

BREWTIEFUL'S

A Culinary Creatures Novella

L Eveland



BREWTIFUL'S

A Culinary Creatures Novella

L Eveland



Copyright © 2023 by L Eveland

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permission requests, contact leveland@grimcatpress.com.

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

NO GENERATIVE AI TRAINING USE. This author expressly prohibits using Brewtiful's in any manner for purposes of training artificial intelligence technologies to generate text, including without limitation, technologies that are capable of generating works in the same style or genre as Brewtiful's. L Eveland reserves all rights to license all uses of Brewtiful's for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

Author note: No AI was used in the production of Brimstone or its cover. This author supports living human artists.

Book Cover by Delaney Rain

1st edition 2023

Please report typos directly to leveland@grimcatpress.com or fill out this form.

If you're reading this, I believe in you! Follow your dreams!

Contents

Special Thanks

Content & Trigger Warnings

Dear Monsterfuckers

1. One

2. Two

3. Three

4. Four

5. Five

6. Six

7. Seven

8. Eight

9. Nine

10. Ten

11. Eleven

12. Twelve

13. Thirteen
14. Fourteen
15. Fifteen
16. Sixteen
17. Seventeen
18. Epilogue
19. Recipe: Lightwing Latte
20. From the Author

Also By L Eveland

Special *Thanks to my* Patrons

A HUGE SHOUT OUT to the superfans who support me on Patreon and help make projects like this one a reality: Heather Rhiannon, Chrissy Lead, Kristela, Natalie Graiff, Devon Beach, Alexa Norn, Nery Poff, Jocelyn Adams, Jolie, Catherine Hale, Kim Franke, Charee Beatty, Taylor Kennedy, Sarah Rukhsana, D.R. Perry, S. Leigh Sparks, Lacey Sutton, and Kyleen Valleaux.

If you'd like to get early access to all my work, you can join the fun and get exclusive extra goodies on my Patreon

Content *Warnings*

ALL EFFORTS HAVE BEEN made to list content and trigger warnings below, as well as the kinks mentioned and displayed in the book. If you feel I missed something, please do not hesitate to reach out to me by email:

Leveland@grimcatpress.com

Content, Tropes, and Kinks in This Book:

MM romance

Explicit sex

Dual point of view

Bi awakening

Accidental marriage

Traumatic brain injury (past)

Memory loss

Hangovers

Size difference

Muscle worship

Fun with adult toys

Belly bulging

Sexy food fight

Dear *Monsterfuckers*

DEAR READERS,

The Culinary Creatures series takes place in an alternate earth universe in which monsters evolved alongside humans. Humans make up only a small subset of Earth's population and have since the beginning of time.

Other than small differences, such as the founding fathers being mostly minotaurs, werewolves, and tentacle monsters, and a brief disaster involving that time NASA experimented with sending werewolves to the moon, their world history is relatively similar to our own, albeit slightly more idealized.

This is an MM romance between a mothman and a himbo human with memory issues. Nicola makes a brief appearance in the previous book, *Bluz*, which you can read [here](#).

Chapter One

Tripp

I WOKE UP AND winced at the light. My head hurt almost as bad as that time I got hit in the head with a flying puck.

Ugh, what liquor store did I drink last night? I lifted a hand, intending to wipe the drool off my chin, but paused when I felt something unexpectedly heavy pinning me down. Cracking open my eyes, I turned my head, despite the creaking complaints in my neck. *What the fuck?*

The girl laying next to me had dark fur on her shoulders and running up over her head. Adorable, feathery black antennae twitched on the top of her head. The weight I'd felt before belonged to a huge black wing with grey leopard spots.

Even hung over as fuck, the way those wings sparkled in the sunlight coming through the window was mesmerizing. I reached out and traced my fingers down the rigid edge, smirking when the wing quivered under my touch. Whoever she was, that was hot. It was too bad I didn't remember shit from the night before.

Well, I remembered ditching my appointment with Cage to go dancing and drinking at The Millenium. Good thing I had, too, because I'd run into none other than Chef Adam Northstar, who'd promised to introduce me to his friend...

The winged monster next to me suddenly yawned, stretching one furry arm over his head. The blanket slipped down enough to reveal a muscled torso covered in fine black fur and the top of a perfectly tapered hip.

A male hip.

Oh my god. I was in bed with a *dude*.

To my horror, my cock gave an eager twitch. I might not have remembered what we did the night before, but my nether regions sure stirred to life like they did.

I'd messed around with a few guys when I was younger, back in high school, but nothing came of it. Besides, I liked tits. I dated *girls*. Lots of girls. I wasn't into guys. Was I?

He turned over with a contented sigh and froze. I went rigid as I found myself staring into a pair of huge red eyes. And I mean red, as in there were no pupils or anything. All. Red.

We stared at each other in awkward silence for a minute, my heart pounding in my chest like I'd just done a dozen burpees. Then we both screamed and scrambled out of our respective sides of the bed, dragging bedding with us. Only problem was, we'd both grabbed the same blanket. He tried to muscle it away from me, but I yanked it my way, pulling him with it.

"Let go!" he snarled, flashing sharp teeth.

I shrieked in surprise and let it go, opting to cover my junk with my hands instead. “Who are you?”

“I’m Nicola Lightwing! Who are you?”

“Tripp Powers!” I frowned and leaned forward. “Wait, you don’t know me?” I thought everybody knew my face. After all, it was plastered all over billboards around town, and I’d been in a dozen ads on TV. Hell, I’d been in two Superbowl commercials. Everybody knew what my big dumb face looked like.

“No!” he shouted, defensive and then winced, putting a hand over his face. “Oh my stars. My head!”

Mine was still throbbing too, making it really hard to think. “Let me get some fucking pants on.” I turned, keeping my hands cupped over my crotch, even though he’d probably already seen everything, and searched the floor for my discarded clothing.

The room was a wreck of overturned bottles and little pieces of confetti. I squinted and picked one up. Why were they shaped like dicks? Never mind. It didn’t matter. I spotted a swath of dark fabric across the room and walked over to grab it, but frowned when I realized it was a shredded powder blue tuxedo jacket.

I blinked rapidly and looked around a little more carefully. There were roses on the table with a big CONGRATULATIONS banner half draped over the chairs. Next to the roses was a three-tiered, half-eaten wedding cake.

Oh no.

Oh, fuck no.

Holding my breath, I looked down at my hands and shifted the left one so it was on top. Sure enough, there was a solid gold band on my ring finger.

“Nicola!” I spun around. “Check your fingers. Quick!”

“Stop shouting.” He winced and rubbed his temples.

“Just do it, man.”

“Why would I...” He trailed off when he lowered his hands and looked at them, antennae twitching. “Where did this ring come from?”

“Probably the same place as the giant wedding cake, the roses, and the ruined tux.” I snatched a flier for the Graceland Wedding Chapel on the strip from the table and held it up.

Nicola stared at it. “No. We did *not*.”

“It sure as fuck looks like we did.” I held up my hand and pointed at the ring.

Nicola’s eyes dipped, and I remembered I was trying not to flash my dick at him.

I yelped and covered up again.

He rubbed his cheek and looked away. “Oh, please, darling. I’ve obviously already seen everything.”

“Yeah, but...” I blushed furiously, unsure how to feel about the whole thing.

It wasn't like I was a virgin before last night, but I couldn't imagine fucking a dude. The furthest I'd ever gotten before was an awkward hand job under the basketball bleachers, which hadn't been terrible, but I'd never *fucked* a dude.

And here I was, married to one.

At least, I thought that's what'd happened.

Nicola sighed and sank down to sit on the bed. "This is too much to deal with before coffee."

Coffee, right. And something to eat, plus some water. That's what we both needed. Once we could think straight, then we could deal with the fallout from whatever had happened last night.

I padded into the bathroom and grabbed a towel to wrap around my waist. Then I went to the minibar over in the corner to grab two tiny bottles of water.

Nicola looked up at me as I held one out to him.

My stupid cock stirred when he was looking up at me like that, and I blushed like an idiot. "Um. I know it's not coffee, but we should probably... You know. Hydrate? That's supposed to be good for hangovers, right?"

He took the water and opened it. "Thanks."

"Welcome."

I cracked open my own, but paused when Nicola opened his mouth and a long, tube-shaped tongue rolled out. He stuck it right in the water and sucked it up like his tongue was a straw.

My dick decided we wanted to know what that felt like shoved in *places* and I sat down quickly, hoping that'd be enough to hide the semi I was suddenly sporting.

“So,” I started, “do you remember anything from last night?”

Nicola shook his head, antennae swaying with the movement. “Not much. I remember going to The Millenium with a bunch of friends and a new client of mine, but after that...”

“A client?”

He nodded. “I’m a talent agent. Signed Greyson Boggs not too long ago. He’s going to take the blues rock world by storm. I just know it.”

“Oh.” I chugged the entire bottle in one go and crushed it into a flat disc between my palms.

“You?” Nicola asked, looking over at me.

“Yeah, not much, honestly.” I shrugged. “I was supposed to meet with my assistant last night, but blew him off to go dancing. I was feeling super stressed and just wanted to relax. Not crunch numbers.”

“Crunch numbers?” He squinted at me.

I nodded slowly. “Yeah, I’m trying to open a coffee shop. It’s...not going well.”

I sighed and glanced away. That was probably what Cage wanted to talk to me about. He always wanted me to change something, to follow the next big trend so we could launch

with a bang. The problem was, I didn't want to follow the trends. If Brewtiful's did what every other coffee chain did, how was it supposed to stand out?

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." Nicola gently brushed velvet-coated fingers over my forearm, making me break out in goosebumps.

Fuck. Just what had he done to me the night before that I was reacting that strongly to a simple touch?

I squirmed, trying to do a better job of hiding my hard-on under the towel. "No, you're probably right. I don't know what I'm doing with Brewtiful's. That's why I hired Cage to be my assistant. It's just that... Well, it's not important right now. You want to order food and coffee?"

"Sure," he said, waving a hand at me and falling over to bury his face in the pillows with a groan. "I'll take care of it. Just give me a few more minutes."

"Okay." I looked around, deciding what to do in the meantime. "Hey, Nicola?"

He sighed and turned on his side toward me, not seeming to notice when the blanket slipped lower, almost to his knees, leaving him completely exposed.

I froze. *Don't look, Tripp. Don't look, don't look, don't look!* The more I thought about not looking, the more I just had to look and damn, that was a *mistake*.

Nicola had a thick tuft of dark fur trailing down from his belly and getting thicker at his groin. His cock jutted out, hard

and lavender colored, from a flushed pink slit running between his legs. It wasn't intimidatingly huge or anything. Actually, my first thought at seeing it was that it was *cute*, which was confusing as fuck. I'd never thought anything about anybody else's dick before, let alone that it was cute.

It was different, but that apparently wasn't a deal breaker as my cock immediately perked up, tenting obviously under the towel, and there was *no* hiding it.

"Why are you turning red?" he asked.

My face and neck were suddenly burning hot. "Um. Your, um..."

"Yes?"

"Your dick is out!" I blurted, and then cringed.

"Yeah, and?" He stared at me like I was an idiot.

Maybe I was an idiot, but if I was, it was because he was turning me into one. A big, slobbering, horny idiot who was apparently very into moth dick.

"So it's distracting," I said, my face burning.

Nicola arched one brow, and then his lips tilted in a wicked smirk. He turned over the other way, but still didn't bother to cover himself. "Better?" he asked, and I swear, he stuck his ass out further.

Having his furry, muscled ass and those beautiful wings facing me wasn't any better. Suddenly, all I could think about

was eating the mothman's ass. Shit, since when was I into any of this?

I swallowed, my throat suddenly so dry that it hurt. "I need to go to the bathroom!" I blurted and ran for safety behind the closed door on the other side of the suite.

Chapter Two

Nicola



FOR FUCK'S SAKE . I winced as Tripp slammed the bathroom door shut and sat up, rubbing my temples.

Marrying him was a mistake, one I hadn't meant to make, but to call it out of character for me wouldn't be too far off base. There was a reason I didn't drink and dance, or hang out with Inzo, Adam, and their friends very often. Those two were always trying to hook me up with someone. The last one had been a sweet kraken who was a hell of a dancer but mediocre in bed. After him, I swore off any matches made by my *friends*.

But apparently drunk me was far more open to their influence than I realized.

I had flashes of memory from the night before, but it was mostly drinking, laughing, and dancing. Nothing too unusual.

At least, not until Ezra decided we should all pile back into the limo and drive around Vegas doing shots. Tripp was super shitfaced by then, and apparently drunk Tripp equaled naked

Tripp. He stripped off his shirt in the limo and that was the beginning of the end for me. There were vague memories of us making out, practically throat fucking him with my proboscis while sitting in his lap and grinding against his enormous cock...

I couldn't remember how or why we'd decided we should go get married, but if I had to guess, I could blame it on my upcoming birthday. I was turning thirty-five, which was quite aged for a mothfolk. Far past the age when I should have found my mate. Unlike many other creatures in the world, mothfolk only lived to be in their seventies. I had wasted my youth toiling away at work, chasing success and financial gain. Now that I had it, I unfortunately had no one to spend it with and that thought was depressing, to say the least.

But marrying Tripp was a *bad* idea. A nice dick was not reason enough for nuptials, despite what drunk Nicola thought.

I sat up with a sigh and pawed the nightstand for my cell. Squinting at the screen showed I had about a dozen missed messages from Inzo and Adam. I ignored them in favor of opening my favorite delivery app to order us some coffee. The app said it'd be almost an hour before they could deliver, and they charged me an arm and an antenna for it, too.

I fell back onto the bed, rolled onto my stomach, and immediately started searching for how to annul our foolish marriage.

The shower started up in the bathroom and I lowered the phone, glancing toward the closed door. Part of me wanted to

join him in the shower. If this was a hookup and not the aftermath of some drunken wedding, that's exactly where I'd be, kneeling in that spray with his human cock stuffed halfway down my throat. Maybe that's still where I should be. I should be enjoying this for the hookup it was with the bonus of a trip to the courthouse afterward.

I mean, it was still technically a hookup, wasn't it? We'd both been naked, but my ass didn't feel like it'd been thoroughly destroyed the night before. With a dick as big as his was, I should've been walking funny for sure if he knew the first thing about using it.

Either way, we'd be laughing off our marriage like the sham it was in a few hours. It wasn't like I could ever have a relationship with someone like Tripp Powers. But I could sure use a little stress relief after waking up next to him and he *was* rather cute when he blushed head to chest. And lights above, did he have one *hell* of a body. I'd probably never pull anyone half as hot again in my life. If I was going to go through all this trouble, I might as well get some dick out of it.

Why not? He was probably in there right now, taking care of his own problem. Maybe he wanted some help.

I licked my lips, conjuring a scene straight out of a porno in my mind. Me, busting down the door, striking a sexy pose in the doorway and catching him red-handed jerking off. His face would turn beet red, but he wouldn't stop. Oh, no. He'd turn toward me and slow down, just enough to be a tease. I could

show him how hard my cock was for him, how ready I was to be filled. *“Need some help with that, darling?”*

I flicked out my proboscis in thought and then threw aside the covers, padding across the chilly floor to wait by the door. Cold doubt spun around in my stomach. What if he was doing something else in there? I didn't want to walk in on him while he was using the toilet. Well, if he was doing that, he'd lock the door, right?

I tried the door, and it swung open easily. The huge bathroom was so steamy that a cloud of it rushed out to meet me. The warm, moist air felt amazing on my face, and I leaned into it. Before I knew it, my wings were fluttering, propelling me over the small space.

The shower was a large glass square with sprayers on three walls. Tripp stood in the middle of it with his back to me, all that glorious, naked muscle on display. My temporary husband had an ass most men only dreamed of: a nice big bubble butt made for grabbing onto. He had trim hips and wide shoulders, and though he wasn't facing me, I'd seen enough to know he had perfect pecs and abs for days.

He stood in the spray absently stroking his cock eagerly, without finesse, like some teenage boy afraid his mother was going to catch him.

I leaned against the door frame in the sexiest pose I could manage and cleared my throat, but he didn't turn around. He must not have heard me over the water. *“Tripp?”*

Tripp turned around and shrieked, immediately reaching for the washcloth to cover himself. Or try to. The tiny hotel washcloth didn't cover much of anything and wound up just draping over his dick.

“Nicola!” The way his voice broke *was* kind of sexy.

I pushed away from the door frame. This hadn't gone at all like I'd hoped. “You've got to stop screaming every time you see me, darling.”

“*Darling?*” His eyes looked like they were about to bulge out of his head as I closed the distance between me and the shower. “Wait. What's... What are you...” He practically fell all over himself to create room between us as I slid into the shower.

I frowned and stopped where I was. His broad shoulders were plastered against the far wall and his chest was rising and falling so fast, I was worried he'd hyperventilate. His eyes were huge and fingers trembling. The poor boy really was *terrified*. That wasn't what I intended at all.

My chest swelled with embarrassment. “Sorry,” I mumbled and turned to pull open the shower door so I could leave.

“No, wait!” Tripp's hand shot out and closed around my wrist. When I turned back around, his face had flushed an even deeper shade of red. “You don't have to go.”

“I don't want to make you uncomfortable,” I replied.

Tripp let go of my arm and shook his head, sending water droplets flying. “I'm not uncomfortable. I'm...” He swiped a

hand back through his damp hair. “This is awkward, okay? I obviously think you’re hot.” His eyes dipped, and he sighed. “So hot. But like... this is all new for me. I...” He swallowed loudly, throat bobbing. “I’ve never fucked a dude before.”

I blinked and stared at him, tilting my head to the side. “What?”

“I’m straight, bro,” he said, rubbing the back of his head. “Or I thought I was. I like pussy, you know?”

“That clearly says otherwise,” I said and pointed at his erection, which hadn’t flagged a bit.

I didn’t think Tripp could blush any harder, but he did. “I know. It’s confusing the fuck out of me. Especially since I don’t remember when we...you know.”

Oh my stars. I was in the middle of this poor himbo’s bi awakening. I didn’t know whether to be flattered or mortified.

“I don’t think we had sex,” I blurted, suddenly a little shyer myself.

Tripp frowned and tapped his chin. “How do you know?”

“Darling, look at you. That thing would destroy my ass and leave me walking bow-legged for days.”

He grinned at me stupidly. “You saying I’ve got a big dick?”

I sighed. No points for humility or intelligence. Good thing he was hot. “I’d definitely know. Unless...” I lifted an eyebrow. I wasn’t the biggest fan of topping, especially when

it came to humans, but who knew what I'd done while I was drunk?

Tripp looked mortified. He put his hands behind him as if he was checking his ass, making me snicker. Oh, this sweet idiot.

Relief flooded his face. "Nothing weird back there..."

"Good," I said, a little relieved as well. I reached to turn off the faucet and yanked a towel down, holding it out to him. "So we didn't fuck. We just got drunk and made a stupid mistake before passing out naked next to each other. We can undo this with a trip to the courthouse, a small fee, and a few signatures."

"What if..." He took the towel and wrapped it around himself, shaking his head. "Never mind. You're right. We should annul this whole thing as soon as possible and get on with our lives. Right?"

"Definitely," I agreed, seizing another towel for myself.

He looked disappointed. Hell, I was a little disappointed myself, but it was for the best. I didn't know Tripp, and he didn't know me. If he thought he was straight, who was I to come in and turn his entire world upside down?

Chapter Three

Tripp

I FROWNED DOWN AT the watery, pale coffee Nicola had ordered. Not only did it smell burnt, but it was lukewarm by the time it got delivered to our room, and totally undrinkable. Even Nicola winced after taking a sip and set it aside.

“No offense, but this coffee is awful,” I said.

“I don’t disagree, but beggars can’t be choosers,” he said with a sigh.

I glanced around the room before perking when I spotted my travel bag tucked under the table. “Maybe I can do something about that,” I said and put the crappy coffee down.

I crossed the room and dragged my travel bag out, digging noisily through it. *Let’s see here. Gym shorts. Chewing gum. Extra socks. Ah, there it is.* With a big smile, I brought out the travel-sized coffee grinder I always carried with me.

Nicola blinked. “You’re kidding me. Who walks around with a coffee grinder in their luggage? I didn’t even know you *had* luggage!”

“Of course I do. Although I’m a little surprised I remembered it.” I stuck out my tongue in concentration as I dug around in the duffel bag, coming up with a small, unmarked bag of beans.

“If you pull an espresso machine out of that bag, I’m going to pinch myself,” Nicola said.

I laughed. “No luck there. We’ll have to make do with the hotel’s coffee maker. Not ideal, but it’ll do.” I retrieved the coffee maker from where it sat near the mini bar and carefully started measuring out the beans.

Nicola leaned on a fist, the weight of his eyes a little less unnerving than it had been before. “Should I even ask why you’re carrying a coffee grinder and coffee beans around in your luggage?”

I turned on the grinder and counted to thirty seconds, letting it run before I answered. “I told you. I’m trying to find investors for my coffee shop idea.”

“Trying?”

I nodded and finished starting the coffee. “Unsuccessfully so far.”

“I don’t understand. You’re a celebrity, aren’t you? And coffee is the lifeblood of corporate America. You’d think people would be lining up to get in on that,” he said.

I snorted and shook my head, finishing the setup for the coffee. “It’s the same answer everywhere I go. The coffee wars are over. There’s a big chain coffee shop on every corner and

nobody wants to compete with that. Well, screw them. Those big corporate chains are soulless storefronts with mediocre coffee and overpriced pastries that people just accept because they're overworked, underpaid, and desperate to stay awake. I'm of the opinion that your morning pick me up should be more than just a boost of caffeine. It should be a boost of confidence, too." I picked up the hotel's pen from the nightstand and scribbled a message on one of the paper cups before filling it and holding it out to Nicola.

He took the cup and turned it around so he could read what I'd written. "You are brewtiful? Oh, darling, I know, but tell me more." He chuckled.

I blushed in response. "That's the whole idea behind Brewtiful's, though. At other coffee shops you go in and give them your name and they write it on your cup. They don't need to do that. In fact, there are way more efficient ways to keep orders straight. They do it to make you feel special, but the novelty of that's kind of worn off. It feels stale. But you know what never gets old? Compliments. Affirmations. Positive vibes. Everybody needs that. Everybody wants it and it takes two seconds to do."

"So your idea is what? Print affirmations on the cups like fortune cookies?" He waved a hand over the cup, clearing the rising steam.

I shook my head. "Handwritten notes from a pre-prepared, psychologist approved list of positive affirmations. I've already got a list of over three hundred affirmations that I've

secured and piles of research from mental health professionals and..." I trailed off, watching him stretch his long, straw-like tongue down into his paper cup while trying not to be jealous of the coffee. *Wish someone would drink me like that.* I wasn't even one hundred percent sure what that meant, but I wanted it just the same.

"My stars, this coffee is *amazing!*" he declared, snapping me from my thoughts.

"It is?" I shook my head. "I mean...of course it is! It's from this little itherie-human co-op down in Florida. They roast it in small batches. I worked out a deal with them to supply the chain if I can get the initial investment."

Nicola cocked his head to the side, antennae twitching. "Wait, so you're telling me you're offering a quality American-made coffee with a damn good gimmick and nobody is biting? How's your pitch?"

I stared at him, lowering my cup. "My what?"

"Your pitch!" he exclaimed, rolling his hand, beautiful wings fluttering behind him. He scooted to the edge of his seat. "Pretend I'm a potential investor. Go on. Sell it to me." He picked his coffee back up and leaned forward, waiting expectantly.

And with that, my mind went completely blank. It wasn't my fault. I was distracted by the soft beating of his wings and the slow way his long tongue unfurled and slid into the coffee. His tongue was the same color as his cock, which was the most unhelpful thing to realize when I was supposed to be selling

my business idea to him. I couldn't think of anything else but that, so I just wound up standing there, stuttering and sputtering like an idiot. "Um. Well... You see, that's... That's it."

"Oh, sweetie, no, no, no!" Nicola sighed and set his coffee aside before standing. "You need to be confident in what you're about! Try again. Here, I'll help you with a jumping off point. Let's imagine I have half a million dollars to give you. I'm ready to hand it to you right now. All you have to do is tell me why I should give it to you instead of someone else in ten words or fewer."

"Ten words or fewer?" I frowned and scratched my head before counting on my fingers. "How am I supposed to tell you anything in less than ten words?"

Nicola sighed again and looked around before he leaned past me to snatch the pen I'd been using. For a minute, we were so close I could smell him and damn if he didn't smell like... Well, like something I wanted to keep on smelling. I wanted to bury my face in his furry little body and just sniff him forever. But not, like, in a creepy way.

Fuck, what was wrong with me?

He didn't seem to notice the way being so close made me squirm and went to get the notepad from the little bedside table. "All right, darling. Let's take it from the top," he said, putting the pen to paper. "Give me two words that describe your ideal customer."

I thought for a minute, tapping a finger against my chin. “I don’t know. I guess people who are busy and appreciate quality.”

“How about *hard-working* and *smart*?”

Those sounded like good words, so I shrugged and said, “Okay.”

Nicola scribbled something on the paper. “All right. Now, describe a problem that hard-working and smart people have that Brewtiful’s can solve?”

That was an easy one. “Energy,” I said and then added quickly. “And attitude!”

“Hmm.” Nicola narrowed his eyes and rolled the end of his pen against his lips.

Except in my head, it wasn’t the *pen*.

“The word attitude can be a little confrontational. How about *outlook* instead? It has a more positive connotation and is more forward-oriented, implying future thinking,” he said.

“Okay,” I muttered. I never would have thought of that. Nicola was so smart!

He wrote some more words down before asking, “Now, why do you want to solve this problem? Tell me a personal story.”

“A personal story?” I stared down into the warm brown liquid, squirming in my seat.

“That’s right. Money talks, but people aren’t machines, Tripp. Get them emotionally invested in Brewtiful’s and your

story, and you're halfway to getting them to invest with their wallets.”

I sighed and took a drink of the coffee, closing my eyes and focusing on the taste, the warmth of it on my tongue. Every sip was like a memory, one I couldn't quite pin down, but I knew it was there just the same. Coffee was comfort in a cup.

I thought about all those awful cold mornings where I had to roll out of bed sorer than shit and get on the ice while most of the city was still asleep. It didn't matter how tired I was, how much I hurt, or how much I wished I could be anywhere else. I had to practice. I had to sacrifice. That was what it meant to be a great athlete. I had to put the game first and myself second. Everything I did was for the game, for the fans.

Except my morning coffee. It was the one thing that was always mine, my ten minutes of uninterrupted peace. No matter how bad I felt, it was always there for me, always there to be the pick me up I needed in the morning or after practice, or late night after a game. It didn't judge me for missing shots, or for body blocking the wrong guy, or for saying something stupid in an interview.

But it wasn't just the coffee, and the sports were only half of my story. The half everyone knew. The rest...

I opened my eyes. “After my head injury, I was in the hospital for a long time, and the doctors said I might not get full function back. They talked a lot of doom and gloom, telling me all the things I could never do again. I was bummed as fuck. I was thinking, well if I can't play sports anymore,

what's the point, you know? Hockey was my whole life. It was the only thing I was ever good at. And then I wound up in therapy with this itherie dude. It was *awesome!* He taught me the power of positive affirmations. Turned me around. I stopped focusing on all the shit I couldn't do and started thinking more about what I could do. It was like... Wow. I got my life back. I learned about the impact of small words, the ones we let live inside our heads. I realized there's a lot of people out there who go an entire day where nobody ever says anything nice to them and I just thought... Well, I can't shoot goals, and I can barely skate, and I barely remember anything anymore. But I know how to do that. I can say nice things. Anybody can. It's like this superpower everybody has, but it hardly ever gets used. I just thought..."

I looked up and found him staring at me, the pen drooping in his fingers. He must've thought I was an idiot, just like everyone else. Maybe he was right. It was a stupid idea. So dumb, anybody could do it. I mean, who would even want that? It was obvious why nobody was interested in investing in Brewtiful's. If it was a good idea, someone would have already done it.

I sighed, my whole self deflating. "It's a dumb idea, isn't it? Cage was right. It'd be too slow, and nobody cares what was written on coffee cups. He said people just wanted their drink fast. I just wanted to make people's days better."

Nicola reached across the space between us and gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. "I don't know Cage, but he was wrong, Tripp. The world always needs more positivity in it. I

think it's a wonderful idea. You just need to learn how to sell it to the right people. I think I can help with that."

I sat up straighter, hope fluttering in my chest. "Really?"

"Of course, darling." He waved a dismissive hand. "It's the least I can do after... Well, all this."

All that hope threatened to flee. "What about the annulment? I thought we were going to do that?"

Nicola brushed his fingers over his antennae. "Darling, it's a holiday weekend. No one will be in their office until at least Tuesday. That means we're stuck with each other for three days. Or at least, legally bound for that long. Of course, I'll understand if you'd rather go our separate ways and just meet up for the paperwork on Tuesday, but I just thought... Well, I have nothing planned for the weekend. Did you?"

I snorted. "Vegas was my plan. I was supposed to come down here, get drunk, party, and get laid." I winced as I said the last part. "I guess... That's not going to happen."

"Never say never, darling," he said with a smile and a wink that left me squirming and blushing. Nicola drank more of his coffee and set the cup aside. "Well, nuptials aside, there is absolutely no reason we can't have a little fun, is there? I mean, you're here. I'm here. Vegas is out there. We have money, time, and a room to stumble back to when the partying is done." He smiled and gave my shoulder a light punch. "What do you say we go out and make a day of it?"

I considered the little mothman sitting across from me, uncertain. I was having all sorts of *feelings* about him, feelings I'd never had for a male of any species before. Spending more time with him might give me just the chance I needed to figure all of that out, and maybe, if I was lucky, he'd help me with my pitch for Brewtiful's along the way.

"All right," I said with a big grin. "You're on." I punched him back, wincing when he yelped in pain. "Sorry."

Chapter Four

Nicola



I WENT TO LUNCH sporting a new bruise on my arm. Poor Tripp didn't know his own strength. Of course, he apologized profusely, and often, even going so far as to call down for some ice to put on it. He really was quite sweet. I could see why I'd decided he should be my husband, even if it was a poor decision only my drunk self would have made.

As for lunch, choosing where to go nearly turned into a disaster. Tripp, being a large and very well built human, wanted to go to some hamburger place that was very popular. The mothfolk palate wasn't exactly meant for meat. We mostly stuck to fruits and some vegetables, though fibers weren't off the table in the right circumstances. Besides all that, I was watching my figure. After all the alcohol I'd consumed the night before, a big plate of greasy fries was the worst thing for me. I thought we should go to the little vegan café down the street, which Tripp was vehemently opposed to.

Halfway through the argument, we both seemed to realize this was exactly the sort of thing married couples fought over

and decided we should compromise because we weren't doing *that*.

We wound up in a quaint little Mexican cantina just off the strip. It was the perfect compromise since he could have his *carne asada* and I got all the *bionicos* I could eat. We spent lunch chatting about my ideas for getting him some investors. I didn't have a ton of connections in the culinary world, but Chef Inzo Amoretti did.

He chewed a bite of his lunch thoughtfully regarding me. "You really think Chef Inzo will help me?"

"Of course, darling. He's *Italian*. Italians invented espresso." I paused to stir the crema into my fruit salad. "I can't promise you he'll invest. He's just put a significant amount of money into another property, mind you. However, if there's anyone who knows the right people to make this happen for you, it's him. We just need to work on your pitch and get it perfect and then you'll have so many offers, you'll be more than set."

"I hope you're right," he said with a sigh.

"Of course I'm right. I'm always right."

"You're so smart, Nicola," he said dreamily and stuck his straw in his mouth, sucking down more of his soda.

I frowned and folded my arms over the table, flexing my wings. "Darling, what's wrong? I thought we were on the same page?"

"We are, it's just... I wish I was as smart as you. Even before my head injury, I wasn't exactly the brightest crayon in the

bucket.”

That wasn't how the saying went, but I wasn't going to correct him. His mixing of the phrases was actually quite adorable. “Is that why you quit?” I asked, leaning on an arm. “Hockey, I mean.”

He nodded and put his cup down on the table.

“Do you miss it?”

“Yeah,” he said with another dreamy sigh. “Playing for the Halifax Hustle was my whole life. There's nothing in the world like being out on the ice in a sold-out arena, when it's the third period with three minutes left on the clock and you're down by one. And then bam! Goal!” He lifted his arms and shouted, drawing looks from everyone in the restaurant.

I tilted my head to one side, antennae twitching. “But then you'd be tied.”

“Right, and it goes into sudden death.” His eyes lit up with excitement again. “God, I miss it. But doc said one more good bump on the head could do me in. I couldn't chance it, so I've been off the ice ever since.”

I frowned. “You don't even skate anymore?”

Tripp shrugged. “What's the point if I can't play?”

I laughed and speared a cube of guava. “Darling, I'm not exactly the finest skater in all the land, but I still enjoy it.”

He sat up straighter, giving me an appraising look. “You skate?”

“Well, not like you,” I said, waving my fork through the air. “And I haven’t in years either, but that’s not the point. The point I was trying to make was that it’s just as important to enjoy things for leisure as it is to enjoy your work. Of course, I should take my own advice there. This weekend will be my first vacation in three years, and I didn’t even mean to take it.”

“What?” he screeched loudly. “But aren’t you like stupid rich? How can you not take vacations?”

I arched a brow. “How do you think I got stupid rich, darling? Not all of us are so naturally gifted that people pay us millions to put round things in nets.” I lowered my fork and sat up. “Speaking of... How much capital do you have invested in Brewtiful’s?”

Tripp bobbed his head back and forth. “About two hundred thousand.”

I frowned. “That’s it? Surely you have much more squirreled away from your time with the Hustle?”

He shook his head. “Medical bills ate a lot of it. The rest went to charity. I have enough to live on for the rest of my life as long as I’m careful, but I’m not like a billionaire or anything.”

Well, now I felt like an ass. I squirmed in place before rapidly searching for a way to change the subject. “So, this Cage fellow...”

“My assistant,” he added with a nod. “What about him?”

“Why does a retired hockey player need a personal assistant?”

“My brain.” He tapped the side of his head. “Like I said, I forget things. A lot. And I have terrible migraines a couple times a week where I can’t leave the house. Cage helps me handle my business when I’m not able to do it myself.”

I hummed in answer. Perhaps I’d never met Cage—maybe I never would—but I didn’t think very highly of him based on Tripp’s description. A good assistant knew how and when to step in with a redirect or an encouraging word. If this Cage fellow really had told Tripp his idea was foolish... Well, Tripp deserved better. He deserved to be surrounded by people who believed in him. And if he ever did have a silly idea and needed to be told such, I hoped whoever he was with did it much more gently than Cage seemed to have.

“What’s wrong?” Tripp suddenly asked, making me look up.

“Hmm?”

“You just stabbed your...mouth...thingie...into that piece of melon really hard and angry like.” He pointed at me. “And you look like you want to murder somebody.”

“It’s called a proboscis, darling, and don’t you worry your sweet head about it. Murderous moods just take me sometimes. I just need to get my blood sugar back up. That’s all.” *And maybe find this Cage and push him off a cliff. Not a very tall cliff, mind you, and one with pillows at the bottom. Pillows filled with knives.*

“A proboscis, huh? Is it...” He stared at me and licked his lips before turning beet red. “I’m sorry. It’s probably rude to ask about your anatomy, isn’t it?”

I smirked and leaned forward. “If it’s a more thorough examination you’re after, darling, you only need to ask. We can play doctor anytime.”

Tripp frowned. “Now you’re just teasing me.”

“Of course I am, but all in good fun, my dear. I quite like the way you blush for me. I find it endearing. If you blushed like that last night, it’s no wonder I snatched you up.”

“Nicola, stop,” he said and covered his face.

“Why? It’s true? I’m not going to pretend it isn’t.” I pointed at him. “You are a catch, Tripp Powers. Perhaps not mine. Not forever. But whoever steals your heart will be richer for it.”

He was red to the tips of his ears and hiding behind his hands still, but with the biggest smile on his face, one I would’ve gladly paid to see again. “Be careful saying things like that to me. I’m a sucker for flattery, apparently.”

“Darling, I’m happy to shower you with compliments. It’s as you say. Kind words aren’t exchanged often enough in the world. Though our partnership is temporary, I see no reason not to enjoy it all I can.” I smirked and hooked my foot around the back of his leg, making him sit up straighter. “And if you change your mind later,” I said in a whisper, leaning across the table. “I’d be very happy to let you enjoy me. No. Strings. Attached.”

Poor Tripp’s eyes were as big as dinner plates. “What?” he squeaked out.

I laughed. “Sex, darling. I mean we can have sex if you want.”

“I...I...I...”

I put my hand over his before he could short circuit. “Easy there. Don’t hurt yourself. I only meant that I heard what you said back in the room about it being new and awkward. It was for me at first, too. It is for everyone. But there’s no need to mull over the questions in your own mind when I’m right here. Should you decide you want to try... Well, whatever you want, really. There are few places I won’t go once. Anyway, the point is, if that’s something you want to explore without obligation, why not make the most of this and just do it? You don’t have to answer now. Or at all. Just know the offer has been made without expectations. The ball, as they say, is in your court.”

His lips twitched, and he stared at me like he was concentrating hard. “That’s... basketball, right?”

I smiled and patted his hand. “Honestly, Tripp, the only balls I’ve ever been interested in aren’t the type that go in nets. I have no fucking idea.”

He laughed at that and shook his head, piling his unfinished food on the tray with the rest of the trash. “You’re too much, Nicola.”

I smiled back. “Thank you, darling. I’m amazing, aren’t I?”

An idea suddenly occurred to me, something to help him take his mind off of his bi awakening, and the pressure he was

putting on himself with the coffee shop funding. I knew just the thing to put Tripp in a better mood.

“Come on,” I said, standing and taking his hand in mine.

He frowned. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise, darling, but I know you’ll just love it. Trust me.”

Chapter Five

Tripp

I FROWNED AND LOOKED out at the ice rink, hugging myself. There were about a dozen people in the stands, most of them parents watching their kids skate around in circles. The only adults out on the ice were couples who were skating arm in arm and smiling at each other like they were in love.

“This is a bad idea,” I said to Nicola.

He looked up at me from lacing up his skates. “Relax, darling. You’re not in any danger of a head injury here.”

“It’s not that. I just...” I sighed. “This is kind of public, don’t you think?”

He paused and sat up. “You don’t want to be seen with me?”

“No,” I said quickly. “That’s not it at all, Nicola. I skated for sport. This is kid’s stuff.”

“Is it now?” He pushed up and stepped out of the little box we were sitting in and out onto the ice. “Then suit yourself and stay here. I’ll have fun by myself.”

“Nicola, wait...”

But he didn't wait. He skated out to join the people circling the rink, and I sighed, leaning on the ledge to watch as he picked up speed, moving to the inside. Damn, he was a pretty good skater. When he said he knew how, I was expecting he meant just that. That he knew how. Instead, Nicola moved across the ice like a seasoned pro.

People started moving out of his way and he shifted so that he was skating backward, picking up speed. My jaw dropped when he took to the air and, with a little help from his wings, did a perfect double axel jump. People around the rink erupted in applause.

Grinning like an idiot, I skated out onto the ice to join him as he came around. “Nicola, that was amazing! Where'd you learn to do that?”

“Remember all those silly romantic figure skating movies from the nineties?” He flashed me a small smile. “Yeah, I was one of *those* kids. I thought I'd be a star.” He shrugged. “I was decent enough my parents let me take classes, but no one would call me amazing. Alas, stardom was not for me.”

“How can you say that? That was so impressive!”

“Less impressive when you factor in the wings,” he said with a wink. “But at least it worked. Got you out on the ice with me.” He held out his hand.

I took it, still grinning, and we moved around the rink together. He had to slow for me, but he didn't seem to mind.

We circled the rink a few times, keeping a steady pace. A few people waved to me, so I smiled and waved back until Nicola's hand tightened around mine, drawing my attention back to him. Gosh, that was kind of hot, the way he got all possessive of me.

My thoughts turned back to the offer he'd made over lunch. A weekend to test drive my bi awakening. Is that what this was? It sounded like a line out of one of those cheesy romances he'd been talking about, but maybe he was right. Maybe I *wasn't* straight. At the very least, I was attracted to *him*, but who wouldn't be? He was sweet, smart, talented... He also had a real nice ass. And those wings!

But the sex side of things was really throwing me for a loop. The furthest I'd ever gotten with another guy was some spit and a hand job. At the time, I hadn't wanted to do anything more, but it wasn't difficult to imagine doing more with Nicola for some reason. I didn't know why he was different or special. He just was.

"So, how does it feel?" he asked me, breaking the silence. "Being back on the ice, I mean. You said you hadn't since..."

I nodded. "I guess I forgot how much I miss it, though this isn't quite the same."

"But it's fun, right?" he asked, turning his head toward me.

I thought about it and nodded. "Yeah, actually. It's really fuckin' nice."

“Well, don’t look now, but I think you’ve been recognized.” Nicola pointed to another entry to the ice where a dozen kids were skating out with cell phones, paper, pens and wearing Hustler jerseys.

They swarmed us in a matter of seconds, all of them clamoring for my attention. Nicola and I slid to a stop, and I looked over at him, concerned he’d be upset, given how prone he was to jealousy. The kids, however, didn’t seem to bother him.

He flashed me a tight smile, nodded and squeezed my hand. “Spend time with your fans,” he said and skated away.

I turned back to the crowd, a little relieved that he was okay with it. Cage would’ve told them to come to an official signing where he charged for autographs.

Someone handed me a sharpie. I looked down to find a kraken bouncing in his skates.

He gave me a sheepish smile. “Mr. Powers, would you sign my jersey?”

I held up the sharpie. “All right, kids. Who wants me to sign their jersey?” Every hand shot up, and I grinned. “Let’s form a line. That’s right. Little ones up front. C’mere, kid. What’s your name?”

I spent the next hour or so with the kids, signing their jerseys, taking selfies, and answering questions. It turns out, they were part of a junior league who’d heard I was in town and come to the rink to see me once word got out that’s where

I was. It wasn't surprising that it'd leaked online quickly. I'd been worried about that as soon as we showed up and people started taking videos with their cell phones.

"Who was your friend?" one boy, an incubus with a long waving tail, asked me.

"Is that your boyfriend? We wanna meet him!" a small minotaur demanded, tugging on my sleeve.

I stood up and rubbed the back of my neck. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"How come?" The minotaur frowned.

I bit my bottom lip and looked over my shoulder to where Nicola was busy doing some small circles on the other side of the rink, which had emptied when the kids came onto it. He worked up some speed, going backward like he was going to do a jump again, but did some kind of spin that left me sighing. God, he was so pretty, especially with flakes of ice melting on his wings.

It suddenly struck me how little I knew about his life. I didn't know where he lived, or what his other hobbies were, or why he did the job he did. I didn't even know his favorite food or his favorite color or his favorite song. Yet here we were, married after knowing each other for what? A few hours? How did that even happen?

And why did it feel like the smartest thing I'd ever done?

"Mr. Powers?" The minotaur kid pulled on my sleeve again.

“Huh? What were we talking about?” I blinked and shook my head, trying to remember.

“Your boyfriend.” The lone human kid pointed right at Nicola.

Nicola must’ve seen him pointing, or heard, because a second later, he was skating over. “Is everything all right over here?”

“Are you Tripp’s boyfriend?” one kid asked.

“Are you going to get married?” another said.

“Are you gay?” demanded another.

In seconds, he was being swarmed by curious kids, his attention darting from one to the other, brows drawing together as if he wasn’t sure how to answer, let alone where to start.

After a minute, he straightened and put his hands behind his back again. “Glad to see you kids have taken an interest. Tripp is a good role model to have. However, at this time, he’s not ready to make a statement concerning his relationship status.”

The human girl frowned and put a hand on her hip. “So you’re saying he’s *not* gay?”

Nicola smirked. “No comment.” He looked at me and held out his hand. “Unfortunately, our time here is coming to an end, children.”

They let out a collective groan of disappointment.

I took Nicola’s hand and waved as we skated for the exit. “Bye, kids! Stay in school!” As we stepped off the ice, I

turned to Nicola. “Sorry about all that.”

“About what? Being who you are?” He shrugged. “I’d be more upset if you ignored your fans after they came out to see you. It’s good for you to spend time with them, but you need to learn how to end interactions more gracefully when you get overwhelmed. I skated over because you looked like you were about to combust.”

“I was, sort of.” I plopped down to start unlacing my skates. “They started asking about you and I just...froze. And then I looked over at you and totally forgot what I was even doing.”

He chuckled and fluttered his eyelashes at me. “I can be quite distracting.”

My face warmed, and I fumbled with the laces, suddenly all thumbs. I knew how to get them undone, but it was like the signal from my brain wasn’t reaching my fingers.

“Here. Let me,” Nicola said gently and knelt in front of me, having already removed his skates.

The heat in my cheeks spread down to my neck, my brain going *other* places with him suddenly at my feet. I started thinking about what it might be like to be inside his mouth. What would he do with that proboscis of his? Whatever he did, I was absolutely sure I’d like it. Nicola seemed like he knew his way around sex with men. Maybe I should take him up on his offer, have him teach me how to do it. I mean, what was the harm? He was right. It was just sex, not a blood pact. I did it all the time with women. That he was a dude, and we were married, didn’t have to change things.

I was starting to like him more and more with every passing hour, but that didn't have to factor in either. It shouldn't. We were adults. We could fuck and still be friends after, right? It was just an experiment, after all.

This is temporary, Tripp. By Tuesday afternoon, you'll be back to being strangers. But then he looked up at me while he was still down on his knees in front of me and my breath caught. There was suddenly an ache in my chest I couldn't explain, one that I knew I could only ease by touching him.

I reached for his cheek, gently brushing my fingers through the thin fur there.

"Tripp?" he said, brow creasing.

"Huh?"

He frowned. "You didn't hear me, did you?"

I dropped my hand and shook my head. "Sorry. I, uh, zoned out. It happens a lot since the accident."

"That's okay. Today's been pretty taxing, and you're probably still dehydrated from last night." He pulled off my skate and set it aside. "But that's what I was asking about. I asked if this happens often, if you've been checked out."

I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair. "I've got a neurologist I see. I've been medically cleared. There's not much they can do. I just kind of have to live with the symptoms. Sorry if it's annoying. I don't mean to be a burden."

Nicola stood and took my chin in his hand, tilting it up, his expression firm and his wings spread wide. “You are not a burden.”

I sighed and looked away. “I might forget some of today, you know. It happens a lot. My memories... They’re a bit fragmented sometimes.”

He smiled and grabbed my street shoes, holding them out to me. “Well, we’d better make the most of today, just in case, right?”

I hesitated, but took the shoes. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, cocking his head. “Should I be some other way?”

I shrugged and bent over to put the shoes on. “It’s just that most people get real impatient with my memory issues. I know I’m kind of an idiot, too.”

He started to protest, so I held up a hand.

“Before you object to me calling myself an idiot, it’s true. I make dumb, impulsive decisions all the time. I know it’s true.”

“And marry mothfolk you just met,” he pointed out. “But that doesn’t make you an idiot. It makes you alive. Darling, listen. We’ve only got one life to live.” He put a hand on his chest. “We can’t go back to undo what was done, so the best thing to do is make what we can of the time we have. What else are we going to do? Sit around and be miserable?”

“You mean you’re not mad that we got married?” I asked.
“Or ashamed or anything?”

Nicola shrugged. “Why? Life’s an adventure and every day is a blank page in it. I have no time for shame. Being ashamed of the past is like... It’s like walking backward and expecting to go forward. We did what we did. You seem a decent fellow in need of a friend. Perhaps I make a poor husband, but I like to think I can be a decent friend.”

“Is that all?” I asked, swallowing. “Just a friend?”

He smirked and stepped forward, pushing my knees wider so he could fit between them. “Reconsidering my offer, are you, darling?” he asked, drawing his fingers through my hair in a way that left me shuddering and biting my lip. “You should. The things I could do for you, the pleasures I could show you...” And then his hands were gone, and I almost whimpered when he was out of reach. “But then perhaps we shouldn’t. I don’t want to ruin you for anyone else.”

Some part of me lamented that he already had, even though Nicola had barely touched me. I think he knew it, though, judging by his sultry smirk.

He held out his hand. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” I asked, putting my hand in his.

Nicola grinned and tugged me along behind him. “For some much needed stress relief,” he announced.

My heart fluttered, hoping he meant back to the hotel because I wasn’t sure my brain could handle much more. It

was getting more difficult to concentrate by the second, but I wasn't willing to end the day. Every second I spent with Nicola was better than the last. I never wanted the day to end.

Chapter Six

Nicola



“YOU DON’T HAVE TO do that, Inzo.” I pressed the button on the hotel elevator and shifted the phone against my ear. “I can pay you back for the room.”

“Nonsense,” insisted the incubus chef on the other end. “It costs the same to keep open whether I stay in it every month or not. Someone might as well use it. Consider it a honeymoon gift.”

I glanced back at Tripp, who looked confused. He stopped in the middle of the lobby, glancing around as if he’d forgotten his way. I waved to get his attention. He grinned and shifted the bags on his arms, coming to meet me.

After our trip to the skating rink, I decided it’d be a good time for a little shopping trip, except I had underestimated just how frazzled Tripp was. He’d clearly enjoyed his time with the kids, but the more exhausted he got, the harder it was for him to remember things and keep track of what was going on around him. He needed to be somewhere quiet and familiar, and he needed to rest. So, after grabbing some multi-packs of

t-shirts, sweats, and underclothes for the both of us—enough to get us through the weekend—I put in a call to one of my assistants, Marin. She'd flown out to buy us a few things. Then I'd called Inzo to arrange payment for the room we were staying in, since it was his private suite we'd wound up in.

“About that,” I said. “I’m not sure there’ll be much of a honeymoon. We’re just staying until the courthouse opens Tuesday morning. Then the plan is to annul the marriage.”

“Oh, Nicola. Really?” Inzo sighed. “Is it that bad?”

“I barely know him, Inzo.” I lowered my voice. “I still can’t believe I let you two hook us up. I should’ve known better.”

“Well, I do hope you’ll change your mind, Nic. You sound so much less stressed than usual. I think he’s been good for you.”

Tripp finally arrived, so I shifted the phone to my other ear. “I’m charging room service to your account, just so you know,” I told Inzo. “And I have expensive taste.”

“Of course you do, my friend,” Inzo said, undeterred. “That’s why we’re friends. *Ciao.*”

I hung up with a sigh and turned to Tripp, putting on a smile. “Got everything?”

“Yeah, I think so.” He glanced down at the multiple bags on his arms. “This feels like a lot.”

“It’s hardly anything. Just some odds and ends Marin picked out based on the measurements I gave her. Something suitable in case we decide to go out.”

“Oh, that’s good,” he said, turning to face the elevator. “I wouldn’t know what to buy. I haven’t done my own shopping in years.”

I smiled, trying to imagine Tripp in a grocery store squeezing vegetables and squinting at packages like a normal person. It didn’t suit him.

The elevator doors opened, and we stepped in, ascending to the penthouse floor.

“So how do you know Inzo Amoretti?” Tripp asked as the floors sped by.

I chuckled. “Ancient history. Back when I was new to the business, I was an assistant on the set of *Top Chef*. My job was essentially to bring coffee to everybody. I was brand new. Inzo was just starting to become a household name back then. Took an instant liking to me for some reason. I think it was because I could remember his coffee order. Anyway, he helped me move up in the industry, and in return, I send him work when he needs it or wants it, or help him out however I can.”

Tripp made a low humming sound.

I glanced over at him and found him staring blankly at the elevator doors. “Are you tired?”

He blinked as if he were just waking up and then yawned. “A bit, yeah.”

I smiled. He was cute when he yawned. Skating had taken a lot out of him.

As soon as I let us into the suite, I took the bags from him and put them near the table. “Why don’t you go shower and take a little nap, Tripp? I’ll call down to have dinner brought up.”

“Really?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Aren’t you tired? You’ve been working all day.”

“Go on and relax, darling.”

He sighed. “All right. If you say so. But shout if you need me.”

Tripp went immediately for the shower while I settled into the chair to text Inzo.

Nic: Did you know Tripp is trying to get investors to open a coffee shop?

Inzo: My broker will kill me if I get involved. He nearly had a coronary after I told him how much I’d given Bluz.

I smiled at that and quickly tapped out a reply.

Nic: I’m not asking you to invest. Just to get me people who will. I think his idea has good bones.

Three dots danced on the screen before Inzo’s reply appeared.

Inzo: Are you sure you’re not the one in need of a good bone?

He followed it with several devil face emojis and a few eggplants.

I rolled my eyes.

Nic: Please, Inzo? It would mean so much to him.

Inzo: All right. Email me the details. I'm about to take Coco out for a walk.

I waited about five minutes before launching the next phase of my plan, long enough for Inzo to leave his home. I shot off a quick text to my second potential source of financing for Tripp and sure enough, the phone dinged about thirty seconds later with a reply.

Adam: I LOVE COFFEE!!!

Adam: Inzo would want me to ask about the financials. Send me those, but if they're good, I'll make it work.

Adam: Oh, and samples!

We spent the next half hour working out a plan. If I could get a sample of Tripp's coffee onto Northstar's brunch menu, it was sure to be a hit. The wealthy clientele of Northstar's would be clamoring to throw their money at Tripp as investors to get Brewtiful's off the ground.

By the time I had a workable plan set up with Adam, I was exhausted. I glanced at the clock with a sigh, noting that it was only four in the afternoon. Mothfolk were supposed to be nocturnal, but I had spent a lifetime battling my natural urge to sleep all day, fueling my success with determination and unhealthy amounts of caffeine. While I still had plenty of the former, I could use a top off of the latter.

I glanced through the cracked door into the bedroom where Tripp had gone to lie down a short while ago. My heart did a

funny little dance at the sight of him lying on his back with his eyes closed. He looked so...adorable wasn't the right word, but it encompassed part of what I felt. When I saw him, sometimes I just wanted to pinch his cheeks. Then, inevitably, I'd envision myself riding his big human cock into oblivion and adorable wasn't the word I'd choose to describe that feeling.

But there was something else now, a new feeling just starting to grow. A strange longing sensation that had nothing to do with sex or pinched cheeks. I looked at him and I felt...

Home.

Like I could curl up in his arms and never leave and be perfectly happy there.

I shook the thought away. Maybe I was only feeling it because we'd spent the day together. As pleasant as the day was, even I didn't believe in falling in love that quickly. Relationships had to be built on more than one good day.

I walked across the room and sifted through the contents on the table, finding Tripp's bag of coffee from that morning. I frowned when I opened the bag and realized they were still beans. I'd need to measure them, grind them...

While I liked my coffee as much as the next mothfolk, I wasn't a connoisseur. Until I had Tripp's coffee, I'd always drank it to stay awake, not for the taste. I wanted to recreate what he'd made earlier, but I had no idea what I was doing.

He's worked so hard today, I thought, pouring what I hoped was the correct amount of beans into the grinder. I don't want to disturb his rest.

So the noise of the grinder didn't wake him, I took it into the bathroom to run it behind a closed door.

Chapter Seven

Tripp

I TOSSED AND TURNED in the bed, unable to get Nicola out of my mind. I'd had dozens of one-night stands and a handful of relationships, but I'd never thought about anyone the way I thought about him. With everyone else, it was all about what I wanted. Short-term rewards. Even with my girlfriends, I'd never once thought of them as forever material. They were just pretty people to keep on my arm to pass the time with. People who put up with me.

Nicola did more than put up with me. He *cared*. He listened.

I thought of how he'd convinced me to get out on the ice again, something I thought I'd never have the courage to do. I'd tried several times, but every time I got close, I froze up, the anxiety just too much. My head would start pounding and I'd have to back away. None of the coaches I'd hired had been able to help me. Not even my therapist had found a way to get me back out there.

But Nicola had, and he'd done it effortlessly. Not only had he gotten me back out on the ice, but he'd helped me to

remember why I loved it so much. When I was holding his hand, it felt like I could do anything, and when we were apart, all I could think about was getting back to him. I wanted to be with him all the time.

Thinking about how our time was so limited, about how we were going to have to annul our marriage on Tuesday, left a pit of anxiety spinning in my stomach. Was that what I wanted? Even if I liked him, we shouldn't stay married. Should we?

I shook my head, trying to shove the thought into the abyss. I had more pressing problems to sort through, like the fact that I was obviously falling for a *guy*.

I lifted my head and glanced toward the door where Nicola was bent over his phone, texting someone. My heart danced at the sight of him so engrossed in whatever he was doing.

Yep, I had it bad for him, which was surprisingly not as distressing as I expected it to be. You would think suddenly having a bi awakening would be stressful, but once I got over the initial hurdle of wrapping my brain around it, it wasn't so bad. Sex would be different, but that wasn't a deal breaker. It didn't weird me out. I'd watched plenty of gay and bi porn. I knew what I was in for.

In hindsight, it probably shouldn't have come as a surprise that I wasn't straight if I was watching gay and bi porn.

Hindsight. I giggled to myself and then sighed. *Okay, so I'm into him. What am I going to do about it?*

The way I saw it, I had two options. One, I could let things keep going the way they were. Keep my distance, deny that I was interested. We could end the long weekend as good friends and I could go back to my old life. Alone.

Or I could take Nicola up on his offer. Explore this new side of myself with him. I'd be risking my heart, though. He seemed set on the annulment. What if I slept with him and decided I couldn't let him go? I was already teetering on the edge of a hard, fast fall for Nicola Lightwing. Sleeping with him might be the thing to push me over the edge. If I fell, and he still insisted that we go our separate ways, it might crush me.

Come on, Tripp, I told myself, taking a deep breath. It's just sex. You're the king of one-night stands and emotionless fucks. You've done it dozens, maybe hundreds, of times before. What's one more? Why is Nicola different?

Because he's Nicola and I like him, I thought.

Then I shook my head. *I can do this. I can be an adult about it. If I don't at least try, I'm going to regret this for the rest of my life.*

I closed my eyes, trying to recreate scenes I'd seen in pornos, substituting myself and Nicola for the actors. Heat flushed my body and my cock stiffened rapidly as I imagined him on top of me, riding me like there was no tomorrow, those beautiful, delicate wings spread out and glittering in the afternoon light.

The bedroom door cracked open with a gentle knock and my heart shot up into my throat. “Tripp?” Nicola called quietly.

I pretended to rub the sleep from my eyes. “Yeah, what is it?”

He sighed and backed into the room holding two steaming cups. The scent of coffee tempted me away from the pillow to sit up.

“I thought I would try my hand at recreating your coffee,” Nicola started, coming over to the bed, “but I seem to have failed. I was hoping you might tell me where I went wrong? I’m sorry to disturb you, darling.”

“No, it’s all right,” I said, taking the coffee from Nicola as he sat down on the bed next to me. I shifted to hide my erection. “Actually, I was just thinking about you.”

“Naughty things, I hope?” he said with one of his mischievous smiles.

“Very,” I admitted and took his coffee from him, too, placing it beside mine.

“Ooh,” he said in a scandalous tone and laughed. “Do tell?”

I blushed as he leaned in, pressing his hand to my chest. “God, it’s hot in here. Is it hot in here?”

“It’s about to get a lot hotter,” he purred. “And where was I in this naughty fantasy you were indulging, hmm?”

“Well, um...I don’t, uh...”

“Was I face down on the mattress? Or maybe on my hands and knees?” He grinned, leaning in more.

“You were...” I licked my lips. My heart was pounding so hard I was worried it’d leave bruises on my ribs. “On top.”

He chuckled and pushed against my chest. I took the hint and fell back, letting him climb on top of me.

“Like this?” he asked and moved my hands to his hips.

It felt like there was something stuck in my throat. I tried to swallow it, but couldn’t. “Sort of. But we were naked.”

“Obviously.”

“And I was...inside you.”

“Naturally,” he said with a little shrug.

“And your wings were...” I sighed and let myself give his thighs a little squeeze. “All spread out and so beautiful, Nicola.”

“Hmm.” The sound came out in a throaty purr that made my cock twitch. “Is that what you want, darling?”

Yes, my brain answered immediately. The rest of me took a minute to catch up. I chewed on my bottom lip, watching hungrily as Nicola carefully removed his shirt and made a show of dropping it on the floor next to the bed. “Is that what *you* want?” I asked and moved my hands to his chest. My fingers sank into that luxuriously soft fur and found the lovely, lean muscle beneath.

He smirked and tipped my chin back with a finger. “Honey, I’d ride you six ways to Sunday and back again in an instant. No question about it.”

“But it’d just be sex, right?” I let my fingers travel down his body, taking in the sight of him. He was so much smaller than me, so delicate.

Nicola’s hand closed over mine. “If that’s all you want, but perhaps that’s a bridge we can cross after you decide if the river is to your liking.”

I frowned. “I have no idea what that means.”

“It means,” he said, rising off my body and shifting to lay beside me, “that I’m not just male, Tripp. I’m not human either. Even if you’ve had experiences with other creatures before, I’m different. You may not enjoy sex with me. Don’t put your cart before your horse.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” I said, and rolled to face him. I put an arm around his waist and pulled him against me. “Can I kiss you?”

His chest swelled with a deep breath. Delicate, velvety soft fingers brushed over the side of my face. “Darling, I thought you’d never ask.”

I pulled his lips to mine, kissing him slowly at first, just getting used to the way he felt. Nicola’s body was warm, his fur soft, but underneath that was a wall of hard muscle that I found I liked maybe even more than the softness of a woman. His lips were different, too. Still soft and pliant, but they didn’t

feel human at all. More like supple, high-end leather. I swept my tongue over his lips, and he opened to me, letting me in. I groaned at the taste of him and plunged my tongue into his mouth, exploring deeper.

Something long, thin, and covered in fine hairs whipped out and curled around my tongue and I gasped. The second I pulled back, he released me. I covered my mouth with my hand, still trying to process exactly what'd happened.

Nicola sighed. "I did try to warn you it'd be different."

"What was..."

"My proboscis, darling. I don't have a tongue or teeth like you. I'm built quite differently on the inside. See?" He opened his mouth to show me.

Instead of a tongue, that long, thin tube I'd seen him drink with was curled up in there, resting along the bottom of his jaw and I wondered how that'd feel around my dick.

He closed his mouth and frowned, arms unwinding from around me. "If you didn't like it..."

"No, wait." I grabbed him tighter and held him closer, my face so hot it felt like there should be blisters. "I um...I like it. A lot. I just...Parts of you seem so delicate. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," he promised, squeezing my arm. "And if I'm ever uncomfortable, trust that I'll let you know. That goes both ways, Tripp. If you don't like anything that happens, we can always stop."

“I don’t want to stop,” I admitted and kissed him again before nuzzling against one of his antennae. “I want to touch you everywhere. I want everything. Even if it gets weird. Especially if it gets weird. But, um... You might have to help me figure out how to do it.”

“Just do what feels right,” he said and put my hands back on him. “I’ll stop you if I don’t like it, but I doubt that’ll happen.”

I nodded and kissed him again. This time, when his proboscis spiraled around my tongue, I leaned into it with an encouraging moan. I pulled his petite body against mine and couldn’t help but grind my cock against him. God, he was so much smaller than me, so light and delicate. My dick went halfway up his stomach. I wasn’t even sure it could go inside him, not without some literal gut rearranging. Was that possible? I didn’t want to hurt him.

“Fuck, Tripp,” he panted, looking down between us. “You’re so big.”

“Is it...Do you think it’ll fit?”

Nicola burst into laughter and yanked me closer so that our faces were nearly touching. “Darling, we’ll make it fit.”

“Yeah, but...I don’t want you to like...rupture something.”

He laughed again and buried his face against my neck.

“Trust me. As long as you’re patient, I *will* make it fit. Now, get your damn clothes off.”

I couldn’t get out of my clothes fast enough.

Nicola yanked off his pants, and I frowned. I was sure he'd had a thick purple cock before, but it seemed to be gone now.

"Where's your...um..." I gestured to the patch of dark fur between his legs.

"My cock?" he supplied with a chuckle and grabbed my hand. "Inside for now. He just needs a little more convincing to come out."

"Inside?" I barely got the word out before Nicola's lips were back on mine and I almost forgot all about it.

"Touch me," he commanded, half pulling me on top of him.

"Where should I..."

"Everywhere. Anywhere. However you like." He lifted his arms above his head and just laid there, his wings spread out at his back, all of him on display, the invitation hanging between us, ripe and juicy.

How was I ever supposed to resist?

I ran my fingers over the fine fur covering his belly, traced them along the insides of his arms. All the while, his red eyes blazed. He didn't react other than the occasional soft sigh or quiet moan. It was a terrible tease, since I wanted more of him, and I wanted him to touch me too, but he was just laying there, letting me do whatever I wanted. Letting me explore his body.

I couldn't take it anymore, so I kissed him again. When his hands closed around my neck, it felt right. Perfect. Like I'd been waiting my whole life for that moment.

Nicola's hands slid down my back as if he could drink me in with his touch. His fingers kneaded my ass and God did that feel good. Way better than I expected it to.

I hesitated when I realized my hand had gone much lower on his body, finding the top of a narrow slit between his legs. I pulled back from the kiss so I could see his face. "Here?" I asked, and lightly slid a single digit along the seam in his body.

He nodded and pulled my lips back to his. "Gently, darling."

Nicola let out an appreciative groan as I pushed two fingers inside of him. The opening was slippery and soft, radiating heat. He held my eyes and reached down to guide me, shifting my fingers back and deeper until I felt the blunt head of his cock. It quivered against my touch and shifted inside of him, pushing against my fingers. He started breathing a little faster, a little harder, while I traced my fingers over him. His cock throbbed against my touch, swelling and pressing harder against my fingers, twitching desperately. Was he...straining to keep it inside of him?

"Does that feel good?" I asked and started pumping my fingers in and out of him slightly.

"Stars, yes," he moaned. "But I can't...I won't be able to..." He whimpered.

"It's okay," I said and kissed his forehead.

Nicola whined quietly, his body trembling, but he was right. He couldn't hold it in any longer. My fingers retreated from

his body and his cock followed, pushing out through the opening hard and beautiful and perfect, glistening and slippery. I closed my hand around him, marveling at how I could fit all of him in my fist.

“Fuck, your hands are so big,” he murmured.

I shuddered as he wrapped his hands around me. It took both his hands to close the gap, and he squeezed, tightening his grip as he moved them up my shaft.

“Nicola,” I whined, knowing I wasn’t going to last long if he treated me like that. The feel of his hands on me was exquisite, like I was being spoiled just by the touch. “I can’t,” I panted. “I need...”

“On your back,” he ordered, and I went without a second thought.

Nicola straddled my hips, his hard cock jutting up and leaking onto my belly.

He smirked and rubbed his round ass against my cock, making me shudder.

“Don’t we need, er, lube?” I asked, still surprised that I was blushing.

Nicola arched a brow and guided my hand back to the slit his cock was jutting out of. We both moaned as he pushed my finger inside. He was impossibly tight there. I wondered if he’d let me fuck him there, but I wasn’t even sure I’d fit while he was still hard.

“Or maybe this’ll do.” I curled my fingers inside of him, gathering some of his natural lubricant.

He shuddered. “Fuck!”

“Sorry!”

“Oh, darling,” Nicola panted, rocking to drive my fingers deeper. “That was a *good* fuck. But you know the saying. There can be too much of a good thing. Keep doing that and this’ll be over before we get started.”

“Oh.” I blushed harder, though I wasn’t even sure that was possible.

Nicola kissed me and guided my slippery fingers around to his backside. I still felt like I had no idea what I was doing with him, but I’d played with my own ass enough times to know I had to get him loosened up first. The way Nicola groaned when I circled his hole made it hard to wait, though. He made the sweetest, softest little sounds, sounds I’d never heard anyone else make, and he was making them for me.

“I love the sounds you make,” I told him, pushing a single finger inside his opening.

Nicola shuddered again, fingers kneading my biceps. He felt impossibly tight at first, enough that I was still worried I wouldn’t be able to get inside of him, but he’d promised he’d make it work.

“Relax for me,” I told him, pumping the finger in and out.

“I am relaxed, darling. Your fingers are fucking *gigantic*.” He squirmed, obviously uncomfortable.

I frowned. “Maybe another position would be better?”

He shook his head. “Just go slow.”

I felt like I *was* going slowly, painfully slow. I wanted my dick inside him *now*. If I did that, though, I’d definitely hurt him, and I didn’t want that. Instead, I pulled him forward, down into another kiss, which gave me a little more room to move my finger. Just pumping it in and out of him wasn’t going to be enough. He was so tight, so small.

I pressed a second finger against his entrance and frowned when he hissed in pain. “Too much?”

“Maybe, yeah.” He let out a frustrated growl as I pulled away. “Listen, darling, I... I think this is going to take a bit more work to get where we want to be. And perhaps some better lube. And an entire afternoon.” He winced.

My heart fell, disappointed. I was really into it and wanted to try, but not at the expense of his health and comfort.

“Oh no. Poor dear.” He sighed and slid down my body. “Well, I can’t leave you like this.”

I blinked as he settled between my legs. “Wait, what are you... OH MY GOD!” My eyes rolled back and my head hit the pillow when he put his mouth around my cock.

It was like nothing I’d ever experienced before, being inside of Nicola’s mouth, and yet there were familiar elements. His mouth was warm and wet and amazing, but that was where the familiar ended and the wildly better began. With no teeth to get in the way, Nicola could use his entire mouth and boy, did

he know how to use every inch of it. He closed his lips around me and started massaging up and down my shaft with his mouth. His proboscis flicked out, winding around my cock to jack me. The tiny little hairs covering it added a whole new sensation that was indescribably good.

Nicola hummed, the vibration running up my cock, into my balls and up my spine. The soft, velvety pads of his fingertips closed around my balls, massaging firmly, and that was it. I tried to shout a warning at him, but it was too late. My orgasm hit me harder than a full-speed shoulder check.

Nicola pulled back a little, obviously surprised, but he didn't stop. His proboscis unwound from around my cock, and I let out a desperate moan as I felt the tip of it brushing over the head of my cock.

Holy shit. Nicola was sucking up my cum through his tongue-straw thing like it was a tasty treat. As if that wasn't enough, he dipped it down *inside of me* in search of more. If someone had told me I'd ever be into a dude sticking his long, straw-like tongue into my dick hole, I'd have told them to seek professional help, but holy fuck was I *ever* into it.

By the time he was done with me, I was a shivering, whimpering, overstimulated mess with tears in my eyes. My muscles quaked like I'd just had the workout of my life and I'd been laying on my back in bed!

He sat up and smacked his lips together loudly, drawing a finger along his bottom lip as he grinned in triumph.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. It was all I could say, the only words that would come to mind. “Holy shit, Nic. Holy fucking shit.”

He sighed. “Well, I did try to warn you I might ruin other men for you. Eep!” Poor Nicola barely got the words out before I tackled him to the bed. “Watch the wings! The wings, darling!”

“Sorry. Sorry!” I winced and let him go. “Are you okay?”

Nicola chuckled. “Oh, yes. And if I’m reading things right, I’m about to be better than okay, yes?”

I blushed and looked down at his hard cock. A second ago, I’d been all on board to return the favor, but now that I had an ounce of sense in my head, I wasn’t so sure. He was different from me. Maybe he wouldn’t like the same thing. Maybe I wouldn’t like it, although that was hard to believe. My mouth was instinctively watering at the sight of it now.

“Um. Well...” I cleared my throat. “I don’t exactly know what I’m doing, you know? How do I...?”

He smirked and leaned back, running a seductive hand down his furry belly. “Ever have a popsicle, Tripp?”

“Yeah. Lots of times.”

“Treat me like your favorite popsicle, darling, and you can’t go wrong.”

Okay, I could do that.

I shifted down between Nicola's legs, trying to get comfy. The position was awkward no matter what I did, but maybe that wouldn't matter once I got into it. I licked my lips and stared down his cock like I was sizing up the competition.

His dick was... Well, it was different, no two ways about it. It was conical, with no discernable head, lavender in color, and when I'd grabbed it earlier, it felt segmented. There were definitely visible grooves running in a spiral around it. It spun into a fine tip with a horizontal slit. All of him was coated in a shiny, slick lubricant, the same stuff that I'd felt while my fingers were inside of him.

Okay, Tripp. You've faced down the toughest players in the NHL, won two Stanley Cups, body checked a hundred guys bigger than you, and survived a helmet-shattering puck to the head. A mothman's dick is not going to be the thing that does you in. You got this, buddy. I blew out a breath.

"You need a pep talk, darling?" Nicola teased.

"Nope. Already did that myself," I said and stuck my tongue out to give him a tentative lick.

As soon as I touched him, he shuddered and moaned, fisting the blankets. That alone was enough encouragement for me to keep going. At least the taste wasn't too off-putting. I expected it to be weird and a little gross, but it wasn't bad. A little bitter, salty, and musky, but he mostly just tasted like clean skin and something my brain said was sexy as hell. The more I had of it, the more I wanted it, too. I closed my mouth around him like he'd done to me and pushed my face down his length,

taking all of him in my mouth at once. Nicola's hands flew to the back of my head, and he ground out a curse, but he didn't push me back or anything. His fingers curled in my hair like he was holding on for dear life. Maybe he was. His legs were sure trembling like it.

Spurred on by how much he was clearly enjoying what I was doing to him, I pushed down a little further, flattening my tongue so he could get further back in my mouth. My tongue dipped into the warm, slick slit his cock was jutting out of, the taste of him stronger there. It drove me wild. I suddenly couldn't get enough and started lapping at the spot like I was starving for it.

Nicola groaned and started panting. His hips jerked, and I almost choked when he pushed further back and hit my throat, but the truth was, he just wasn't big enough to choke me. Maybe that'd be a turn off, but I liked it. It meant I could fill my whole mouth with him and have room to maneuver my tongue to tease him. I'd never be able to do what he did, but damn if I didn't want to try.

"Stars, Tripp," he moaned. "Oh, my fucking stars, that's good. Don't. Stop."

Like I had plans to. If I'd known I'd like sucking moth dick that much, I'd have been doing it all day. I gripped his hips, pinning them to the mattress. He whined in frustration because he couldn't thrust anymore, but that was the whole point. I wanted to enjoy doing this for as long as I could. Plus, I'd just realized that my hands were large enough to curl around and

grip his ass while I was holding his hips. I squeezed him, making him groan in pleasure before I started pushing and pulling him, forcing him to thrust between my lips.

“Faster,” Nicola planted. “Faster, please!”

But I didn’t want to go faster, and I was in charge. He wasn’t strong enough to fight the grip I had on him, completely at my mercy, and I was going to savor this for as long as I could.

“Tripp...”

God, he was so sexy when he was moaning my name. It was too soon for my dick to rally, but damn if I didn’t wish I could.

“Tripp! I...It’s...” He let out the most miserable little whine, one that almost made me want to take mercy on him. “Please, darling. I’m so close!”

Well, how was anyone supposed to say no to that? He was such a sweet talker.

I released my hold on him, surrendering control to let him set his own pace. Nicola grabbed the back of my head and started jackhammering his dick into my mouth, using me like his favorite toy and fuck if it wasn’t the hottest thing. I moaned around him to let him know I liked it and relaxed as much as I could, giving him all the control.

Nicola’s movements suddenly got all uncoordinated and jerky. He let out the most beautiful, shuddering sigh and flooded my tongue with his release. It was more than I was expecting, and with a lot more force, enough that I struggled to swallow around him.

When it was done, he groaned and sagged back against the bed, throwing an arm over his face. His chest rose and fell with harsh pants.

I sat up and did my best to make my face presentable, scrubbing it with the rumpled sheet. “You okay?”

“Okay?” He lowered his hand and peeked at me from beneath it. “*Okay?* darling, how am I supposed to live now?”

I frowned. “I don’t understand.”

He laid there for another minute, just trying to catch his breath. “Are you certain you’ve never done that before?”

“Never with a dick, but I’ve had lots of popsicles,” I said with a shrug.

“And I am jealous of every single one.”

“So it was okay, then?”

He guided me down to the mattress to lie next to him and curled up against me. “Darling, you were wonderful. Now just let me bask in the afterglow a bit before you start trying to pull me back into the real world.”

“I don’t understand what that means,” I mumbled.

“Hold me, darling. Tell me I’m beautiful and let me have a nap. And when I wake up, feed me.”

I grinned and slid my arm under him, pulling him closer. “You are beautiful, Nicola.”

He sighed happily and shifted to lie on his side. “That’s the stuff,” he mumbled as I pulled the blanket up over him.

I chuckled and kissed the top of his head, but he was already half asleep in my arms.

Chapter Eight

Nicola



I ROLLED OVER WITH a groan, reaching for Tripp's warmth, and found the sheets bare. My eyes fluttered open, and I frowned at the sight of the empty bed. The covers were thrown back, and the door cracked open. I could hear him moving around in the other room of the suite, but I couldn't quite make out what he was doing.

"Tripp?" I called, sitting up.

The door pushed open wider, his big frame blocking out the light beyond. "Sorry. Did I wake you? I was trying to let you sleep in."

"No, no." I rubbed sleep from my eyes and yawned. "What time is it?"

"Five," he replied with a wince.

I squinted at him. "In the morning? Stars above, why are you up at such an unholy hour?"

"Habit. I was just doing my morning workout." He stepped into the room and my eyes finally adjusted to the change in

light, revealing he'd put on a pair of gray sweatpants and nothing else. They sat low on his hips, leaving most of the best parts of him free for my eyes to roam over.

I sighed dreamily as I took him in. The best part of waking up was seeing a sweaty Tripp Powers in nothing but a pair of tight gray sweatpants. "If you insist on getting all sweaty so early, maybe I could help?" I flapped my wings and flew over to where he was, practically depositing myself in his arms.

Tripp laughed. "Tempting as that is, I'm all hot and sweaty and haven't showered. I'm pretty sure I smell awful."

He didn't. He smelled like sweat and sex, and I wanted to gobble him up. "I like the way you smell when you get all sweaty," I purred and buried my face against his meaty pecs.

Underneath all that muscle, Tripp's heart was pounding as he carried me back to the bed. I thought maybe he was going to take me up on my offer. After all, he really seemed to enjoy himself the night before. Why not go for round two?

Instead, he set me on the bed beside him and put his hands on his knees, staring at the floor. "Listen, Nicola. About last night..."

Oh no, I thought with a wince. This doesn't sound good.

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry if it didn't go as you expected. I, um... I really didn't know what I was doing. Like, I've watched porn and stuff, but I know that's not real and, well, you're different. I wanted to do it right, and I'm sorry we

didn't get to, and I'm sorry if you were disappointed by my performance."

I blinked in confusion. "Wait, what?"

"I'll...understand if you don't want to do anything else." He rubbed the back of his neck without looking at me.

"Tripp, darling..." I took his hand. "Your performance was nothing short of amazing. Why would you think otherwise?"

Tripp frowned. "Because we didn't...I couldn't...you know." The poor human's face was blazing red.

"Because we didn't have penetrative sex?" I supplied and then couldn't help but laugh at how ridiculous a notion it was. "Darling, I'm not from Ikea. There's more to sex than simply inserting rod A into slot B until climax. Just because we didn't go all the way doesn't mean I didn't enjoy every second of that, because let me be clear. I absolutely, positively, one hundred percent would do it all again without one single change. Except, well, maybe to make you more comfortable in the beginning."

"Really?" His eyes widened briefly before he squinted at me, scrutinizing. "You're not just saying that to make me feel better, are you?"

"Tripp Powers! Are you calling me a liar?" I pulled away, putting a hand dramatically against my chest to feign offense. "I'm insulted!"

"No, I didn't mean..." He sighed and rubbed his face. "Okay, but like...You're not even the least bit upset?"

“Upset? No. Disappointed? Maybe a little, but that burden falls on me. It has nothing to do with you being inadequate in any way. Let’s chalk it up to poor preparation. If you’re interested in trying that again, we’ll need a few things to make it work, probably.”

“Like what?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

“Well, proper lube for one,” I said, counting on my fingers. “And maybe a decent plug.”

“A plug?”

I chuckled and patted his shoulder. “A butt plug, darling. Your fingers are quite large and I’m sadly more delicate than I’d like to admit. We need the proper tool for the job. That means either a butt plug or dildo, if you’d prefer.”

“Oh,” he said, blushing. He squirmed in place. “Um, well... I wouldn’t know anything about any of that. I’ve never messed around with that kind of stuff, Nicola.”

I grinned and stood up, stretching. “Well then, I know how we’ll spend our Sunday. Why don’t you make up some coffee since I’m clearly terrible at it?” I gestured to the two cold and abandoned cups I’d messed up the night before. They were still sitting on the bedside table, untouched. “Then we can jump in the shower and go on another little field trip. What do you say, darling? Are you up for a little shopping spree with me?”

Tripp smiled warmly. “Yeah, absolutely.”



I SQUINTED INTO THE dawn creeping through the bedroom windows while Tripp shook the last of the coffee beans into the grinder. My people weren't meant to be awake at that hour. Every instinct in me was screaming that I should go back to bed, sleep through the day, and get back up at dusk. We were nocturnal by nature, and here I was, fighting that nature.

Why? Because I'd somehow gotten it in my head that I wanted to be somebody. The world wasn't made for nocturnal monsters. Business was always conducted between the hours of nine in the morning and five in the afternoon. If I stuck to my natural sleep cycle, I never would have had a chance to make it in the entertainment industry. How could I compete with the other talent agents in the field if I was asleep? I couldn't. So, I had resolved early on in my career to battle my inner nature and flip the clock. I'd sleep at night like everyone else, and stay awake all day.

Hence my coffee addiction. Caffeine was my salvation in those early days, and it still propped me up most of the time.

But some days, I wondered why I bothered, especially when I had such a comfy bed waiting for me, and nowhere I had to be. Though I'd promised to take Tripp shopping, hadn't I?

I sighed. *Best put yourself together, Nicola. You have a baby bi to guide through the rainbow of his awakening.*

“The key to making good coffee is the ratio,” Tripp was saying, completely unaware that I was waging a silent war against the sun in my head. “And the ratio changes based on your brewing method. A lot of people swear by the French press or the Chemex method, and I like the taste of that, but I gotta be honest with you, Nicola. I’m just too clumsy to go brewing coffee in glass containers, and the press is nice, but it takes up too much counter space for an appliance that does only one thing.”

“You sound like you’re selling me something on QVC, darling.” I leaned on my elbow.

“I’m practicing,” he said proudly. “I figure whoever you get as an investor in Brewtiful’s will want a demo, right?”

“A demonstration, yes, but not a lecture.” I stifled a yawn. “And I’m too tired to pay attention just now.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“It’s all right. Just caffeinate me and call me pretty. That’s all I need in life right now.”

“I can’t help it,” he said, carefully measuring the water. He used the premium bottled water out of the minibar instead of from the sink. “I just really like coffee. It’s the process for me. I’ve never been smart about anything, but for some reason, I get this. If all math was coffee math, I’d be a genius.”

I chuckled and patted his arm. “You are in your own way. Not everything is about being book smart, you know. I read a book once about the different sorts of intelligence. Did you know, there’s a such thing as physical intelligence?”

“Really?” he asked excitedly.

I nodded and leaned back in my chair. “You have to have a particular amount of spatial awareness to be good at sports. Even if you don’t realize it, when you were on the ice, you were making complex calculations in your head all the time. How fast did you need to go? How far? How hard is the impact going to be? How hard do you need to hit the puck to make it go where you want without hurting someone?”

“Yeah,” he said and winced, rubbing the side of his head. “Miscalculations can be dangerous.”

“Does it hurt, darling?”

He sighed and shrugged. “It’s just a headache. I get them all the time.”

“Nonsense. There’s no reason for you to suffer. Come here. Sit.” I pointed to the floor space between my legs.

Tripp came over to settle between them without so much as a whimper of resistance, sitting with his back to me.

I put my hands on his shoulders and squeezed. “*Relax.*”

“Oof. You’re stronger than you look.”

“And you’re far too tense,” I said, kneading the thick muscle of his shoulders. “What’s on your mind, darling?”

“I just really want Brewtiful’s to be a thing, you know?” He leaned back and closed his eyes while I worked out the knots of tension.

“It’s important to you. Your dream.”

“More than a dream,” he said quietly. “It’s a promise I made myself when I didn’t have anything else to look forward to. The one thing I had left in the world when I thought I had nothing. If I don’t do this, Nicola... I don’t know. It almost feels like I never existed.”

I thought for a long moment, working my way up his neck to the base of his skull. My fingers started to ache with the effort, but it was worth it if it helped him relax.

I understood what he meant, I supposed. I felt like that with every deal I closed. Each one was important, earth shattering, life changing...Until it wasn’t. There was always another deal to close, more talent to hunt down, a bigger star to chase. The work was never ending, even if I enjoyed it. It was satisfying to a degree, but it wasn’t true happiness. It had taken a long time for me to realize that the elation I felt when I signed new talent and shook hands on a new deal wasn’t happiness. Not really. It was just an adrenaline high. The harder I chased after success, the more miserable I became.

This weekend with Tripp, strange as it was, was the first time in a long time I’d stopped to think about what I was doing and why. It was also the first time in many years that I found myself truly happy. I could have sat in that hotel room with

him for days doing nothing but drinking coffee and chatting about life as long as I got to touch him.

And it wasn't the coffee or the room making me feel that way.

It was Tripp.

His easy smile. The fresh way he looked at the world. His excitement over small things.

He'd made me feel alive in a way I hadn't for so long.

My throat was suddenly tight and a cold dread for Tuesday settled in the pit of my stomach. How could I go through with annulling this marriage? If I did, I might never see him again. I didn't know if what we had was love, or if that was even possible after just a few days, but it was something good, and I wanted more of it. More of him.

"Mmm, that's good." He tipped his head back and smiled up at me, eyes closed.

I couldn't resist bending down to press a quick kiss to his lips.

Tripp's eyes opened, dark lashes fluttering. Our eyes met and my heart jumped like I'd just been hit by an electric shock. I could look into his pretty blue eyes forever and never get tired of it.

He blinked slowly and reached to touch the side of my face. "Nicola, about Tuesday. I—"

Before he could finish the thought, my phone buzzed. I snatched it up from the table to answer it with a scowl. “This had better be important or I’ll—”

Chef Adam Northstar giggled on the other side. “You’re so grumpy first thing in the morning, Nic! You remind me of Inzo.”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Adam! What can I do for you?”

“Well, there was a lull in the prep this morning so I figured I’d call you while I could to work out the details of that coffee deal,” he said.

I sat up straighter and pushed Tripp’s head away so I could turn and take notes. “Yes, of course. You wanted samples?”

“Actually, if it’s as good as you say, I’d love to feature it on next Sunday’s menu,” he said. “I can do a full spread designed to complement it. You know how I love my themed brunches. Of course, that means I’ll need a sample ASAP. Not that I doubt your claims that it’s the best domestic coffee you’ve ever tasted but...Needs more salt. Sorry. A chef’s work is never done. Anyway, what was I saying?”

“You wanted a sample of Brewtiful’s coffee for Northstar.” I glanced over at Tripp, whose eyes had gone as wide as saucers.

“Oh, yes. How soon can you arrange that?”

I considered all I had to do and how long it would take. Tripp’s bag of coffee beans was empty, which meant we

needed to get more. To have enough for Northstar, that meant a flight out to meet Tripp's suppliers. And if we had to stop to do the annulment paperwork on Tuesday... "Wednesday?"

Adam hissed. "Oh, can't. I do my ordering on Wednesday, which means it'd have to be before then. Can you do Tuesday afternoon?"

"Tuesday?" *Only if we skip the annulment.* I glanced over at Tripp, who nodded furiously. "Absolutely," I agreed.

"Perfect!" Adam exclaimed. "Then I'll see you and Tripp here at Brimstone Tuesday afternoon at two o'clock. And thank you, Nic, for the opportunity."

"Thank you," I said and hung up.

"Oh my God, Nicola!" Tripp threw his arms around me and squeezed, careful not to get my wings. "You got me into Northstar?"

"Not yet, darling," I said, wriggling free. "First, we need to meet with your supplier and get the beans. You said they were in Florida. I can get us a flight out there tonight at the earliest, but with the meeting falling on Tuesday..."

He pressed his lips together in thought. "We don't have to get the annulment done on Tuesday, do we? I mean, does it really matter if we do it then or Thursday?"

"Or next week," I offered hopefully.

He waved a dismissive hand. "Yeah. It doesn't matter. It's not like it's time sensitive or anything."

“But this deal with Northstar is,” I said, rising. “If he likes your coffee, Northstar will be inviting some big potential investors to a special brunch on Sunday at his restaurant. Coffee connoisseurs, darling. The kind of people who can not only finance Brewtiful’s but take it to the next level.”

“Oh, Nicola!” Tripp exclaimed and hugged me again. He buried his head against my shoulder. “I can’t believe you did this! You’re so good to me! I don’t deserve this.”

I took a half step back and lifted his chin with a finger. “Darling, you deserve the world. You always have. My work hasn’t made you worthy of that. All I’ve done is give you the right tools and connections to reach your full potential. You’ve done the rest.”

“But,” he said, blinking back tears, “I haven’t done anything but come up with an *idea*. You’re the one helping me make it real. Without you, I—”

I put my finger to his lips, silencing him. “*We* are making it real. Together.”

His jaw trembled, and he hugged me a third time. “Thank you, Nicola.”

I smiled and hugged him back. “Don’t thank me yet, darling. This was the easy part. Now, the real work begins.”

Chapter Nine

Tripp

I PULLED MY COLLAR up as if I could hide behind it and tucked my head down low. I could see the headlines all over the sports blogs already. Tripp Powers, spotted in Vegas sex shop. What would my mother say?

Nicola didn't seem the least bit embarrassed to be there. He walked in like he owned the place. Sometimes, I wished I had half his confidence. I used to be a lot more confident before my head injury. Then it was everything anyone wanted to talk about for months. Between my injury, the recovery, and retirement, it felt like I'd had a camera in my face every day for almost a year.

"Hi, there. Anything I can help you find?" came a chipper female voice at my side.

I almost shrieked and jumped out of my skin before I realized she was speaking to Nicola.

He flashed her a wide smile and curled his arm around mine. "No, thank you. I think we'd just like to browse."

The woman—who was human with pink hair—smiled back. “If you need anything, just shout and I’ll be right there!” she said and grabbed a box from a pile on the floor before walking away.

I let out a relieved breath and eyed a tall display of little neon vibrators, deciding whether to duck behind them. Maybe I could hide there until Nicola found what he wanted. I wasn’t even sure why he’d made me come in to begin with. I didn’t want anything in there. He could buy whatever he wanted, and I’d be just as happy to help him use it.

Oh, God. My face felt like it was *on fire*.

“Tripp, darling, are you all right? I’ve never seen you so flushed.” He flapped his wings, rising to place a hand on my forehead. “You’re not feverish.”

I pulled away from him. “No, I’m just...” I leaned in to whisper. “How can you be so cool about this? What if someone recognizes you?”

Nicola blinked once and then laughed, flying past me to a giant wall of lube bottles on display. He picked one from near the top and flew back down, putting it in the little plastic basket he had on his arm. “You mean what if someone discovers I like hot, gay sex? How absolutely *scandalous*. How dare consenting adults enjoy themselves in the privacy of their own homes! What *is* the world coming to? Someone sound the alarm! The sky is falling! The gays are having fun again!”

“All right, I get it,” I mumbled. “Just...keep your voice down, okay?”

He tilted his head to the side. “Let me see if I’ve got this right. You’re totally okay with being painted in the tabloids as a playboy with a woman on each arm, but being seen in a sex shop is a bridge too far? Why?”

“I don’t know,” I said, rubbing the back of my head and trying not to look around. “It’s just weird, I guess.”

“And why is it weird?” He moved to the first aisle, browsing casually like he was searching for produce and not a dildo.

I scrambled after him. The only thing more embarrassing than being spotted in an adult toy store would be being spotted *alone*. “I don’t know.”

“Here.” He shoved something at me.

I took it without thinking and then nearly dropped it when I realized it was a giant twelve-inch double-sided dildo. In my panic, I must’ve hit a button or something because suddenly one end of the damn thing started twisting around like that little girl’s head in *The Exorcist*. “What do I do?” I blurted and started to sweat.

“Well, you didn’t burst into flames or fall over dead, now did you?” He took the toy and hit the hidden button, shutting it off. Nicola eyed me before putting it back and moving down the aisle. He picked up another package and put it back with a sigh. “Listen, Tripp. If you don’t want to do this, then that’s fine. You only need to say so.”

“What?” I scrunched up my face, confused.

He turned away from the display of toys and my heart instantly clenched at the sight of him looking at me with those sad eyes. “Do you want to have sex with me or not?”

I glanced around nervously, afraid someone would hear for some reason. But why? That didn’t make any sense. It wasn’t like I was ashamed of being with Nicola, even if our arrangement was temporary. I was just...

Well, it was hard to put into words. If it was just me and him, that was okay, but what if we suddenly got swarmed by cameras or fans? There’d be uncomfortable questions, people demanding that I qualify whatever this was. Things would change. He might even get irritated with all the attention and decide to cut things off, and that wasn’t what I wanted.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “That’s not it, Nicola. I do. It’s just that when we’re in public together, I’m always worried someone is going to spot us and come over with questions, and I don’t know what to say. It’s why I froze up on the ice yesterday. People started asking about you and me and I just... I don’t know how to answer that.”

His expression softened, and he came over to take my hand. “You don’t owe anyone an explanation for what you do.”

“Yes, I do,” I said, pulling away. “I’m a public figure.”

“But you’re allowed to have a private life, no matter how public you are,” he insisted with fire in his tone. “People need to butt the fuck out of your private business, Tripp.”

“They won’t though.” I grabbed my arm and turned away.

Fractured images danced through my memory, photographs on the front of Sports Weekly of me with my face all bruised and looking like a mummy after my recent surgery. Pictures of me struggling to make it down a hallway in a walker like an old man. Candid photos taken of me sitting around at home surrounded by empty takeout containers and bottles from when I couldn’t cope with the forced retirement.

“No matter what I do, there’ll always be someone who wants to take a picture of it,” I said. “Some paparazzi who want to make a buck by making me look bad.”

“Bullies, you mean.” Nicola snorted. “You have to deal with them as such, darling. You can’t control whatever gets written about you in the tabloids, but you can control how you react to it. It’s only a scandal if you let them treat it like one.”

I spun on Nicola. “So I should just act like it doesn’t bother me that the only pictures most people have seen of me are of me half dead in a hospital bed?” I didn’t mean to raise my voice, but it came out that way.

Heads turned toward us, and I wanted to shrink into a puddle.

Nicola crossed his arms, the basket hanging limply in front of him. “Public Tripp needs to act like it doesn’t, yes. But Private Tripp can brood about it all he wants with his closest friends and those who care about him. That’s the distinction you need to make, darling.” He put a hand on my arm as if I

hadn't just shouted at him. "Who do you have to talk to in private? A friend? Family?"

I shook my head. I used to have my teammates, but ever since my injury, we hadn't really spoken. I just couldn't face them. There were my parents, but they didn't understand, and I tried to keep them out of the public eye as much as possible.

"What about your assistant? Cage?" Nicola asked.

I snorted. "Cage would just tell me to man up and deal with it. Like every celebrity does."

Nicola narrowed his eyes. "The more I hear about this Cage fellow, the more I dislike him."

"I don't really have anybody," I said quietly.

"Well, you do now," he said, patting my arm. "You have me."

I perked up. "Really?" Then my heart sank as I remembered how temporary our arrangement was. "But what about after... you know?"

"Pfft." He waved a dismissive hand and made his way down the aisle to pull something off the shelf. "Regardless of where we wind up at the end of this journey, I don't want to just move on and forget you exist. We should remain friends, yes? And what are friends for if not to listen to each other bitch and moan about the pressures of work?"

I blinked. "You want to be friends?"

Nicola chuckled. "We're friends already, aren't we?"

Something warm sprouted in my chest like a tiny sun and I smiled. It'd been a long time since I'd had a friend. Too long. As much as I enjoyed exploring sex with Nicola, having him as a friend held even more appeal.

I smiled and nodded. "Yeah, we're friends." *More than friends.*

"Wonderful news, darling. Now, come down here and help me. I can't decide between the Maverick Man and the Colossus Cock."

I grinned. I was pretty sure friends didn't help friends pick out sex toys. That was the kind of thing reserved for best friends. Since Nicola was my only friend, that automatically made him my best friend.

My best friend, my lover, and my husband. All three sounded so good, I almost hoped this would never end. What would he say if I told him I didn't want to annul the marriage? We still barely knew each other, even if it felt like I'd been waiting for him forever. Maybe that's what a marriage was, though. Two best friends for life, having their whole lives to get to know each other better than anyone. That wouldn't be so bad. And if it didn't work out, there wasn't exactly a time limit to undo things. If we decided ten years down the road that we were better off as friends, we could change things then.

Could I do that? Ten years of this with Nicola? It was hard to wrap my brain around ten days of it, let alone ten years, but I wanted to try. I wanted to do everything with him.

Including helping him decide between the Maverick Man and the Colossus Cock dildoes, so I followed him down the aisle.

Chapter Ten

Nicola



ONE COULD BE FORGIVEN for thinking it was ironic for mothfolk to fly business class on an airplane. While I did have wings, flying from Las Vegas to Florida was simply out of the question for the modern mothman. My ancestors would have balked at such a sojourn. Besides, the humidity in the south would be murder enough.

Tripp slept through most of the four-and-a-half-hour flight. I didn't blame him. Plane rides were boring. That gave me time to get caught up on all the emails I'd been dodging from my other clients, and to assure them that I was alive and we'd reconnect in the future. With that done, I turned to something else I'd been putting off: finding out everything I could about this Cage fellow.

Tripp's assistant was a slippery one to track down. For someone in proximity to such a famous figure, he was strangely absent from most social media. His online digital footprint was far too small to be of use to Tripp, which made me like him even less. Tripp needed someone to help him

manage his online image, especially if he wanted to launch Brewtiful's into the stratosphere.

As we began to descend, Tripp woke from his nap, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He stretched and yawned. "We almost there?"

"Descending now," I said and lowered the tablet I was working on. "Darling, I think you should fire your assistant."

Tripp blinked rapidly, slowly processing what I was saying. "Fire Cage? But then, who will help me?"

"He's not really helping you now. A decent assistant should be managing your social media accounts, encouraging you within reason through your various pursuits. An assistant lifts you up, frees you to follow your heart. As far as I can tell, all Cage does is your shopping and your laundry." I tapped the tablet. "Your socials are a ghost town and your appointments are a mess."

"He sends me reminders," Tripp protested.

"Tripp." I gave him a serious look and lowered the tablet. "I know you want to be nice, and you are. You're too nice for your own good. Sometimes, doing what's right for you means getting your claws out."

He sighed and rubbed his face. "I know, but...Nicola, he's been with me forever and he's a friend of a friend. I *can't* fire him."

"But I can," I offered, getting a confused look from Tripp. I put a hand on his bicep and squeezed. It was supposed to be a

comforting gesture at first, but touching him suddenly reminded me of how much I liked being close to him. “I know you don’t want to be the bad guy here, but you need to do what’s best for you.”

“Who’s going to do all that if I fire Cage, Nic?” he said, shoulders slumping.

“I would.”

He stared at me for a moment. “You would? But what about... I mean, aren’t we still going to...undo this?”

Something clenched in my chest at the thought of never seeing Tripp again. Never getting to touch him again, not waking up beside him again. Never getting to see that sweet smile again. “Is that still what you want?”

He lowered his eyes, thinking hard. “I mean, that’s the sensible thing to do, isn’t it? Who gets married in Vegas after one night and just stays that way, right?”

I took a deep breath before blurting, “We could.”

Tripp stared at me, his expression impossible to read.

I cleared my throat and added, “I mean, if you wanted. We could try it out. See how long it takes before we get sick of each other’s company.”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever get sick of you, Nicola,” he admitted quietly.

The words warmed my heart. “You say that now, but it’s only been a few days. I can be a lot.”

“So can I. That’s why I need an assistant. And while I’d love to have you as mine, I’m not sure that’s a good enough reason for us to stay married, Nicola.”

“Oh, poo on that,” I said, pulling my hand away and waving it dismissively. “Marriage is just another word for a partnership. It’s no different from a corporate merger done on a small scale.”

He frowned. “Isn’t it?”

I sighed. “Well, I suppose it is. Corporate entities are rather cold, aren’t they? You and I are... Well, we’re friends. Lovers. Can’t we be partners too? And if we are, then I dare say those might be all the necessary ingredients for a marriage, Tripp.”

He considered me for a long moment, and my heart started pounding in my chest. What if he disagreed? What if he didn’t want to stay married, and he was just after a fling? I’d just put myself out there, made myself vulnerable. He could still reject me. I had told myself it wouldn’t bother me if he did, but that wasn’t true.

Stars save me. I *liked* him. Given time, I could grow to *love* him. Maybe I already did. Maybe that’s what this strange warmth I felt in my bones was, this need to be close to him, to touch him all the time. I’d never felt that with anyone, but it was so natural with Tripp.

When Tripp opened his mouth to answer, though, I silenced him with a finger on his lips. “Don’t answer now, darling. Think it over. Let’s get the funding you need for Brewtiful’s

first. Give us a week and answer me after the event at Northstar. Can you wait that long?"

His lips twitched into a small smile. "I feel like I've been waiting forever already, but all right. A week is nothing when we could have forever."

Oh, heavenly stars. This man. He had my heart in a chokehold. How was I ever not supposed to fall for him?

We landed and rushed through the airport to collect our luggage. We didn't have much, so we swung by a department store to pick up some decent clothes for meeting with Tripp's suppliers. Eventually, we'd have to fly back to Seattle to get Tripp's things. The thought of getting to see where he lived filled me with excitement. I wanted to show him where I lived in Ohio, too, though I was sure that would be much less interesting to him.

If we stay together, we'll have to consolidate our belongings to one location, I thought, watching him hold up a blue tie. *I wonder if Tripp would object to me moving in with him.*

I had always wanted to live out West. That was where most of my clients lived. Flying from Seattle to LA would be much less taxing than living out of a suitcase four months a year. Half the time, my apartment in Columbus sat empty. I was on the road so much, it was barely lived in.

I stood in the department store, dreaming up snowy mornings where I stayed in bed until Tripp brought me coffee, or evenings spent huddled under a blanket on the sofa

watching TV, or afternoons spent working in our separate offices punctuated by lunch and coffee in a quaint kitchen.

“Nicola?”

I blinked and shook my head when I realized Tripp was waving a hand in front of my face. “What?”

He frowned. “You kinda zoned out there. You okay?”

“I’m wonderful.” I cleared my throat and pointed to the red tie he was holding up. “The red looks better on you, darling.”

“Really?” He lifted the tie and cocked his head to one side. “Okay. You’re the boss.”

I sprouted a wry grin. “Oh, am I now?”

Tripp flushed all the way to his ears. “Well, I mean, aren’t you? Besides, I kind of like it when you boss me around.”

I laughed and seized the tie from him, flying up to wrap it around his neck. His eyes were as big as saucers as I pulled him in for a kiss. For once, he didn’t flinch while we were in public. “That I can accommodate.”

Chapter Eleven

Tripp

I STOOD AT THE window in our hotel room, watching the sunset over the ocean. The drive from Orlando down to Griffon Beach had taken just over an hour and a half in the little rental car Nicola got, but I felt like I'd been cooped up for days. Before we went west, I hoped there would be time to go bury my feet in the sand and enjoy the feel of ocean waves rolling over my ankles. It'd been a long time since I'd felt that.

It seemed this was the week for a lot of old feelings to come back.

I lifted the chai tea I'd made for a sip. It wasn't as good as coffee, but there was nothing better than a hot drink to calm the nerves. And I was nervous about that night, especially knowing Nicola's plans.

I turned my head, eying the closed bathroom door. A small trail of steam crept up from under it and I could hear the shower running. Nicola said he needed some time to get ready. I wasn't sure what exactly that entailed, but he said he'd be a while. Every minute he was gone made me more nervous.

The last time we'd fooled around had been amazing, but it hadn't gone like I'd planned. I didn't want to disappoint him again. All of this was new to me, so I'd been doing a little research on my phone when he wasn't around. I got out my phone again and pulled up one of the articles I'd saved: *How to be A Good Top*, which I guess was what I was doing. I think.

Bears and otters and tops, sides, vers... There was a lot of new terminology to learn just to figure out how to put my dick in a different hole. I figured there'd be stuff to learn, but I didn't expect to have to pick up a whole lingo.

Everything was like that, though, wasn't it? When I first got into coffee, I'd had to learn to speak the language too. I had to learn the difference between light and dark roasts, different methods of processing, the difference between a coffee cherry and a coffee bean. I'd even taken a class on how to do latte art. I wasn't very good at it with my fat fingers, but I could make a recognizable heart about fifty percent of the time.

I skimmed the article and then set my tea aside to go digging in my toiletries bag for nail clippers to use. After cleaning up the mess, I decided I should try to set the mood and went to fiddle with the curtains and the lighting, moved a few pillows around. Then I remembered I should set out everything we bought and grabbed the bags from Fangtasiez, blushing as I got out the big pink toy Nicola had bought. Just thinking about how good he'd look with that stuffed inside of him was getting me hard.

Shit, how did I ever think I was straight? Then again, I'd never thought about anyone the way I thought about Nicola. He was special.

I was still fighting with the plastic packaging, trying to get it open, when I heard Nicola clear his throat. The noise surprised me enough I lost my grip on the package. It fell to the floor, and I watched in horror as the big pink dildo bounced out of the plastic and into the air, hitting Nicola square between the eyes.

"Fuck! Are you okay?" I launched off the side of the bed and went to look him over, putting my hands on his shoulders and turning him this way and that. He'd come out of the shower with only a towel wrapped around his waist.

He chuckled. "It'll take more than a dildo to the forehead to do me in."

I frowned. "All it took for me was a tiny little puck."

Nicola's velvety fingers brushed over my forehead before he took my face in his hands. "Darling, you're not done in. You're here. With me."

"I know, but..."

"Shh. No more talk of yesterday," he said, and bent to pick up the toy before pulling me toward the bed. "No more worries about tomorrow. Not tonight. Tonight, there's only you and me, and now."

I sighed, relieved. That sounded so nice. The best thing in the world, especially if it included spending time with Nicola.

He took my hands in his. “Do you still want to do this?”

“Yes. More than anything. But only with you.”

Something in his face softened, and he shook his head. “Oh, Tripp, darling. You shouldn’t say such things. My jaded old heart might go soft.”

I snorted. “You’re not jaded or old.”

“Not when I’m with you,” he said, rising to his knees on the mattress. “When I’m with you, I feel like a different person. A better person.”

“Same.”

He gave an approving hum and crawled into my lap. With a firm hand on my chest, he pushed lightly, and I went to my back without any resistance. Nerves threatened to choke off all my air, but Nicola made me forget all about them with a kiss. The way his soft, warm lips pressed against mine could make me forget anything, and I wouldn’t even mind it. I kissed him back, sliding a hand under the towel to grip his ass as I plunged my tongue into his mouth. The taste of him sent a surge of desire through me. I ripped the towel away from his hips and sat up to yank my shirt off, desperate to feel all of him against me.

But when Nicola’s lips left mine, the nerves returned full force. All I could think about was how disappointing last time must’ve been for him, even though he said it wasn’t. I couldn’t let that happen again, and I needed to let him know that I was

thoroughly prepared so he didn't think I was some kind of slacker.

"I was reading some articles online about topping," I told him as he started kissing along my jaw.

"Were you now?" he asked between kisses, amused.

I nodded and flexed my fingers, squeezing his ass. "Yeah. Um. I think I should... I mean, the guide said..."

Nicola sat up and gave me a sultry look that had my dick stiffening to steel in my pants. "Darling, you don't need to worry about guides. *I'm* your guide. I'll tell you everything you need to do. Unless you'd rather get back on your phone?"

"No," I said quickly and shook my head. "I want you."

"Good," he declared. "Now, take the rest of your clothes off like a good boy."

I shuddered, but did as he told me because I did want to be good for Nicola. I wanted to make him happy, to do things right for him. To be good for him.

I slid my jeans and underwear off and tossed them aside before pulling him back to me. My hand slid up his back as we kissed, pausing only when I met his wings. "Can I touch these?" I asked hopefully. I'd been dying to touch them since I first saw them.

"Gently," he advised and spread them out further.

I bit my lip and carefully moved my fingers over one panel of his wing. They were thin and membranous, like bat wings,

but strong. Spread out like that, they caught the light, letting me see the intricate maze of veins and blood vessels pumping through them. God, they were beautiful, sparkling like they were covered in silver glitter. I slid my fingers up his wing, loving the texture, the way my hand looked against it.

Nicola shuddered and let out a low groan.

“Does that feel good?” I asked, a little perplexed. For some reason, it hadn’t occurred to me he’d be able to feel it at all, but it made sense.

“They’re very *sensitive*. Like you are here.” He dragged his fingertips over my ribs, making me squirm.

“Yeah, but that just *tickles*,” I countered.

“Really? Even when I do this?” Nicola bent down and replaced his fingertips with his lips.

I almost lost my damn mind. My eyes rolled back, and I couldn’t stop myself from pulling his hips down against mine to grind against him. “Holy fuck, that feels good.”

“I want to kiss you everywhere,” he said, his lips moving over my skin. “There’s so much of you to taste and explore.”

A little whine escaped my lips as he kissed over a nipple, his proboscis darting out to tease it. “Yes, please.”

Nicola shifted to grab the lube from the bedside table, holding it out to me. “While I do that, maybe you could help get me ready for you?”

I nodded excitedly and took the bottle. My hands shook as I coated my fingers in it, mostly because Nicola had gone back to teasing my pecs and my nipples with his soft lips. No, not teasing. What he was doing, it felt more like worship, like adoration. He was kissing and massaging every inch of me like I was a god, and fuck if it wasn't so hot I could barely concentrate on what I was doing. I couldn't think, could barely move. Fuck, I really wanted to follow the guide, but I couldn't do it like this, not with him being so distracting.

I put the lube aside. It was useless when I was shaking so badly. Nicola let out a small gasp of surprise when I picked him up from my hips.

“I want you to sit on my face,” I told him.

His lips tilted in a smirk. “Oh, really?”

“Yes,” the word practically came out as a growl. “I want your ass in my face. Now.”

“Hm. So impatient, but I like this side of you.” He peeled my hands off his hips and quickly pivoted to turn the other way with the help of his wings, and Nicola's cute little round ass was in my face, exactly where I'd wanted it since the first time I'd laid eyes on it.

Nicola moaned loudly when I licked over his entrance, and I wanted him to make that sound again. Forever. I pulled him tight against me, smothering my face with him, licking, sucking, teasing. With every lick, his hole softened for me. I pushed my tongue against it and groaned when I felt his hole

throbbing for attention, so I lavished more on it, letting him push up against me.

I slipped my tongue past the tight ring of muscle, making his hips buck. His cock was out and leaking onto my chest, but when he canted his hips more and started rubbing his dick between my pecs? Fuck, that was hot. I wanted him to come like that all over me. Wanted to feel it running down my abs, over my ribs, everywhere. Maybe I could make him come twice. That'd make up for my poor performance the first time.

I yanked his hips back harder against my face and redoubled my efforts before reaching around to push his cock down against my chest.

He moaned, rocking his hips and thrusting against the muscle there. "Oh, fuck, Tripp. I... You're going to make me come if you don't stop."

That's the whole idea, I thought and didn't let him go. He didn't fight it, speeding the pace of his hips until his cock began to spurt all over my chest. His tight hole throbbed and flexed around my tongue, pulsing with his orgasm and for a few seconds after. It was beautiful and hot, and everything I hoped it would be.

But he seemed a little frustrated by it. "Fuck, darling," he whined and pulled away from my face. "I didn't want to finish just yet."

I picked him up before he could get away and sat him on the bed next to me. "Oh, we're not done yet. That was just to make up for last time."

He snorted. “For fuck’s sake. I told you there was nothing wrong with last time.”

“Then consider it a down payment,” I replied and sat up. I bit back a moan at the feel of his cum sliding down my chest. I was filthy, but I had no urge to clean it up. I wanted it to stay there like a mark of ownership. I’d never belonged to anybody before, but I wanted to be Nicola’s.

He leaned back in the bed, red eyes gleaming as I moved between his legs. “Darling, you look positively beautiful wearing my cum.”

I beamed proudly. “I know. And you’re going to give me more of it before we’re done here.”

“Ooh, I *like* bossy Tripp.”

I grinned even wider and pushed his legs apart, carefully shifting his knees up the way the guide had suggested I do. “Then you’re going to like the rest of this even more.”

Chapter Twelve

Nicola



I SHUDDERED AND TENSED as Tripp's slick fingers slid over my hole. Everything was still so sensitive that I wanted to squirm away, wanted him to do it again, wanted *everything*. Maybe I should have told him, but I didn't want to put more pressure on him.

His forehead was all scrunched up and his tongue was sticking out from between his lips like he was concentrating really hard on what he was doing. It was adorable how focused he was on doing this according to some guide he'd read. I didn't want to tell him there wasn't a right or wrong way to do it because I was a little worried he'd lose his nerve. For once, Tripp seemed confident. Nothing looked better on Tripp Powers than confidence. Well, and a smile, of course.

My eyes rolled back, and I made a small sound of pleasure as Tripp's finger breached my entrance.

"Like that?" he asked, his tone hopeful.

"Oh, yes, darling. Just go slow."

He nodded and went back to work, fully focused on slowly giving a few testing thrusts with his finger. It was his smallest finger, and I'd done some prep work in the shower, trying to open myself up more for him, but his fingers were still so large. One was easy. We'd have to work our way up to at least three and then the toy before I could take him. Tripp's cock was proportionally large, but it was still practically a third leg. He was a rather large person, even for a human.

"You're really warm inside," he said, as if he were amazed.

I pulled his lips down to mine and asked, "More?"

"I thought you said *slow*," he teased with a big grin.

I half scowled when he pulled his finger out. "I didn't mean that—OH!"

I gasped as he pushed in two big fingers, filling me up. The stretch was a bit much at first, and it burned mostly because he'd done it a little too fast, but my body quickly adjusted to accommodate him.

"You were saying?" he mused.

"You're a monster," I groaned. "Truly, Tripp."

His fingers stopped moving, and he frowned. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

I gripped his big, perfect chin and pulled him down into another kiss, savoring the taste of him. "No, darling. You're doing so well. I love the way your big fingers fill me up."

His cheeks flushed, but he beamed proudly before carefully adding a little more lube to his fingers. That made it easier. A lot better. I let out an encouraging moan as he started to get a little braver, moving his fingers faster and with more purpose. He hovered over me, breathing heavily but oh so careful not to put any weight on my wings.

I shifted slightly so I could reach between his legs to wrap my hand around his cock and he let out a small whimper, thrusting his hips forward. “Poor boy. I’ve been neglecting you,” I purred and worked my fist up and down the shaft. He was so big around my fingers didn’t touch, so I added a second hand, squeezing tight.

Tripp gave a low, needy moan that set my blood on fire and made my cock twitch where it had retreated back inside me. It was still too soon for it to come out and play again, but I wished I could. I hadn’t expected him to make me come so quickly before. Tripp must’ve really been doing his homework, which just made him even more endearing.

But endearing wasn’t what I was after. My whole body was running hot with need. Despite the fingers plugging my hole and pumping in and out of me, I wanted more. Needed more.

“Tripp, I need more,” I groaned, moving my fists over his leaking cock.

He caught my hands, stilling them. “And I need a little less or I’m going to ruin the whole thing by coming too fast.”

I whimpered in protest as he pried my hands free. Part of me wanted to demand that he get inside of me right now, but I

knew I wasn't ready. If we tried and failed a second time, it'd be a hell of a blow to poor Tripp's confidence, and that was the last thing I wanted. As frustrated as I was, we had to take it slow.

I twisted to grab the pink dildo from the bedside table, holding it out to him. "Finish getting me ready for you. I can't wait any more."

Heat flashed in Tripp's eyes and he licked his lips. His fingers retreated from my body and he grabbed the dildo, slicking it up with the lube. "Careful, Nic. I might start to like hearing you beg for me."

I groaned and shuddered. How was it he seemed to know exactly the right words to get me all hot and bothered?

"Please?" I added again and slid my fingers down to the slit between my legs. "Please, Tripp? I need it so bad. Need for you to fill me up."

Tripp's eyes widened as I slipped two fingers into the slit, rubbing them against the hidden head of my cock. His tongue flicked out, wetting his lips. "Holy fuck, that's hot. Don't stop doing that."

I whimpered because I knew he liked it, and did as I was told while Tripp tried to focus on getting the toy lined up. He pushed it in slowly, almost too slowly.

The wet sounds of my fingers thrusting in and out of me mingled with Tripp's heavy breathing, and suddenly all I could think about was what it would be like to have all my holes

filled at once. I didn't know if he'd fit into the tight slit in the front of my body, but I sure as hell wanted to try. I imagined being filled to the brim with his cock thrusting against mine inside my body and groaned loudly, widening my legs even more to encourage him, whispering, "More, more, more."

The toy slid home, and I gasped at the feeling of being so full. My body twitched around the toy, alternating briefly between the mild burning discomfort of being stretched out and strobos of pleasure. I felt feverish until Tripp leaned down to kiss me.

"Everything okay?" he asked gently.

"Don't stop," I whimpered. "Please? You have no idea how bad I need this."

"I'll take that as a yes," he said, eyes sparkling with pride. "Tell me if I go too fast or too hard with it."

I didn't think that was possible, as I was getting desperate.

Tripp gripped the base of the toy and pulled it almost all the way out of me before pushing it back in slowly, too gently. Like he was terrified of hurting me.

I whined, trying to encourage him to go faster, harder, but he seemed content with the pace, just leaning over me, watching me fuck myself with my fingers while he fucked my ass with the toy. Stars, it felt good not to rush, even as desperate as I was for more. My cock was getting hard inside of me and starting to ache from where I was holding it in place, but I liked having it there, feeling so full. I could only take so much,

though, and moved my fingers away with a groan, letting my cock slide free.

Tripp immediately seized my hand and brought my fingers to his lips, sucking the taste of me from them eagerly. “I fucking love how you taste, Nicola. How you feel. I love watching you touch yourself, and the way you beg me for more. This is the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever done.”

I wanted to tell him there was more to come, but he started slamming the toy home harder, just right, sending shockwaves of pleasure through me. With every thrust of the dildo into my body, he grazed my prostate, making my cock throb and leak.

“Is this good?” he asked and nuzzled the side of his face against me. The stubble on his cheek was like sandpaper.

“So good,” I panted. “Don’t stop.”

I loved that about him, how he kept asking if he was doing it right, how he was so focused on making sure it was good for me. Not just because it was hot as sin, but because it meant he cared.

I’d never had anyone spend so much time trying so hard to make me happy, both in bed and out, but Tripp did that. He genuinely seemed to care about my wellbeing, my happiness, and I wanted him to be happy, too. More than happy. Somewhere along the way, it’d become important to me that he was safe and secure as well. I’d gotten invested in helping him chase his dreams and facing his fears. I wanted Tripp to grow as a person, and I wanted to be there to see it, to be a part

of it. Every time he flashed one of his big, proud smiles, I wanted to be the reason for it.

I had never felt that for anyone, hadn't even believed it was possible. Whenever people spoke of love, they spoke of it as a feeling, but this was more than that. I hadn't just developed *feelings* for Tripp. I'd developed hopes and dreams for *us*, something I never would have thought possible.

I had given up on ever finding love, but Tripp was making me believe again.

Emotion swelled in my chest and it felt like I was about to explode if I didn't do something to express just how much I felt for him. In that moment, it wasn't even about the sex, or how good he was making me feel. I just needed to tell Tripp how much he meant to me, so I pulled him close and I kissed him, but that wasn't enough.

"I need you, Tripp," I panted. "I need you inside me now."

He pulled back and studied me, heat shimmering in his eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Darling, I've never been more sure of anything. I want you to fuck me. I need you to. Tripp, I..." I wanted so badly to get the words out, but they were caught in my throat.

He cupped my cheek and nodded. "Okay. I'll go slow."

I whined when he pulled the toy free, suddenly empty. Tripp rose to his knees, giving his cock a few pumps with a lube-slick fist. Hungry eyes rolled over me, making me shudder with want. He lined his cock up with my entrance carefully,

still moving frustratingly slow. I was thankful for it a moment later when he started to push inside. The burning stretch hurt more than I expected, especially given all the prep. He felt too big, too much.

Like he was splitting me in half with it.

Just when I thought I'd have to tell him I couldn't take anymore, he eased off, sliding back out of my body to apply more lube. I let out a relieved sigh.

“Fuck, you're tight.” Tripp's voice had gone all deep and gravelly. It was sexy as hell. “You still okay?”

I nodded, sweat running down the back of my neck. I was panting too hard to answer.

It was a little easier the second time. I clung to him, digging my fingers into his shoulders while he sank slowly into my body. It still hurt a little...until suddenly it didn't. It was almost like a light switch had been flipped and all that burning, stretching discomfort was translated into euphoria. I moaned, feeling myself relax around him, and Tripp slid home with a grunt.

For a second, all he did was hover over top of me, utterly still. “Good?” he managed, panting.

“So good,” I said and looped my arms around his neck, pulling him down into a kiss. “Fuck me please?”

“Fuck yes,” he groaned and started to move.

I threw my head back against the pillow, stars lighting behind my eyes as sparks of pleasure coursed through me. I'd

never felt so full, so stretched tight, and with every thrust, he seemed to fill me more. I swore I could feel his cock far deeper than anything had ever been inside me, making my belly swell with it. When I looked down between us, I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing. Each time Tripp thrust into me, my cock jumped, leaking precum everywhere, but not just because he was somehow hitting exactly the right spot, but because my belly was bulging every time he put his cock in me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I panted, watching my belly swell and shrink, swell and shrink. He was so big he was literally rearranging my guts with his cock and I was so here for it.

“That's so hot,” he moaned, watching my cock jump every time he pumped into me. “Oh, shit, that's hot.”

“Tripp...” My fingertips and the tips of my wings started to tingle and inevitable, luscious pressure had started to build inside of me to the point I could barely contain it. “Tripp, I... I...”

As if he knew what I was trying and failing to get out, he closed a big hand around my cock, jerking me in time with his thrusts. “Come on. Come for me.”

I moaned so loud, the people in the next room definitely would've heard us through the thin walls. My muscles went rigid as my cock started to pulse, and my wings fluttered wildly. I clenched hard around him, lips muttering incoherent pleas for him not to stop.

“Fuck,” Tripp gritted out. “Fuck, I can feel it...I can feel you coming. Fuck!” His hips stuttered, and he groaned, pushing deeper as he came. He fell forward with an exhausted grunt, letting all his weight fall on me.

I was so blissed out, I didn't even mind that he was half crushing me under his gargantuan weight for a second. At least, until I remembered I needed to breathe. Then I flailed around, trying to shove him off of me. “Air,” I gasped.

“Oh, shit. Sorry.” He pushed up, lifting his weight off of me with a grimace.

I flushed at the rush of warm wetness as he slid his softening cock from my body.

He rolled to one side, and we laid there for a minute on our sides facing each other, trying to catch our breath.

“I, um...Sorry. You okay?” he asked with a frown.

I gulped in some air, a hand on my chest, and stared up at him, genuinely unsure of how to answer that. I felt amazing. Better than I'd ever felt. That was definitely the best sex of my life but... With a man who I was supposed to be leaving, eventually.

“Tripp,” I whispered and touched his cheek gently.

He caught my hand and kissed it. “What's wrong?”

The words swelled in my throat again, but this time, I didn't swallow them. I couldn't. “I don't want you to leave me.”

His expression softened, almost like he might cry.

I swallowed. “I mean, maybe this isn’t the best time. I... that...”

“I don’t want to leave you either,” he said quickly, taking my hand again. “I don’t care if it is the wrong time. Maybe there is no right time. You’re the one who said there were no rules, right? That I should just do what felt right? Well, Nicola, you feel right, and I want to keep doing you.”

I pressed my lips together, trembling with the effort to keep the laughter in. He frowned for a second, concentrating hard, and then he must’ve realized what he said because his frown turned into another grin. I gave up and let myself laugh, and he laughed along with me.

“You know what I mean,” he said, giving my shoulder a little shove.

“Darling, I hope you mean it just like you said it.” I sat up and stretched out my arms, giving my wings a quick flap to stretch them as well. “That was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“Really?” he asked, eyes wide.

I nodded and touched his cheek again. “But it’s more than that. I like you. I think... I think drunk me made a decision sober me would’ve been hesitant to make, but it was the best decision. I’m glad we got married.”

“Me, too,” he admitted. “The last few days have been the happiest of my life, Nicola. You’ve helped me do things I never thought I’d be able to do again, showed me a side of myself I didn’t know existed. You make me happy. Happier

than I've ever been with anyone. But..." He trailed off, looking sad.

"But what?"

His eyes flicked up to mine. "My memory problems don't normally bother me that much because I didn't care, but with you... I want to remember everything. I know I can't, though. I'm scared I'm going to forget this. What if I forget our anniversary or my memory gets worse and I forget you? What if I forget *us*?" His chin trembled.

My heart ached to see him so distressed. I scooted closer, curling up against his chest. "Then I'll remind you. Every day if I have to."

"I don't want to be a burden to you."

"You are not a burden, Tripp," I said firmly, looking up at him.

"But..."

I growled and pushed him over onto his back. "Don't you get it?" I said, climbing up on his chest. "I love you, you idiot. I love you just the way you are, memory problems and all, and you don't have to do anything to deserve that. If you remember nothing else, I want to make sure you remember that. I'll tell you every damn day how sweet and special you are, how much I love that crooked smile, or the way you stick your tongue out when you're thinking hard. I love the way you walk, the way you talk, even when dumb things fall out of

your mouth. I. Love. *You.*” I punctuated the last three words by poking his chest.

He blinked a few times before his eyes went all watery. “I think I love you, too. But...what if you change your mind?”

“Then we will fly over that bridge when we come to it,” I said and slid off of him to nestle in against him again. “But I don’t think I will. I’m a sensible mothfolk, Tripp. You’re my favorite star. Now that I’ve caught you, I’m not about to let you go.”

“Oh my God, Nicola,” he said, sounding all weepy as he pulled me into a kiss. “You have no idea how happy that makes me.”

I smiled. “Well, hopefully I can do something to make you even happier in the next few days. We’re going to seal this deal with Northstar, get you your investors, and launch Brewtiful’s to smashing success, darling. I promise you.”

Tripp squeezed me so tight, I squeaked as all the air left my lungs. “Thank you, Nicola,” he said, kissing me all over. “Thank you for believing in my dream.”

Chapter Thirteen

Tripp

WE MET WITH THE supplier and toured the roasting facility. Nicola asked a lot of questions about things I hadn't even thought about, like shipping, packaging, and other product varieties. He was a much better businessman than me. Well, business *moth*.

Once we finished our tour of the roasters and Nicola had asked all of his questions, we went into the office and sat down with Ben Czernik, the itherie who owned the roasting facility. He and Nicola talked about a bunch of numbers while I mostly zoned out. I couldn't keep track of all that stuff, which was why I'd hired Cage to begin with.

Firing him was going to be hard, but Nicola was right. I should be surrounded by people who shared my vision and encouraged me to chase my dreams while keeping me grounded. Cage didn't do that. Still, I felt bad. I didn't like disappointing people, and putting him out of a job would be one of the hardest things I'd ever done.

By the time we left the facility, I was feeling really bummed. It must've been noticeable because Nicola frowned at me in the car and asked, "What's wrong, darling? I thought you'd be happy about the deal I worked out."

"I am," I told him. "And I'm excited about flying back to LA to meet with Chef Northstar, and getting Brewtiful's off the ground. It's just... Well, I was thinking about how you said I should fire Cage. I don't want to hurt his feelings."

"Stars, you're too sweet for your own good," Nicola said with a sigh. "Darling, instead of looking at it like that, think of it as providing him an opportunity."

"An opportunity?" I tipped my head to the side, studying him while he drove.

He nodded. "Exactly. Cage wasn't a good fit for working with you. We both agree on that. Chances are, he probably knows it too. I bet he's just as unhappy as you are about the poor fit. Letting him go allows him to move on to pursue bigger, better things. Jobs where he might fit in better with people who share his vision of the world."

I sighed and sank back against the seat. "I like that but... I still know it's going to suck big time to do it. I'm going to feel bad."

"And I'll make you feel better," he promised, putting his hand over mine. "But you've got to do it, even though it's hard. Being in charge of a company means making those difficult decisions. It means choosing what's best for the company, and what's best for you and your vision for it."

Nicola was right again. I watched the road pass by on our way back to the hotel. Our luggage was already packed, and we were supposed to fly out to LA early tomorrow. That'd give us a day to get over the jet lag—a day which I fully planned to spend in bed with Nicola—before we met with Chef Northstar on Tuesday.

I could wait until after we closed the deal to fire Cage, but that didn't seem fair. He should have as much time as possible to be out there looking for a new job. Plus, I didn't want it hanging over my head. I was nervous enough about the tasting on Tuesday, and the big event in a week.

“I should do it today,” I said and glanced over at Nicola. “Is it bad if I don't do it in person?”

“A video call will suffice, I think,” he said coldly. Nicola *really* didn't like Cage.

“You know you won't be able to help me all the time,” I said, facing Nicola. “You have clients. Eventually, don't you have to get back to working with them? I feel bad that you're blowing them off to spend all this time with me.”

“Nonsense,” he said, waving a hand at me. “First of all, I'm on a *vacation* through the end of the week. I haven't taken one in years, so no one should be upset. Besides, if anyone needs me, they have my phone and my email. Truth be told, my job is rather hands off most of the time. I have other people below me who do the bulk of the work once I get people signed, although my clients know they can come to me if they need anything.” He reached across the center console to pat my

hand. “It’s fine, Tripp. Trust me on this. You have my full attention until after we seal the deal. If you want it.”

My face heated, but I smiled and squeezed his hand gently. “Of course I want it. I want all the attention you’re willing to give me.”

He chuckled. “Oh, that can definitely be arranged, darling.”

We made it back to the hotel room, and I immediately set myself to making some coffee. I’d gotten some extra equipment from the gift shop at the roasting place and wanted to show Nicola what I could really do with the right tools. So, while he showered and got ready to relax for the evening, I got to work making the fanciest coffee I knew how to make with a little extra twist. I pulled out all the stops, sifting through some hand ground spices I’d picked up at the shop to make the perfect blend.

When Nicola emerged from the shower, I presented him with my masterpiece.

He blinked at the cup with its whipped cream and the cherry and chocolate drizzle. “What’s this?”

“A special blend I made just for you,” I said, blushing as he took it.

“Oh my stars. Is that a cherry on top?” He sighed happily and sank into the chair. “This looks like a dessert. What’s the flavor?”

“Try it for yourself.” I gestured to the cup and rocked back on my heels nervously as he lifted it for a sip.

Nicola's eyes widened, and he tilted his head to the side. "It's chocolate. No, wait..." His proboscis slid out from between his lips and went right back into the coffee like a straw for a second taste. "It could be cherries, but there's something else in there that makes it a hundred times more decadent. What is it?"

"Its dark chocolate-covered cherry with coconut milk and a light dusting of cinnamon sugar on the whipped cream. Oh, and the whipped cream is a special vegan kind. I was trying to get the cinnamon on there to look like wings, but um...I kinda need more practice."

"No, I can see it," he said, nodding. "And what do you call this delicious masterwork of coffee?"

I shrugged and moved closer. "I was thinking I might name it after you, since you're what inspired it."

"Oh, Tripp." He set the coffee aside. "You're sweeter than the coffee you've made me."

I grinned and shrugged. "What can I say? You bring that out in me."

He got up out of the chair and flew up to kiss me. I closed my arms around him, ready to carry him into the bedroom of our little suite, but he wriggled away.

"Darling, aren't you forgetting something?" he said, gently tapping my nose. "Isn't there an important phone call you need to make?"

I sighed. “I was kind of hoping you’d forget that.” I was sure trying to. Why was it I forgot all kinds of important things but couldn’t forget what I actually wanted to forget?

“Nope,” he said, popping the P in the word. “I’m here to be your memory when you need it, and that means even when you’re pretending to forget.” He pushed my phone at me.

“Call. Now.”

I sighed and sat down at the table, pulling up Cage’s number. He picked up on the second ring.

“Tripp! Thank God. Where have you been?” he said.

I winced. “Yeah, Cage? We need to talk.”

Chapter Fourteen

Nicola



TRIPP DID AMAZING. HE was compassionate, and with a little prompting, he was firm when he needed to be. Not that he had to be particularly hard on Cage. Cage, the poor kid, seemed relieved to hear he was being let go. Almost as relieved as Tripp was to let him go.

When the call was over, and I had finished the amazing coffee he'd made me, we wound up on the little sofa in our suite surrounded by a mess of coffee ingredients. I picked up the whipped cream, intending to make a dessert out of him.

Unfortunately, my phone had other ideas, as it started to ring just as our kissing got hot and heavy. I should have just ignored it. Would have if it had been anyone other than Inzo calling me. With Tripp's dream in the balance, I knew I had to answer. That didn't mean I had to be pleased about it.

"What?" I growled, picking up the phone.

"Well, is that any way to greet an old friend?" Inzo purred.
"Especially one you've played for a fool."

I sighed and slid off of Tripp's lap. "Adam told you, did he? I was wondering when I'd get this call."

"You're a devious little moth, Nic. I love that about you."

I reclined on the sofa and Tripp immediately started kissing over my chest and stomach. "You're not angry?"

Inzo laughed. "Oh, of course not. I'd have done the same thing. It's business. I know how ruthless you have to be to get what you want. It's one of the things I admire most about you, that casual ruthlessness with a smile. But listen, Nic. If you ever fucking go behind my back to cut a deal with my human again, I will serve you up like a fucking Monday night special." He said it without a hint of malice, but that just made it all the more frightening when it came to Inzo.

Well, usually. I wasn't scared of him or his threats. Besides, I was too distracted by the way Tripp's mouth was slowly making its way down my body.

"You said you were out of cash," I pointed out. "Besides, Brimstone wasn't the right venue, anyway. Northstar is much more the speed we're looking for. At any rate, it's done. We'll be in town tomorrow. I have a flight booked with Faerie Air tomorrow."

I bit down on my cheek to stifle a moan as Tripp's mouth fell between my legs, his tongue pushing into my slit in hopes of finding a hard cock waiting for him, and he wasn't disappointed. It was taking all my effort not to let the damn thing slide free, because once it did, there was no way I'd be able to carry on a conversation with Inzo.

“Faerie Air?” Inzo snorted. “Oh, no. That won’t do. Friends don’t let friends fly across the country in such dreadful accommodations. Let me send the jet. Then you can avoid a layover and get here faster.”

“Inzo you don’t have to...” I trailed off and had to shove my fist into my mouth like a gag because Tripp had managed to push his tongue far enough inside of me that he was licking over the head of my cock, sending delicious shivers of pleasure up through me.

Inzo, blissfully unaware of what he was interrupting, said, “Nonsense. Consider it part one to a rather elaborate wedding gift I have planned. “You can get here in time for dinner at Brimstone. My treat.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear. “Tripp, please.” The words came out as a whine, though I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to stop or keep going.

“Nicola?” Inzo’s voice buzzed loudly.

I sighed and brought the phone back to my ear. “Yes, I hear you. Thank you.”

“Not going to object?” he said smugly. “Whatever happened to your annulment plans, hmm?”

“They’ve been postponed,” I said shortly.

“Postponed *indefinitely*?”

Oh, that haughty little incubus! If I admitted it to him over the phone, I was never going to hear the end of it. He’d think our getting together was all thanks to him and Adam. To be

fair, it was in a way, but I didn't want to credit him for anything. Inzo's ego was already nearly too large to fit through doorways.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I snapped and hung up. I flung the phone across the room and grabbed the back of Tripp's head, pushing his face further into me. "You are far more naughty than you let on." I gave up trying to hold my cock in and let him have it.

He made a small, distressed sound and gagged a little at first until I let go of him. Then he pulled back and gave my cock a teasing lick. "Not like you'd play fair either, given the other option."

"Darling, all's fair in love and business."

Tripp smirked and grabbed the can of whipped cream. "Is it now?"

Instead of spraying it on my body to lick off like I thought he intended, he sprayed a big glob of it into his palm and smeared it over my face. I gasped and sputtered, unsure of how to react while he howled with laughter.

"That's it!" I grabbed the jar of cherries from beside the table and flung two of them at him. They hit him in the chest with a loud *plop plop* and I couldn't help but giggle.

Tripp retaliated by grabbing the chocolate syrup and squirting it all over my fur, making an awful sticky mess. I huffed and wiped it off of me, smearing it on his chest, and

then followed that up with a handful of cinnamon sugar. It stuck to the syrup, sparkling on his chest like pixie dust.

“Huh,” he said, looking down and flexing his pecs. “You know, I look kinda hot dipped in sugar.”

“Maybe you need a little more,” I said and seized the chocolate syrup from his hand, squirting it all over him.

Before I knew it, we were laughing hysterically and caught in a food fight with all kinds of coffee ingredients, from chocolate and caramel syrup to smears of whipped cream. While Tripp was getting ready to fling another handful of the latter at me, I flew at him, tackling him onto his back on the floor for a very messy kiss.

“You’re a menace to society, Tripp Powers,” I said.

“You love me for it.” He grinned like an idiot and grabbed my hand, quickly licking it clean.

And he was right. I did. I loved everything about this man. How had I ever thought I’d be able to leave him?

“I want to be inside you again, Nic,” he huffed and grabbed the lube. Surprisingly, it was the only thing still sitting on the nearby table that hadn’t been spilled or otherwise squirted all over us.

I took it from him and applied a liberal coating to the hand he’d just cleaned with his tongue, applying some to me and to him. “When you woke up next to me on Saturday morning, did you ever think we’d be here?”

“No,” he said, already breathing hard while I worked my hand up and down his length. “But I’m glad we are. I can’t imagine my life without you. Everything is better now that you’re in it.”

I smirked. “Remember when you thought you were straight?”

“Make me forget,” he said and eased me onto his cock.

It was easier the second time, though by no means easy. I was learning to love the way my body stretched around him, the way he filled me so completely, the way he treated every encounter like it was shiny and new. I supposed it was for him, but I had forgotten how good it could be to be with someone else. Someone who really saw me, someone who could laugh with me. Tripp made me feel alive in ways I had never known were possible.

I rode him on the hotel room floor in the middle of the mess we’d made, and I couldn’t be happier.

Tripp kissed me furiously, like he’d been doing it all his life, and he held my face in his hands. “You’re so gorgeous, Nicola,” he said in a raspy voice. “I can’t believe you’re mine.”

“Believe it, because I am,” I replied, panting. “I was yours before either of us even knew it, and I’ll be yours every day. And if you ever forget, I will remind you. I will always remind you.”

He gripped my hip a little tighter, lips parting, face flushed, and shouted my name in warning. “Nicola!”

I rolled my hips against his and gripped my cock, pumping it quickly. “Go on, darling. Fill me up. Make me yours again.”

Tripp’s hips jerked, and he groaned the way he did whenever he came. I moved my hand faster, and followed him into bliss a few seconds later, coming all over his cinnamon sugar dusted skin.

When it was over, I collapsed, my wings limp and hanging over us like a blanket.

At least, until Tripp sneezed.

“Eep!” I flailed and shifted as that made his softening cock jump while it was still inside me, and that was a rather uncomfortable feeling.

“Sorry.” He sniffled and carefully extracted himself from my body. “I think some cinnamon got up my nose.”

I looked around with a frown. “We’ve made quite a mess.”

Tripp winced, taking in the damage. “Housekeeping is going to be pissed.”

“We’ll clean up what we can and leave them a sizable tip.” I sighed. The hotel would charge any damage to my credit card, but I’d also be up front with them at the desk when we checked out. I wouldn’t tell them how the mess had happened, though. They didn’t need to know that.

Tripp sneezed again, his entire body jerking with the effort.

I laughed and offered him a hand up. “We should shower and clean this mess up. We have a long flight tomorrow.”

“Did I hear Inzo offer his private jet?” Tripp said, taking my hand.

I tried to help him up, but that mostly resulted in him yanking me down and then us awkwardly getting back to our feet separately and pretending that had never happened.

“Yes,” I said, dusting cinnamon and sugar off of my fur. It was no use. The syrup ensured it was stuck there.

“Does his jet have a bedroom?” Tripp wiggled his eyebrows.

I smiled at his devious suggestion. “You know... I think it does.”

Chapter Fifteen

Tripp

INZO'S PRIVATE JET DID have a bedroom in the back, but unfortunately, Nicola and I were still so jet lagged from flying from Nevada to Florida that we wound up crashing in the bed instead of doing anything more fun. A loud ding woke us about half an hour before our descent, so there wasn't time for fooling around, much as I wanted to.

We got out of bed, still groggy, and dressed to meet with Inzo, who was supposed to be waiting for us once we got off the plane. I was nervous about meeting Adam again, mostly because I wanted him to think of me as a professional and not just a friend. That was an uphill battle considering the last time he'd seen me, I'd been pounding shots and hanging out the roof of his limo.

When we disembarked, I was feeling woozy and my head was pounding. Every shaft of light felt like it was stabbing my brain behind my eyes. There was definitely a migraine coming on. I had popped a couple of my migraine pills, determined to see the night through, but they only helped so much.

Inzo, Adam, and their kitten Coco were waiting for us on the tarmac. Inzo held Coco, petting her like he was some sort of supervillain, while Adam smiled warmly.

“Nic! You made it!” Adam came forward and hugged Nicola. “You look great!”

“I look like I’ve spent way too many hours on a plane,” he said grumpily.

“Surely the private jet was better than a bloody commercial airline.” Inzo lifted an eyebrow.

“It was,” Nic agreed with a sigh. “But it has been a rather busy few days. It’s good to be back on solid ground.”

“Are you feeling all right, Tripp?” Adam asked, putting a hand on my arm. “You look a little green.”

“I have...headache.” Getting words out was still tough. I felt almost like I was drunk, and the migraine medicine was having a sedating effect.

Nicola wrapped his arms around one of mine. “He’s got a migraine,” he whispered. “As much as I’d love to take up your offer for dinner at Brimstone and to hang out with you, Tripp needs to rest.”

“No, no,” I grumbled, rubbing my head. “You should go out with your friends. I don’t want to get in the way.”

“Nonsense. I’m taking you to the hotel, putting you in a dark room, and giving you a massage. You can sleep this off so you can be fresh for our tasting tomorrow.” Nicola patted my arm and started guiding me forward.

Adam frowned up at me, keeping pace. “Are you sure you’re up to it? Tomorrow, I mean.”

I had to be. Nic and Adam had gone through too much trouble to set all of this up. I was too close to realizing my dream. I wasn’t going to let my stupid head injury get in the way, not a second time.

I started to shake my head and immediately regretted it. “I’ll be fine. Just need...sleep.”

Nicola put me in a car. I didn’t remember the journey or any sights, mostly just laying there with my head against the cool glass, praying I didn’t throw up everywhere. I felt stupid and guilty. Nicola had been looking forward to dinner at Brimstone, and a night with his friends and my stupid head had gotten in the way. Again.

“I’m sorry,” I said, shielding my eyes as he walked me through the hotel lobby. “I’m really sorry.”

“Shh. No more talking,” Nic said, patting my back. “Let’s just focus on getting you better. Rest your brain, darling. It’s my favorite part of you.”

Even as messed up as I was, hearing that sent a thrill through me. I’d gotten a lot of compliments over the years. People told me I was a great player, that I was strong, handsome, funny... But never smart. Nicola was the first person to say he valued me for *me*.

He took me up to the room, leaving the lights off, and immediately guided me to the bed, where he helped me

undress. The clean, cool sheets were a small comfort, and I sighed, settling into them.

“Face down, darling,” Nicola instructed.

I was too tired to ask why, so I rolled over onto my stomach. “Oof!” I grunted as Nicola’s weight suddenly settled on my back. That’s right. He said he was going to give me a massage, but I hadn’t expected he’d do it with his *feet*. He was small and light enough that the weight felt amazing, so I settled down and let him walk all over me. Literally.

“You’re pretty fucking amazing, Nicola,” I said into the pillow.

“You are too. Now get some rest. I need your A-game tomorrow.”

“Yes, coach,” I muttered, and I was pretty sure I fell asleep within ten seconds.



MY MIGRAINE KNOCKED ME flat through most of the next morning, too, but by noon I had enough function left to go to the tasting. I didn’t have a choice. If we missed our deadline with Adam, he wouldn’t be able to get his order done in time and we’d miss Sunday, which would make me and

Brewtiful's look bad. We really had to wow these investors if we wanted to get Brewtiful's off the ground.

My hands shook as I measured out the coffee beans and put them in the spice grinder that Adam had provided. I had never used a fancy machine like the one he had, though I knew how it worked in theory. With him looking over my shoulder, though, everything felt harder.

"Where do you source the beans from?" Adam asked.

"From a small co-op in Florida," Nicola supplied while I worked. "They roast them in house and ship them out the same day. They were ready to move about nine hundred pounds a week."

Adam put his hands on his hips. "Can they scale that? If you're opening shops, you might need a lot more than nine hundred pounds a week."

"That's about two hundred seventy thousand cups, give or take a few thousand," Nic answered thoughtfully. "That's a lot of volume."

Adam shrugged. "I never expected Northstar to take off like it did, but we go through hundreds of pounds of food every week. It's mind blowing. And I'm only open one day a week. You don't even want to know what ordering for Brimstone looks like."

"They can scale," Nicola said with a sigh, "but we're not looking for that level of investment right now. Our three-year plan is focused on slow, organic growth. We're offering a

partnership with you here at Northstar, with an optional extension to Brimstone, and no more than twenty stores, all on the west coast.”

“That’s very slow growth,” Adam said, rubbing his chin.

“It’s not about the money,” I said. “It’s about quality. I don’t want to compete with the big national chains. I want to be a better alternative. I want to offer more than service with a smile. Brewtiful’s will pride itself on being the pick me up you need every morning, both in a cup and on it.”

“Interesting,” Adam said, watching the coffee drip down into the pot. “I like the gimmick and the mission.”

“But,” Inzo added from the doorway, “gimmicks and mission statements are only worthwhile if you have a good *product*.”

“Tripp’s coffee is the best,” Nicola said firmly. “And not just because of the beans. He’s got a whole formula, a specific ratio and process.”

“One that employees will have to learn.” Inzo left his place at the doorway, pacing over, hands folded behind his back. “I see why you want to go slowly. Training employees will be expensive.”

“Worth it,” I said and gestured to Nicola. “We have a whole plan to keep satisfaction high and turnover low by offering good pay and benefits. That’s why the start up cost is so high. Not only are we offering a premium product with pizzaz, but

we're doing it ethically, giving back to the communities we'll be a part of."

"And unlike the other guys, we actually mean that," Nicola said, holding out the papers he'd printed out.

Adam took one, his eyes widening before he handed it off to Inzo.

Inzo wrinkled his nose. "You're building the Brimstone of coffee."

"I like that," Adam said with a smile.

Inzo held the papers back out to Nicola. "As the person who built Brimstone, let me give you some advice. Don't ever let this lose its soul. Whether you open one Brewtiful's or one hundred, keep your vision at the center of everything you do and work hard with that in mind, and you will achieve everything you've dreamed of and more."

I smiled widely. "Thank you. I will."

"Ah, I think it's done," Adam said and turned to grab some fancy looking coffee mugs from a table next to us.

"Oh, no need. That's one of the most important things about Brewtiful's. You can't put it in just any old mug." I opened the sleeve of paper cups we'd brought with us and took the marker Nicola offered, scribbling something on three different cups before filling each of them. I offered one cup to Adam, one to Inzo, and the final one to Nicola. Then I stepped back and held my breath.

Inzo's face remained unmoved except for a tiny pull at his lips as he read what I'd written.

Adam sprouted a boyish smile. "Aww. That's so sweet! Inzo, look what he wrote! 'Chefs don't make mistakes; they make new dishes.' What'd he write on yours?"

With a proud smirk, Inzo turned the cup so everyone could see the short but sweet message I'd written. His cup said WORLD'S #1 CHEF in all caps.

"That's so you," Adam said with a chuckle.

"Well, now that you've appealed to our egos, I expect the coffee to be even better," Inzo said.

I held my breath again as they both tasted it. Moment of truth. I knew the coffee was good, but any number of things could've gone wrong. I could've mismeasured. Could've gotten a bad batch of beans. Could've used the machine wrong. Could have—

"Oh my *God*," Adam declared, wide-eyed. He put a hand on Inzo's shoulder. "That is the best coffee I've ever had in my life!"

"It's quite good," Inzo agreed with a nod.

I could've melted into the floor, I was so relieved. Tears welled in my eyes. This was happening. It was really happening! Just one more big hurdle, and Brewtiful's would be real.

"Excellent!" Nicola said, beaming and pulling out his phone. "How many pounds of beans can I put you down for?"

Chapter Sixteen

Nicola



WE DIDN'T MAKE IT back to Brimstone for dinner that week. We decided to take Tuesday through Saturday night off as our official honeymoon. No work allowed.

Well, that was Tripp's rule, but of course I snuck in a few sly hours on my phone while he was resting or otherwise occupied. I took him all over the town, and we saw everything there was to see in LA and Hollywood, even going back to Vegas once for a single night to dance again, though we weren't nearly as wild the second time. Tripp said he wanted to remember every minute with me, or at least as many minutes as possible.

In between our outings, we basically never got out of bed. We couldn't get enough of each other, me and Tripp. Though I knew that wild sexual need would dim with time, what I felt for him was still as bright as the first day I fell for him. He helped me remember how to laugh, and I reminded him every day that he was confident and capable.

Tripp and I were more than husbands, more than lovers, more than business partners. I was his cheerleader, bringing him out to ice rinks almost every day to watch his confidence grow. He wasn't a hundred percent out there yet, but he would be with time. I knew it.

In turn, Tripp became a constant source of laughter and affection for me. There wasn't an hour that went by where he wasn't touching me, holding me, kissing me, reminding me that there was more to life than the grind and churn of work. There was him. There was happiness.

For the first time in my life, I began to look forward to all the tomorrows of the world because I knew I'd be waking up next to him. My best friend. My partner. My husband.

On Saturday night, we went to bed early, both of us confident that we would be securing all the investment money we needed to get Brewtiful's off the ground tomorrow morning. We had a plan in place to wow the wealthy diners. Tripp had a whole speech with notecards and everything that I'd helped him write.

Adam had sent over the coffee-themed menu he'd come up with, and everything sounded lovely. All we had to do was wake up and show up on time and everything would go smoothly.

So, of course, that wasn't what happened.

My eyes snapped open in a dark, unfamiliar room. At first, I wasn't sure what had woken me, and then my phone chirped. I pawed at it, pulling it from the nightstand to squint at the

screen. There was a flashing red battery in the corner, but that wasn't all. In the center of the screen was a calendar reminder I'd set.

“Shit!” I sat upright.

“What? What is it?” Tripp jerked awake next to me.

“The brunch at Northstar!” I was already stumbling out of bed on my way to the shower. “It's in an hour!”

“Fuck, we'll never make it across town in time.” He threw back the blankets and rushed to join me.

I'd never showered and dressed so fast in my life. While I wanted to make some coffee when we got out, there just wasn't time. Dammit, and I'd been hoping Tripp would get one more chance to practice his speech before we had to do the real thing. It couldn't be helped, though. There just wasn't time. We were lucky we'd gotten up in time at all.

I called for a car while Tripp was still trying to get his hair to lie flat. I practically yanked him out of the bathroom after, shoving the notecards for his speech at him.

“How's your head?” I asked. He'd been having a lot of migraines lately, probably due to the stress.

“It feels a little soft, but not bad,” Tripp said, and waved me off. “It's normal after a migraine. I'll be fine.”

I sure as hell hoped so. This was his chance at a big break. Everything had to go *perfectly*.

We rushed out of the room only to find the elevator was down for repairs. With a curse, I grabbed Tripp's hand and flew for the stairs. By the time we made it to the bottom, Tripp was sweating bad enough that there were stains in his armpits and he didn't look professional at all. No matter. We'd get him cleaned up, and he'd be fine.

My nearly dead phone buzzed again, and we thought that meant our car had arrived, so we hurried out of the lobby and ran straight into a torrential downpour of rain. It would've been fine if the car was actually waiting for us, but the ride share parking spot was completely empty.

Shivering, we ducked back into the lobby, and I opened my phone with a scowl. "The fucker canceled on me!"

Tripp wore a mask of raw terror. "What? Adam canceled?"

"No, no. The driver. I'll try to order us another car. Maybe I have enough battery left." My fingers moved furiously across the screen, but the phone died just before I completed the order. "Shit!"

Tripp combed his fingers through his wet hair. At least we didn't have to worry about the sweat stains anymore. "Did you see the time?"

"Eight forty." I looked up at him. Though neither of us said it, we both knew we weren't making it in time. "We'll make it work," I promised Tripp, putting a hand on his arm. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

I dashed to the front desk and pleaded with the staff to call us a ride, emphasizing that it was an emergency. Of all the fucking days not to charge my phone! The staff gave me the name of the taxi company that was to pick us up and I thanked them. A taxi would be more expensive, but at least we'd get there.

As soon as we saw the cab pulling up, both Tripp and I ran to the curb. That was a bad idea, since the cab drove right through a mud puddle and splashed it all over us.

Tripp froze in place, staring down at his mud-stained clothes. "Oh no. What do I do? I have to go change!"

If he went back upstairs, we'd miss our window and be impossibly late.

"There's no time," I said and pulled open the cab door.

He blinked at me with tears in his eyes. "But..."

I flew up to him and cupped his cheek. "We will make it work, Tripp. I promise you. A little mud isn't going to get in the way of your dreams. I won't let it. Now, get in the car and let's go make your dream of Brewtiful's a reality."

Chapter Seventeen

Tripp

THE HAPPIEST DAY OF my life had turned into a nightmare. I was soaked to the bone, covered in mud, and we were running late. In less than twenty minutes, I'd have to walk into a room full of rich investors and somehow convince them that Brewtiful's was worth their time. That *I* was worth their time. I couldn't do that if I looked like a half drowned oversized rat.

Nicola kept telling me it'd be okay, that I could do this. I just had to make people see past the mud and the mess.

"Sell the story of Brewtiful's," he urged. "Sell the dream, darling."

When we arrived at Northstar and came into the kitchen tracking mud and dripping wet, Adam rushed over to us, wide eyed.

"Good God, what happened?" He offered the towel on his shoulder.

Nicola took it and started wiping down my face. “There’s no time. Is the coffee ready?”

Adam frowned. “It’s brewed, but we can delay it if you need time to go back and change.”

My heart sank, and I gently pushed Nicola back as I shook my head. “If it sits, it won’t be at its best. I want them to taste the best, regardless of whatever the outside looks like. It’s the inside that counts, right?” I looked to Nicola who nodded.

Adam looked me over again and took a deep breath. “All right. If you’re sure.”

“Don’t really have a choice. The world doesn’t stop just because I’m having a bad day.” I sighed.

Nicola squeezed my hand. “You’ll do wonderful. Do you have your notes?”

I nodded and lifted the pile of notecards. Luckily, they hadn’t gotten too ruined in the rain.

Adam and Nicola walked me to the kitchen doors. Several serving carts were set up with dozens of paper cups of coffee already ready to go. Nicola and I had spent the last two days personally writing a note on each one of them for the guests. I couldn’t let all that effort go to waste.

You can do this, I told myself and reached for the door.

“Wait,” Nicola said. “You’re forgetting something.”

I turned and saw him holding out another paper cup of coffee with my name on it. I blinked, surprised that I had a cup. He

hadn't told me there'd be a cup for me.

Nicola pushed the cup into my hand, flew up and kissed my cheek. "Go make that goal, darling. I'll be in here cheering you on."

He pushed a microphone into my hand and opened the door. I stumbled into a brightly lit dining room full of people I didn't know. The din of conversation died slowly, all eyes turning on me. They slid up and down my body, judging me, taking in the mud stained clothes, the messy hair... I started to sweat and froze up, my head suddenly throbbing.

"I..." I realized I wasn't speaking into the mic and lifted it.

"I, um..."

The microphone squealed, and I winced.

"The cards," Nic hissed from the doorway. "Read the cards!"

Oh, that's right. We'd written out everything I was supposed to say, right down to marking out the dramatic pauses and where I should stop for laughter. I tried to shuffle the cards and coffee in my hands but wound up dropping the cards.

Then I just stood there like an idiot deciding if I should bend down and pick them up or just give up. It was clear this wasn't going to go my way. Maybe I wasn't meant to open Brewtiful's, and this was the universe's way of telling me so. Maybe Nicola was wrong, and it really was time for me to give up and go home.

I don't know why I looked at the cup of coffee in my hand then. Maybe it was random. Maybe it was fate. Either way, my

eyes finally fell on the message Nicola had written for me on my cup. At first, I thought it was just my name, but then I turned the cup around and saw it. There, scribbled in Nicola's handwriting, was exactly what I needed to hear.

I believe in you and your dream.

My throat was suddenly tight. Nicola believed in me. I couldn't give up as long as that was true, so I steeled myself, shifted my grip on the coffee and the microphone, and decided to start again.

"I'm having a bad day," I announced into the microphone. "But we all have bad days, right? Days where we're running late, and we forgot to charge our phone. Days where it's raining even though the weatherman said it'd be sunny, or when traffic just sucks. We've all been there."

Several heads bobbed in agreement.

I started to pace slowly. "On days like that, it seems like nothing can go right. But what if something did go right? What if I could guarantee you that for the price of a cup of coffee, I could make your day better?" I lifted the cup of coffee in my hand. "This is a cup of coffee. A one hundred percent recyclable caffeine delivery receptacle, right? That's what I thought too. Until I realized it could be so much more."

I lowered the coffee cup, and the doors opened on my signal, waiters pushing in the carts full of personalized paper coffee cups.

“My name is Tripp Powers,” I said, “And I want to tell you how I plan to change the world one cup at a time, one smile at a time.”

And so I did. I told them my story. I told them about my injury, my therapy, and my dream. I told them about how I’d tried and failed so many times, but I didn’t give up because I believed in my idea.

Then I told them about my lowest point, how I’d skipped out on my meeting with Cage to go party. My intention had been to give up on Brewtiful’s that night. To never think about it again. But then I met Nicola, and all it took was one person to believe in me to get me back in the game.

“Belief is powerful,” I said as the last of the coffees found their owners. “It makes things real. So maybe my idea is just good coffee with a positive message on every cup like the cups in front of you. And you know, it is a simple idea, but I’m a simple guy. I’ve been fortunate enough in my life to find the things that make me happy, and now I want to spend the rest of my life sharing some of that happiness with the rest of the world. Yeah, it’s a message on a cup. But when you’re having a bad day, sometimes, you just need that one good thing to turn everything around. My husband, Nicola, was my one good thing. Help me make Brewtiful’s the next good thing in the world. Please enjoy your samples of Brewtiful’s coffee and thank you for your time.”

I turned and handed the microphone off to Adam, who’d come out to say a few words. The last thing I expected was a

round of applause to erupt in the dining room. At first, I didn't know what to do.

“Esteemed guests, Tripp Powers,” Adam said, gesturing to me.

It finally dawned on me that I should bow or something, so I did and hurried away.

As soon as I was back in the kitchen, Nicola threw his arms around me. “That was brilliant, darling! Absolutely stunning! Way better than what we had written on those cards.”

I smiled. “I couldn't have done it without the message you left for me.”

“I'm so glad you found it,” he said, kissing me.

“No kissing in the kitchen,” someone growled.

We parted, snickering, and I held onto Nicola's hands as we moved out of the way of the chefs and servers running around.

“What now?” I asked.

He took a deep breath. “Now we wait and pray they were as moved by your speech as I was...and the food.” He gestured to a small table that had been set up in the back for us, and we sat.

Over the next hour, we enjoyed Chef Northstar's café brunch menu featuring Brewtiful's coffee in every dish. There was a delicious array of breads for a starter ranging from doughnuts to a delicious date bread that was to die for. Next came the savory coffee braised roast beef served with coffee braised

beets and heirloom carrots. The meat was so tender, it almost didn't feel real. There was a brie and bacon jam dish served with cocoa, cardamom, and espresso roasted almonds and finally, the crowning jewel of the collection, the best tiramisu I'd ever had. By the end of it, I was stuffed so full, I was starting to worry they'd have to roll me home.

“Well, darling,” Nicola said, patting his full belly, “are you ready to go out there and meet your adoring fans?”

I took a deep breath and gave the door a nervous glance. “Guess I have to, huh?”

“If you want them to sign checks, you do.” He sat up and reached across the table to take my hand. “But I'll be there with you, every step of the way.”

The kitchen door opened, and a kraken wandered in. He scanned the kitchen before his eyes settled on us and then he turned, adjusting his spotted bow tie. “Excuse me. I'm Shelby Torvin. Of Torvin Pictures? Could we talk?”

My heart almost stopped. Torvin Pictures was the Disney of action thrillers.

Nicola kicked me under the table and mouthed, “Say yes.”

“Uh, sure,” I said and stood, offering my hand. “I'm Tripp Powers.”

Shelby chuckled and wrapped a tentacle around my hand, shaking it. “I know. I saw your speech, and I must say, that's quite the story. I didn't expect the coffee to live up to the

promise, but you know, it did. It's the best damn coffee I've ever had. What's your secret, kid?"

I glanced back at Nicola and smiled. "No secret. It's just a jolt of happiness and caffeine in every quality cup."

"I like that. In fact, I liked it so much I wanted to be the first one to come back here and make an investment in your company." Another one of his tentacles whipped out a pen and a napkin. "I know an opportunity when I see one, and you, kid, are a success story waiting to happen. I want in on that," he said as he scribbled on the napkin. "Here's my number. Call me tomorrow and we'll work out a deal. I wrote down the numbers I'm thinking though. Ballpark." He put the napkin in my hand and patted my back. "Hope your day gets better, kid. Have a good one," he said and then wandered away before I could answer.

I looked down at the napkin and my eyes almost bulged out of my head. "Nicola. Is this real?"

"It will be once we do some paperwork tomorrow," he said, seizing the napkin from me.

The kitchen door opened again and a big minotaur stepped through, booming in a deep voice. "Excuse me. Are you Tripp Powers? Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about this Brewtiful's coffee. Let's make a deal."

An itherie woman pushed through the door. "Not fair, Thomas! I want in, too!"

"And me," called someone else behind them.

“Are they meeting with investors in the kitchen?”

“Hey! No cutting in line.”

My hand closed around Nicola’s tears threatening. “Nicola... This is it. It’s happening!”

People were literally falling in line to invest in my impossible dream. I couldn’t believe it was really happening. All the blood, sweat, and tears I’d been through to get there were finally paying off, and it was all because Nicola had believed in me.

I put my arms around him and kissed him.

“What was that for?” he shrieked as I picked him up and spun him.

“For believing in me when no one else did. For being there. For helping me. For getting drunk and making the stupid decision to marry me in Vegas,” I said.

Nicola smiled and brushed his hand over my cheek. “Oh, darling. That was the smartest decision I ever made.”

Epilogue Tripp

IT WAS A SUNNY day in Seattle when I cut the big red ribbon in front of the first Brewtiful's to thunderous applause. It couldn't have happened on a better day, either.

Exactly one year had passed since that day in Vegas, and Nicola and I couldn't be happier. All talk of an annulment had long ago fallen to the wayside. Now we spent our evenings talking about his stars getting signed or all the work I was doing to get Brewtiful's off the ground.

Nicola had taken a step back from work to enjoy life. He was no longer taking on new clients and just focused on the ones he'd signed. It was just as well since that Greyson Boggs guy turned out to be a huge hit. He sometimes had to fly out to Nashville because Boggs did a bunch of shows out there, and I went with him.

But our home was outside Seattle now. He'd sold his condo in Ohio to come live with me in my little cabin outside of town. Well, slowly getting bigger cabin. We had contractors

working to expand it since we were talking about adoption and fostering.

For the first time in a long time, I was proud of myself and how far I'd come. I'd worked hard over the last year. Though I didn't always understand the business side of things, Nicola explained a lot to me in a way that I could understand.

"Mr. Powers-Lightwing!" A young mothfolk named Filly fluttered over, tapping away at her tablet.

Oh, and there was that. My new assistant, Filamina Eddison. She was damn good at her job, almost as good as Nicola.

"The president of Starchucks called again," she said looking up.

I wrinkled my nose. It was another offer to buy me out, no doubt. "Tell him Brewtiful's is not for sale."

"I told him as much," she said, flying alongside me as we made our way into the store. "You know how he is. Anyway, you also got an email from the commissioner of the National Hockey League. He wants to work out a brand deal. Oh, and that lady from the ad agency called. She said we can start filming the new TV spot next week."

"Super." I paused just inside the doorway to sign a jersey someone offered me before slipping behind the counter. "Have you heard from my husband?"

God, I'd never get tired of calling him that.

Filly clicked through several screens before answering. "I've got confirmation his plane has touched down an hour ago, but

nothing after that.”

I sighed. Nicola had promised to be there on opening day, even though one of his rockstars had an emergency breakdown or something and he had to go deal with it. He’d only been gone a day and already I missed him. If I listened closely, I could almost hear his voice through the hissing of the espresso machine.

“A Lightwing latte special with coconut milk and extra cinnamon dust, darling, and don’t skimp on the whipped cream.”

No, wait. That sounded exactly like him. Either I was hallucinating or...

I turned around and my heart skipped a beat. Even after a year, every time I saw him was like the first time. A big grin spread over my face and I went to the register, dismissing the employee working there. “I’ve got this order, Dunkin.”

“I presume you’re the manager of this establishment?” Nicola said and waved around.

“Do you have a complaint?” I asked, leaning on my elbows.

Nicola crossed his arms and looked around. “As a matter of fact, I do. I’ve waited entirely too long for you to come over here and kiss me.”

I laughed and jumped the counter, scooping Nicola up for a spin and two kisses before putting him back down. “Hopefully that makes up for it?”

“Oh, you’ll be making up for it all night later,” he promised.
“Now, how about that latte?”

I made his order just the way he liked it, with two cherries in the whipped cream and a chocolate drizzle, and then I brought it to his table with a plain black coffee for me along with a couple of doughnuts.

“So,” he said as I sat down. “What now?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve done it, Tripp. Brewtiful’s is open and poised to do very well. You have a dozen new locations already in the works and you’ve married the moth of your dreams.” He smirked at me. “What’s left for Tripp Powers now that he has everything he’s ever wanted?”

I looked around. He was right. I’d made it. Everything I had ever wanted was right there, sitting at the table across from me. Yeah, finally having Brewtiful’s was nice, and being successful was great, but all of that meant nothing if I had no one to share it with. Brewtiful’s was a dream come true, but Nicola... He was something else. Something better than a dream. He was right there, and he’d been with me all along.

I smiled and reached across the table to take his hand. “Now, we change the world. One cup, one smile at a time.”



Recipe: Lightwing Latte



Ingredients

- 2 oz of espresso, prepared
- 8oz of milk
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tablespoon of cocoa powder
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of vanilla
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon cherry-flavored coffee syrup
- 2 maraschino cherries

- Whipped cream
- Chocolate syrup for drizzle

Instructions:

1. Brew and pour espresso into a large cup.
2. Stir vanilla and cherry syrup into the espresso.
3. Steam milk in a saucepan to 150F, heating on low and stirring frequently
4. Transfer the steamed milk to a glass measuring cup and tap lightly to break up any large bubbles
5. Pour the steamed milk over the espresso, holding back the foam with a spoon
6. Top the espresso with foam
7. Top with whipped cream
8. Combine cinnamon, sugar, and cocoa powder. Apply a light dusting to the whipped cream to resemble wings
9. Top with two cherries for eyes and serve.

From the *Author*

THANK YOU FOR READING Brewtiful's!

This was the last book in the Culinary Creatures series, and it's been a journey! This series began as a sort of love letter to all the cooking shows I watch. Shows like *Hell's Kitchen*, *Diners Drive-ins and Dives*, and *Bar Rescue*. These shows fostered my love of cooking, and have always been a source of comfort during the roughest periods of my life.

I'm especially a fan of Gordon Ramsay, whose philosophy about presenting yourself on a plate really resonates with me. It's his version of "be yourself". His personal story has been a constant source of inspiration to me and inspired me to push through when I felt like giving up. The story of Brewtiful's reflects some of my journey into learning to write and publish as a business. It takes hard work, dedication, and most importantly, someone to believe in you.

I grew up in the kitchen, cooking from a young age, and the progression of these books has reflected my journey through the culinary world. Spaghetti and meatballs was the first dish I

learned how to cook, and won me a blue ribbon back when I was in 4-H. I eventually turned to baking, learned I wasn't very good at it, and then spent about a decade learning how to grill, roast, and broil meats before I stumbled into my love of coffee.

Writing books is my dream job, but a close second would be to own a café, bookstore, and cat rescue where people could come in, have a coffee, and read a book surrounded by rescue cats. I don't know if that'll ever become a reality, but it's always nice to dream.

While *Brewtiful's* marks the end of *Culinary Creatures*, it is not the last book in the universe! There is one more fantastic tale of tentacles and holiday spirit coming as part of the *Tinsel and Tentacles* collection. If you're looking to revisit the world of *Culinary Creatures*, pre-order your copy of *Rebel Without a Claus* here!

You can check out my current works in progress on [Patreon](#) or subscribe to my newsletter to keep up to date.

Thank you for being a part of this love letter to my culinary heroes and most beloved foodstuffs!

L

Culinary Creatures

Brimstone and Bolognese

Brimstone

Beefcakes

Bluz

Brewtiful's

Also in the Culinary Creatures Universe

Rebel Without A Claus

Monsters in My Bed

Kissed by the Krampus

Scales and Song

Hearts and Halos

Lassos and Lace

Bounty and Bone

Kindred Spirits

Flame and Shadow

A Dream of Flame and Shadow

A Glint of Steel and Roses

Wayward Sons

Body Count