

Johnny grinned at me. “You’re in the club.”

“What club?”

“The club of people Sebastian actually likes. It’s a very exclusive group.”

I laughed. “I don’t know that he actually likes me... seeing as he said, ‘I don’t actually *like* you.’”

“‘Very much’ – he said he doesn’t ‘like you very *much*.’”

“Oh, now you’ve convinced me.”

“Let’s put it this way: he’s never said he’d ask to marry me, and I’m a dude.”

I grinned. “Okay, point taken. What do we do now?”

“We wait.”

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During the lull in Johnny's and my conversation, we could hear shouting from the other room.

And then there was suddenly a loud knock.

Johnny looked over, concern on his face. "Connor?!"

"It's alright, Johnny, my dad's guys are getting it," Connor called back.

Even so, Johnny started down the connecting hallway towards the main room. I followed close behind him.

I could hear the sound of everything that happened next, even though I couldn't see all the participants. The edge of the hallway blocked my view of most of the main room. I could only see Connor, who stood in front of the enormous windows looking out over the Strip. Everyone else was at least a few feet out of sight.

There was the sound of a door opening.

Then a man's voice, similar to Connor's, but a little higher. "Connor."

"Vincent," Connor replied coldly, his face twisted in displeasure. "I'd say it's nice to see you, but I don't like lying to your face."

"No, just stabbing us in the back," Mrs. Templeton sneered.

"I brought someone with me," Vincent's voice said. "I hope you don't mind."

Then there was the sharp *click click click* of stiletto heels on the floor.

And Connor's face immediately went grey.

I had never seen him look like that, ever. He looked like someone had sucker-punched him in the solar plexus, and he was about to throw up.

Either that, or he had seen a ghost.

Or something worse.

“Hello, Connor,” a woman’s voice said.

A voice I had heard earlier that day.

Low and throaty.

A young Lauren Bacall.

My stomach nearly fell out of my body as I reached the corner of the hallway, a step behind Johnny.

There she stood, Grace Kelly with the golden blonde hair, still dressed in her silk blouse and pencil skirt.

She walked up and stood beside the other new arrival, a man who looked like a slightly shorter, slightly less handsome version of Connor, with sandy hair instead of black.

“Shit,” Johnny whispered.

Connor just stood there, stock still, staring at her.

I tapped Johnny on the shoulder and gave him a questioning look, though deep down, I already knew the answer.

I didn’t want to hear it aloud... but I had to.

I had to know for sure.

Johnny glanced back at me, a sick look on his face.

“Miranda Lockwood,” he whispered.

I shook my head, as though that meant nothing to me.

Yet it did. Mr. Templeton had said her first name earlier.

You’ve come down a ways since Miranda.

Johnny’s voice was sympathetic and grave, as though he were breaking the news of a loved one’s death.

“Connor’s ex-fiancée.”

The woman who had broken his heart.

I looked back at the woman again – and saw her slip her hand into Vincent's.

My eyes widened, and I glanced over at Connor.

She might as well have shot him.

I saw the agony in his face... how hurt he was...

How much of an effect she had on him, even eight months later.

And my whole world came tumbling down.

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